THE SHIFTING ROLE OF WOMEN IN EXTREMIST AND TERRORIST GROUPS:

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROSECUTION AND REHABILITATION

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AQ	Al Qaeda
BnH	Blood and Honour
CT	Counter-Terrorism
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
EU	European Union
EU MS	European Union Member States
FTF	Foreign Terrorist Fighter
ISIS	Islamic State
KKK	Ku Kux Klan
NSU	National Socialist Underground
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
QRR	Quarterly Research Review
RAN-PS	Radicalisation Awareness Network-Policy Support project
RWE	Right-Wing Extremism
VRWE	Violent Right-Wing Extremism
VE	Violent Extremism
VEO	Violent Extremist Offender

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **relationship between gender and violent extremism (VE) has long been subject to misconceptions and oversimplifications** by academics, policymakers and practitioners, portraying women either as victims or brainwashed supporters. Downplaying or ignoring the **full range of ways in which women contribute to the objectives of their VE movements or groups** has fuelled a **positive security bias** that hinders accurate sentencing and risk assessment, as well as the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes. Therefore, an enhanced understanding of the **diversity of roles that female VE play**, as well as of their **dynamic nature**, is essential to design tailored responses in terms of both prosecution and rehabilitation.

This paper describes and contextualises **the shift in female roles that is currently taking place within ultraconservative VE groups and movements: right-wing extremist and jihadism.** Additionally, it analyses the **implications of the increased diversity of female roles in prosecution and rehabilitation**, highlighting challenges, good practices, and lessons learnt from a relevant adjacent field: Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR).

INTRODUCTION

Previous research indicates that women's and men's push and pull factors for engagement in violent extremism (VE) are similar, as can be their levels of ideological commitment or brutality (Nacos, 2005; Cragin and Daly, 2009). Despite sharing the complex motives for radicalisation and engagement with VE, **misconceptions about gender and VE still exist** and "oversimplify complex movements and trends" (Alexander et al., 2019: 5), resulting in positive security biases that **portray women either as harmless victims or brainwashed supporters of a movement** that legitimises the use of violence in pursuit of political or religious objectives (Winterbotham & García-Calvo, 2022: 7). This has **important legal and security implications**, as data shows that female terrorism-related offenders "are less likely to be arrested, less likely to be convicted, and receive more lenient sentences compared to men" (Alexander et al. 2018:6). This fact constitutes a double opportunity: on the one hand, for VE groups it is a 'win-win' strategy, considering the high success rate of attacks carried out by female activists and the significant media coverage that their acts garner (Bloom, 2011)[1]. These groups can exploit the inoffensive appearance of women to avoid detection by law enforcement. On the other hand, for female VE, who can exploit assumed gender stereotypes by presenting themselves as mere victims to avoid prosecution or get a lighter punishment for engagement in criminal activity related with VE or terrorism. This, in turn, limits their rehabilitation opportunities and increases those of reengagement (Schmidt, 2018: 5).

A number of challenges hinder the recognition of **links between women and VE**: firstly, due the mentioned positive security bias, **documentation of women's involvement in modern terrorist groups has been**

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[1] Women create four times as many victims as their male counterparts. See: Mia Bloom (2011), "*Bomshell. Women and Terrorism*", Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

inconsistent and ultimately unreliable[2]. There is a lack of systematic knowledge regarding female adhesion to terrorist and VE groups as, for instance, until recently, databases did not work with gender-disaggregated statistics, taking for granted that VEs are male. Secondly, the commonly accepted **dichotomy between "victim" and "perpetrator" does not necessarily reflect reality**, as both conditions are not mutually exclusive. For example, women who travelled to territory held by the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq may have done so due to a degree of coercion or may have been subjected to gender-based and sexual violence in the conflict-zone, while simultaneously having contributed to the religious and political goals of ISIS. Thirdly, **emphasis has traditionally been put on combatants or violent actors** – primarily men´s roles – neglecting other non-violent but relevant contributions to the group's objectives, such as fundraising, logistical and supportive roles, tasks which are usually feminised (Alexander et al., 2019: 4; Bloom, M. & Lokmanoglu, A., 2020: 400).

While motivations for engagement and ideological fervour between male and female VE do not fundamentally differ, the opportunities to occupy certain roles within VE groups or movements do. The width of the gap depends on contextual and operational factors, as well as on the ideology of the group, which determines its view on gender roles and power dynamics. For example, the Red Brigades, a far-left Italian terrorist group, or certain revolutionary nationalist movements, share a more egalitarian view of the relationship between men and women in society, favouring women's participation on equal terms vis-à-vis male militants. Conversely, on the opposite side of the ideological continuum, in far-right or jihadi groups female roles were typically relegated to the private/domestic sphere, due to the patriarchal idiosyncrasy typical of its ideology (Winterbotham & García-Calvo, 2022: 7). In other words, **female supporters of jihadi and far-right groups have traditionally had limited opportunities to take on roles other than support ones.**

However, **a shift is taking place in these two ultraconservative ideologies, jihadism and VRWE**. VE and terrorist organisations are rational actors with demonstrated capability to evolve and strategically adapt to changing contexts in order to advance in the achievement of their political or religious goals (García-Calvo, 2015: 40). In this sense, they perform intellectual and discursive contortions **to make traditional views linking women to the domestic sphere more attractive to potential female young supporters.** As a result, the past two decades have seen a **sharp increase in the number of female sympathisers** and the creation of many female-centred groups (Ebner & Davey, 2019:33; Miller-Idriss and Pilkington, 2019). Additionally, both VE groups have empowered **women in different ways, broadening the catalogue of roles occupied by women, with increased levels of visibility and responsibility** (Winterbotham and García-Calvo, 2022: 23).

Academia, policymakers, and practitioners are increasingly aware of the **gap between gendered assumptions and reality regarding the current role of women within VE and terrorist groups**, and of the need to recognise the full spectrum of agents who support terrorist and VE groups (Alexander et al., 2019: 6). A consensus is being reached on the importance of the **gender perspective to mitigate the risks arising from gender stereotypes permeating policies, interventions, or legal responses.** However, the question of *how* to take into consideration the different experiences of women in VE and their specific needs regarding rehabilitation remains unclear. Women, like men, are not monolithic in the ways they contribute to terrorist and violent extremist groups (Alexander et al., 2019:6). **The study of roles and their dynamic nature within VE groups or movements is important:** it can help more systematically identify profiles and pathways into terrorism, develop more valid instruments for individual risk assessment, as well as evaluate whether an individual is likely to disengage, why

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[2] For more information, see: Leonard Weinberg & William Eubank (2011), "Women's Involvement in Terrorism", *Gender Issues*, 28. Pp 22-49.

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the individual might choose to leave, and what factors may be most effective in precipitating and sustaining **disengagement** (Altier et al., 2020). In terms of **prosecution,** acknowledging the variety of female roles within VE groups or organisations leads to a more thorough collection of evidence and intelligence, a better understanding of the threat these individuals pose and, ultimately, to more accurate sentences.

In sum, the violent extremist (VE) landscape is currently undergoing important changes in the EU and beyond. One of them refers to the **shift in the role of women in certain VE and terrorist groups**, which constitutes the main focus of this research paper. A better understanding of the roles that female VE play within their groups or movements allows for a tailor-made response. Precisely, **this paper attempts to shed light on the current shift in the roles that female VE occupy in ultraconservative groups and movements, concretely RWE and Jihadism, as well as on its implications in prosecution and rehabilitation of female offenders.**

METHODOLOGY

The main research questions that this paper aims to answer are: **How are female roles shifting in VE and terrorist groups?** and **What impacts do these roles have on the prosecution and rehabilitation of female violent extremists, including VEOs?**

The study team has considered the following sub-research questions:

- In which extremist ideologies does the shift in female roles take place?

- How do women currently contribute to advancing the objectives of their group/movement, as a result of their changing roles?

- In light of the current changes in female roles, what difficulties exist regarding prosecution and rehabilitation efforts?

- How can the positive security bias on women be mitigated when it comes to managing radicalised women?

- In which ways can the gender perspective be incorporated in prosecution and exit work to better manage the risks and meet the needs of female violent extremists to minimise the risk of re-offending/recidivism?

The RAN-Policy Support project (RAN-PS) has given extensive attention to the management of female VE returnees from conflict zones. Although religiously inspired violent extremism and the management of female returnees remains the most pressing issue for EU Member States (EU MS), this paper will also give space to Violent Right-Wing Extremism (VRWE), as important changes are also taking place with regards to female implication in this type of political violence. The broader question of how women contribute to advancing the objectives of VE movements, and how this affects prosecution and rehabilitation, remains understudied.

To fill this gap, the research team has carried out a review of the most recent and relevant literature:

- Academic and grey literature (produced by international organisations, recognised think-tanks and projects) in English and Spanish.

- Previous relevant RAN-Policy Support project outcomes: Consolidated Overviews (both Prevent and Research), Quarterly Research Reviews (QRR) and Conclusion papers from Workshops, Thematic Research Meetings and Study Visits.

In general, the literature review encompasses the period from 2015 to today, to capture the recent evolution of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, a limited number of earlier references related to the study of roles in VE have been included, recognising that the theoretical foundations in this field predate 2015. In addition, in some cases, it was necessary to refer to previous studies, particularly in the case of the VRWE, to grasp the evolution of women's roles in these groups or movements when no more recent sources were available.

Considering the target audience of the paper, the authors prioritised relevant literature focusing mainly on Western countries, including experiences from: Australia, Canada, EU Member States (MS), and the United States. All of them are liberal democracies that have experienced first-hand the impact of terrorism and share extensive experience in preventing and countering it. Exceptionally, relevant sources from the Western Balkans, a priority area of interest for the European Commission, have been included. Since this phenomenon is relatively new, the paper will draw on a relevant adjacent field to VE with a longer history of experience and practice: DDR. The paper will describe good gender mainstreaming practices from this field that could be applicable to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE).

BETWEEN AGENCY AND COERCION: WOMEN IN VRWE

From the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in the early 20th century to Neo-Nazi groups in the 1990s, the far-right and white supremacist scene used to appear as male (Blee, 1996:680). Many have pointed to the fact that female membership in VRWE and active engagement did exist to some extent, but has been overlooked by academia, policymakers and law enforcement due to gendered assumptions about women and their relation to violence (Blee, 1996; de Leede, 2021; Latif et al., 2023). However, although already in the 1990s some women did play significant and active roles in the groups they were affiliated to, most often female far-right members contributed to 'the struggle' through procreation and support tasks, primarily in connection to a (male) significant other who was already an active member (Blee, 1996:680). In her study of women in the groups Aryan Nations, KKK and others, Blee suggests that female roles could be categorised in three groups: familial, as wives and mothers to their immediate and Klan family; social, facilitating activities within the movements; and operative, using indirect influence to maintain cohesion within the group (Blee, 2002). In other words, female far-right supporters used to be mainly 'second order' activists, whose engagement was very much linked to personal relationships, and to a lesser extent to ideological commitment (Veilleux-Lepage et al., 2022:39; Blee, 1996:680). **Currently, however, while many militant movements remain predominantly male, a shift is taking place in the international far-right landscape** (Ebner & Davey, 2019: 32).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, and particularly **from the 2010s onward, the far-right scene has diversified.** Firstly, a strategic change occurred, aimed at reaching broader audiences and avoiding pressure from law enforcement: the overtly offensive and violent white supremacist rhetoric driving the white power movement was rebranded through a softer, seemingly harmless (and even humorous) frame of white victimhood. Additionally, traditionally male-centred far-right agendas were "repackaged as reconcilable with

female interests" (Cochrane & Smith, 2021:3). This is achieved through narratives drawing from the notion of gender complementarity[3], such as on 'the salvation of traditional womanhood' which are appealing for women in search for clarity of identity and roles rooted in patriarchy (Cochrane & Smith, 2021:3, Ebner & Davey, 2019:38). This modernisation process has given **rise to the new 'alt-right'[4]** (Azani et al., 2020:15).

Also, due to the increased use of new platforms, apps and end-to-end encrypted chats, the current far-right landscape takes the form of **loosely structured networks of individuals and platforms that interact in online communities,** allowing for anonymous, unorganised participation by supporters that may or may not engage with formally organised groups. Therefore, the scene has abandoned the rigid hierarchical structures it used to operate in, resulting in a model of **'leaderless resistance'** that blurs the boundaries "between organisations and movements, instruction and inspiration, and satire and incitement" (Azani et al., 2020:13). Additionally, the Internet and the increasing use of algorithmic amplification **shape radicalisation processes** and engagement in VE in a way that enhances individuality and ideological 'flexibility'. Each person incorporates different elements (in varying degrees) into his or her set of beliefs, including but not limited to antisemitism, xenophobia, racism, homophobia or misogyny (Roberts K., and Wallner C., 2023).

In this current heterogeneous far-right landscape, spanning from skingirls, neo-Nazis and other overtly white supremacists to 'modern' alt-right supporters, **there are different views on how female engagement within a movement should be.** While the performance of traditional roles as wives and mothers continues to be a political endeavour, some women see a different role for themselves in the 'struggle' (de Leede, 2021:4; Matfess & Margolin, 2022:54). The diversification of the scene has resulted in **visible and leading roles more commonly being occupied by women,** making original ideological contributions, or engaging in violence and recruitment. Therefore, **current female participation in Right Wing Extremism (RWE) ranges from violent to non-violent, and from public to private.** This is not necessarily the result of a mandate within a movement or organisation. It is an expression of agency, which contradicts the notion that women in RWE milieus lack autonomy and ideological commitment, only engaging in passive forms of participation (Latif et al., 2023). The mentioned **agency coexists with coercion**, as female far-right supporters need to continuously navigate the expectations (and pressure) from an ideologically conservative group that relegates women to the private sphere, while pursuing her own ambitions and desires. Female roles in the current far-right sphere can be classified as follows (Campion, 2020):

- **Violent actors** typically engage in military training and violent attacks as part of a group or dyad. In fact, women have so far very rarely initiated violence as lone actors (Campion, 2020: 6).

- **Facilitators** support these activities through logistical assistance (e.g. providing safe accommodation and materials, including weapons). More recent examples of facilitation come from the women of Blood and Honour (BnH) who supported the National Socialist Underground (NSU) in Germany by supplying passports, aliases, safe houses, and securing resources or equipment (Campion, 2020: 12).

- **Activists** are those who contribute to 'the cause' in a direct and noticeable way, be it through organising events, participating in rallies and protests, raising funds, running websites, or engaging in unrestricted procreation. They help normalise attitudes and behaviours, which can lead to a shift in public discourse and the mainstreaming of radical narratives. Also, female presence protects the movement against

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[3] Notion by which women are biologically different to men, which makes gender equality neither possible nor desirable (Campion, 2020:13)

[4] The 'alt right' refers to a set of far-right ideologies, groups, and individuals whose core belief is that 'white identity' is under attack by multicultural forces using 'political correctness' and 'social justice' to undermine white people and 'their' civilisation (see, *Definitions by Southern Poverty Law Center*). Their believes are exclusionary, hierarchical, and dehumanising (such as traditional manifestations of VRWE), but modern alt-right groups rebrand ideas, "using suggestive or coded language that implies exclusionary beliefs rather than espousing them directly" (Miller-Idriss, 2020:7).

criticisms of misogyny. Due to the broad scope of the term, female activists as conceptualised by Campion (2020) will also fall into other categories.

- **Thinkers** make original contributions to the far-right pool of ideas, emerging as organic intellectuals that shape the alt-right ideological space (Veilleux-Lepage et al., 2022:36; Campion, 2020:7). Greece's Golden Dawn Party, for instance, was found to have ideological space for women (Koronaiou and Sakellariou, 2017).

- **Promoters** repackage, simplify, disseminate, or translate ideas with divulgation purposes, having an important role in ideological magnification and recruitment. Particularly online, women have gained outreach capacity and prominence as public speakers, bloggers, podcast hosts or participants in talk shows (Worth, 2021). Some discuss politics; others seemingly apolitical topics such as relationships, motherhood, parenting, lifestyle or well-being. Of particular importance are alt-right female influencers, who take the forefront in opposing feminism, leading the conversation on gender complementarity, the salvation of "lost womanhood" and the dangers that white women are exposed to by immigrant men, portrayed as backward and misogynistic sex assaulters. Coming from women, these narratives will seem more legitimate and harmless and can serve as a "soft introduction to hard edge ideology, facilitating the 'redpilling'[5] of individuals who are vulnerable to radicalisation" (Ebner & Davey, 2019:33). For example, in the French and German identitarian movements, female members are closely engaged in propaganda activities, in a calculated effort to distinguish the movement from preceding 'old style' groups (Zuquete, 2018:45).

- **Exemplars** have the highest ideological significance, as they embody idealised icons, symbols and sub-cultural heroines: loyal wives, widows and mothers, the reproductive future of a threatened race, or innocent martyrs (Campion, 2020:13). They adhere to the cultural constructs of womanhood, embracing traditional roles, behavioural norms, values, and virtues, serving as examples for others to emulate. Female exemplars project social identity in the subculture, which is particularly important in a context of perceived urgency to save "lost womanhood". The online sphere has provided spaces for female engagement, promoted the creation of female-led alt-right or white supremacist platforms and has turned women into a "key asset in the branding and outreach strategies of extremist movements" (Ebner & Davey, 2019:33).

In sum, female violent actors and facilitators constitute, respectively, **violent threats and valuable sources of network intelligence.** Also, thinkers, promoters, and exemplars have an **important impact on ideology and identity building** within the far-right ecosystem. The increased numbers of female far-right supporters, their prominence, and the diversity of roles they occupy have shaped the current far-right landscape, contributing **to two main trends**:

The first one is the **social and political normalisation of far-right ideas and narratives,** both in North America and in Europe. Social media has given female RWE militants a "new platform to leverage in support of their cause" (Matfess & Margolin, 2022: 53). Female thinkers, promoters, activists and exemplars have played a significant role in the mainstreaming of white nationalist, anti-migration, anti-feminist and Islamophobic radical discourse, generating millions of views and drawing attention to far-right causes. Women are very successful ambassadors for the movement, as they make extremist ideas seem harmless and legitimate: social media

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[5] This term is used within the far-right context to refer to a process of political awakening that will show the world 'as it really is. It comes from the film The Matrix (1999).

accounts about fitness, lifestyle, food or maternity have proven suitable to disguise messages about identity, tradition, the homeland and purity (Miller-Idriss, 2020).

The second trend is related to the **internationalisation of the new far-right movement**. (Female) supporters who have gained online popularity use their outreach potential to feed the conversation and interact with each other, creating a heterogeneous transnational network of far-right movements that span across Western cultures. For example, the American alt-right commentator Brittany Sellner (formerly B. Pettibone), who has 176.000 followers on her YouTube channel, "plays a vital role in bridging the gap between Europe and North America" (Ebner & Davey, 2019:35). She married Martin Sellner, an Austrian figurehead of 'Generation Identity', and networks with far-right European leaders[6]. She is a powerful voice within the movement on both sides of the Atlantic due to her podcast "Virtue of the West" and her YouTube videos, in which she discusses politics (including European politics), as well as other topics such as 'Why is Dating Becoming So Difficult,' 'Women Are Losing Their Femininity' or 'Women Want Love, Men Want Respect?'.

The normalisation and expansion of female roles within the far-right ecosystem is expected to continue, either in the framework of the movement's efforts to whitewash and mainstream RWE ideas, or simply for pragmatic reasons, such as female RWE supporters proving to be successful in their roles. This trend is further fuelled by **technological progress and the availability of new platforms like social media,** which constitute an opportunity **for female militants to gain visibility and leadership** (Matfess & Margolin, 2022: 54). Additionally, alt-right thinkers and promoters further pave the way for this shift to continue through rhetorical devices[7] derived from the notion of gender-complementarity, allowing for female participation in the political domain "without threatening male political dominance" (Campion, 2020:5).

RELIGIOUSLY INSPIRED VE

THE SHIFTING ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE GLOBAL JIHADIST MOVEMENT BEYOND MOTHERS AND WIFES

Due to the highly patriarchal and misogynistic Salafist-jihadist culture, **women have traditionally occupied domestic and supportive roles within jihadist terrorist groups**, while combative (violent) and leadership roles have been overwhelmingly reserved to men. As mentioned above, although women have historically played pivotal roles in terrorist movements, even as perpetrators, culture has equated violence with masculinity, thus ignoring or minimising women's roles as agents of terrorism. As a consequence, women have generally been stereotyped by the mainstream media and conventional wisdom as 'victims' or 'pawns' without any agency or political will within jihadist terrorist groups (Bloom & Lokmanoglu, 2020: 2-4). However, **with the advent of ISIS in 2014, the role of women in the global jihadist movement evolved and expanded**, and it is imperative that policy makers and practitioners from EUMS acknowledge this shift and its implications in terms of prosecution and rehabilitation of female jihadists.

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[6] For instance, see interview with Dutch far-right political figure Eva Vlaardingerbroek: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NteBYYuSbrM
[7] A prominent example of these rhetorical devices is the trope of the shieldmaiden. The shieldmaiden is a female warrior from Scandinavian mythology. In the alt-right imaginary, it embodies the balance between being a selflessly caring mother and spouse, on one hand, and a brave soldier ready to make sacrifices for her ideas, on the other. This combination of femininity and bravery is cherished.

Classic Islamist texts emphasise the **importance of the role of women as devoted wives and mothers**. According to the jihadist tradition, a woman's main duty is to remain in the household to support their *mujahideen*[8] husbands and indoctrinate their children (Khelghat-Doost, 2016: 21). In a similar vein, contemporary Jihadist ideologues, such as Abduallah Azzam or Ayman al-Zawahiri, have maintained that women should not participate in violent jihad except in very particular circumstances, when jihad becomes defensive; namely, "if the enemy is attacking [their] country, the men are not enough to protect it, and the imams give a *fatwa*[9] for it" (Winter & Margolin, 2017: 26).

Al Qaeda (AQ), the vanguard global jihadist organisation until the emergence of ISIS, has always defended that women are meant to fulfil moral and supportive responsibilities in the movement. Within AQ, the epitome of an 'operation-based organisation'[10] women have occasionally acted as fundraisers and recruiters, but first and foremost, they have bared the responsibility of being wives and mothers tasked with the 'vertical transmission' of jihadist values to the next generation (Spencer, 2016: 77). Following a strictly dogmatic understanding of what the 'appropriate' role for a jihadi woman is, **AQ's core leadership has generally refused to formally approve of women's participation in tactical combat roles** (Bloom & Lokmanoglu, 2020: 6).

By contrast, in the last two decades, **some local jihadist organisations with nationalist agendas,** such as **Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad, as well as certain global jihadist organisations like Boko Haram** , have strategically circumvented the general dogmatic prohibition on women taking on combatant roles, adopting a pragmatic approach: they **have used female suicide bombers due to their tactical advantages**, i.e. less scrutiny by security forces due to gendered assumptions about women being peaceful subjects; increased international media attention; or an intended shaming effect on men (de Leede, 2018: 4). Yet, aside from the few (and narrow) exceptions, before the emergence of ISIS, women in jihadist organisations were generally confined to the private sphere and were forbidden to engage in violent action.

Unlike AQ, ISIS was born as a state-building project (Khelghat-Doost, 2019). Consequently, since its conception, it needed women to engage in active and organisational roles in order to build the so-called 'caliphate', a proto-state ruled by the strict application of sharia law. First and foremost, the wife and mother roles continued to be central within ISIS. Actually, the most important duty for women in ISIS was to give birth and indoctrinate the next generation of jihadists, in order to guarantee that the movement would have enough manpower to keep colonising territory for years to come, as well as to ensure the **transmission of its ideology and values** (Leede, 2018: 5-6). The role of **wife and mother of the next generation of jihadists is crucial in the process of state-building and for the survival of the group.** In this dimension **women actively contribute to the shaping of the identity of the *new* society** that transcends race, ethnicity, culture or nationality, and is **built exclusively on the ideology of jihadist Salafism** (EUROPOL, 2019: 20-21).

Additionally, however, women began to perform a myriad of different tasks within ISIS. To begin with, they participated in the **state-building effort by taking on positions as teachers, doctors, nurses or administrative workers**. Some also occupied a role within the **state security apparatus**; for instance, the Al Khansaa Brigade was an all-female militia created to enforce ISIS' strict conception of Islamic morality. Moreover, many female ISIS members acted as recruiters, both offline and online: studies show that the Islamic State predominantly relied on Western female recruits to lead the social media campaign, with the aim of motivating women to join

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[8] In literal terms, it means 'one who struggles on behalf of Islam'. In recent years, however, it has been adopted by those who consider themselves engaged in the armed defence of Muslim lands (Oxford Reference).
[9] 'A ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognised authority'(Britannica).
[10] According to Khelghat-Doost (2019), organisation with a structure based on operative clandestine networks whose aim is to expel the 'infidels and apostates' from the lands of Islam - this type of organisation contrasts with 'state-building' organisations such as the Islamic State.

ISIS ranks (Spencer, 2016). Lastly, women also performed **logistical activities for the group**, such as delivering messages, transporting weapons, intelligence gathering or acting as decoys (Khelghat-Doost, 2016: 22).

At the height of its power, while jihad was still framed as **offensive, ISIS expressly prohibited women from fighting** (Winter & Margolin, 2017: 26). However, **as the caliphate began to incur in significant military and territorial losses, jihad was reframed as defensive and the stance on female fighters shifted**. In July 2017, coinciding with the fall of Mosul, ISIS' online magazine *Rumiyah* issued a 'call to arms'; interestingly, **the article urged women to take up arms 'not to compensate for the small number of men but rather due to their love for jihad'.** Subsequently, in October 2017, after the loss of Raqqa (ISIS's major stronghold,) an **essay in *al-Naba* magazine stated that women were not only permitted but now obligated to fight** (Khalil, 2019: 9). Seven months later, ISIS released an official propaganda video featuring female combatants. Women's participation in battle was further reinforced in videos that emerged from Baghouz, where women were clearly seen fighting alongside men to defend ISIS' last enclave, which was finally lost in March 2019 (Vale, 2019: 5).

All the above suggests that there has been a **progressive shift in the role of women in the global jihadist movement: from a primary role as wives and mothers,** the participation of women has been expanded to significantly include the **roles of recruiter, propagandist, organiser, security enforcer, and even combatant.** A worrying consequence of this shift is the fact that, in the last decade, **ISIS has inspired dozens of women around the globe to plan and perpetrate terrorist attacks in its name**. Cases of **women self-radicalising and attempting terrorist attacks in their home territory in the name of ISIS have also taken place in countries like the UK, the US or EU MS** (Khalil, 2019: 12). For instance, within the EU, an all-female cell planned several attacks in France in September 2016, including an attempt to blow up gas tanks near Notre Dame. The suspected planners were primarily radicalised online, and social media was central to both their recruitment and scheming (Simcox, 2018)

The so-called caliphate was defeated in March 2019 in the battle of Baguz, however, around 70,000 former ISIS members (overwhelmingly, women and children) remain detained in Kurdish-run refugee camps such as Al-Hol in North-West Syria. Of particular interest to the EU MS is the situation in the Al-Hol annex where some 10,000 women relatives of ISIS members with Western nationalities, are still confined. These ISIS sympathisers, in the absence of their adult male relatives – who are either dead or imprisoned in jails located in Syria or Iraq – **showed ideological entrepreneurship and operational agency**: they continue to implement the group's strict moral codes and have started to police other residents' dress and behaviour; in some cases, their radical enforcement of sharia law has escalated into brutal physical punishments and killings of other women who were deemed as 'apostates' (Vale, 2019).

It is imperative to keep in mind that former ISIS female foreign fighters, whether **currently detained in refugee camps or having been repatriated to their country of origin, as well as women who are inspired by ISIS' ideology to commit acts of violence, can potentially pose a serious threat to Western countries** (Davis, 2020). As the Islamic State shifts from governance project to global terrorist movement, pro-ISIS women around the world will probably continue to act as **proselytisers, recruiters, and fundraisers for the movement, as well as terrorist plotters and attackers, thus remaining a vital force for the transformation and resurgence of ISIS** (Khalil, 2019). It is crucial to understand that, for the most part, women are not victims or passive instruments in the hands of men, but subjects with agency and an active role within the global jihadist movement. Therefore, **their individual threat needs to be carefully assessed**.

The experience of the Islamic State shows that the relationship between radical Islamist ideology and the practical role of women in the jihadist milieu is far from static; rather, it will evolve as strategic and tactical realities change. What remains clear is that, **irrespective of their role in combat, women's participation in non-combatant and supportive roles, as financiers, online recruiters, logistic facilitators, and above all, carriers of**

the ideology and educators of the future generations of jihadists, will remain indispensable for the continuation and survival of the global jihadist movement (Margolin, 2019).

IMPLICATIONS PROSECUTION AND REHABILITATION

The underestimation of the complexity of women's reasons to engage in VE and terrorist groups, as well as their potential contribution to the organisation, have influenced the evolution of institutional formal responses to VE and terrorism in the different EU MS. Coherently, **P/CVE and CT policies, mechanisms, and tools have been developed in a gender-blind manner, without considering the female experience in these groups or movements, and thus the specific needs of female activists in terms of prosecution and rehabilitation** (RAN-PS Conclusions Paper, 2021). However, the rapidly changing landscape of violent extremism, including the role of women, should be better understood by policymakers and practitioners in order to avoid gender gaps. Deepening the knowledge on how women specifically participate in VE and terrorist groups – understood as the roles they take on within them, the knowledge and skills developed throughout their period of involvement, as well as the personal experience of female activists within particular groups – and accepting the assumption that this type of involvement is not static, but can evolve over time, can help in the development of more tailored interventions both in prosecution and rehabilitation of VE (Margolin, 2022: 47).

Below we will explore some of the difficulties and gender gaps identified in literature and practice for the prosecution and rehabilitation of female VE. These are primarily focused on the knowledge from females returning from ISIS-held territory in Syria and Iraq – the so-called 'caliphate', established between 2014 and 2019. In the case of female RWE supporters, they are rarely convicted for their criminal extremist activities and therefore do not serve custodial sentences in EU MS[11]. As a result, explicit references to them are scarcer in the literature. However, given the ideological similarities between the far-right and jihadism regarding gender relations and female involvement in extremism, the issues raised in the literature concerning female FTF returning from Syria and Iraq can inform the approach to women who engage in far-right groups or movements.

PROSECUTION OF FEMALE EXTREMISTS

Criminal justice responses often fail to address the diverse roles that female members of extremist groups serve. Female jihadist prosecutions in the EU are relatively new, still limited, and heterogeneous in MS (UNODC, 2019). The main difficulties in prosecuting and securing a conviction of women linked to ISIS in European soil relate mainly to the **prevalence of gender stereotypes** in relation to their participation in jihadism – in which the role of women is typically reduced to the private or domestic sphere, supporting their male counterparts as wives, and caring for the children in their capacity as mothers – fuelling a **positive bias regarding the threat that women currently pose to national security** (Davis, 2020: 7). More precisely, the above-mentioned interrelated

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[11] Women extremists are rarely convicted and, when they are, it is not for terrorism-related offences. The United States, a liberal democracy comparable to those in the EU, is no exception, in spite of their longer experience in the prosecution of VRWE. For instance, following the events of the January 6th Capitol Hill Siege, 103 women were arrested (14% of all arrests, which is unusually high), of which 33 faced felony charges and 69 for misdemeanour charges. 24 of these convictions were sentenced and only 7 women, all for misdemeanor charges, were sentenced to jail time. See Matfess & Margolin (2022).

factors – gender stereotypes and positive security bias – impact on various phases of the prosecution of women linked to VE groups through the criminal justice system. Concrete difficulties and gaps identified include:

1. **Free choice *vs.* coercion:** An important consideration related with prosecution of female violent extremists, both jihadist and far-right ones, concerns the voluntary or forced involvement in such VE and terrorist groups. Some individuals – both women and men – become associated with terrorist groups of their own volition and contribute to the activities of the group in voluntary terms, demonstrating their commitment with the group´s objectives and strategies for pursuing them, as well as leadership to mobilise other same sex sympathisers towards the jihad. However, others become associated with terrorist groups as the result of pressure and coercion. Data suggest that women are more affected by the latter situation than their masculine counterparts, due to factors including economic dependency, traditional gender roles assumed within communities, or motivated by individual vulnerabilities linked with traumatic experiences (UN, 2019: 30-31). The distinction between voluntary and coerced recruitment for involvement in a terrorist group is not always clear but key for prosecution. Investigators should focus also on the personal circumstances surrounding women involved in VE groups, in order to assess the free will or coercion behind the decision to perform in favour of the group. Finally, it can be helpful to have at least one person of the same gender involved in the investigation team, as women can often feel more confident when speaking with female officials (Fitzpatrick, 2021:28).

2. **Collection of evidence:** In the last decade, linked to the conflict in Syria and Iraq, EU MS have focused their investigations and intelligence gathering on male profiles, involved in combatant (violent) actions, because of their potential threat to the peaceful coexistence in society. In contrast, for some time, women were considered of no particular concern in security terms (Renard, 2021: 12). In this context, women were not a priority target – neither in the EU MS nor in Western Balkan countries – for investigations and in obtaining evidence on activities they may have carried out during their stay in the conflict zone (Kelmendi, 2019: 27; Davis, 2020: 6). This gender discrepancy seems to have come to an end in several EU MS since 2016, notably in Belgium, the Netherlands and France, pioneer EU countries in the systematic prosecution of female jihadists (Renard, 2021: 13; Koller, 2021:6). Furthermore, women's lower public exposure and increased activity in the online environment – linked to their roles as online propagandists, radicalisers and recruiters, for example – has made it difficult to obtain information about the nature of female involvement both in jihadism and RWE. This has prevented law enforcement and the judiciary from making an accurate assessment of the scope of their activities and prosecuting them in European courts.

   It is important that justice systems recognise the range of possibilities that exist in relation to women's participation in these groups. Beyond the immediate potential for violence, women also present indirect threats by spreading ideology, aiding in recruitment and propaganda efforts, and fostering the involvement of their spouses and extended family members in extremist activities. Also, the performance of 'traditional gender roles' is, in itself, a valuable contribution to VE organisations and ideologies (Matfess & Margolin, 2022:53). Assessing these multifaceted aspects is essential to grasp the complete scope of the risk posed by female jihadists (ICF, 2021: 17). Ensuring the collection of evidence and intelligence, including online, for the activities of all genders in ISIS could help mitigate the tendency to fall into a positive security bias and assist the prosecution of female returnees (Davis, 2022: 8; UN, 2019: 3).

3. **Sentencing:** The same positive security bias has operated in the criminal prosecution of female RWE and women linked to jihadist terrorist groups returning from Syria and Iraq in Western Countries (Matfess & Margolin, 2022:54). Recent studies confirm that government institutions due to assumed gender stereotypes often exhibited differential treatment toward female ISIS members in some liberal democratic societies countries because of a perceived lower threat level to national security compared to their male counterparts, resulting in convictions other than in terrorist-linked offences or lenient sentences for them.

For instance, Alexander and Turkington (2019) demonstrated how in the United States women served shorter sentences for Islamic State-related crimes than their male counterparts. On the contrary, sometimes female activists were punished more severely in their capacity as mothers who have dragged their children into VE groups, having transgressed prevalent cultural norms in Western societies regarding motherhood.[12] Most European countries started actively prosecuting female returnees later than male returnees and initially received more lenient sentences than men (Koller: 2021: 21; Kumar, 2021: 6; Davis, 2020: 7). But this landscape evolved since 2015, when MS started to change their perceptions and understanding of women's diversity of roles in terrorist groups which started to influence criminal justice responses to female returnees. This has led to more systematic investigations, prosecutions for a range of offences and corresponding sentences. For instance, Koller and Schiele proved that women linked to the global jihad prosecuted in German courts do not receive different (lenient) sentences compared to men for the same terrorist offenses (Koller & Schiele 2021: 38; CTED, 2019: 5).

Criminal justice responses, including sentencing practices, must be tailored to each individual case and gender. Such an approach must consider the different roles that women can play in terrorist groups, including supporting and operative roles, while also taking into account any mitigating circumstances, like sexual and gender-based violence and any forms of exploitation such as forced and early marriage, sexual slavery, rape or forced domestic labour (UNODC 2019: 31). Finally, there is a need for training and capacity-building on gender-sensitive approaches to investigations and prosecutions within judicial systems, with focus on the role of women in VE groups, in order to better anticipate women´s involvement in future terrorist groups (CTED, 2020: 5-7; Davis, 2020: 8).

REHABILITATION OF FEMALE EXTREMISTS

In this section we will delve into the main challenges identified for the rehabilitation of women in VE groups in prisons settings. These are informed by two main identified difficulties: **lack of information and data-driven assessment on the experience of women** in VE and terrorist groups; and **lack of experience in dealing with female violent extremists in prison.** Both have a combined impact on:

1. **Eligibility to follow a rehabilitation programme in prison**: The rehabilitation of females involved in VE activities also faces challenges stemming from the traditional paternalistic conception of women linked with ultra conservative extremist groups or movements. Because they are convicted, sometimes for offences other than terrorism, sentences may be which complicates both the women's eligibility to participate in rehabilitation programmes specifically designed to deal with violent extremists' offenders. In addition, authorities give less attention to potential radicalisation and recruitment of women in prison than in the case of men (Schmidt, 2018:30).

2. **Risk assessment:** Many MS apply standardised risk assessment tools – such as VERA-2R, the most common among EU MS, but also TRAP-18, ERG 22+ org MLG (Coleman *et al.*, 2021: 7; Koller, 2021: 16) – that are not gender-sensitive. These tools are constructed and assessed based on the experience of adult men, without considering the specific factors that impact on the radicalisation and particular experience of women in this groups like age, or personal circumstances such as trauma or having experienced abuse and/or sexual violence, for instance (Alexander, 2019: 51). These tools also focus on operational roles, of a violent nature,

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[12] For instance, Audrey Alexander and Rebeca Turkington demonstrate how in the United States women serve shorter sentences for Islamic State-related crimes than their male counterparts. See, "Treatment of Terrorists: How Does Gender Affect Justice?", *CTC Sentinel*, 11, no. 8: 2018. Pp 24-29. In another study, Rachel Schmidt includes data on how women and her defences in the UK exploit in court gender stereotypes of victimhood to avoid prosecution or responsibility for encouraging violence or to obtain lenient sentences for VE criminal behaviours, even for serious crimes. The paper also digs on the harsh punishment suffered by mothers due to patriarchal conception of motherhood still enforced in European criminal justice systems. See, "Duped: Why Gender Stereotypes are Leading to Inadequate Deradicalization and Disengagement Strategies'', TSAS Working Paper Series no 18-07: 2018. Pp. 17-24.

without taking into account other non-combatant or subordinate roles, typical of female involvement, such as the education (indoctrination) of their children and the maintenance and transmission to the next generation of the social and family values typical of Jihadism and VRWE (Winterbotham & García-Calvo, 2021: 23-24). This lack of gender sensitivity is detrimental to the formulation of specific exit programmes tailored to women's needs. This lack of knowledge about the female experience in violent extremist groups makes it difficult to design and implement specific prison rehabilitation programmes for female extremist offenders, as we will see more in depth below.

3. **Availability of rehabilitation programs in prison**: There is a lack of data on the experience of women involved in VE and terrorist groups regarding push and pull factors for radicalisation, the role played by each individual when involved in VE or terrorist groups. This makes it difficult to make them available to the criminal justice system, as already seen, but also to gain a better understanding of their experience, which subsequently constrains the design of rehabilitation programmes adapted to their circumstances. Generally, intervention programmes and tools have been developed based on the experience of men, mainly involved in operative (violent) actions, and are not adapted to the needs of women, who mostly play non-combatant/violent roles within organisations. The general trend for the rehabilitation of female VEs in EU MS promotes interventions tailored to individual needs, which might not always consider relevant aspects related to gender (ICF, 2021:18; de Leede, 2021: 8).

Rehabilitation programmes and tools -like risk or threat assessment ones- targeted to female violent extremism offenders must address gender considerations to gain effectiveness and dismiss the risk of potential re-engagement. It's also important to ensure that female professionals involved in rehabilitation work are available in prison settings, like social workers, psychologists, mentors, etc. to facilitate the working alliance. For all the team, men and women, specific knowledge and training both in gender issues and on the current role that women assume within VE and terrorist groups should be also a priority (de Leede, 2021: 8).

LESSONS LEARNT FROM DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILISATION AND REINTEGRATION (DDR) PROCESSES

Given the more than three decades of research and practice in the field of DDR processes, important lessons can be drawn from this literature to support policymakers and practitioners in overcoming challenges they face precisely for the rehabilitation of women involved in political violence. In fact, a broader reflection on the lessons learned in this adjacent field to VE allows us also to point out a series of general recommendations, which additionally are applicable to reducing the difficulties in prosecuting the women targeted in our study, which we address in the second part of this section.

A - Reflections on Rehabilitation

Women involved in paramilitary or insurgent groups were initially labelled in simplistic or paternalistic terms such as 'females associated with the war', 'dependants', or 'camp followers', which obscures the wide range of possibilities in which women have contributed from a tactical, strategic, material support, logistical, or operational perspective to war, illustrating the reluctance of political actors and practitioners concerned to consider female militants as full members of such groups. Similar to VE, the same 'no weapon, no entry' conditions were applied in the early stages of the DDR processes, prioritising male ex-combatants above women and children (Taarnala, 2016: 4). In this context, DDR programmes originally failed to evaluate the needs of women and girls without regard for other factors such as age or experience within the group. For example, the DDR process missed women's progress inside their armed groups- namely, knowledge, skills and capacities developed-, as well as its transformative potential in return to their local communities. Recent research on DDR

shows that gender considerations are critical for the successful rehabilitation of female militants and, as a result, should guide applicable legislative frameworks (Altier, 2021: 46).

B - General reflections

Finally, some general recommendations could be extracted from the experience coming from DDR for prosecution and P/CVE and CT regarding trends in the responsibilities currently assumed by females in VE.

- In order to draw attention on the relevance of all actors, men and women, involved in VE and terrorist groups and their potential threat to the peaceful coexistence and cohesion of our democratic societies, the **gathering evidence and intelligence of data over the investigation phase should be disaggregated by sex (and gender).** This is a necessary starting point for informing all assessments for future prosecution and in rehabilitation work. This information and analysis of each profile will shed light on the variety and complexity of the current involvement of women in VE and terrorism avoiding stereotypes and presumptions.

- In the same vein, as women tend to be more open to speak with same-sex practitioners, **female professionals should be present in all stages of the prosecution and rehabilitation processes of female VE.**

- To deal with the reality of current involvement of women in VE and terrorist groups, **training in both specific gender issues and in the current role that women play in VE and terrorist groups should be available for policy makers and practitioners concerned.**

- Linked to the previous point**, international cooperation** can provide VE policymakers and practitioners with the necessary knowledge, technical skills and tools, and can also help to respond to the gender dimensions of violence at any given stage. A good example is the RAN-Policy Support project through a variety of outcomes available for policy makers: papers, training courses or tailor-made services, among others.

CONCLUSIONS

In spite of the patriarchal and ultraconservative nature of the ideologies driving VRWE and jihadi groups and movements, which links women with the private sphere, **a shift is taking place in the ways female supporters contribute to the advancement of the political and/or religious goals of their organisations**. Not only a significant increase has been recorded in the number of female supporters, but also the catalogue of roles they now play is now broadening, including positions of responsibility and visibility. **Both ideologies are respectively undergoing this evolutionary process in different ways and for different reasons**:

- The **VRWE scene has become increasingly diverse and dynamic in the last two decades – particularly since 2010.** Firstly, it has **modernised and whitewashed its narratives** (although the ideological core remains unchanged), giving rise to the alt-right movement. Secondly, it has adopted the so-called **'leaderless resistance' model**, by which traditional hierarchical groups are progressively receding in importance in favour of loosely connected networks of individuals and platforms that interact in online communities. Thirdly, **individualised online radicalisation processes allow more 'ideological flexibility'**,

as each person can choose which elements to incorporate into his/her set of beliefs. The increasingly heterogeneous and dynamic nature of the far-right scene results in an increased **variety of views on female engagement, and therefore a wider range of roles occupied by women VEs**. The classification of roles used in this paper categorises VE women as: **violent actors, facilitators, activists, thinkers, promoters and exemplars.**

- In the case of jihadism, **the rise and fall of the ISIS in Syria and Iraq between 2014 and 2019 constituted a turning point for the involvement of females in the global jihad**, particularly from European countries. Women actively contributed to the state-building effort through positions as caregivers, mothers, teachers, as well as healthcare and administrative workers. In addition to more traditional support, some women worked as propagandists, recruiters (particularly online) and even were part of the state security apparatus. Additionally, in the final moments of the Caliphate, women engaged in violent action in the battle of Baghouz in 2019. With the decline of the caliphate, women have become the organisation's **moral reference point, and are responsible for the intergenerational transmission of the organisation's legacy and ideology**, as mothers and wives. They have also been more active in **operational actions in Western home countries** such as France, the UK and the USA.

Despite this, **misconceptions on the relationship between women and VE have led to a positive security bias** that portrays women either as victims or as brainwashed supporters of a group or movement, downplaying or directly ignoring the threat they can pose to national security, as well as their needs in terms of rehabilitation. Institutional **P/CVE and CT are neither adapted to the shifting nature of roles, nor they take into account the full spectrum of ways in which female militants can contribute to the political and or religious goal of their groups or movements.** This results in a number of challenges when it comes to prosecution and rehabilitation:

- Since women are **perceived as harmless**, they are not the target of evidence-gathering efforts. This was particularly the case in Syria and Iraq. However, tracking the activities of female VEs, including online, is of paramount importance for prosecution. Also, **as a result of the positive security bias, women typically receive more lenient sentences, or convictions other than in terrorist-linked offences**, which in turn has an impact on their **eligibility for rehabilitation programmes**. These need to be adapted to the experiences and needs of women, as they are usually targeted at adult men. In addition, the most commonly used risk assessment tools are blind to non-violent roles, which neglects the valuable contributions of many female militants to their organisations or movements. Rehabilitation programmes and risk assessment tools targeted at female VEOs must address gender considerations to gain effectiveness and mitigate the risk of potential re-engagement.

- The **prosecution and rehabilitation of female VEOs is a relatively new phenomenon in Western democracie**s: the field still has a **weak evidence base**. To inform the adaptation of P/CVE and CT policies, practices and tools to better address the specific experiences and needs of women, this paper has drawn from a relevant adjacent field with longstanding experience and a considerable body of knowledge: Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration. Women who have been involved in insurgent or paramilitary groups and female VEs face similar misconceptions about the relationship between women and political violence. These wrong assumptions generated comparable challenges regarding the management and rehabilitation of these women. Therefore, the following lessons learnt from DDR can be useful for P/CVE and CT:

  > First and foremost, **gender-disaggregated evidence and intelligence collection is essential for accurate sentencing, risk assessment and tailored rehabilitation programmes**. Additionally, policymakers and practitioners need to ensure that interventions and tools are sensitive to non-

operational roles, which are commonly played by women. Lastly, professionals need to receive **specific training** on how to address gender considerations in their remit.

> An enhanced **understanding of the roles women currently play within VE groups or movements** allows academia, the policymaking community and first line practitioners to identify **profiles and pathways into terrorism, sentence female VE more accurately, develop more valid instruments for individual risk assessment and design tailored rehabilitation responses.**

- **Finally, it is important to consider that the roles assumed by women within VE groups and movements are not static but dynamic.** Therefore, **the collection of data** by Law Enforcement agencies and other actors involved in EU MS must be constant to assess the evolution of the phenomenon. **Changes in the international realm, wars or unexpected crises could also impact in the VE or terrorist groups strategies** which would affect the position and role of women within them as well. Follow-up of training for relevant actors involved could help in capturing the changing nature of this phenomenon, and to adapt the response in a coherent manner.

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