# GENDER DIMENSIONS OF THE RESPONSE TO RETURNING FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS:

## RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

# CTED TRENDS REPORT FEBRUARY 2019

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## Executive Summary

- The available data paints a complex picture of the women who travelled to the conflict zone of Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, with respect both to their regions of origin and demographic backgrounds (which appear more diverse than previously suggested). However, knowledge gaps remain as many Member States do not consistently record gender-disaggregated data on FTFs.

- Researchers estimate that only four per cent of all recorded returnees from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic are women and that those women account for around five per cent of women who travelled to the conflict zones. These figures suggest an urgent need for closer analysis of the reasons why women are not returning; ways to facilitate their return in a human rights-compliant manner; and the fate of those who have returned.

- There is very limited knowledge about the women who remain in the conflict zone. Researchers warn that a significant number of foreign citizens, including women, may have been left behind in the conflict zone, potentially overburdening judicial capacities and detention facilities. Another concern is the fate of local women and girls who lived in ISIL-occupied territory. How their situation is handled will have important implications for long-term peacebuilding in the region.

- Whereas most research on gender and terrorism has focused on the role of women, new approaches to studying masculinities provide a more nuanced understanding of gendered practices and their relation to both male and female radicalization to violence. Unpacking these gender dynamics and their underlying power structures will be an important avenue for further research.

- Gender appears to impact how individuals are recruited to terrorism, with women more likely to be recruited online than offline. Yet, there is a limited understanding of the most effective ways to counter gendered messages online.

- Research suggests that women tend to receive more lenient treatment in the criminal-justice system, based on (often false) gendered assumptions about their limited agency. An important corollary of these findings is that women also tend to receive more limited rehabilitation and reintegration support, thus putting them at potentially greater risk of recidivism and re-radicalization and potentially undermining their successful reintegration into society.

## Scope of Report

The present report was prepared by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED)[1] in accordance with Security Council resolution 2395 (2017), which reaffirms the essential role of CTED within the United Nations to identify and assess issues, trends and developments relating to the implementation of Council resolutions 1373 (2001), 1624 (2005) and 2178 (2014), and other relevant resolutions.

Council resolution 2395 (2017) also recognizes CTED's relationships with, inter alia, academia; think tanks; and international, regional and subregional organizations, and notes their value in promoting an analysis of emerging threats, trends and developments.

The present report seeks to provide counter-terrorism policymakers, practitioners and experts with an analysis of the latest research into some of the challenges presented by one such trend: **the gender dimensions of the response to returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs).** Council resolutions 2242 (2015) and 2395 (2017) task CTED to gather gender-sensitive research on the drivers of radicalization to terrorism for women and on the impacts of counter-terrorism strategies on women's human rights and women's organizations. The report primarily draws on the work of academia and think tanks (particularly members of CTED's Global Research Network (GRN)),[2] but also includes information from international, regional and subregional organizations.

*This report is for informational purposes only and does not necessarily represent the views or official positions of CTED, the Counter-Terrorism Committee or any of its members.*

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[1] Guided by Security Council resolutions 1373 (2001) and 1624 (2005), the Counter-Terrorism Committee works to strengthen the capacity of United Nations Member States to prevent terrorist acts, both within their borders and across regions. It was established in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States. The Committee is assisted by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), which carries out the policy decisions of the Committee, conducts expert assessments of Member States, and facilitates the delivery of counter-terrorism technical assistance.

[2] The GRN – a network of over 100 leading research institutions from across the globe - helps CTED keep abreast of emerging terrorism and counter-terrorism trends. See September 2018 GRN newsletter for further information.

# Introduction

In recent years, women's support for, and participation in, ISIL's activities has generated growing attention. Women's radicalization to political violence and terrorism is nothing new per se, but ISIL's success in recruiting women has been remarkable in several ways, including in terms of the sheer numbers; the geographical diversity of the women; and the new policy challenges that have emerged as a result of this unprecedented level of mobilization.

The Security Council has responded to these developments by introducing a range of provisions that require Member States to consider the different roles played by women, analyse the drivers of their radicalization, and devise gender-sensitive counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) responses which take into account the impact on women's human rights.[3] With regard to FTFs, including returning and relocating FTFs and their families, the Council specifically:

- Recognizes the "many different roles, including as supporters, facilitators, or perpetrators of terrorist acts" that women play, which "require special focus when developing tailored prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies, and stresses the importance of assisting women and children associated with foreign terrorist fighters who may have been victims of terrorism, and to do so taking into account gender and age sensitivities."[4]
- Calls on Member States to develop risk assessment tools for individuals who show signs of radicalization to violence, including with a gender perspective.[5]
- Encourages Member States, as well as international, regional and subregional entities, to ensure participation and leadership of women in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of strategies for returning and relocating FTFs and their families.[6]
- Encourages Member States to develop gender-sensitive counternarrative strategies in the prison system.[7]

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[3] See resolutions 2178 (2014), 2242 (2015), 2395 (2017) and 2396 (2017).
[4] Resolution 2396 (2017), para. 31.
[5] Resolution 2396 (2017), para. 38.
[6] Resolution 2396 (2017), para. 39.
[7] Resolution 2396 (2017), para. 40.

- Highlights the importance of empowering women (as well as all other concerned civil society groups) in CVE efforts.[8]

Further guidance on the implementation of these measures is provided by the recently adopted Addendum to the Madrid Guiding Principles.[9] A gender perspective is also integrated in CTED's assessments of Member States' implementation of Security Council counter-terrorism resolutions and its recommendations for technical assistance.

At the same time, a fast-growing body of research continues to provide new insights into this complex phenomenon and offers entry points for a more nuanced understanding of gender and the role of women in terrorism beyond the issue of FTFs.

This Trends Report presents the latest research findings across four key gender dimensions of the FTF phenomenon:

I.     Numbers and Demographics
II.    Drivers of Radicalization
III.   Gendered Narratives
IV.    Implications for Counter-Measures

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[8] Resolution 2178 (2014), para. 16.
[9] https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/addenda_madrid_guiding_principles_as_adopted_27_december_2018.pdf

# I. Numbers and Demographics

Women's participation in terrorism is nothing new. Research has estimated that women represent, on average, between 10 and 15 per cent of a terrorist group's membership.[10] However, it has proven challenging to establish the number of women associated with ISIL. Numbers alone are not the main reason why the gender dimension must be looked at. However, incomplete knowledge of the numbers seriously impedes our ability to understand and counter the unique threat posed by women and to offer the appropriate support. This section will focus on what is known about the number of women who travelled to the conflict zones and their demographics. It will consider three categories of women associated with ISIL: women who travel, women who return, and women who remain.

## Women travellers

Assessing the role of women in ISIL has been hampered by a lack of primary data. As a result, it is difficult to be certain about the number of women who travelled to the conflict zones, their countries of origin, and other key demographic data.

A recent report, based on the most detailed dataset available to date, estimates that up to 4,761 (or 13 per cent) of those who travelled to Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic were women.[11] There were, however, some notable regional differences. Eastern Asia contributed the highest proportion of women to its FTF population (35 per cent), followed by Eastern Europe (23 per cent), Western Europe (17 per cent) and the Americas, Australia and New Zealand (17 per cent); Central Asia (13 per cent) and South-Eastern Asia (13 per cent), Southern Asia (12 per cent), Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (6 per cent), and Sub-Saharan Africa (<1 per cent). This regional variation may partly be the result of context-specific "push and pull" factors, but also reflects incomplete data-gathering. **Because many States do not record gender-disaggregated data on FTFs, it is difficult to obtain a full picture of the scale of the phenomenon.**

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[10] Hilary Matfess and Jason Warner, 'Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operations and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram's Suicide Bombers,' Combatting Terrorism Center, August 2017; Katherine Brown, 'Blinded by the explosion? Security and resistance in Muslim women's suicide terrorism,' in Laura Jober, Caron E Gentry (eds), *Women, gender and terrorism*, University of Georgia Press, 2011.

[11] Joana Cook and Gina Vale, 'From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State,' International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2018.

A range of case studies have also revealed that the demographic backgrounds of women who travelled to ISIL territory are more diverse than has often been suggested.[12] This diversity included:

- A wide age spread (which contradicts the stereotype of only very young women and girls being 'duped' to join ISIL)

- Different marital statuses (with many women marrying or remarrying during their radicalization)

- Different levels of education, including a significant number of women with senior high school diplomas (which suggests that, as in many other cases, there is no direct causality between terrorism and low education)

*Figure 1: Number of foreign ISIL affiliates in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic*



75% 13% 12%
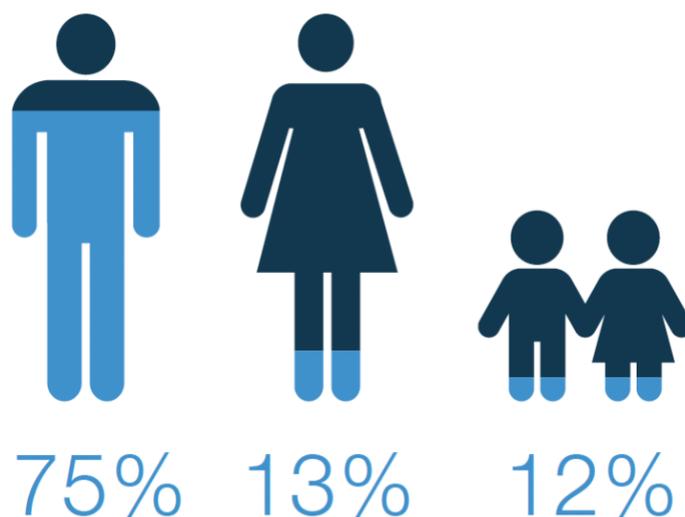
Total foreign IS affiliates in Iraq and Syria: 37,497 – 41,490
Foreign female IS affiliates in Iraq and Syria: 4,162 – 4,761
Foreign minor IS affiliates in Iraq and Syria: 3,704 – 4,640
Confirmed children born in Iraq and Syria: 730

*Source: ICSR*

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[12] See Brian Dodwell and Daniel Milton, 'Jihadi Brides? Examining a Female Guesthouse Registry from the Islamic State's Caliphate,' *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 11:5, May 2018; Nava Nuraniyah, 'Not Just Brainwashed: Understanding the Radicalization of Indonesian Female Supporters of the Islamic State,' *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 30:6, 2018; Audrey Alexander, 'Cruel Intentions: Female Jihadists in America,' George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2016.

## Women as returnees[13]

FTFs have been returning from the conflict zone more slowly than originally expected.[14] A significant recent research finding is that women are returning at a considerably lower rate than both men and children.[15] **It is estimated that, of a total of 7,366 recorded FTF returnees, only 256 (four per cent) were women, and that those women accounted for around five per cent of women who had travelled to Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic**.[16] Again, there are regional differences. Whereas the proportion of women who have returned to South-East Asia is around 28 per cent, only 8 per cent of women have returned to Western Europe.

Although the reasons for the lower rate of return among women are not fully known, several factors are believed to contribute to this phenomenon:

- Like their male counterparts, female affiliates often surrendered their passports upon arrival in the conflict zone, as a sign of dedication to ISIL
- Women were often unable to travel freely without a male guardian, making the opportunity to escape and return more challenging (particularly for those with children)
- Some women were required to pay large fees to human traffickers to facilitate their departure[17]
- It has also been reported that some countries may be prioritizing the return of children, with some preferring that their adult citizens (including women) be prosecuted in the region.[18]

These findings pose many significant questions, from both the research and policy perspectives. They suggest the need for closer analysis of the reasons why women are not returning; ways to facilitate their

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[13] No research on female relocators is currently available.

[14] *See* 'The Challenge of Returning and Relocating Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Research Perspectives,' United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, March 2018.

[15] Cook and Vale, 'From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State.'; Adrian Shajkovci and Anne Speckhard, 'Beware the Women of ISIS: There Are Many, and They May Be More Dangerous Than the Men,' *Daily Beast*, 21 August 2017.

[16] In contrast, 1,180 (17 per cent) of total returnees were minors, and those minors accounted for around 25 per cent of minors who had travelled to, or had been born in, Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. Cook and Vale, 'From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State.'

[17] *Ibid*., p. 47.

[18] CTED-UN-Women research symposium, 18 July 2018.

return in a human rights-compliant manner; and the fate of those who return. **It would be essential for Member States to ensure that collection of data on all returnees and relocators is gender-disaggregated, so as to permit a fuller understanding of the scope of the problem, as well as a more tailored response.**

*Figure 2: Number of returnees to countries of departure*



79%    4%    17%
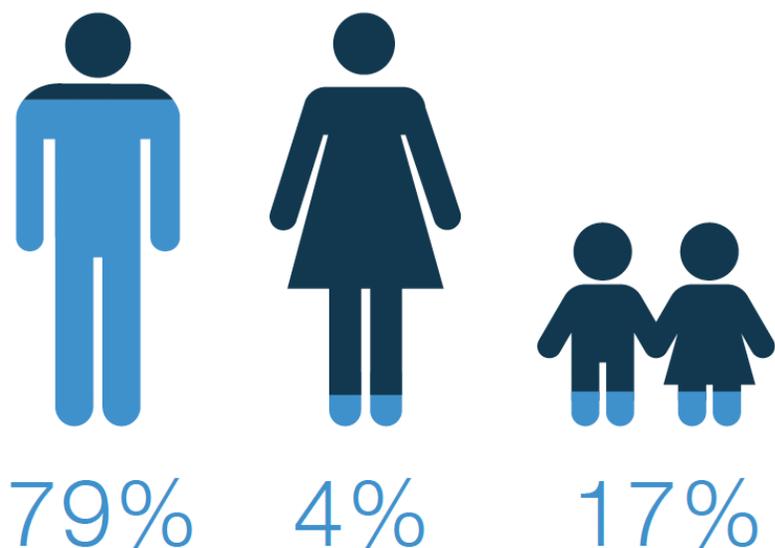
Total returnees from Iraq and Syria: 7,145 – 7,366

Female returnees from Iraq and Syria: 256

Minor returnees from Iraq and Syria: 411 – 1,180

*Source: ICSR*

## Women who remain

The situation of women who remain in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic is understudied. **Given the low number of female returnees, there is an urgent need to understand what happens to those who stay.** Researchers warn that some countries may be opting to leave their citizens, including women, in the conflict zone, potentially overburdening local judicial capacities and detention facilities, increasing the risk of

human rights violations and sowing the seeds of potential further radicalization.[19] This situation could exacerbate future ISIL-related threats and, more generally, threaten the long-term recovery and stability of the region.

Even less is known about the fate of local women who lived in ISIL-occupied territory and might have been associated with, or supported, the group in various ways, whether or not on a voluntary basis. **The treatment of these women has important implications for the development of prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration approaches and long-term peacebuilding in the region.** Although research on this issue remains limited, several important challenges have been identified:

- There appears to be a risk of blanket stigmatization of all individuals associated with ISIL, whether as combatants, civilian employees, family members, or merely residents of ISIL-controlled territory. Such stigmatization is reported to have hindered the restoration of trust and social cohesion in areas retaken from ISIL.[20]
- Women and girls who married ISIL members, as well as their children, often encounter difficulties in returning to their former communities after the cessation of conflict, even if their husbands or parents are dead or missing.[21]
- In many cases, wives and children of ISIL fighters were themselves victims of ISIL's violence and may have been coerced into facilitating crimes. However, it has been reported that judges and prosecutors are not taking these mitigating circumstances into account.
- Even family members of ISIL personnel who are not found guilty by a court may still be punished by administrative processes that exclude ISIL-affiliated persons from important social services and benefits.[22]

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[19] Cook and Vale, 'From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State.', p. 49.
[20] Mara Redlich Revkin, 'After the Islamic State: Balancing Accountability and Reconciliation in Iraq,' *The Limits of Punishment: Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism*, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, May 2018, p. 51.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 53.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

## II. Drivers of Radicalization

Researchers and analysts suggest that many social, political, economic, ideological and personal motivations drive individuals to join terrorist organizations. Those motivations play out differently, depending on the local context and individual factors.

### Gender stereotyping

Early attempts to explain ISIL's appeal to women tended to portray them simply as 'jihadi brides' who travelled to the conflict zone for romance and adventure. They also tended to focus on personal or emotional motivations and put an emphasis on manipulation and coercion, in line with a long-standing tendency in research and policy to ascribe rational motivations to men, and emotional motivations to women.[23]

Empirical evidence has shown that such interpretations of female motivations are problematic for a number of reasons. Many authors note that the emphasis on the personal plays to stereotypes and depoliticizes female violence. This not only denies women agency and fails to acknowledge their perceived grievances, but also leads to dangerous gaps in the security response.[24] **If policy-makers ignore the variety of women's motivations in favour of stereotypes, this will limit the reach of any policy designed to counter or prevent their involvement in violent extremism**.[25] Likewise, communities may find female radicalization more difficult to detect because it contradicts their own assumptions and norms about how women should behave.[26]

These attitudes also have a gendered "flipside". Research into community perceptions shows that men and boys are ascribed greater agency in their radicalization process and criticized for making the wrong choices.[27] Whereas women are infantilized and not taken seriously, and the risk that they pose is underestimated, men and boys are subjected to harsher judgments that ignore their vulnerabilities and dismiss the level of manipulation that they may have experienced. There is some evidence to suggest that these attitudes carry over into the criminal-justice system (as will be discussed below).

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[23] Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*, Zed Books, 2007; Mia Bloom, *Bombshell,* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.
[24] Anne Jacobs, 'The Evolution Of Women In The Islamic State,' Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 26 September 2017.
[25] Sofia Patel, 'The Sultanate of Women: Exploring female roles in perpetrating and preventing violent extremism,' Australian Strategic Policy Institute Special Report, 2017.
[26] Elizabeth Pearson and Emily Winterbotham, 'Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation,' *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 162:2, 2017, p. 65.
[27] *Ibid*.

## Common drivers

More recent research has shown that the drivers of female radicalization do not tend to differ from those of men. Those drivers include political and economic factors, as well as personal and psychological factors. Women living in different contexts, with different life experiences and needs, and different individual trajectories join terrorist groups. The local drivers of radicalization can vary significantly from those that apply to FTFs. Human rights violations by State actors, including those that result from the adverse effects of counter-terrorism measures themselves, are another powerful factor driving individuals towards radicalization. A recent United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) study into drivers of extremism in Africa states that the "tipping point" to radicalization for 71 per cent of the individuals surveyed was State abuse of law or human rights, making State action "the primary factor finally pushing individuals into violent extremism in Africa".[28] Similarly, civil society leaders in many conflict-affected countries have stated that lack of trust and negative experiences with law enforcement drive the corrosion of state legitimacy and generate grievances that contribute to radicalization.[29] Violations of women's human rights, including violence against women, are believed to be an important driver of women's participation in terrorism, even though they remain understudied.[30]

To summarize: **the broad appeal of ISIL to a range of different women is clear, but their motivations for travelling to the "caliphate" are not uniform and cannot be countered by "one size fits all"' policies.**[31]

## The role of masculinities

Whereas it is increasingly established that the drivers of radicalization (including political, economic, ideological and personal factors) do not differ substantially for men and women, there is nonetheless a gender dimension to radicalization, which applies to both men and women. Recent research seeks to address

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[28] United Nations Development Programme, 'Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment,' 2017, p. 73.
[29] Allison Peters, 'Countering terrorism and violent extremism in Pakistan: why policewomen must have a role,' The Institute for Inclusive Security, March 2014.
[30] Jayne Huckerby and Fionnuala Ni Aolain, 'Gendering Counterterrorism: How to, and How Not to – Part II,' Just Security, May 2018.
[31] Patel, 'The Sultanate of Women: Exploring female roles in perpetrating and preventing violent extremism.'

this more nuanced understanding of gender, unpacking how gender roles within society and communities are central to radicalization of both men and women.[32]

**Most research on gender and terrorism has focused on the role of women. However, an analysis of masculinity is also important to an understanding of male and female extremism.** The issue of masculinity has been largely absent from mainstream discussion of radicalization, with the exception of occasional references to a "crisis of masculinity" and "toxic masculinity".[33] Some researchers have suggested that young men are more likely to be lured into joining extremist groups when they are struggling to fulfil their perceived needs and identities as men, and that **analysis and policies must therefore incorporate (or "men-stream") considerations of masculinities in order to truly address the root causes of radicalization.**[34] However, several authors warn that such efforts should not be used to stigmatize certain groups of men, in particular young Muslim men.[35]

Masculinity is not just about men; it is also about understanding the power structures and gendered practices that serve to subordinate women and men. Research suggests that violent extremists often draw on concepts of violent masculinity as an outlet for disempowerment, resentment and marginalization.[36] Concepts of masculinity are therefore crucial to an understanding of why both male and female extremism are shaped by structural factors that affect group dynamics, as much as by agency.[37]

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[32] Pearson and Winterbotham, 'Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation,' p. 62.
[33] Pearson, 'Why Men Fight and Women Don't: Masculinity and Extremist Violence, p. 12.
[34] Jossif Ezekilov, 'Gender "Men-Streaming" CVE: Countering Violence Extremism by Addressing Masculinities Issues,' *Reconsidering Development,* Vol. 5:1, December 2017.
[35] Pearson, 'Why Men Fight and Women Don't: Masculinity and Extremist Violence;' Michael Kimmel, *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into and Out of Violent Extremism,* University of California Press, 2018.
[36] Kimmel, *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into and Out of Violent Extremism.*
[37] Pearson, 'Why Men Fight and Women Don't: Masculinity and Extremist Violence,' p. 16.

## III. Gendered Narratives

ISIL has proven highly adept at using gendered messaging in its recruitment of both men and women. Its messaging towards women, often carried out by female recruiters, is far more complex than the cliché that joining the so-called "caliphate" is a pious calling. Analysis shows that, in Western societies, the messages often tap into a narrative of alleged "disrespect" shown to Muslim women:

> *"approaching other women in person or through social media, [these recruiters] assert that Muslim women are viewed in the West solely as victims, supposedly oppressed by their own communities and mocked (or worse) by those outside them. […] Hijab-wearing women are told they'll never escape the label of terrorist so long as they remain in North America or Europe."*[38]

ISIL's English and French propaganda materials sought to project messages of female empowerment, geared specifically towards Western women whom they hoped to entice to travel to the conflict zone.[39] More research is needed on other local contexts and on the ways in which ISIL tailored its messaging to appeal to women in other parts of the world.

Yet, the gendered dimensions of ISIL's online propaganda concern more than tailored messaging towards potential female recruits. **There is a growing body of research into gendered messages aimed at men and, in particular, the use of pejorative and submissive notions of womanhood to reinforce ideas about masculinity.** Lahoud finds that ISIL's strategic messaging glorified violence against women, prioritized men's rights over those of women, and imposed strict limitations on women's role in society.[40] Other research shows that ISIL frequently uses women and children in its propaganda to convey messages of emasculation and shame to male audiences.[41]

Understanding these gendered dynamics has implications for counter-narratives. This is particularly important, since **research suggests that, compared to men, women are more likely to be recruited online than offline.**[42] In many cases, this has to do with gendered norms regulating public and private life. Women's lack of access to public spaces, for example, makes female offline radicalization more

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[38] Heather Hurlburt and Jacqueline O'Neill, 'We need to think harder about terrorism and gender. ISIS already is,' vox.com, 1 June 2017.
[39] Nelly Lahoud, 'Empowerment or Subjugations: An Analysis of ISIL's Gender Messaging,' UN Women, June 2018.
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] Alejandro Beutel and Krystina Perez, 'From WWI to ISIS, Using Shame and Masculinity in Recruitment Narratives,' National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 1 June 2016.
[42] Pearson and Winterbotham, 'Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation,' p. 66-67.

challenging. Nonetheless, **research into effective ways to counter gendered messages remains limited.** Several researchers note that the response so far lags behind ISIL's skilful and manipulative use of gendered narratives.[43] Lahoud suggests that, if the desire for empowerment and adventurism drives women to join ISIL, then counter-messaging initiatives should demonstrate that, in ISIL's worldview, neither empowerment nor adventurism are on offer for women. Others suggest that counter-narrative campaigns lack references to positive female experiences and role models.[44] Moreover, insufficient attention is paid to constructing alternative notions of masculinity.[45]



*Positive male role models.*
*Source: ReliefWeb Credit- Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam*

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[43] Hurlburt and O'Neill, 'We need to think harder about terrorism and gender. ISIS already is.'
[44] Patel, 'The Sultanate of Women: Exploring female roles in perpetrating and preventing violent extremism.'
[45] Kimmel, *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into and Out of Violent Extremism*.

## IV. Implications for Counter-Measures

A more nuanced understanding of the gender dimensions of radicalization, as well as of the different roles played by women and men within ISIL, has important implications for the design of counter-measures and prevention strategies.

### Risk assessment

Security Council resolution 2396 (2017) calls on Member States to develop risk-assessment tools for individuals who show signs of radicalization to violence, including with a gender perspective. Research suggests that such risk assessments have often been hampered by gender bias. Male returnees are typically considered to have acquired combat experience and skills, despite mounting evidence that some men play supporting roles with no direct involvement in combat.[46] Men are therefore assumed to pose a higher threat on return. In turn, the gendered assumption that women lack agency can have serious security implications by letting dangerous actors slip through the cracks.[47]

Women play diverse roles in terrorist groups, including as perpetrators, recruiters, propagandists, ideologues and supporters. In some situations, women who at first were victims become perpetrators, whether to improve their situation, through personal relationships, or as a result of indoctrination to radical ideas.[48] It is therefore essential to bear in mind that **there is no simple binary between victim and perpetrator** and that women engage in extremist violence in complex ways. There is, for example, ample evidence that women play important roles in ISIL's recruitment and propaganda activities. **Researchers warn that, even if women do not fight, they can still spread radical ideas and encourage others to commit attacks.** This has important implications for risk assessments, including in prison settings.[49]

It is therefore clear that female returnees, like their male counterparts, represent a range of roles and experiences. Case-by-case assessments of returnees must therefore take into account both the risks and needs of individuals, depending on their specific experiences and circumstances.

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[46] Amandine Scherrer, Cecilia Isaksson, Francesco Ragazzi and Josh Walmsley, 'The return of foreign fighters to EU soil,' European Parliamentary Research Service, May 2018, p. 36-37.

[47] Christien and Turkington, 'Women, Deradicalization, and Rehabilitation: Lessons from an Expert Workshop,' p. 3.

[48] Agathe Christien and Rebecca Turkington, 'Women, Deradicalization, and Rehabilitation: Lessons from an Expert Workshop,' Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, April 2018, p. 3.

[49] Rachel Bryson, 'The Complex Challenge of Female ISIS Returnees,' Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, March 2018.

## Prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration

Changes in the definition and criminalization of acts of terrorism, introduced in the FTF context, have had profound effects on women. The growing focus on a range of support acts, in addition to violent acts, has led to increased convictions of women who engaged in such behaviour as terrorist offenders. Europol's 2016 EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report found that the share of women arrested on terrorism charges rose from 18 to 26 per cent between 2015 and 2016.[50]

Research into country case studies in Europe and North America has shown that many Member States struggle with the investigation and prosecution of women associated with ISIL. However, there have been signs of evolving investigation and prosecution practices, driven by a growing understanding of the roles played by female returnees from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. Whereas it was often assumed that female travellers were passive victims of male FTFs, insights into their various roles have resulted in more frequent criminal investigations and prosecutions.[51]

Despite this evolution, research into judicial proceedings reveals a continued gender bias with regard to sentencing practices, with women accused of providing material support to terrorists groups receiving comparatively lenient sentences based on the assumption that they were duped under false pretences.[52] These studies suggest that, in some regions of the world at least, women may receive more lenient sentences while men tend to receive harsher sentences based on gendered assumptions about their more deliberate choices and higher level of aggression. An important corollary of these findings is that women also tend to receive more limited rehabilitation and reintegration support.[53] **Because women are, sometimes falsely, believed not to pose a significant threat, they may not receive the necessary rehabilitation and reintegration support, thus putting them at potentially greater risk of recidivism, re-radicalization and potentially undermining their successful reintegration into society.**

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[50] European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016. The 2018 Report states that this percentage dropped again between 2016 and 2018 (to 16 per cent), although it is not clear whether this is connected to the low rate of female returns, lack of proper data (no gender data was reported for more than 400 out of a total of 1219 arrests) or some other factor. Both reports are available at: https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports.

[51] Scherrer et al., 'The return of foreign fighters to EU soil,' p. 45-46; Rik Coolsaet and Thomas Renard (eds.), 'Returnees: Who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them? Assessing Policies on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands,' Egmont Paper 101, February 2018.

[52] Christien and Turkington, 'Women, Deradicalization, and Rehabilitation: Lessons from an Expert Workshop,' pp. 3-4; Audrey Alexander and Rebecca Turkington, 'Treatment of Terrorists: How Does Gender Affect Justice?' *CTC Sentinel,* Vol. 11:8, September 2018.

[53] *Ibid*.

More broadly, there continues to be a limited understanding of best practices and most effective methods in the rehabilitation and reintegration of women FTFs. Experiences in other contexts have shown, for example, that socio-economic reintegration and opportunities are a key factor for success, but that such programmes are more commonly offered to men than to women. A case study of women who returned to Boko Haram after completing disengagement programmes suggested that poverty, social marginalization and lack of socio-economic opportunity were key factors.[54] Similarly, research into gender and gangs finds that women's employment outcomes following short prison sentences are three times worse than those for men.[55] Because former women gang members commonly cite employment as an important source of assistance in the disengagement process, it has been recommended that prison systems improve jobs training programmes for women.[56]

A particular challenge relates to women who have experienced sexual violence at the hands of terrorist groups (including those who have been kidnapped or trafficked). The stigma of sexual violence often leads to alienation and social isolation for women returnees. Anecdotal evidence indicates that public support from religious leaders or other community leaders can reduce the stigma and thus contribute to reintegration efforts.[57] The problem remains, however, that to date there have been no cases of prosecution for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) committed by terrorist groups.[58]

**More research, including impact evaluations, will be required to better understand gender-specific needs and vulnerabilities in this area and avoid gender bias that potentially both compromises security and neglects the needs of women**.

## Implications for CVE

Incorporating gender into CVE strategies is a complex task. The participation of women in CVE efforts is seen as an essential component of efforts to address radicalization at the community level, as well as a way to empower women. Thus far, however, many initiatives have failed to bring out women's full potential as powerful agents of change within society.

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[54] Hilary Matfess, 'Rescued and deradicalised women are returning to Boko Haram. Why?' *African Arguments*, 1 November 2017.
[55] Christien and Turkington, 'Women, Deradicalization, and Rehabilitation: Lessons from an Expert Workshop,' p. 5.
[56] *Ibid.*
[57] *Ibid.*
[58] *Report of the Secretary-General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence,* S/2018/250 (23 March 2018).

Analysis has shown that gendered assumptions underlie many CVE programmes. Based on such assumptions, it is often believed that women are inherently more peaceful than men and that, if empowered to do so, they can stop radicalization to violence. Many schemes have focused on mothers who are considered to be in a unique position to detect signs of radicalization in their children. Such approaches have been criticized by a number of researchers.[59] Brown questions both the gendered and racialized assumptions that women are guided by a maternal instinct and that women, particularly Muslim mothers, are more present in the home and can therefore detect signs of radicalization in their children.[60] Others question why CVE programmes do not engage fathers. There is no conclusive empirical evidence to support the claim that mothers are best positioned to detect and counteract early signs of radicalization. Lastly, it has been noted that **focusing on women's roles as mothers can undermine efforts to promote the empowerment of women in their various roles in society and thus undermine women's efforts to achieve gender equality.**[61]

Several other researchers have observed that current CVE practices risk shifting responsibility away from the State to civil society, and to women in particular. This, they argue, not only instrumentalizes women and frequently puts them at risk; it also suggests a flawed understanding of the causes of radicalization.[62] In view of the role played by State action (especially human rights violations) as a driver of radicalization, strengthening good governance should be a priority. Women's effective participation in CVE offers opportunities for their empowerment. However, it should not be seen as a substitute for giving women greater say in formal governance institutions, including the security sector.

Researchers also warn of a negative funding impact on women's rights organizations. Many women's civil society organizations (CSOs) struggle to secure funding for women, peace and security work unless it is tied to CVE. There is therefore a risk that the CVE agenda will be imposed on them, potentially

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[59] Emily Winterbotham, 'Do Mothers Know Best? How Assumptions Harm CVE' Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, September 2018; Sophie Giscard d'Estaing, 'Engaging women in countering violent extremism: avoiding instrumentalization and furthering agency,' *Gender and Development*, Vol. 25:1, 2017.

[60] Katherine E. Brown, 'Gender and Counter-Radicalisation: Women and Emerging Counter-Terror Measures,' *Gender, National Security and Counter-Terrorism*, ed. Jayne Huckerby and Margaret L. Satterthwaite (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013) cited in Winterbotham, 'Do Mothers Know Best? How Assumptions Harm CVE'.

[61] Fionnuala Ni Aolain, 'Situating Women in Counterterrorism Discourses: Undulating Masculinities and Luminal Femininities,' *Boston University Law Review* 93, 2013.

[62] Giscard d'Estaing, 'Engaging women in countering violent extremism: avoiding instrumentalization and furthering agency.'

instrumentalizing and securitizing local peacebuilding initiatives.[63] The prioritization of CVE over other peacebuilding work also has an impact on funding opportunities for academic research.[64]

Given the range of gender-focused criticism of current CVE practices, researchers suggest that effective and gender-sensitive CVE programming requires a paradigm shift.[65] Such a shift would require women to be involved in the decision-making, design and implementation processes of CVE policies and programmes at all levels, so as to ensure that women are agents and leaders, rather than just subjects, in CVE. Researchers (and policymakers) also note that evidence-based research into the impact of CVE policies, in general, and as they relate to gender, specifically, remains scarce.

## The role of the security sector



*Policewomen from the Afghan National Police train at a police training centre in the capital, Kabul.*
*Source: United Nations Photo*

Researchers emphasize that building inclusive security and law-enforcement institutions by recruiting more women and elevating them into decision-making positions must be prioritized within an overall counter-

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[63] Anna Möller-Loswick, 'The countering violent extremism agenda risks undermining women who need greater support,' Saferworld, 26 April 2017; Duke Law International Human Rights Clinic and Women Peacemakers Program, *Tightening the Purse Strings: What Countering Terrorism Financing Costs Gender Equality and Security* (2017).
[64] 'Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism and WPS: Concepts, Practices and Moving Forward,' LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security Key Issues Report, August 2017.
[65] Patel, 'The Sultanate of Women: Exploring female roles in perpetrating and preventing violent extremism.'; Giscard d'Estaing, 'Engaging women in countering violent extremism: avoiding instrumentalization and furthering agency.'

terrorism and CVE framework.[66] In order to be effective, local and national security forces require community trust. In many cases, not only is such trust missing, but abuse by the military and police is a driver of extremism.[67] To strengthen trust between police and communities, police forces must be representative of, and have access to, the populations under their protection. They must also reduce corruption and abuses committed by security actors. Policewomen are vital to enhancing counter-terrorism and CVE efforts because they are more likely to reduce the occurrence of human rights abuses, access marginalized communities, limit the use of excessive force, and more efficiently deescalate tension.[68] Guidance on gender and security sector reform (SSR) recommends that gender training for security-sector personnel should address masculinities and men's understanding of themselves in order to challenge the "cultures of violent masculinity" that are often prevalent within the armed forces and the police.[69]

Without sufficient female police or military officers to conduct searches, engage with women at the community level, or access the population of returned women fighters, serious security gaps will persist. Women police officers can reach certain marginalized populations from which their male counterparts may be prohibited or may not easily access. Policewomen can conduct body searches of women and girls at checkpoints in a culturally appropriate way. Policewomen are also able to collect different information about security threats owing to their access to spaces to which men are traditionally denied access. The development of a more diverse security sector, paired with the provision of training for security forces on men and women's complex roles in violent extremism is therefore also critical to enhancing the operational effectiveness of police forces.[70]

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[66] Peters, 'Countering terrorism and violent extremism in Pakistan: why policewomen must have a role.'
[67] *Ibid*.
[68] Rafia Bhulai, Allison Peters and Christina Nemr, 'From Policy to Action: Advancing an Integrated Approach to Women and Countering Violent Extremism,' Global Center on Cooperative Security, June 2016.
[69] Megan Bastick and Kristin Valasek (eds.), 'Gender & Security Sector Reform Toolkit,' Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DECAF), https://www.dcaf.ch/gender-security-sector-reform-toolkit.
[70] Christien and Turkington, 'Women, Deradicalization, and Rehabilitation: Lessons from an Expert Workshop,' p. 7.

# Conclusions

The FTF phenomenon, including the issue of returnees and relocators, will likely remain on the counter-terrorism agenda of Member States and the international community for many years to come. The role of women poses unique challenges in this context. The Security Council has called on Member States to develop a range of gender-sensitive measures, such as tailored prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies, risk-assessment tools, counter-narratives and CVE programmes. However, much work remains to be done to ensure that such measures fully take into account the specific risks, needs and vulnerabilities of women and men. CTED will continue to support Member States in identifying both gaps and good practices in this area.

The research discussed in this report reveals the many complexities and nuances that a gender-sensitive approach to the FTF problem entails. The research suggests that responses will have to be adapted across different cases and local contexts and that it remains crucial to conduct impact evaluations to identify good practices, including with a full appraisal of the human rights implications of counter-terrorism and CVE. Although progress has been made in analysing the role of women in the FTF context, there is an urgent need for Member States to ensure more effective and systematic collection of gender-disaggregated data. The availability of such data would permit a fuller understanding of the scope of the phenomenon, facilitate more comparative research, and thus contribute to more effective responses.

The FTF phenomenon is only one aspect of women's involvement in terrorism. Its unique challenges notwithstanding, the recent focus on female FTFs has renewed interest in, and strengthened, research into the gender dimensions of terrorism more broadly. This research increasingly emphasizes that "gender" is about more than women's participation. Addressing gender also entails analysis of the gender dynamics of male engagement in terrorism and counter-terrorism and requires an understanding of the power structures between the sexes and their gendered role expectations. Further inquiry into the role of masculinities and their implications for gender-sensitive counter-terrorism and CVE measures for both men and women would help broaden the debate beyond its current narrow focus on the role of women.

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