

HOME TEAM JOURNAL

Issue
no. **14**
Aug 2024

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People have differing expectations, requirements, aspirations, priorities at different stages of their career."

ERIC YAP

Commissioner of
Singapore Civil Defence Force



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HOME TEAM JOURNAL

The *Home Team Journal* is a publication by the Home Team Academy in collaboration with the Ministry of Home Affairs of Singapore and its departments, which are collectively known as the Home Team. It is a journal by practitioners and researchers for practitioners and specialists in safety and security.

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO MAINSTREAM GENDER INCLUSION IN PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND COUNTER TERRORISM?

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to define gender inclusion in the preventing violent extremism (PVE) and counter-terrorism (CT) sectors. It is important to have a genuine basis for understanding the impact of gender inclusion and gender mainstreaming, especially in fragile, conflict and violent (FCV) contexts, where women and girls experience acute vulnerabilities, while simultaneously recognising men, boys and marginalised communities are also impacted by violent extremism and terrorism. This article investigates what it means to meaningfully and mindfully gender mainstream in the PVE and CT sectors for communities affected by violent extremism and terrorism. The analysis uses desk research and lived examples to highlight where preventing violent extremism and counter terrorism policies and interventions could be improved.*

VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM ARE GENDERED ISSUES

Societal power imbalances are widely recognised as contributing factors to violent extremism and terrorism. Women and girls, men, boys and marginalised communities are affected differently, underscoring how their individual and gendered experiences can often influence their involvement in violent extremist or terrorist activities. Women and girls, for instance, not only play multifaceted roles as facilitators, attackers, recruiters, and supporters of terrorist groups, but frequently also fall victim to conflict-related sexual violence or are objectified by policymakers as tools to prevent violent extremism and terrorism. Their preexisting limited access to socioeconomic opportunities also exacerbates their vulnerability. In volatile environments, their voices are marginalised and their contributions undervalued, which increase their vulnerability to violence against them (Sans, 2022).

The impact on individuals also vary depending on states' responses, interventions and policies. For example, policymakers often burden women with the responsibility to curb a man's violent extremist actions. This approach not only exploits women's goodwill but widens the chasm of gender inequality, neglecting their rights and security, and ignoring potential repercussions in already volatile settings (Sans, 2022).

All these indicate that violent extremism and terrorism are inescapably gendered phenomena. Yet, attempts to improve gender-based policies relating to preventing violent extremism (PVE) and counter-terrorism (CT) have been largely unsuccessful, not for a lack of information, as numerous scholars have contemplated "women's roles" in violent conflict, but because findings are often not adequately translated into policies (Sans, 2022). Thus, it remains essential to actively consider gendered needs to develop PVE and CT measures that work for everyone.

* This article is adapted from an earlier piece by the author published by the International Affairs Forum titled "Gender Inclusion: What it means to Gender Mainstream in Preventing Violent Extremism and Counter Terrorism?" available on https://www.ia-forum.org/Content/ViewInternal_Document.cfm?contenttype_id=5&ContentID=9827

Defining Gender Inclusion and Gender Mainstreaming

To effectively improve PVE and CT measures, understanding the fundamentals of gender inclusion is necessary. While gender inclusion is not a new concept, understanding it is essential to establish a prosperous society based on equality and equity. Yet there is confusion about what it means. The author's attempts to pinpoint a definition in the literature only found **explanations** for "gender inclusive" or "gender and (social) inclusion". In the context of PVE and CT, much of the literature quickly moved into discussions about mainstreaming and operationalisation of gender inclusion, bypassing the crucial first step of defining gender inclusion itself.

Against this backdrop, the author offers this definition: **Gender inclusion is a process of being gender sensitive by adapting language, behaviours, policies, interventions and mechanisms that provide an equal and equitable landscape for all actors (regardless of sex)**. Here, it is vital to note gender inclusion should not result in being gender neutral or blind, as gender neutrality and blindness tends to perpetuate the existing gender inequalities. Instead, gender inclusion aims for an even-handed manner in PVE and CT measures given that societal power imbalances typically result in women and girls being excluded or ignored. A gender lens is thus required to remove gender biases and stereotypes that perpetuate inequalities (Sans, 2022).

Mainstreaming gender inclusion is essential. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2020) offers this definition of gender mainstreaming: "[T]he process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as girls', boys' and men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetrated. **The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality** [emphasis added]."

CURRENT REALITY

There are a few recurrent themes in states' and international organisations' efforts to introduce gender inclusion into the PVE and CT sectors.

States and international organisations try to have the best of both worlds by linking gender mainstreaming with security and most often, the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda, thus fortifying states' security agenda while simultaneously addressing the gendered consequences of violent extremism and terrorism. These links are further strengthened by insisting that states uphold their human rights obligations, particularly to women and girls. Additionally, there is advocacy for states to use intelligence gathering to potentially identify victims and perpetrators of violent extremism and terrorism; this may, but usually does not, include reports on sexual/gender-based violence (S/GBV), typically prevalent in fragile, conflict and violent (FCV) affected contexts, as such violence is often seen as unrelated or "personal domestic matters".

In practice, therefore, gender mainstreaming is often accompanied by using run of the mill expressions and calls for capacity building, raising awareness, and training of trainers etc., which is jointly carried out with states' consent by international donors and development partners to integrate gender into PVE and CT policies, programmes and activities.

If lived history is an indicator, the current approach to gender inclusion, while seemingly gender inclusive by using a gendered lens, is merely evidencing the lack of action displayed in times of crises. For example, the war in Gaza is having a significant impact on women and girls. As at 12 June 2024, 37,202 Palestinians have been killed, including 15,694 children and 10,367 women (Kuwaiti News Agency, 2024). A report by UN Women dated 19 January 2024 found 70% of the 27,600 civilian fatalities were women and girls, particularly noting: "Women and girls in Gaza are dying at unprecedented levels." It further highlighted that "951,490 women and girls have been displaced from their homes" and "two mothers are killed every hour in Gaza." A 2023 report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicates that "one child is killed every 10 minutes." And yet, what is being done to protect women and children in Gaza?

On the other hand, when the war began in Ukraine in 2022, humanitarian corridors were established for women and children to move to safer locations, and S/GBV awareness and alarms rang to ensure the safety of women and girls, proving that solutions exist and can be implemented. In comparison and similar to Gaza, in other FCV contexts, where violent extremism and terrorism are present, such as Afghanistan, Northern Cameroon, South Sudan, Myanmar, Mozambique, Yemen and Northeast Nigeria, women and girls continue to be subjected to severe forms of abuse, showcasing gross negligence towards and the lack of credibility for gender inclusion in the PVE and CT sectors.

In many instances, gender mainstreaming approaches have been criticised as a “box-ticking” exercise, as the rhetoric espoused fails to match up to the reality on the ground. According to the 2021 “ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework 2021-2025”, there is a “lack [of] political power needed to bring about transformative change for women; and for not being robust enough to counter the multiple sources of backlash against women’s rights. As a result, while many governments, development organisations and donors claim a commitment to mainstreaming gender in their policies and programmes, few are implementing it to the degree that is required. There remains a large gap between the rhetoric around gender mainstreaming and actual development and government practice.”

Statements such as this are not uncommon and it calls into question the efficacy of gender inclusion practices. Currently, as the ground reality and rhetoric do not match, the general approach to gender inclusion is both disingenuous and promotes lip service. Furthermore, by not giving due recognition to the progress of gender inclusion, both the WPS and gender inclusion agenda are even more weakened. Moreover, it exposes the PVE and CT sectors to “women-washing”—throwing around words related to gender mainstreaming, while overlooking gender-specific vulnerabilities present in the violent extremist and terrorist contexts.

Without an appropriate gender-sensitive lens, PVE and CT policies, programmes and interventions run the risks of muddling programme design, implementation, baseline and endline evaluations, while further frustrating donors and stakeholders

who have strong corporate commitments for gender inclusion. Moreover, in protracted crises, when gender inclusion is most needed, we see a failure to act and prevent harm to women and girls. This is due to a lack of willingness to put women and girls at the centre of the discussion during conflicts, hindering mindful and meaningful gender mainstreaming approaches for integrating gender effortlessly and efficiently in PVE and CT policies, strategies, programmes, and interventions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to integrate gender into PVE and CT policies, programmes and interventions and especially in times of crises, a systematic (re) structure that accounts for various levels of organisation at the programmatic levels and within institutional frameworks (i.e., government, international development organisations, NGOs, civil society organisations, academia and the private sector) is needed.

At the programmatic level, considerations that should guide the programme cycle include:

1. In-depth gendered analysis that take into account the local context and use a feedback loop mechanism for *real-time data* to operationalise and integrate gender considerations, while factoring in community ownership and sustainability of programme outcomes.
2. Gendered analysis of the project design, tailoring programme objectives with the needs of women and girls, men, boys and marginalised communities, as identified by communities. This should include a gendered risk assessment and associated mitigation measures to counteract potential bottlenecks in programme implementation and in times of crises.
3. Intentional gender verification milestones at implementation stage to account for gender integration.
4. An accurately identified gender framework for monitoring and evaluation criteria that consider both positive and negative gender dynamics to build on and improve future work.

At the institution level, leading by example means implementing internal policies enabling support for these programmes. For example, basic policies should routinely advocate for gender sensitive employee retention by considering:

1. Committing honestly to gender equality and equity.
2. Establishing human resource policies to achieving gender parity at all levels of employment.
3. Fostering an enabling environment that supports equal pay for equal work.
4. Enhancing the integration of a gender perspective with the aim of removing gender-restrictions or barriers and to improve internal working conditions systematically.
5. Empowering working parents by establishing institutional policies that allow “parental” time-off, rather than penalising or stigmatising the decision to have a family. This should also apply to elderly care.

The idea behind these policy examples is to demonstrate that gender mainstreaming should be achieved at an institutional level with engagement and full participation, in order to have mindful and meaningful gender mainstreaming at the programmatic level. Without the required commitment from senior levels of leadership at institutional levels, the buy-in to implement at the programmatic level is hindered, as it rests on the shoulders of workers, fighting an uphill battle for something they will not receive.

While this is not a substantial list, it provides a basis for gender mainstreaming in PVE and CT programmes by providing a reference point for circumventing unfavourable gender consequences to PVE and CT activities, policies, interventions and programmes. Should such an approach be taken seriously, conditions on the ground, especially in crises, would improve for women and girls, boys, men and marginalised communities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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ISSN: 2010-0617