

## 5. Transforming Ideology and Restoring Identity

Violent extremists target both hearts and minds, and weave ideology into their discourse, tailored to each audience. There are multiple frameworks for understanding the role of ideology in violent extremism, and its related role in disengagement and/or deradicalization. The use and perversion of religious ideology or ethnic supremacy to justify violence is often prevalent. But the effectiveness of violent extremists' radicalization tactics often rests on their ability to tailor and construct a mix of religious and political ideologies with economic and social issues that are of relevance to each potential recruit.

Therefore, many disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes also focus on ideological change. While prevention policymakers are averse to intervening in people's beliefs, due to valid concerns over freedom of conscience and expression, when it comes to deradicalization there is an understanding of the need for "initiatives that strengthen critical thinking, dialogue and acceptance of diversity and that challenge the legitimacy of violence as a means of pursuing ideological or political objectives."<sup>168</sup>

Without holistic, individualized, and gendered assessment of returnees, these programmes will be ineffective as they may overestimate the role of ideological motivations and neglect structural, material and other psychological drivers. In Nigeria, for example, Neem Foundation tested a comprehensive risk assessment tool with 1,500 children returned from Boko Haram and found that identity, not ideology, poses the most significant challenge.<sup>169</sup>

Individuals associated with violent extremist groups are motivated by diverse factors; women and girls are no different. While women and girls have largely been framed as victims or associates without agency, experience shows that those women who are genuinely convinced of the ideological narratives and goals of violent extremist groups can often be more resistant to "de-radicalization" or ideological transformation than men.<sup>170</sup>

For example, in Indonesia where returnees are required to sign a pledge that they recognize the Indonesian state and will respect its laws, the women who are ideologically hardened and refuse to acknowledge secular authorities have been more reluctant to sign than men with similar views.<sup>171</sup> This finding echoes across regions, as practitioners from Tunisia and Nigeria relate parallel experiences.<sup>172</sup>



*Women learn religious interpretations and alternative narratives that support peace*

Ultimately holistic programmes that draw not only on religion, but also identity, purpose, culture and history, and integrate meaningful and dignified livelihoods opportunities, are much more effective than those that treat ideological beliefs as divorced from the rest of the individual's circumstances.

<sup>168</sup> UNODC. (2017). Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System. Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

<sup>169</sup> Dr. Fatima Akilu, GSX Oslo Workshop, April 2018.

<sup>170</sup> Interview with Mira Kusumarini, April 2018.

<sup>171</sup> Interview with Mira Kusumarini, April 2018.

<sup>172</sup> GSX Oslo Workshop, April 2018.

## Gendered (dis)empowerment

Gender plays a role in the marginalization, disempowerment and frustration that often contribute to individuals' vulnerability to violent extremist recruitment. For women and girls, gender inequality factors into this, in some cases causing them to join as an alternate path to empowerment and an escape from the gendered norms of their family, community or society.

Violence against women is another factor in the recruitment of women and girls in both developing contexts like Nigeria and developed contexts such as Muslim minority communities in Europe and North America. However, as Hamsatu Allamin remarked, "Until societies face the realities of gender-based violence and inequalities, they will remain a compounding factor in driving the radicalization of women and girls."<sup>173</sup>

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Violent extremist groups, despite their misogyny across the board, offer women and girls forms of power and privilege unavailable in their own lives. Promising utopia, recruiters tap into the pain and hopes of individuals with thwarted aspirations in a world where unattainable dreams are evident to them thanks to modern communications technologies, exacerbating perceptions of very real inequalities and discrimination. Explaining these inequalities through a prism of ideology, recruiters use religion, identity, culture, and politics to weave a narrative that disassociates vulnerable individuals from their communities and society, and presents the violent extremist group as a viable alternative and a community that offers respect, belonging and purpose, as well as economic opportunities in some cases. Lack of religious literacy, often disproportionate among women and girls, compounds their vulnerability to ideological narratives of violent extremist groups. In some cases, the promise is a complete illusion, in others—such as the wives of commanders in Boko Haram and the women who served as morality police under ISIL—the power, recognition, and comfort enjoyed by some women and girls associated with violent extremists is very real. They often miss this power upon their return, especially when, as Hamsatu Allamin shared, "No one is finding a better society when they come back."<sup>174</sup>

The struggle faced by women and girl returnees is compounded as they are stigmatized for presumed perpetration of violence. Yet they need to tell their stories and share the negative impacts on them in order to heal and to inform society. Reflecting on the experiences in Uganda with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), Gladys Canogura noted that until the women and girls are recognized as human beings in society, they will not be able to rehabilitate themselves and reintegrate into the communities.<sup>175</sup>

Combating stigma is part of the work CSOs are doing to lay the groundwork for effective reintegration in receiving communities (see Chapter 4 on Community). Women's organizations' strategies include forming networks of returnees to speak for themselves. In Uganda, for example, KIWEPI has supported women and girl returnees to demand rights as former combatants and victims of forced recruitment as children and victims of sexual violence.<sup>176</sup> In Nigeria, the Allamin Foundation has established two victim-led networks in the northeast, one of the families of victims of terrorist attacks and one of the mothers of victims of enforced disappearance. Yet even with such support, solidarity, and advocacy, many women and girl returnees cannot openly talk about their experiences. The trauma of sexual violence is profound and complex as survivors can feel shame and humiliation as well as guilt for having survived while others did not. As a result, ideological rehabilitation must be coupled with psychosocial services (See chapter 7 on Coping with Trauma).

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<sup>173</sup> Interview with Hamsatu Allamin, April 2018.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Interview with Gladys Canogura, Executive Director of the Kitgum Women's Peace Initiative (KIWEPI) in Uganda, April 2018 in Oslo, Norway.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

## *Purpose, meaning and belonging: What do we offer? What are we for?*

The ideological narratives of recruiters for violent extremist groups, religious leaders and laypeople alike, are emotionally charged and appeal to the very human pursuit of meaning in one's life. Whether centred around political, spiritual, or personal issues, these ideologies target the individual on the emotional level. In interviews with 900 women in Pakistan, 40 percent remarked how compelling a certain extremist preacher was, convinced that the researchers would understand if only they came and listened.<sup>177</sup> This "quest for significance" as Dr. Mia Bloom referred to it, can be very potent.<sup>178</sup> The question for prevention strategies is what kinds of interventions and social dynamics can influence individuals to take pro-social pathways when enraged by injustices or if feeling a lack of purpose. Or, as Dr. Fatima Akilu has asked, "What can replace what these radicalized women had when they were part of an extremist group?"<sup>179</sup>

Research has found that pro-social involvement is especially effective as a reintegration method. Those who have sought out "voluntary, sustained, and ongoing helpfulness" over a sustained period prove less likely to reoffend. Pro-social activities and skills help instil a "higher purpose" that individuals often sought by joining a violent extremist group in the first place.<sup>180</sup> Here again local civil society organizations are often pioneering targeted programmes. For example, in Pakistan, PAIMAN has fostered a community-based peace architecture comprised of volunteer peace groups or TOLANAs of formerly radicalized or vulnerable youth and women, working in consort with local authorities, traditional leaders, and police.<sup>181</sup> In southern Iraq, Al Firdaws Society demobilizes children and youth from militias through engaging them in painting churches, repairing school buildings, entertaining children in the hospital, and giving blood, as a better way to serve their community and affect positive change.<sup>182</sup> Working with returnees to embrace and normalize pro-social behaviours such as community service, volunteerism, and non-violent activism, civil society actors are able to channel the anger and desire for change that drives many to join violent extremist groups in the first place.



*Women peacebuilders in Iraq engage the military to address security issues from a gender perspective*

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*"What can replace what these radicalized women had when they were part of an extremist group?"*

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<sup>177</sup> Remarks of Mossarat Qadeem, GSX Oslo Workshop, April 2018.

<sup>178</sup> See the works of Maria Stephan such as: Maria Stephan (2016), *Defeating ISIS Through Civil Resistance?* (available at: <https://www.usip.org/blog/2016/07/defeating-isis-through-civil-resistance>) and Maria Stephan (2009), *Civilian Jihad: Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization, and Governance in the Middle East* (available at: <https://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9780230621404>).

<sup>179</sup> Niguidula, G. (2017), *Women and De-Radicalization*. Georgetown Security Studies Review.

<sup>180</sup> USIP (2017), *Deradicalizing, Rehabilitating, and Reintegrating Violent Extremists* (available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/11/deradicalizing-rehabilitating-and-reintegrating-violent-extremists>.)

<sup>181</sup> Remarks by Mossarat Qadeem, GSX Oslo Workshop, April 2018.

<sup>182</sup> Interview with Fatima Al-Bahadly, 2018.

## Religious legitimacy

States and international organizations are often not the best actors to convey alternative narratives or programming aimed at transforming ideologies, as they likely lack the religious or political legitimacy in the eyes of returnees, including in countries where religious and state authority are bound together.<sup>183</sup> This is also true for women and girls who have been forcibly recruited, abducted and or lived under occupation and may see the government as having failed to protect and rescue them.<sup>184</sup> Moreover, even if the state's religious education is legitimate, there is no one-size-fits all approach in tackling returnees. For example, in Malaysia, rehabilitation programming is exclusively in the hands of the government, which engages primarily in religious education, but some participants were not adherents to extremist ideology; rather, they were motivated by other reasons.<sup>185</sup>

Practitioners in Indonesia found that sending preachers to work with returnees can be counter-productive unless the individuals are ready to open up, as the violent extremist group has touched people on a very personal level. Many CSOs lack the internal capacity to tackle extremist religious ideologies. Often, they don't have existing working relationships with religious institutions that could provide religious mentoring and education. However, religious organizations and institutions responding to violent extremism, including returnees, often lack capacity to address and thus neglect the many other interrelated non-ideological factors of disengagement and rehabilitation. Partnerships across these sectors that leverage complementary skills and resources are key to effective programming, but love and emotional support are as critical as religious re-education for effective ideological rehabilitation. There is also an urgent need to prepare female religious counsellors to address the needs of women and girls that poses yet another challenge, especially in societies with enforced gender segregation where religious authority and learning rests largely with male leaders.



*Youth in Pakistan celebrate their cultural heritage and promote peace*

<sup>183</sup> Cockayne, J., & O'neil, S. (2015), UN DDR in an Era of Violent Extremism: Is It Fit for Purpose?

<sup>184</sup> Interview with Gladys Canogura, GSX Oslo Workshop, April 2018.

<sup>185</sup> Consultation with Malaysian researcher, 2018.