MASCULINITIES AND PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

PROMUNDO

VITAL VOICES
GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP

Voices AGAINST VIOLENCE
THE GBV GLOBAL INITIATIVE

MASCULINITIES AND PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

Authors:

Abby Fried with Giovanna Lauro and Gary Barker (Promundo-US)

About Promundo:

Founded in Brazil in 1997, Promundo works to promote gender equality and create a world free from violence by engaging men and boys in partnership with women, girls, and individuals of all gender identities. Promundo is a global consortium with members in the United States, Brazil, Portugal, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Chile that collaborate to achieve this mission by conducting cutting-edge research that builds the knowledge base on masculinities and gender equality; developing, evaluating, and scaling up high-impact interventions and programs; and carrying out national and international campaigns and advocacy initiatives to prevent violence and promote gender equality.

For more information, see: www.promundoglobal.org

MASCULINITIES AND PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

PROMUNDO

VITAL VOICES
GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP

VOICES AGAINST VIOLENCE
THE GBV GLOBAL INITIATIVE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Traditional efforts to reduce violent extremism attempt to provide men and boys with alternatives to joining extremist groups. However, these efforts often fail to consider the gendered factors that may drive men and boys to support and join such groups. While a gender perspective on violent extremism should, of course, seek to understand and include women's and girls' experiences, it is crucial – given that men account for the majority of violent extremists – to consider that men and boys are gendered, as well. Specifically, there is a need to better understand the ways in which gender inequality, harmful masculinities, and violence-supportive attitudes and practices, as well as young men's identity construction and trauma from their own experiences of violence, influence their engagement in violent extremism. Approaches that incorporate this understanding would benefit not only those men and women directly impacted by extremist violence, but society more broadly, by challenging the structures of power and violence that support gender-based violence (GBV) and gender inequality.

This paper asks the question: What do masculinities have to do with violent extremism? By "masculinities," we mean identities; power (by some men or groups of men over others, and by men over women); individual and collective actions; and individually held and societally reinforced norms related to manhood. We also view masculinities as socially constructed, contextual, intersectional, and interacting with numerous other factors; we do not view male identity as a single explanatory factor for participation in violent extremism, but rather as one of many interacting factors, and one that is often overlooked.

Specifically, this paper attempts to change the narrative and shift the paradigm around violent extremism, from countering violent extremism after it occurs, to preventing men and boys from taking violent action in the first

place. This shift requires a reframing of the conversation around preventing violent extremism (PVE), from a focus on "push" and "pull" factors to a more holistic understanding of people's lives and identities. Violent extremism is not a discrete phenomenon, but one that occurs in relation to other forms of violence committed by and against men and boys. Therefore, solutions cannot be gender-blind, but must move toward gender-aware and eventually gender-transformative approaches – i.e., rather than largely ignoring the influence of gender norms on attitudes and behaviors, approaches must gain and incorporate an understanding, not only of how these norms influence men's and boys' actions and shape their vulnerabilities with regard to violent extremism, but also of the ways in which programmatic action can tackle gender inequality and prevent violent extremism at the same time, for long-lasting impact.

This paper presents an ecological model that takes men's and boys' identities at the individual, family, community, and structural levels into account:

At the individual level – men's harmful attitudes, history of intimate partner violence (IPV), gender socialization, work-life trajectories, and religious beliefs.

At the family and community level – men's childhood experiences, including parental involvement and the intergenerational transmission of violence, as well as their social networks and emotional connectedness as adults, and any family members or peers who are involved in violent extremism.

At the structural level – men's lack of economic opportunities, and their perception of loss or "failed masculinity" tied to a sense of economic or job entitlement, as well as political grievances, and the militarization of society (i.e., when military or police forces become key

societal institutions, highly present, visible, and influential in the community, often to the point of shaping the population's daily interactions).

This paper does not present an exhaustive review of existing programs. Rather, it discusses a selection of interventions that represent the spectrum of gendered approaches to PVE. Six programs that aim to prevent violent extremism are presented: Youth Spaces for Peace in Far North Cameroon; EXIT-Germany and HAYAT in Germany; an Al-Firdaws Society program in Iraq; the Ending Terrorism Through Youth Service Action Locally (ETTYSAL) Program in Tunisia; and the Mawada Project in Libya. Together, they demonstrate the varying degrees to which existing programs recognize that gender norms, and particularly masculinities, are a key and often missing piece of efforts to prevent violent extremism from occurring, as well as to deradicalize individuals who have already become participants. In particular, we highlight the Youth Spaces for Peace program (developed and implemented by Promundo, the Living Peace Institute, and ALDEPA in the Far North region of Cameroon, with support from UNICEF), which demonstrates how a gender-transformative approach – i.e., one that seeks to identify, challenge, and change harmful gender norms, relations, and power dynamics in order to promote gender equity and individual agency – can work in settings of high violence and violent extremism.

Recommendations

Researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and others working on preventing violent extremism must acknowledge that harmful gender norms, particularly those related to manhood, play a role in men and boys' vulnerability to violent extremism, and they must work to better incorporate gender-transformative approaches into their work. Recommendations for future research, programming, and policy, include:

- Recognize that gender norms influence vulnerability to violent extremism, and that challenging harmful gender norms directly is key to PVE. Avoid research, programming, or policy that is *gender-blind* – that is, programming that does not consider gender norms, gendered power dynamics, and their effects.

- Understand that violent extremism is one form on a continuum of violence and that masculine norms contribute to multiple forms of violence.

- Be specific in sex and age disaggregation in order to bridge the gap between "youth" and "women." Currently, the majority of work on violent extremism and its prevention focuses either on the role of youth – a term often used to mean young men only – or on the role of women.

- Draw lines of collaboration between the PVE and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agendas, for their mutual benefit, ensuring the equal participation of all voices that promote peace and equality.

- Recognize the importance of involved, non-violent fatherhood for creating positive childhood experiences and supportive family networks – both of which are recognized as strongly protective against the pull of violent extremism.

- Building on the success of psychosocial support models for individuals who have witnessed or experienced violence, provide spaces for youth – particularly young men – to gather and reflect on their own experiences of violence, learn healthy coping mechanisms, and challenge their long-held negative gender attitudes.

- Move away from military actions against specific groups, which can often act as "trigger points." Experiences of injustice, discrimination, corruption, and abuse by security forces act as drivers for violent extremist group recruitment.

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on what masculinities – i.e., what it means to be a man within a given group or society, power dynamics between specifics groups of men (and between men and women), and salient norms related to manhood – have to do with men's and boys' participation in violent extremism. While there is a growing body of research analyzing women's and girls' roles in violent extremism, it is essential to understand what drives men and boys into these organizations, given that the vast majority of violent extremists are male. Once we understand these complex and intersecting driving factors, we must apply that in order to shift research, program, and policy approaches in the field of preventing violent extremism toward inclusion of a gender lens. This paper does not intend to be an exhaustive review of the evidence around violent extremism, but rather to present an analysis of key research in order to outline the connections between masculinities and PVE that have often been overlooked.

Preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has become a greater focus of global policy since September 11, 2001, and the rise of high-profile violent extremist organizations such as ISIS, Boko Haram, and al-Qaeda. While a wide range of activities fall under the broad umbrella of countering violent extremism (CVE) and preventing violent extremism (PVE), and while there is no single accepted definition of either term, this paper will use the term PVE and the following definitions:

Violent extremism refers to a particular type of extremism that employs the use of violence as either a means to an end, or as an end in and of itself. Extremism itself is defined by its relation to, and rejection of, a broader ideology.

Preventing violent extremism involves engaging individuals and communities with the aim of diminishing their exposure to the causes and promoters of violent extremism, as well as disrupting the progression to violence. Specifically, these approaches seek to increase access to support and resources that promote individual and community well-being. This term and its implications are distinct from "countering violent extremism," in which approaches are generally reactive to extremist violence, rather than aimed at altering the dynamics that motivate it.

There is a growing body of research and programming around women's and girls' myriad roles in supporting and combating violent extremism, and around their experiences of it. While it is important to understand women's and girls' experiences, it is crucial to consider men and boys as gendered beings as well – especially considering that men account for the majority of violent extremists. This paper asks the question: What do masculinities have to do with violent extremism? That is, what role do "masculine norms" – i.e., messages, stereotypes, and social instructions related to manhood that supersede and interact with being born male or identifying as a man – play in driving violent extremism?

BACKGROUND AND FRAMING

With the increased focus since 2001 on counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism, policymakers have sought to better understand and more effectively engage different actors in fighting radicalization and recruitment to violent extremism.[1] While there has been a shift from traditional military counter-terrorism operations to more preventive measures that seek to undermine the attractiveness of violent extremist movements, finding successful ways to do this has been difficult.

There is more evidence of what does *not* work than of what does. An important lesson has emerged: military-focused operations alone cannot and will not end violent extremism; in fact, they may very well induce greater feelings of grievance toward government and external organizations.[2] What is needed is a holistic approach that involves governments, civil society, multinational organizations, and individual citizens in addressing the root causes, rather than the symptoms, of violent extremism. For this multi-layered approach, a thorough and nuanced understanding of gender – particularly masculinities – is needed.

Traditional efforts to address violent extremism attempt to provide men and boys with alternatives to joining extremist groups; however, they fail to consider the gendered factors that help drive men and boys to join and support such groups. Research and interventions that do consider gender have primarily focused on the role of women and girls in violent extremism.[3] While a focus on women and girls is essential given both their greater vulnerability to violence perpetrated by violent extremist groups and their increasing participation in such groups, men and boys continue to represent the overwhelming majority of those recruited into extremist groups and carrying out extremist violence. Therefore, it is crucial to look deeper into the reasons women *and* men join such groups, and, in particular, into the ways in which men's and boys' everyday gendered identities are constructed and then manipulated for recruitment purposes.

Although international bodies and policy frameworks have stressed the need to address the root causes of violent extremism for decades, it is only in recent years that momentum to approach prevention with a gender lens has increased. The United Nations (UN) is starting to realize the need to shift the paradigm from security-based reactive measures to community-based preventive actions. On 15 January 2016, the Secretary General presented to the General Assembly a Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, which outlines long-term underlying political and economic

---

1. For the purposes of this paper, we will distinguish between "radicalization" and "violent extremism," using "radicalization" to refer to the process of holding certain beliefs or ideology, and "violent extremism" to refer to certain behavior. Violent extremists may or may not adhere to radical ideology, and individuals who hold radical ideological beliefs may or may not participate in acts of violent extremism. For more on this distinction, see: Neumann, P. The trouble with radicalization. *International Affairs 89*(4), 873-893.; Bondokji, N., Wilkinson, K. & Aghabi, L. *Understanding Radicalisation: A Literature Review of Models and Drivers.* West Asia-North Africa (WANA) Institute.

2. Mercy Corps. (2016). *"Motivations and Empty Promises": Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth.* Mercy Corps.; Search for Common Ground. (December 2017). *Inuka!: Community-Led Security Approaches to Violent Extremism.* Search for Common Ground.; Ekpon, T. (2017). *The Role of Young People in Preventing Violent Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin: A contribution to the Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security mandated by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015).* The Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) and The Centre for Sustainable Development and Education in Africa (CSDEA).; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2017). *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment.* New York: UNDP.

3. See, for example: Winterbotham, E. (2020). *What Can Work (and What Has Not Worked) in Women-Centric P/CVE Initiatives.* London: Royal United Services Institute.; USAID. (2018). *The Role of Women in Violent Extremism in Asia.*; Chowdhury Fink, N., Zeiger, S., & Bhulai, R. (Eds). (2016). *A Man's World? Exploring the Roles of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism.* Hedayah and The Global Center on Cooperative Security.; Osborne, A. (2017). *Engendering Extremism: Gender Equality and Radicalisation in the West Asia-North Africa Region.* Amman: West Asia-North Africa (WANA) Institute.

conditions that drive individuals to join violent extremist groups, including scarce employment opportunities and resources, poor governance, and repressive governments. However, while the Plan includes a recommendation to research women's roles in violent extremism, it indicates no recognition of the ways in which entrenched gender norms, particularly expectations imposed on men and boys, influence violent extremist groups' strategy and success.

Manhood is, in part, about being socially recognized by other men, and achieving a perceived social status by being recognized as men, and, as such, aspects of manhood are performed before other men and before women. Other processes integral to manhood – e.g., discouraging men's emotional vulnerability, labeling spaces and roles "male" and "female," and reinforcing patriarchal power structures that benefit men over women as well as some men over other, less-powerful men – serve to shape the ways in which masculine norms contribute to the perpetration and experience of violence.[4] Men who fail to adhere to the behaviors, attitudes, and values of the hegemonic masculine ideal can face ridicule and social exclusion. It is crucial to understand that masculine norms are intersectional, i.e., that they are interconnected and linked with other identities, such as race, ethnicity, sexual identity, religion, and socioeconomic status. Throughout this paper, these identities are discussed in connection with violent extremism – how gender and other identities influence motivations, experiences, and risk factors for those who choose or do not choose to become involved in violent extremist groups. Failure to achieve the societal expectations associated with one's gender – e.g., for young men to become providers and young women to become obedient wives and child-bearers – can be a powerful contributing factor to an individual's vulnerability to violent extremism, and exerts particular pressure in the absence of achievable and socially acceptable alternative aspirations.

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the normative or dominant ideal of masculinity that emphasizes certain expressions of masculinity and enforces certain men's dominance, power, and privilege over other men, as well as over women.[5]

It is also important to note that, while the vast majority of violent extremists are men, the vast majority of men in settings where violent extremism is more common are not engaged in violent extremism, and many are vocal advocates against it. Around the world, there are examples of men and boys – community leaders, fathers, religious leaders, peace activists, youth, and others – who, alongside women and girls, resist harmful gender norms and advocate for nonviolent masculinity. Many men speak out against oppressive regimes and voice their grievances in nonviolent ways, despite the risk of being seen as weak or unmanly for doing so.[6] Many religious leaders preach the peaceful foundations of their religions, sometimes at great personal risk, in order to counter the violent and vengeful interpretations that violent extremist organizations espouse.[7] The men and boys who are able to resist the norm that equates manhood with violence are often able to do so because they have had a male family member who modeled alternative, equitable attitudes and behaviors, or they have peers who question traditional masculine norms.[8] Many programming and advocacy efforts provide messaging that underscores the negative aspects of life in a violent extremist organization, but it is equally important to present positive examples of nonviolent alternative paths.

4.   Heilman, B. with Barker, G. (2018). *Masculine Norms and Violence: Making the Connections.* Washington, DC: Promundo-US.

5.   Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics.* Gender & Power. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

6.   Khattab, L., & Myrttinen, H. (2017). *"Most of the men want to leave": Armed groups, displacement and gendered webs of vulnerability in Syria.* London: International Alert.

7.   Search for Common Ground. (2017). *Transforming Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilder's Guide;* Mercy Corps. (2016). *"Motivations and Empty Promises": Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth.* Mercy Corps.

8.   Barker, G. (2005). *Dying to Be Men: Youth, Masculinity and Social Exclusion.* Sexuality, Culture and Health Series. New York: Routledge.

METHODOLOGY

This paper seeks to fill a void in the understanding of the root causes of violent extremism by providing a more gendered analysis of the factors that are widely acknowledged to play a role in driving people – particularly men and boys – to support violent extremism. The methodology of this paper was a desk-based review of key academic and practitioner publications, which took place between October 2018 and May 2019, with an additional scan of newly published resources in late 2019 and early 2020. To explore the ways that key organizations active in the field of PVE are thinking about gender and masculinities in their work, and the gaps that exist, individual interviews with five researchers and practitioners were conducted in October and November 2018.

What this paper is and what it is not: This paper is not a comprehensive literature review on the topic of violent extremism, nor is it a presentation of original field research. Rather, it presents key examples of foundational work that examined the drivers of violent extremism without gender analysis, as well as some newer research and programming that begins to take gender into account. It is the intent of this paper to build upon these existing analyses and move the conversation forward by providing a lens into the ways that gender inequality, harmful masculinities, violence-supportive attitudes and practices – as well as men's and boys' own identity construction and traumatic experiences of violence – may influence their engagement in extremist violence. Following a review of selected case studies of programs that aim to prevent violent extremism by addressing these factors, the paper ends with recommendations for research, programming, and policy.

It is important to acknowledge that many people, of all genders, are forced to join extremist groups, through violence, abduction, threats, and other methods. This paper largely focuses on the factors that drive people to join these groups voluntarily (albeit often within the context of few alternative opportunities or limited agency).

This paper will present these factors in an ecological model that takes men's and boys' identities into account at the following levels:

INDIVIDUAL	FAMILY/COMMUNITY	STRUCTURAL
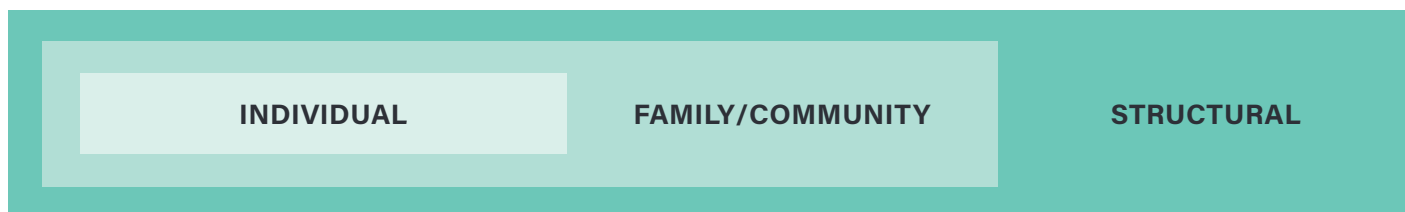
- **Individual:** men's harmful attitudes, history of intimate partner violence (IPV), gender socialization, and religious beliefs;

- **Family/community:** men's childhood experiences, including parental involvement and the intergenerational transmission of violence, as well as their social networks and emotional connectedness as adults;

- **Structural:** men's lack of economic opportunities and their perception of loss tied to their sense of entitlement, as well as political grievances, and militarization of society.

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN MASCULINITIES AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

"There is a troubling commonality in terrorist attacks, extremist ideologies, and brutal crimes: the violent misogyny of the perpetrators."

António Guterres
United Nations Secretary-General, UN General Assembly Address, September 2019

Violence as a continuum: Any analysis of violent extremism must consider it as one form on a continuum of violence. Indeed, evidence shows that many men who join violent extremist groups have a history of perpetrating intimate partner violence against the women and girls in their lives prior to joining, and they are allowed – and often encouraged – to continue committing gender-based violence against the women and girls in the territories that they control.[9] Additionally, we know that male identity and masculine norms are linked with various forms of violence, including sexual violence, homicide, bullying, suicide, and conflict-related violence. Men and boys are disproportionately both the perpetrators of these forms of violence and the victims of certain forms such as homicide and suicide.[10] Violent extremism cannot be understood without examining the other forms of violence that are occurring in men's and women's lives.

Participation in violent extremism as a pathway to manhood: The high-profile cases represented by ISIS's system of sexual slavery, Boko Haram's abduction of girls, and al-Shabaab's forced marriages reveal the extent to which violent extremist groups perpetrate gender-based violence, and the ways in which participation in violent extremist groups enables some young men to achieve a sense of socially recognized manhood. In a context in which adult manhood is not considered to have been achieved until a man has married and had children, and in which financial prospects are preconditions for marrying, violent extremist groups offer salaries and

9.   Roy, O. (2017). *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of the Islamic State.* New York: Oxford University Press; Kimmel, M. (2018). *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into - and Out of - Violent Extremism.* Oakland: University of California Press; Smith, J. (2019). *Home Grown: How Domestic Violence Turns Men Into Terrorists.* London: Quercus Books.

10.   Heilman, B. with Barker, G. (2018). *Masculine Norms and Violence: Making the Connections.* Washington, DC: Promundo-US.

brides to young men who otherwise have no economic pathway forward. But these brides are commonly obtained via the abduction and enslavement of women and girls. Indeed, men can also prove their manhood by participating in sexual slavery, rape, and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls. It is vital to understand that, while men are the primary perpetrators of violence, research indicates that men are not inherently violent,[11] but are socialized to express their masculinity through dominance over women and over certain other men. This socialization, amidst intersecting variables such as social conditions, life experiences, political economy, and individual attitudes, can lead to violence in many forms, including against women or other men, and, in certain contexts, violent extremism. To understand the motivations for some men's involvement in violent extremism, and to reduce and, one day, prevent all forms of violence, including gender-based violence, it is first essential to understand and address prevailing gender-inequitable norms and attitudes.

The following sections will explore the ways in which these gender norms interact with individual, family, community, and structural factors to promote men's and boys' vulnerability to, or resilience against, the pull of violent extremist organizations.

Individual level factors

Harmful attitudes – Violence against women is interconnected with violent extremism – at the individual level, where violent extremists have perpetrated violence against women in their lives, and at the structural level, where misogyny and patriarchy are canonized and used to support political institutions and movements. Recent mixed-methods research carried out by Monash University and UN Women in Indonesia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines has found that, **more than any other factor, support for violence against women is linked with support for violent extremism**. No correlation was found between other commonly attributed factors – such as age, education level, socioeconomic status, employment, religiosity, or even gender – and support for violent extremism.[12] Similar results were found in Libya.[13] Clearly, this association is not causality, but it is evident that holding attitudes favorable to violent extremist groups and holding attitudes favorable to the use of GBV are related.

"The first victim of an extremist or terrorist is the woman in his own home."

Nazir Afzal
Former Chief Crown Prosecutor for North West England[14]

History of intimate partner violence – In her 2019 book, *Home Grown: How Domestic Violence Turns Men into Terrorists*, journalist Joan Smith explores the connection between individual men's violent extremist actions and their perpetration of violence against their female partners. Through examination of high-profile terrorist attacks in Europe and the United States, Smith shows how **the extensive histories of intimate partner violence**

---

11. Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1993). *Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life.* Harvard University Press.; Barker, Gary. 2005. *Dying to Be Men: Youth, Masculinity and Social Exclusion.* Sexuality, Culture and Health Series. New York: Routledge.

12. Johnston, M., True, J. (2019). *Misogyny & Violent Extremism: Implications for Preventing Violent Extremism* Policy Brief. UN Women.

13. Johnston, M., True, J., & Benalla, Z. (2019). *Gender Equality and Violent Extremism: A Research Agenda for Libya.* UN Women.

14. Smith, J. (2019). *Home Grown: How Domestic Violence Turns Men Into Terrorists.* Quercus Editions: London.

and misogynistic attitudes of the perpetrators were clear warning signs for violent extremism, but were not considered by law enforcement or prevention programs. These histories included physical, sexual, emotional, and financial violence toward their female partners, and in some cases, their daughters. Smith argues that this privatization of violence – often without accountability or consequences – allowed these men to practice and evolve their perpetration before bringing it into the public sphere.[15] Ultimately, Smith makes the case that terrorist acts can be prevented if intimate partner violence is understood as a warning sign and taken more seriously. However, while it is crucial to prevent intimate partner violence for its own sake, its presence alone cannot predict violent extremism. The handful of individual cases examined in Smith's book involve histories of intimate partner violence among many other factors, such as childhood experiences, gender socialization, harmful attitudes, and others discussed in this paper. And while a history of intimate partner violence may be common among men who join violent extremist groups, there are also many men who commit intimate partner violence and do not join violent extremist groups. Thus, it seems more appropriate to understand intimate partner violence as a potential warning sign, and a co-occurring factor among men who participate in other forms of violence, whether violent extremist organizations or other armed groups. What the literature does confirm is that various forms of violence – in the home, in public, and in armed groups – often co-exist and co-occur (rather than proving one to be a causal factor for another).

Gender socialization – Violence-supportive attitudes and behaviors are intricately linked with gender norms, which are learned and internalized beginning very early in life through **gender socialization**, the process through which children are taught the social expectations, attitudes, and behaviors associated with gender.[16]

From an early age, the gender socialization process places pressure on everyone to conform to the norms associated with their gender. Influenced by parents and other caregivers, siblings, peers, religious leaders, teachers, and the media, what it is to be "a real man" may vary depending on the cultural context, but is often characterized by the role of financial provider and physical protector of the family. Men and boys are also expected to be physically strong, to show limited emotion, to be heterosexual and have sexual prowess, and to have the final say in decision-making. Gender socialization is relational; men and boys who fail to live up to this ideal of "a real man" are often criticized or punished for being "feminine" or "weak." The notion that men and boys should be dominant over women and girls (as well as over other men and boys) is often a key component of their gender socialization and identity. Facing such societal pressures around what it means to be a man, men and boys who fail to achieve certain status or to exhibit particular traits may be more vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist groups as a path to the fulfillment of idealized manhood. The box below highlights how these masculine norms work to shape and create some men's use of violence.

---

15.   Ibid.

16.   According to UNICEF, "Early gender socialization starts at birth and it is a process of learning cultural roles according to one's sex." For additional information, see: https://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/index_40749.html

VIOLENCE AND MASCULINITIES: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK[17]

Diverse gender and masculinities theorists – from Raewyn Connell's work on hegemonic and subaltern masculinities[18], to Judith Butler's work on gender as performative (and masculinities as performed and judged by other men)[19], to the vast array of work by Michael Flood and others on men's use of violence in the context of partnered relationships and the complex interplay of individual, childhood, and societal conditions that drive that violence[20] – frame masculinities as: 1) power structures, 2) relational in that they are constructed in relation to women, 3) contextual, 4) performed, and 5) varying over the life cycle. In a previous paper in this "Making the Connections" series, Promundo identified five common and internationally salient processes that influence the likelihood that men will participate in or be victims of multiple forms of violence, including violent extremism:

1 **Achieving socially recognized manhood:** Often at the core of masculine gendering and the use of violence is the demand that male-identifying persons must achieve and continually re-achieve their manhood.

2 **Policing masculine performance:** The process of withholding the social status of "being a man" is held in place by the continual policing of men's and boys' performance of gender. For many men and boys, the use of contextually-specific kinds of violence is one of the criteria by which they are judged by other men as having achieved manhood.

3 **"Gendering" the heart:** Typically, around the world, men are discouraged from showing emotional vulnerability, and are policed to show only a limited range of emotion. It is in this way that violence becomes acceptable, while vulnerability, cooperation, and nonviolence are judged to be non-masculine.

4 **Dividing spaces and cultures by gender:** Gender norms produce many harmful and unnecessary divisions and fractures within societies. Social spaces (and even "microcultures") associated with men often become places where violence is rehearsed and reinforced. These include armies, male-specific social groups, and armed groups such as gangs.

5 **Reinforcing patriarchal power:** Violence is ultimately about the reinforcement of power structures that not only advantage men over women but also advantage particular men over certain other men.

Far from violence being a natural, inherent feature of masculinity, this review affirmed that violence is systematically encouraged and reinforced as part of gender-specific socialization processes that boost violent masculinities and hyper-masculine norms over their opposite.[21] In this regard, masculinities – which can be defined as norms, social expectations, and power dynamics[22] – often contribute to but are not the only explanations for or drivers of violence, including violent extremism.

---

17. This framework first appeared in: Heilman, B. with Barker, G. (2018). Masculine Norms and Violence: Making the Connections. Washington, DC: Promundo-US.

18. Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.; Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity.

19. Butler, J. (1988). Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal* 40.4: 519–31.

20. Flood, M. (2003). Engaging Men: Strategies and Dilemmas in Violence Prevention Education among Men. *Women Against Violence: An Australian Feminist Journal*, No. 13: 25-32.

21. Barker, G. (2016). "Male Violence or Patriarchal Violence? Global Trends in Men and Violence." Sexualidad, Salud y Sociedad (Rio de Janeiro) 22 (April): 316–30.

22. Lindsay, L. & Meischer, S. (2003). *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Religion and religiosity – While religion is often used as a recruitment tactic, it is crucial to recognize that the use of violence is antithetical to Islamic teachings, and in fact, **many researchers have found no relationship between religion and support for violent extremism.**[23] Seeking to correct the common misconception that religiosity contributes to support for violent extremism, many religious leaders and scholars speak out in support of the peaceful nature of their religions and face backlash and violence from extremist groups for doing so. However, some religious leaders and teachers, who are extremists themselves or who have ties to extremist groups, play an important role in recruitment by twisting interpretation of the Quran to appeal to youth who are illiterate or who have no access to other religious sources, particularly in places where state-supported education is lacking.[24]

In Syria, belief in extremist interpretations of religion appears to be, at most, a secondary factor in the decision to join an extremist group, and an equal number of respondents interviewed by International Alert cited religious teachings as reasons they did *not* become involved in violent groups.[25] For those who did join, if ethnic and religious identity played a role at all, it was in determining *which* armed group they joined, rather than in whether they joined at all.[26] Similarly, in quantitative research conducted by UNDP among former combatants in Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Cameroon, and Niger, while 51 percent of respondents selected religion as a reason for joining, 57 percent admitted to limited or no understanding of religious texts.[27] Violent extremist organizations are acutely aware of this lack of religious education in the population and use it to manipulate common grievances. Recruiters, too, often prey upon vulnerable men's and boys' gender identities by offering religious doctrine as a way to fulfill unattained masculine norms. By depicting themselves as glorious protectors of family and community, as saving their culture or religion from extinction by external forces, violent extremist organizations offer men who have been unable to take up their socially-expected roles and responsibilities a path to do so. In this way, **religious or ideological indoctrination is often a consequence of violent extremist recruitment, rather than a cause**.[28]

Family and community level factors

The intergenerational transmission of violence – While people who voluntarily join violent extremist groups come from a variety of socioeconomic settings and family situations, there is evidence that **childhood experiences can affect individuals' vulnerability to violent extremism.** It is well documented that a child's family members, particularly their parents and other caregivers, are instrumental in their physical, social, cognitive, and emotional development in the early

23. Johnston, M. & True, J. (2019). *Misogyny & Violent Extremism: Implications for Preventing Violent Extremism* Policy Brief. UN Women.; Mercy Corps. (2016). *"Motivations and Empty Promises": Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth.* Mercy Corps; Slachmuijlder, L. (2017). *Transforming Violent Extremism: A peacebuilder's guide, 1st ed.* Washington DC: Search for Common Ground.

24. Ekpon, T. (2017). *The Role of Young People in Preventing Violent Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin: A contribution to the Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security* mandated by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015). The Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) and The Centre for Sustainable Development and Education in Africa (CSDEA).

25. Aubrey, M., Aubrey, R., Brodrick, F., & Brooks, C. (2016). *Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight: Vulnerability and resilience to recruitment by violent extremist groups in Syria.* London: International Alert: London.

26. Khattab, L., & Myrttinen, H. (July 2017). *"Most of the men want to leave": Armed groups, displacement and gendered webs of vulnerability in Syria.* London: International Alert.

27. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2017). *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment.* New York: UNDP.

28. Kimmel, M. (2018). *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into - and Out of - Violent Extremism.* Oakland: University of California Press.; Roy, O. (2017). *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of the Islamic State.* New York: Oxford University Press.; Aubrey, M., Aubrey, R., Brodrick, F., and Brooks, C. (2016). *Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight: Vulnerability and resilience to recruitment by violent extremist groups in Syria.* London: International Alert.

years of life, and these developments are key for lifelong health and well-being.[29] Despite global gender norms that place women in the primary caregiving role, research overwhelmingly confirms that fathers' involvement affects children in much the same way that mothers' involvement does. Fathers' involvement has been linked to improved cognitive development and school achievement, better mental health for boys and girls, and lower rates of delinquency for boys.[30]

Research also confirms that some forms of violence – particularly men's violence against female partners – are commonly transmitted from one generation to the next. Data from 24 of the 27 countries where the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES)[31] was conducted found that men who, as children, witnessed their mother being beaten by a male partner were, on average, two and a half times more likely to use violence against a female partner in adulthood.[32] Children's experience of violence in childhood is also linked to poor educational achievement, behavioral problems (including violent, defiant, or risky behavior), delinquency, poor mental health, poor social skills, and poor communication and problem-solving skills.[33] At the same time, research finds that a more equitable division of caregiving is associated with lower rates of violence against children.

Several studies have shown childhood experiences to be foundational in the lives of many violent extremists.

A quantitative UNDP study in Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Cameroon, and Niger, found a statistically significant difference between extremists and non-extremists in their perception of childhood happiness: the former extremists perceived their childhoods to have been less happy than did the reference group of non-extremists. Among the factors that determined childhood happiness, parental involvement and interest in the respondent's life showed a strong correlation. Those who had voluntarily joined violent extremist organizations reported the least parental involvement/interest in their lives during childhood.[34] However, questions regarding the presence or absence of the respondent's father did not reveal conclusive differences between the groups.

On a more anecdotal level, there are many examples of high-profile extremists who experienced adverse childhood experiences, including violence by their parents. The Kouachi brothers, who were responsible for the 2015 attack on the Paris offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, experienced beatings by their father and neglect by their mother before becoming orphans and spending time in the French care system. Neighbors and family members have noted that the boys were bullied by peers and other authority figures throughout their lives. The absence of positive male role models was evident when radical male mentors entered their lives, including an extremist imam and young jihadists they met in their neighborhood and in

29. See, for example: Brazelton, T.B., Greenspan, S.I. (2001). *The Irreducible Needs of Children: What Every Child Must Have to Grow, Learn, and Flourish.* Reprint edition. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.; Laporte, L., Jiang, D., Pepler, D.J., Chamberland, C. (2011). The Relationship Between Adolescents' Experience of Family Violence and Dating Violence. *Youth & Society, 43*(1): 3–27; Lamb M., Lewis C. (2013). *Father–Child Relationships.* In: Cabrera N.J., Tamis-Le-Monda C.S. (2013). *Handbook of Father Involvement: Multidisciplinary Perspectives, Second Edition.* New York: Routledge.

30. Levtov, R., van der Gaag, N., Greene, M., Kaufman, M., and Barker, G. (2015). *State of the World's Fathers: A MenCare Advocacy Publication.* Washington, DC: Promundo, Rutgers, Save the Children, Sonke Gender Justice, and the MenEngage Alliance.

31. IMAGES was developed by Promundo and the International Center for Research on Women, and it is the largest, most complex study ever on men's and women's practices and attitudes related to gender equality. This study was built on the pioneering work of the World Health Organization and inspired by the UN Multi-Country Study on Men and Violence.

32. Promundo analysis based on published IMAGES reports (https://promundoglobal.org/programs/international-men-and-gender-equality-survey-images/). Presented at SVRI 2019.

33. See, for example: Repetti, R. L., Taylor, S. E., & Seeman, T. E. (2002). Risky families: Family social environments and the mental and physical health of offspring. *Psychological Bulletin, 128*(2), 330–366.; Kaplan, S. et al (1999). Child and Adolescent Abuse and Neglect Research: A Review of the Past 10 Years. Part I: Physical and Emotional Abuse and Neglect. *Child & Adolescent Psychiatry 38*(10), 1214-1222.; Widom, C. & Brzustowicz, L. (2006). MAOA and the "Cycle of Violence": Childhood Abuse and Neglect, MAOA Genotype, and Risk for Violent and Antisocial Behavior. *Biological Psychiatry 60*(7), 684-689.; Lansford, J. et al (2007). Early Physical Abuse and Later Violent Delinquency: A Prospective Longitudinal Study. *Child Maltreatment 12*(3), 233-245.

34. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2017). *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment.* New York: UNDP.

prison.[35] Similarly, Abu Nidal (Sabri Khalil al-Banna), who was responsible for attacks in more than 20 countries, was neglected and humiliated as a child of his father's eighth wife, and lost both parents at the age of eight.[36]

Again, it must be affirmed that the majority of boys who experience similar adverse childhood events do not become terrorists or participate in lethal violence. Clearly, these childhood experiences must be viewed as powerful but not absolutely determinative events in the array of individual, contextual, situational, and structural factors that drive young men (and young women) to join violent extremist groups.

Perceptions among the general public support the idea that parents are instrumental in preventing violent extremism. For example, a quantitative study in Indonesia found that 86 percent of both male and female respondents believe that it's important or extremely important to have a "strong father" in the household, and 90 percent believe that it's important or extremely important to have a "caring father" in the household. Accompanying qualitative research found that these notions constituted a dichotomy between a strong disciplinarian father figure and a compassionate, caring one, and revealed a bias toward a disciplinarian father as head of the household and role model, especially for male children.[37] At the same time, women, as the primary caregivers of children, were seen as more influential in preventing violent extremism. Similar perceptions were found in the Philippines and Bangladesh.

Sense of inclusion and belonging – Qualitative research among Jordanian and Syrian youth in Jordan suggests that extremist groups provide a support system for youth who lack such support at home, and that peer influence can pull youth into violent extremist groups, as they join groups with their friends, or follow friends or family members who have already joined.[38] On the other hand, **close ties to family and friends have proven to be strongly protective against recruitment into violent extremist groups.** Youth in Nigeria who had a strong family influence, particularly those whose parents talked openly about Boko Haram with their children, were more resistant to recruitment.[39] Having strong social networks of friends and peers outside of their family also made youth more likely to resist. In Kosovo, the vast majority of survey respondents identified the family as the most important preventive factor against radicalization and entry into violent extremist groups.[40] These social and emotional ties may also provide psychological support that builds resistance by helping people deal with trauma and grief and manage strong emotions of anger and desire for revenge in healthy, nonviolent ways.

Notably, the United Nations' 2015 Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism states, "Membership in a [violent extremist] group also promotes a sense of belonging or relief from the burden of alienation, isolation, or anomie," though this phenomenon is not recognized as a gendered one.[41] Violent extremist groups – from Syria to Nigeria to the United States – can provide a sense of camaraderie and belonging missing from many young men's lives (as can other armed groups, whether conventional militaries, gangs, or other social groups for young men such as sports teams). Because many young men are socialized to deny emotion, be self-sufficient,

35.   Smith, J. *Home Grown: How Domestic Violence Turns Men Into Terrorists.* Quercus Editions: London, 2019.

36.   Ibid.

37.   Johnston, M., True, J., Gordon, E., Chilmeran, Y., & Riveros-Morales, Y. (April 2020). *Building a Stronger Evidence Base: The Impact of Gender Identities, Norms and Relations on Violent Extremism: A case study of Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines.* UN Women.

38.   Bondokji, N., & Harper, E. (2017). *Journey Mapping of Selected Jordanian Foreign Fighters.* Amman: West Asia-North Africa (WANA) Institute.; Ekpon, T. (2017). *The Role of Young People in Preventing Violent Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin: A contribution to the Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security mandated by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250* (2015). The Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) and The Centre for Sustainable Development and Education in Africa (CSDEA).

39.   Mercy Corps. (2016). *"Motivations and Empty Promises": Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth.* Mercy Corps.

40.   Goshi, A. & Van Leuven, D. (May 2017). *Kosovo-Wide Assessment of Perceptions of Radicalisation at the Community Level.* Republic of Kosovo.

41.   United Nations, General Assembly, *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: report of the Secretary-General,* A/70/634 (December 2015), available from https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674.

and avoid revealing vulnerability, male friendships are often forged around superficial concerns rather than the sharing of personal, emotional issues.[42] For many young men – especially young men who are ostracized or marginalized – a violent extremist group provides a sense of belonging and a space that satisfies the essential human need for connection.

It should also be noted, however, that many men who join violent extremist groups have already achieved marriage and fatherhood, showing that such connections are not necessarily enough to deter them. Many of the men profiled by Joan Smith had children, particularly infants, when they committed acts of terrorism, revealing a certain detachment from their existing personal connections. For these men, these family relationships seem to be more about achieving the status of husband and father than about emotional connectedness.[43]

Structural level factors

The United Nations has recognized that "countries that fail to generate high and sustainable levels of growth, to create decent jobs for their youth, to reduce poverty and unemployment, to improve equality, to control corruption, and to manage relationships among different communities in line with their human rights obligations, are more prone to violent extremism and tend to witness a greater number of incidents linked to violent extremism."[44] In many countries, indeed, **poverty and lack of economic opportunity increase the vulnerability of youth to extremist groups.** Salient and widespread gender norms that dictate that men and boys must provide for their families, and that women and girls must marry to ease the financial burden they place on their families, exert enormous pressure if such dictates are unable to be met. Climate change should be noted as an additional contributor to economic instability – particularly in contexts where agriculture is a main source of income – as drought, harvest failure, and rising sea levels reduce agricultural prospects. Pressure is also high for boys in families where fathers are absent as a consequence of war and death, or because the fathers are polygamous and unable to meet the needs of all of their families.

Lack of meaningful, achievable opportunities – The pressure of unemployment is particularly heavy for young men who complete their education and are unable to find jobs and fulfill their role as adult men. In the Lake Chad basin, former Boko Haram fighters have cited hopelessness and a lack of income-generation opportunities as the reasons they joined.[45] The promise of food and shelter, as well as higher incomes, drives young men to join extremist groups in the region. Anecdotal evidence from formative research conducted with former Boko Haram members in the Far North region of Cameroon shows that a combination of many factors contribute to their motivation to join, with poverty and lack of economic opportunity emerging as the most potent drivers.[46] In other regions in Africa, employment was most frequently cited by former extremists as the single most immediate need they faced at the time of joining extremist groups such as Boko Haram and al-Shabaab; individuals who were employed or enrolled in school took longer in their decision to join.[47]

Where men are expected to be financial providers for their families, the wages provided by violent extremist

42. Heilman, B., Barker, G., and Harrison, A. (2017). *The Man Box: A Study on Being a Young Man in the US, UK, and Mexico.* Washington, DC and London: Promundo-US and Unilever.

43. Smith, J. *Home Grown: How Domestic Violence Turns Men Into Terrorists.* Quercus Editions: London, 2019.

44. United Nations, General Assembly, *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: report of the Secretary-General,* A/70/634 (December 2015), available from https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674.

45. Ekpon, T. (2017). *The Role of Young People in Preventing Violent Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin: A contribution to the Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security mandated by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015).* The Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) and The Centre for Sustainable Development and Education in Africa (CSDEA).

46. Unpublished *Espaces Jeunes Pour La Paix* in Far North Cameroon formative research report

47. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2017). *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment.* New York: UNDP.

organizations can be attractive when employment is hard to find. Half of the respondents in a survey conducted by Monash University and UN Women in Libya agreed that "men should be willing to sacrifice their own well-being to provide financially for the women in their lives."[48] Former combatants in Syria, who were interviewed by International Alert, noted their lack of ideological interest in extremist groups, and pointed, instead, to the higher salaries paid by extremist groups as the motivation for their allegiance.[49]

It is important to understand that gender norms are supported and perpetuated by men and women alike, and thus there is a need to engage both men and women in efforts to transform these norms. In certain contexts such as Kenya and Somalia, some women support violent extremism by encouraging their sons to join in order to earn a salary and provide financially for the family.[50] In these contexts, the pressure to be a "real man," and the anxiety and humiliation of being unable to provide for one's family, can make extremist groups attractive – particularly if coupled with a sense of grievance against the greater structural forces that have caused one's lack of economic opportunity. These trends and factors are similar to those that lead young men to participate in armed groups in other contexts, as research on gang involvement in Latin America and in armed groups in sub-Saharan Africa has shown.[51]

Perceived loss and sense of entitlement – It is important to stress that **violent extremists come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, and a direct link between poverty and violent extremism should not be made.** In Kosovo, 43.8 percent of respondents

in a nation-wide survey believed economic incentives to be a main driver of violent extremism, in contrast with returned fighters' actual socioeconomic backgrounds.[52] This research points to a gap between public perception and the lived realities of people who join violent extremist groups. Likewise, a 2017 survey among the general population in Jordan found that seven percent of interviewees endorsed violent extremist groups. These seven percent were disproportionately male, aged 18 to 24 years, living in urban areas, classified as middle-class, and educated at the university or advanced level. It is clear that there is a dynamic at work that has more to do with frustration and perceived loss or deprivation due to a sense of entitlement, regardless of income level and ability to meet basic needs. Similar perceptions of injustice have been found among men participating in armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa, beyond the oversimplified "youth bulge" argument, among combatants of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, along with real economic and political grievances.[53] White extremist organizations in the US and Europe also rely upon this sense of entitlement – often of privileged white men – to recruit men who feel that they have lost what they think is rightfully theirs in a changing world in which they may no longer be the main breadwinners, their wives may be working outside the home, and their children may be circumventing parental authority.[54]

Lack of trust in public institutions – In addition to economic frustrations, **lack of faith in political institutions is widespread among populations vulnerable to recruitment into violent extremism.** In a quantitative UNDP study with former violent extremists and non-extremists in Africa, more than 50

48.   Johnston, M., True, J., & Benalla, Z. (2019). *Gender Equality and Violent Extremism: A Research Agenda for Libya.* UN Women.

49.   Aubrey, M., Aubrey, R., Brodrick, F., and Brooks, C. (2016). *Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight: Vulnerability and resilience to recruitment by violent extremist groups in Syria.* London: International Alert.

50.   El-Bushra, J., & Gardner, J. (2016) The impact of war on Somali men: feminist analysis of masculinities and gender relations in a fragile context. *Gender & Development 24*(3), 443-458.

51.   Bannon, I., & Correia, M. (2006). The Other Half of Gender: Men's Issues in Development. Washington, DC: World Bank.

52.   Goshi, A., & Van Leuven, D. (May 2017). *Kosovo-Wide Assessment of Perceptions of Radicalisation at the Community Level.* Republic of Kosovo.

53.   Bannon, I., Correia, M. (2006). The Other Half of Gender: Men's Issues in Development. Washington, DC: World Bank.

54.   Kimmel, M. (2018). *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into - and Out of - Violent Extremism.* Oakland: University of California Press

percent in all groups agreed with the statement, "The government only looks after the interests of a few." However, the difference between those who voluntarily joined extremist groups and those who did not join was stark: 83 percent of those who voluntarily joined violent extremist groups agreed, compared with 65 percent of the reference group of non-extremists. This inability to access halls of power – to be one of the "few" – is emasculating to men in a patriarchal society in which power is equivalent to manhood.

The provision of key services is one factor that contributes to how governments are perceived. Among the survey group who voluntarily joined violent extremist groups, 67 percent rated the government's success in providing education as "not at all/poor," compared with 41 percent of the reference group. Similarly, the voluntary group and the reference group rated the provision of healthcare as "not at all/poor" at 67 percent and 41 percent, respectively.[55] In such contexts, it is not surprising that extremist groups, including Boko Haram and ISIS, have gained supporters by providing services such as education and healthcare in places long neglected by national governments, and that men would ally themselves with power that allows them to provide for their communities and families.

Inability to voice dissent – Lack of access to political discourse leaves many young men feeling that there are limited avenues for expressing their frustrations with their government. In Nigeria, youth, in particular, cited the lack of access to government officials – limiting their ability to seek redress for grievances, request services, or influence political discourse – as a leading factor in the decision to join Boko Haram.[56] In fact, many communities supported opposition to what they saw as an ineffective government rife with corruption.

Adding to the underlying distrust of government are **the actions that state security forces take to combat violent extremism, which often involve violations of due process and human rights on a broad scale, leaving men unable to fulfill their socially mandated roles as protectors of their communities and their families.** Communities are often more afraid of state security forces than of violent extremist groups[57], and joining a violent extremist group may be a way for men to reclaim their role of male protector. Perceived or real support of these military actions by outside actors, such as the United States and the United Nations, can merge political grievances against foreign governments with those against one's own. Many violent extremists point to a specific government action that acted as a trigger or tipping point that, when combined with other factors, increased their motivation to join. These precipitating events included the killing or arrest of a family member or friend; experiencing or witnessing torture; unfair trials; and the loss of property.[58] These events deny men the ability to protect their communities and loved ones – and this loss can manifest as anger and the desire for revenge. When asked what emotions they felt upon their decision to join, male respondents in UNDP's quantitative study largely reported hope/excitement and anger, while female respondents reported fear, and to a lesser extent, hope/excitement.[59]

However, **political grievance alone cannot explain the motivation to join violent extremist groups, as many men and women opt to express their dissatisfaction through nonviolent means.** For those who choose to join violent extremist groups, their political grievances and lack of economic opportunity have often been twisted by extremist groups who seek to nurture, in their targets, a sense of emasculation and loss of the two

55. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2017). *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment*. New York: UNDP.

56. Mercy Corps. (2016). *"Motivations and Empty Promises": Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth.* Mercy Corps.

57. Cilliers, J. (2015). Violent Islamist Extremism and Terror in Africa. ISS Paper 286, October 2015. Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Security Studies.

58. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2017). *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment*. New York: UNDP.; United Nations, General Assembly, *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: report of the Secretary-General*, A/70/634 (December 2015), available from https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674.

59. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2017). *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment*. New York: UNDP.

pillars of heteronormative masculinity – the ability to form a family and the ability to protect and provide for one's family. Savvy recruiters manipulate some men into externalizing these frustrations into hateful anger and violence against those in power whom they blame.

Masculine norms and militarization – In a context of political grievance and limited economic opportunity, an existing militarized culture may paint violence as an acceptable and heroic way for men to express their frustration. In Syria, for example, military education is embedded in the Syrian curriculum, and two years of military service is compulsory for young men after graduation. In such cultures, where male military leadership is glorified, young men are primed to consider militaristic violence as a means to achieve status, and to be shamed by others for not engaging in violence.[60] Similarly, in militarized Libyan society, the inadequate processes of demobilization and reintegration of soldiers, combined with the lack of civilian employment, has led former soldiers to bring their skills to new militia and violent extremist groups.[61]

Men and boys in Western countries also actively participate in and encourage this glorification of male violence. Movies, television shows, and video games portray men gaining power and social status through violence, and often turn the male character from a "loser" into a powerful, avenging hero, which violent extremist organizations duplicate in their messaging.[62] Such methods are used to recruit men into extremist white nationalist groups in Europe and North America. Members of neo-Nazi groups in Germany and Sweden, for example, are often recruited through a specific street youth culture that provides an outlet for their rage and signals toughness through hardcore punk-rock lyrics, military-style clothing, and referring to themselves as "soldiers."[63] In the US and other countries, this militarized masculinity is often deemed necessary by white nationalist extremists to combat what they see as the rise of militant feminism that is upending the patriarchal structures from which white men have long benefited.[64]

60.   Khattab, L., & Myrttinen, H. (2017). *"Most of the men want to leave": Armed groups, displacement and gendered webs of vulnerability in Syria.* London: International Alert.

61.   Johnston, M., True, J., & Benalla, Z. (2019). *Gender Equality and Violent Extremism: A Research Agenda for Libya.* UN Women.

62.   Roy, O. (2017). *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of the Islamic State.* New York: Oxford University Press.

63.   Kimmel, M. (2018). *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into - and Out of - Violent Extremism.* Oakland: University of California Press.

64.   Greig, A. (2019). "Masculinities and the Rise of the Far-Right: Implications for Oxfam's Work on Gender Justice," Oxfam Research Backgrounder series: https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/research-publications/masculinities-and- the-far-right.

EXAMPLES OF PROGRAMS THAT AIM TO PREVENT VIOLENT EXTREMISM

While we cannot point to one overwhelming reason that people join violent extremist organizations, we have seen how a chain of interacting factors – at the individual, family, community, and structural levels – can combine with harmful, hyper-masculinist gender norms and gendered socialization to make some men and boys vulnerable to violent extremism. The following section explores a handful of programs that recognize these masculine norms to varying degrees and seek to prevent violent extremism by addressing them. It is important to understand where each program falls on the continuum of gender programming – that is, the extent to which each program acknowledges harmful gender norms and then accommodates or transforms them.

Gender-transformative approaches seek to promote gender equality through the transformation of stereotypical gender roles. Such approaches promote critical reflection on the way we are raised, and the expectations that are imposed on us and that we impose on each other as to how gender identity is performed; they seek to support all individuals in building relationships based on respect and equality, and to transform social structures, policies, and power dynamics that perpetuate disparities based on gender identity. Gender-transformative programs have mostly been implemented in the context of preventing gender-based violence (mostly men's violence against women) and in sexual and reproductive health, but have valuable lessons to inform programs working to prevent violent extremism.

Gender-aware approaches incorporate conscious analysis of potential gender-related outcomes during their design and implementation. Gender-aware programming is not necessarily gender-transformative. It can exist anywhere on the spectrum of 1) **gender-exploitative** (reinforcing gender inequalities and stereotypes in pursuit of project outcome); 2) **gender-accommodating** (acknowledging but working around rather than reducing gender inequalities to achieve project objectives); or 3) gender-transformative. In contrast, **gender-blind** programming does not examine gendered power dynamics and norms and their potential effects.

Youth Spaces for Peace in Far North Cameroon

What are the objectives of Youth Spaces for Peace?

In the Far North of Cameroon, with support from UNICEF Cameroon, the Living Peace Institute and Promundo-US (both members of the Promundo Global Consortium) partnered with local NGO ALDEPA to develop and implement the pilot of "Youth Spaces for Peace," a gender-transformative intervention targeting adolescents (aged 14 to 20) who have been in direct or indirect contact with non-state armed groups active in the region (such as Boko Haram). Inspired by Youth Living Peace, the intervention aims to promote gender equality and prevent private and public violence by engaging young people – in- and out-of-school – as agents of change in the promotion of peace and management of conflict through a combination of group education and community mobilization. Given the pervasive nature of armed conflict in Far North Cameroon, the intervention includes a particular focus on understanding the trauma that youth endure in the context of a prolonged armed conflict.

Who are the program participants?

The pilot targeted 150 youth (boys and girls aged 14 to 20) in Mora and Zamaï, in the Far North region, with a particular focus on former hostages and associates of Boko Haram, those internally displaced by Boko Haram, and youth from host communities (communities hosting internally displaced populations).

What does the program entail?

Over the course of fourteen weekly, 3-hour, same-gender group-education sessions, through personal questioning and critical thinking, the participants learn healthy mechanisms for coping with their experiences of violence. They also reflect on their gender identity, challenge long-held negative gender attitudes, and relearn to establish trusting relationships.

A further key component of the program involves the mobilization of the wider community to promote the sustainability of the changes that the participants have undergone and to encourage broader normative change. To that end, the fifteenth and final session of the Youth Spaces for Peace methodology consists of a community celebration that brings together members of the community – including community leaders – for speeches, songs, dance, performances, and stories of positive change from participants and their community members.

What is the impact of the program?

The results of the pilot showed that participants gained emotional maturity, as their self-esteem and confidence in their futures were significantly improved, their coping mechanisms were healthier, and their attitudes around gender norms were more equitable, including regarding household roles, couple decision-making, and violence against women and girls.

Where does the program fall on the gender continuum?

Youth Spaces for Peace is a gender-transformative approach that seeks to identify, challenge, and change harmful gender norms, relations, and power dynamics in order to promote gender equity and individual agency.

EXIT-Germany

What are the objectives of EXIT-Germany?

EXIT-Germany has been a successful deradicalization and disengagement program for neo-Nazis in Germany since 2000. EXIT-Germany offers alternatives to extreme right-wing ideology and encourages personal reflection in order to reject the movement.

Who are the program participants?

While each individual must make the decision themselves to leave extreme and violent right-wing environments – EXIT-Germany does not actively search for clients – the program provides participants with the support they need to successfully remove themselves from these environments.

What does the program entail?

Along with logistical aid to exit radical right-wing groups, EXIT-Germany offers referrals to mental health and employment services to assist members with rebuilding their lives. Critical reflection on their role within their former organizations and their past crimes is of paramount importance to the exit strategy. EXIT-Germany also partners with academic institutions in conducting research to provide a deeper, practice-based understanding of right-wing violent extremism in German society.

What is the impact of the program?

Over 500 individual cases have been successfully completed, with a recidivism rate of approximately 3 percent.[65]

Where does the program fall on the gender continuum?

While EXIT-Germany encourages reflection on one's life and choices, it does not specifically seek to alter the harmful gender norms that contribute to the conditions for participants' engagement in neo-Nazi groups in the first place. In recognizing men's need for employment and camaraderie, EXIT-Germany is gender-accommodating because it acknowledges the gender norms that men face, but the organization does not seek to change them.

HAYAT in Germany

What are the objectives of HAYAT?

HAYAT (Turkish and Arabic for "life") was established in 2011 as the first counseling program in Germany for individuals involved in extremist Salafist groups and their relatives. HAYAT seeks to intervene early to prevent people from joining violent extremist groups in Germany and abroad through emigration, as well as to assist their exit from them.

Who are the program participants?

HAYAT serves individuals involved in extremist Salafist groups and their relatives.

What does the program entail?

The approach, following the example of EXIT-Germany, provides a national hotline that allows concerned relatives and friends to express their concerns. HAYAT then conducts an initial analysis and risk assessment. If the person in question is deemed to be in potential danger of violent radicalization, an individual counseling plan is designed to halt the radicalization process. Counseling is offered in German, English, and Arabic. HAYAT, like EXIT-Germany, also acts as an intermediary between individuals and their families on one hand and institutions on the other, to provide access to education, social services, employment, and the justice sector, if desired.

What is the impact of the program?

While results of HAYAT are not widely published, anecdotal evidence from early in the program shows that some cases of emigration to join violent extremist organizations were prevented, while others were not prevented but were deemed nonviolent. Some early cases were closed successfully – meaning counseling was no longer needed – while others were ongoing at the time of evaluation.[66]

Where does the program fall on the gender continuum?

Like EXIT-Germany, HAYAT provides clients with the emotional support and brotherhood that they found in the violent extremist group, as well as employment and structure to help them envision a future. They find a community among fellow former extremists, as well as financial stability. By acknowledging these masculine norms but not seeking to change them, HAYAT is also a gender-accommodating program.

65.   EXIT-Germany. (2014). *We Provide the Way Out: De-radicalization and Disengagement. Revised Second Edition.* Berlin: EXIT-Germany.

66.   Koehler, D. (2013). *Family Counselling as Prevention and Intervention Tool Against 'Foreign Fighters'. The German 'Hayat' Program.* Journal EXIT-Deutschland.

Al-Firdaws Society in Iraq

What are the objectives of Al-Firdaws Society's PVE program?

In Iraq, the Al-Firdaws Society's work is originally rooted in protecting women and girls affected by war and strengthening their role in peace building. However, the PVE program was inspired by the founder Fatima Al-Bahadly, who found her teenage sons at risk for recruitment. The PVE program seeks to prevent radicalization, or intervene in the radicalization process, by providing alternative religious narratives and fostering connections to community for vulnerable youth.

Who are the program participants?

The Society works with male and female youth both before and after recruitment into violent extremist groups.

What does the program entail?

The Society began a PVE program that provided religious literacy and promoted young people's positive involvement in their communities and schools. However, there is not enough information publicly available on what this outreach to youth entailed.

What is the impact of the program?

In three months, the program had deradicalized and reintegrated 150 youths from violent groups.[67] This mobilization was possible given the Society's long-term presence and the trust it has earned in Basra.

Where does the program fall on the gender continuum?

There is not enough information on this program publicly available to classify it on the gender continuum.

ETTYSAL in Tunisia

What are the objectives of ETTYSAL?

In Tunisia, the Ending Terrorism Through Youth Service Action Locally program – or ETTYSAL, which translates to "reaching out" in Arabic – was adapted from a violence prevention program for youth at risk of recruitment into gangs in the US and Central America. Funded by the US State Department and implemented by Creative Services International, the program used individual and family counseling to build youths' resilience against violent extremism.

Who are the program participants?

The ETTYSAL program worked with youth aged 14 to 23 – gender unspecified – in the cities of Manouba and Kasserine, areas where violent extremist recruitment is extensive.

What does the program entail?

The program used a Youth Services Eligibility Tool to assess youths' vulnerability to recruitment, including factors such as social isolation, weak parental supervision, critical life events, risk-taking behaviors, and peer influence. Of 600 youth assessed with this tool, 100 deemed higher-risk – those who presented six or more of the 12 risk factors – were selected for the program, which provided individual as well as family counseling for a period of 12 months.

What is the impact of the program?

By improving family connectedness and individual resilience, the program reduced participants' feelings of resentment and marginalization. After completing the program, 95 percent of participants were evaluated as lower risk – showing fewer than six risk factors – by the Youth Services Eligibility Tool.[68]

---

67.   International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN). *ICAN's Innovative Peace Fund (IPF)* information available at: https://icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ICAN_IPF_2018.pdf

68.   Creative Associates International Project Overview available at: https://www.creativeassociatesinternational.com/past-projects/tunisia-ettysal/

Where does the program fall on the gender continuum?

While the ETTYSAL program took into consideration many of the factors that have been discussed in this paper – family connectedness, feelings of resentment, social isolation, adverse childhood events, etc. – there was no recognition of gender norms and their confluence with these other factors. The ETTYSAL program was therefore gender-blind.

The Mawada Project in Libya

What are the objectives of the Mawada Project?

The Mawada Project, a collaboration between the Libyan Program for Reintegration and Development and the Ministry of Social Affairs, was designed to assist former extremists to reintegrate into peaceful society and help facilitate broader socioeconomic rebuilding.

Who are the program participants?

The program was open to any ex-combatant over 40 years of age who is getting married and/or starting a family.

What does the program entail?

The program sought to provide financial aid for wedding costs and related necessities.

What is the impact of the program?

After identifying 4,500 eligible candidates, the program was put on hold due to political turmoil, so it has yet to be implemented.

Where does the program fall on the gender continuum?

The Mawada Project directed its effort to promote social and economic stability at a crucial component of men's identity – that of marrying and becoming the head of a family. The program recognized the centrality of marriage in this context to achieving employment, social recognition, and status, and how the cost of weddings can be prohibitively high. At the same time, the program does not necessarily question the underlying norm in which men (and women) are only valuable or valued in Libyan society when they marry. In acknowledging these gender norms and not seeking to challenge or change them, this program is gender-accommodating.

Important Considerations

While PVE programming is necessary, it is important to understand the sentiment that is often widely felt in communities toward the governmental or external actors that provide it. In their quantitative study in Africa, UNDP found that 48 percent of respondents who joined violent extremist groups were aware of PVE initiatives, but they identified distrust of those delivering these programs as one of the primary reasons for not taking part.[69] Another challenge in PVE programming is their assessment or evaluation. How is a PVE program shown to be successful? How do you measure the prevention of violent extremism? This difficulty may be one reason that many programs target individuals for deradicalization, rather than develop and implement broad, society-level prevention initiatives.

Nevertheless, there are decades of research and programming around violence prevention and community needs from which to draw lessons. There are clear similarities between the factors that make men and boys vulnerable to violent extremism and those that lead them into other violent groups, such as gangs. Research that explores the links between "public" urban violence, and forms of violence committed in the "private" sphere of the home, has found evidence of risk and protective factors at critical junctures in the

lives of boys and young men similar to those discussed in this paper.[70] In Jordan, Questscope's non-formal education (NFE) initiatives for out-of-school youth have been found to not only increase participants' reading, writing, and vocational skills, but also to improve their self-esteem, communication and conflict resolution skills, and hopes for the future.[71] In Lebanon, ABAAD – a leading women's rights organization that provides direct services to GBV survivors, as well as gender-transformative prevention programming in the country – through its Men's Centre also provides counseling and support to men and their families, to promote nonviolent behavior and relationships. In the Balkans, the Young Men Initiative led by CARE International Balkans – which began in 2007 as an adaptation of Promundo's Program H to transform attitudes and behaviors around gender, relationships, and violence – was found to increase boys' positive attitudes around gender equality, decrease violence-supportive attitudes, and improve attitudes of what it means to "be a man."[72] The program has expanded to be implemented in schools throughout the region, and an adaptation explicitly focused on preventing violent extremism among young people is currently being developed. It is clear that learning and applying these proven methods of engaging men and women can help in the development of successful and sustainable PVE programming.

69. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2017). *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment.* New York: UNDP.

70. Taylor, A.Y., Moura, T., Scabio, J.L, Borde, E., Afonso, J.S., Barker, G. (2016). *This isn't the life for you: Masculinities and nonviolence in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) with a focus on urban violence.* Washington, DC and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Promundo.

71. Questscope. (2018). *Final Evaluation Report of USAID NFE Program.*

72. Namy, S., Heilman, B., Stich, S., & Edmeades, J. (2014). *Be a Man, Change the Rules!: Findings and lessons from seven years of CARE International Balkans' Young Men Initiative.* Washington, D.C.: The International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Gender norms, and particularly masculine norms, have for too long been ignored in work on preventing violent extremism. While on a broader level, governments must work to expand meaningful education and employment opportunities for all, and eliminate corruption, exploitation, and other causes of political grievance, the recommendations that follow urge researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to understand and acknowledge that masculine gender norms play a key role in driving violent extremism – and, therefore, in preventing it.

- **First and foremost, carry out research, programming, and policy development that is gender-informed and gender-aware rather than *gender-blind* –** that is, programming that does not consider gender norms, power dynamics, and their potential effects. Recognize that gender norms – long-held beliefs and attitudes that individuals hold based on what is societally acceptable according to their gender – influence vulnerability to violent extremism, and challenging harmful gender norms directly is key to PVE.

- **Understand that violent extremism is one form on a continuum of violence and often interacts or co-occurs with other forms of violence.** Harmful masculine norms have clear links to multiple forms of violence, but more nuanced research is needed on the links between different forms, such as men's perpetration of intimate partner violence and violent extremism, and men's experiences as victims of public violence (such as that committed by security forces) and violent extremism. Specifically, it is important to move beyond the simplistic assumption that the co-occurrence of GBV and participation in violent extremist groups is the same as causality.

- **Go beyond considering women when applying a gender lens, and bridge the gap between "youth"**
and "women." Currently, the majority of work on violent extremism and its prevention focuses either on the role of youth – a term often used to mean young men – or the role of women. Further gender- and age-specific research that examines the different motivations, recruitment methods, and roles of men, women, boys, and girls in violent extremism is needed, as well as subsequent programming and policy.

- **Draw lines of collaboration between the PVE and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agendas, for their mutual benefit, ensuring the equal participation of all voices that promote peace and equality.** While this paper primarily focuses on men and masculine gender norms in order to fill a gap in the PVE field, it is crucial to recognize the decades of peace-building work that women-led organizations have undertaken. Greater collaboration and streamlining between seemingly parallel paths can amplify impact and avoid any unintended negative consequences.

- **Recognize involved, nonviolent fatherhood as an entry point.** While adverse childhood experiences – particularly the intergenerational transmission of violence – may contribute to individuals' vulnerability to violent extremism, this intergenerational cycle also occurs with positive childhood experiences. Supportive family networks can be strongly protective against violent extremism by providing psychological support and emotional ties, particularly when parents speak openly and honestly to their children about violent extremist groups.

- **Provide spaces for youth – particularly young men – to gather and reflect on their own experiences of violence, learn healthy coping mechanisms, and challenge their long-held harmful gender attitudes. Build on the success of psychosocial support models for children who have experienced or witnessed**

violence.[73] Building on the importance of psychosocial support models for individuals who have witnessed or experienced violence, the pressure on young men to be a "real man" – which often equates to financially providing for and physically protecting the family – can be intense and the goal unattainable, particularly in contexts of conflict or insecurity. Peer groups can be important influences in changing gender norms and deepening the social ties that build resilience to violent extremist recruitment.

- **Engage religious leaders, including imams, priests, and rabbis, in increasing religious literacy and reimagining religious institutions as key sites for the prevention of radicalization.** Violent extremist organizations skew religious doctrine by depicting themselves as glorious protectors of family and community to draw in those wanting to fulfill unattained masculine norms. Religious literacy programming and large-scale messaging campaigns can provide an accurate foundation of religious understanding that is more difficult for extremists to manipulate.

- **Ensure that programming aimed at shifting gender socialization patterns and promoting healthy masculinity is multifaceted in order to address the confluence of family, school, media, and entertainment.** Teachers and school administrators should be empowered to challenge rigid, traditional gender messages, while gender-transformative parenting programming should support both mothers and fathers in raising sons and daughters in an equitable, nonviolent manner. Such programming by itself does not directly prevent violent extremism, but it addresses many of the underlying causes discussed in this paper, and can provide a space for identification of young men who are more susceptible to the pull of violent extremism. PVE programming can draw on the experiences of organizations around the world that for years have been questioning patriarchy and promoting healthy masculinities.[74]

- **Engage male security personnel, including senior officials and decision-makers, in more than simple tokenistic advocacy efforts,** but rather in programming to transform their own behaviors and the dominant masculine norms that perpetuate violence. This means, for example, engaging military leaders and decision-makers in proactive discussions about promoting healthy masculinity by reflecting on their own power dynamics.

- **Move away from the use of military actions against specific groups, which often act as "trigger points" for those targeted to become engaged in or more supportive of violent extremism.** Experiences of injustice, discrimination, corruption, and abuse by security forces act as driving factors for joining violent extremist groups. Traditional aggressive CVE actions can have the reverse effect of their intent, instead facilitating violent extremism by marginalizing and alienating key groups. States must earn citizens' trust by moving away from repressive, violent means and toward holistic, community-centered solutions to prevent violent extremism.

- **Take a constructive, aspirational approach by promoting positive and healthy narratives of men and boys who resist harmful gender norms and choose nonviolence and peace.** While many programming and advocacy efforts underscore the negative aspects of life in a violent extremist organization, it is equally important to highlight positive examples of men who embody nonviolent, equitable attitudes and behaviors, to demonstrate to men and boys who are vulnerable to radicalization and violent extremism that there are alternative paths. These narratives are important to document and share, within settings where young men may be more likely to join violent extremist groups, as well as in Western countries where leaders and policymakers often label or view young men from specific Muslim-majority countries as inherently prone to violent extremism.

73. Promundo and Sonke Gender Justice. (2018). *Breaking the Cycle of Intergenerational Violence: The Promise of Psychosocial Interventions to Address Children's Exposure to Violence.* Washington, DC: Promundo-US and Cape Town: Sonke Gender Justice.

74. See, for example, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at: https://menandboys.ids.ac.uk/emerge and the MenEngage Alliance at http://menengage.org/.

CONCLUSION

In traditional approaches to violent extremism, there has been little acknowledgment of the ways in which entrenched gender norms, particularly the expectations imposed on men and boys, influence violent extremist groups' strategy and success. Such acknowledgment, in PVE programs and policies, would benefit not only those men and women directly impacted by extremist violence, but broader society by challenging the structures of power and violence that support GBV and gender inequality.

It is crucial to understand that masculine norms are intersectional, i.e., that they are interconnected and linked with other identities, such as race, ethnicity, sexual identity, religion, and socioeconomic status. These identities have been discussed in connection with violent extremism – the ways in which gender and other identities shape motivations, experiences, and risk factors for those who choose or do not choose to become involved in violent extremist groups. Failure to conform to societal expectations associated with one's gender – of young men to become providers, and of young women to become obedient wives and child-bearers – is a potent contributing factor in individuals' vulnerability to violent extremism, and exerts particular pressure in the absence of achievable alternative aspirations. The pressure on young men to be a "real man" by financially providing for and physically protecting the family can be intense, and the goal unattainable, particularly in contexts of conflict or insecurity.

Although international bodies and policy frameworks have stressed the need to address the root causes of violent extremism for decades, they have yet to do more than acknowledge the importance of the roles that women and girls play in preventing violent extremism. While a focus on women and girls is essential given both their greater vulnerability to violence perpetrated by violent extremist groups and their growing participation in such groups, men and boys continue to represent the overwhelming majority of those recruited into extremist groups and carrying out extremist violence. Because of this, it is crucial to look deeper into the reasons women *and* men join such groups, and, in particular, into the ways in which men's and boys' everyday gendered identities are constructed, and then manipulated for recruitment purposes.

It is also important to note that while the vast majority of violent extremists are men, the vast majority of men are not engaged in violent extremism; indeed, many are vocal advocates against it. Around the world, there are examples of men and boys – community leaders, fathers, religious leaders, peace activists, youth, and others – who, alongside women and girls, resist harmful gender norms and advocate for nonviolent masculinity. While many programming and advocacy efforts underscore the negative aspects of life in a violent extremist organization, it is equally important to lift up positive examples of men who embody nonviolent, equitable attitudes and behaviors, to demonstrate to men and boys who are vulnerable to radicalization and violent extremism that there are alternative paths.