



This quick-read guide provides an explanation of how gender issues can prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE), guidance on how to design gender-sensitive counter-narratives, and a case study of gender-sensitive P/CVE programming in **Box 17**.

This guidance consists of excerpts from UK Government guidance on gender and P/CVE.⁵⁹

Why does gender matter?

Violent extremism organisations (VEOs) have long recognised the importance of gender in:

- their communications and propaganda activities;
- their recruitment methods;
- how they manage their organisations and any territory they hold; and
- in how they plan and undertake operations.

VEOs also strategically target men, women, boys, girls and SGMs for gender-based violence (GBV) to aid their causes. They also use GBV perpetrated by government security forces and other relevant actors to mobilise support.

For example, in contexts where young men struggle to achieve manhood through traditional means (e.g. through a job or marriage), VEOs appeal to their sense of emasculation and offer men a way to reclaim their manhood through fighting.

Similarly, VEOs have recruited women by appealing to notions of 'hyper-femininity'⁶⁰ (e.g. to mobilise them to protect their children and themselves) or by appealing to their aspirations of living a society where Muslim ideals, including those of feminine behaviour, can be realised.

To prevent and counter violent extremism effectively, it is therefore crucial that we also:

- recognise and respond to the ways that gender impacts on individuals' identities and agency;
- understand how this relates to their grievances, opportunities, resilience and vulnerabilities in contexts where VEOs operate; and
- become aware of the multitude of roles that women and men play in both violent extremism and P/CVE.

This will make our P/CVE work more effective and equitable, help us avoid harm and allows us to build long-term peace and security by promoting gender equality and women's human rights.

“CVE programming is implicitly gendered, but overtly gender blind.”⁶²

**Box 17. Case study of gender-sensitive counter-narratives⁶³**

UK Government partners have taken a number of steps to ensure that their P/CVE counter-narratives work is gender-sensitive; and that it addresses the specific concerns and vulnerabilities of different types of men and women in their target communities and audiences. Following formative research... the implementing partner (IP) found that some of the women in their target audiences were not using their social media platforms due to a lack of electricity and internet coverage; not having access to smartphones; and/or not feeling safe online to discuss pertinent issues without receiving online harassment and abuse (with the potential for this to become offline violence).

Reacting to these findings, the IP refined the way they covered gender issues online that some may consider taboo (e.g. women's empowerment, sexual violence by VEOs). They set up a closed conversation for women on their social media platform, making it a women-only, online safe-space that was highly curated. Through using snowball targeting (where participants are encouraged to invite other women from their peer group or family), over 3,500 women now use this online space to regularly and openly discuss the issues they find most relevant, such as women in Islam, GBV, domestic violence and the gender agenda of VEOs. The platform also enables women to go through learning modules and facilitated discussions on P/CVE issues.

To ensure the project reaches the most vulnerable women and men, the IP has also established women and men's groups, trainings, social 'cafes'; and workshops offline in hard-to-reach locations. In these settings, expert facilitators hold community conversations around relevant issues such as men's roles/masculinities in their post-war context; psychological trauma; and how vulnerable women can get involved in small scale early recovery projects in their community that increase their feelings of inclusion and belonging; and ultimately resilience to VE.

Six ways to design gender-sensitive messaging on P/CVE

- 1. Recognise the gendered narratives of VEOs and respond with an alternative or counter narrative about gender.** Seek to understand how VEOs tap into women and men's gender identities and roles as part of their propaganda and recruitment strategies (see **Part I**, section 1.1. for examples).
- 2. Challenge myths about gender** as part of your alternative and counter-narratives work **to help promote universal values and gender equality. VEOs often promote myths and disinformation about GBV, what gender equality means and the negative effects of gender equality programming**, with far-reaching implications. For example, across Central and Eastern Europe, XRW VEOs use Cold War ideologies of corrupt European states to increasingly develop and mobilise individuals around an 'anti-gender' discourse, which argues that gender equality is an anti-family, pro-gay and anti-life ideology.
- 3. Highlight disparities and hypocrisies between VEOs narratives and reality** to help reduce the credibility of and debunk VEO narratives **on gender**. Different men and women within VEOs sometimes share their societal and social norms, but may also deviate from them. VEOs often fail to fulfil the promises they make to communities around gender issues (e.g. protecting women from GBV, women making a significant contribution to their communities, or men gaining honour and glory due to their VE activities) leaving male and female recruits feeling disillusioned. Women who produce and disseminate VEO propaganda about the need for rigid, traditional gender roles and women's confinement to the private sphere also don't always uphold these roles themselves.

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4. **Recognise the importance of women in disseminating VEO propaganda and ideology.** This includes recruiting other women and encouraging men to join VEOs. Strategic communications programming can **respond to this by tapping into peer networks to promote and support men and women who spread messages of peace and tolerance.** Young men and women in particular may have specialist knowledge of the communications/media/social media environment and be best placed to engage effectively with P/CVE initiatives operating in this space.
5. **Give a voice to women** in alternative and counter-narrative work. This includes identifying potential risks as well as the opportunity to design key messages and assess their likely effectiveness. Strategic communications interventions can also help **amplify credible women's voices** that promote peace, tolerance and non-violent community activism.
6. Avoid messaging that promotes or strengthens harmful gender norms and stereotypes (see **Quick-read guide: changing harmful social norms** (page 77) and **Quick-read guide: communications content development** (page 87)).

See the UK Government's guidance on gender and P/CVE for further recommendations on gender-sensitive P/CVE programme design, including guidance on how to promote the participation and leadership of women in developing P/CVE strategies.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Edited text taken from: UK Government (2019). *UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2018-2022 – Implementing Strategic Outcome 6: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism.*

⁶⁰ United States Institute for Peace (2015), op.cit

⁶¹ For more analysis on gender roles and violent extremist groups, see Ladbury, S. (2015) *Women and Extremism: the Association of Women and Girls with Jihadi Groups and Implications for Programming.* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0897fed915d622c000245/61578_Women-Extremism-Full-Report.pdf [Accessed on 25/10/2019]

⁶² Satterthwaite, M (2014), 'Missing indicators, disappearing gender: Measuring USAID's programming to counter violent extremism'; in Satterthwaite and Huckerby (Eds), (2014), op.cit, p.82.

⁶³ Based on: UK Government (2019). *UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2018-2022 – Implementing Strategic Outcome 6: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism.*

⁶⁴ UK Government (2019). *UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2018-2022 – Implementing Strategic Outcome 6: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism.*