



Role of Toxic Masculinity in Violent Extremism

Looking at PVE through the lens of gender is necessary for transformative and sustainable peace. Violent extremist groups differ in ideology and operations – but almost all seek to recruit disillusioned young men. Thinking about PVE in the context of gender often excludes discussion of the connection between masculinity and violent extremism. Discussions of gender in preventing violent extremism have narrowly focused on women without looking at the role of men. Women are regarded as either victims or perpetrators. Examining violent extremism and its prevention is incomplete without investigating how masculinity is understood and enacted amongst these groups.

Violent extremist propaganda, across political and religious spectrums, often equate masculinity with violence, control, and aggression. Workshop experts Houda Abadi, an associate director at The Carter Center, and Arno Michaelis, a former white supremacist and current peace educator, began the workshop by deconstructing toxic masculinity and the role it plays in violent extremism. Abadi introduced the session by explaining that if

an untenable moral and legal situation – hundreds of foreign terrorist fighters and their wives and children have been detained in Kurdish-controlled Syria or by the Iraqi government. Very few have been repatriated to their home countries, as those countries lack the political will to repatriate them. Where reintegration programs exist, they are untested. Processes of disengagement and deradicalization remain poorly understood. Houry stated that the problem of returnees is “not a future problem, but a present one.” In addition to the hundreds of unreturned fighters and their families held in Iraq and Syria, Houry noted that France has imprisoned approximately 20 returned foreign fighters who are slated for release in 2018-19, but has no rehabilitation programming in place. Other countries are facing similar situations, and the international community and its legal institutions are at a loss for dealing with this pressing issue.

Children brought to, or born in, Daesh territory present a particularly urgent moral and legal dilemma for the international community. According to Abadi, Daesh recruited local and foreign children to engender, validate, and solidify an intergenerational culture of violence and religious extremism. Children are used extensively in Daesh’s propaganda, both in a bid for legitimacy as a state, and as victims and perpetrators of graphic violence. Daesh uses opportunities to mobilize support and prey on children in schools, mosques, town squares, and markets. To recruit foreign children, Daesh offers adventure, a sense of purpose, and the image of a pristine Muslim society. Children play a variety of roles in Daesh’s organization and are systematically desensitized to violence from an early age; military themes are incorporated into early education, followed by military training and the witnessing of public executions. Of the roughly 7,000 who have returned, almost 17 percent – or some 1,200 – are children¹. Such children are in a precarious legal position. They are increasingly viewed as a security threat by their states of origin and refused entry. Often, for those born in the “Caliphate,” parentage is unknown or unprovable, and the lack of rehabilitation programming is acute.

To gain greater insight into the challenges and complexity of dealing with returnees, Abadi led a simulated case study that broke participants into teams, each with a prescribed role, to develop policy recommendations on whether the women and children in Daesh territory should be repatriated. Participants noted how difficult it was to balance security and humanitarian concerns and gained a greater appreciation for the different perspectives as they assumed a role they may not typically play. One participant, a religious leader from the United States, pointed out how unprepared countries are for this situation and “how poor the institutions are in the United States

when she said that “the concerns of civil society are different from the interests of the government. We need to find a way to bridge these interests.”

To illustrate some successful rehabilitation programs, Mossarat Qadem shared with participants the PAIMAN rehabilitation program in Pakistan. She noted that PAIMAN uses a community-led peace model. It is done outside of prison, is voluntary, and is heavily personalized and individualized. Qadem emphasized the importance of a holistic approach to reintegration that includes programs at the individual, family, and community levels. Programs can be designed to provide returnees with access to education, life skills, employment, and psychosocial support. Reintegration efforts also must focus on addressing cultural and ethical norms alongside religion, and must ultimately address economic livelihood. Qadem said PAIMAN has rehabilitated over 1,400 former Taliban fighters to date.

Participants celebrated PAIMAN’s work but worried about the applicability of the PAIMAN model to their own contexts. Most worried that working with security services is not desirable or possible in their own contexts and expressed concern about programs that focus on deradicalization and the way deradicalization intersects with Islamophobia in the discourse and public policy of Western states.

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