



Radicalisation and Gender – What Do We Know?

Joana Cook, Eva Herschinger,
Seran de Leede, and Anna-Maria Andreeva



International Centre for
Counter-Terrorism



Universiteit Leiden

Radicalisation and Gender – What Do We Know?

Joana Cook, Eva Herschinger, Seran de Leede,
and Anna-Maria Andreeva

ICCT Report

November 2024

About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism.

ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices. Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

Licensing and Distribution

ICCT publications are published in open access format and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Research Assistance

This report was produced with research assistance from Nina Prillwitz, Katharina Bauerfeld, Violet Collins, Lisa Erlmann, Abirami Rajesh, Ishaansh Singh, and Uladzimir Turko.

Contents

About ICCT	iii
Abstract	1
Introduction	2
Methodology	4
Topical Focus of the Literature on Gender and Radicalisation	5
Publications per Year	7
Gender across the Three Stages of Radicalisation	8
Discussion and Conclusion	14
About the Authors	16

Abstract

The literature focusing on gender and radicalisation has steadily increased over the last ten years. This has reflected the rise of extremism across the globe, and has been particularly triggered by researchers seeking to better understand the experiences of individuals throughout all stages of the radicalisation process. However, research on the topic has also largely focused on the experiences of women, especially those associated with Islamist forms of extremism. Such narrow focus has resulted in several gaps in the literature, which in turn has translated into gaps in practice. This report seeks to identify the key trends in research between 2014 and 2024 concerning literature on gender and radicalisation, as well as make explicit the areas that remain underexplored. Focusing on tangible recommendations, which align with the needs of practitioners, the report seeks to bring forward the state of the art of research on gender and radicalisation.

Keywords: gender, radicalisation, violent extremism, stereotypes, bias, reintegration, terrorism, counter-terrorism, preventing and countering violent extremism

Introduction

The landscape of contemporary extremism and terrorism in Europe has undergone significant changes in recent years. Two developments stand out. First, despite women and girls being involved in extremist groups for decades, their involvement became only particularly visible alongside the rise of Islamic State as it garnered a lot of attention in media, policy and research. Second, socio-political discussions on gender, gender norms, and gender equality policies have had a unique mobilisation and politicisation power. Extremist groups exploit these debates by, for instance, propagating violence or conspiracy narratives related to (anti-)feminism and gender-specific hatred and violence, highlighting the mobilisation potential of sociopolitical discussions on gender. Given both recent trends, an improved understanding of how gender influences key areas of radicalisation is important to fully understand these contemporary developments. These include first, the motives of people to join and support violent extremist groups; second, a gender-sensitive understanding of the roles or experience they play the role of gender within these groups/movements; and third, how/why they may disengage from these movements. To fully understand these contemporary developments, a strong research base which considers the gendered dynamics of radicalisation processes and gender-based analysis in practice is crucial.

This report aims to pave the way for an improved understanding of how gender impacts radicalisation processes by analysing pertinent literature between 2014 and 2024 to identify contributions and gaps. Current research on gender and radicalisation is highly valuable because it allows us to move past tired stereotypes of radicalised males as the norm in terms of violent actors and radicalised women as the duped victims. However, there remains an identified need to move beyond the binary analysis of women or men. We require a genuine gender-based analytical lens that examines how radicalisation is influenced by gender. This includes gender-based analysis around why and how men and women radicalise (and similarities and differences in their pathways and experiences), how one's gender affects group roles and dynamics, and also how it affects their exit/disengagement from violent extremist movements.

To provide a clear analytical approach to these areas of research, we have divided the radicalisation process generally into three stages: 1) radicalisation/recruitment, 2) in-group engagement or support for a movement (in the case of lone actors), and 3) disengagement, exit, and post-group rehabilitation/reintegration developments. This division is purely for analytical purposes and helps provide a clearer, more detailed picture of existing research. We focus exclusively on research which forefronts 'gender' and 'radicalisation' to assess more clearly how contemporary scholarship frames and approaches the relational aspects of these two terms.

After some remarks on methodology, we first look at topical trends in the research between 2014 and 2024 by focusing on the keywords and also the number of publications per year. This then moves to stage-based analysis in this literature per year, starting with research dealing predominantly with the on-set of radicalisation, before looking at studies focusing mainly on in-group/movement engagement, and finally research on the exit/disengagement and related developments. Results from studies dealing with more than one part of the radicalisation process have been included in all relevant sections.

To check to what extent academic findings correspond to practice and policy, a complimentary study produced simultaneously has examined to what extent gender perspectives are incorporated in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) practices.¹ These two reports are produced in conjunction with an analysis of the role of gender in mobilisation

¹ Anna-Maria Andeeva, Annika von Berg, Bibi van Ginkel, Elisabeth Hell, Shams Jouve, Alexandra Korn, Bärbara Molas, Maximilian Ruf, and Sophie Scheuble, "Assessing Gender Perspectives in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Practices." *International Centre for Counter Terrorism Report*, November 2024, <https://doi.org/10.19165/2024.7214>;

dynamics.² The three stages described above are mirrored in the second report to complement our analyses. While our paper highlights the strengths and limitations of research on gender and radicalisation, the second study demonstrates that practitioners and policymakers oftentimes remain unaware of, or unconvinced of, the importance of gender-based analysis in their work, highlighting important gaps in both research and practice. It is thus important to underscore the need to translate research findings more effectively into practice and policy.

² Bàrbara Molas, "Assessing mobilisation dynamics of violent extremist organisations through a gender lens", *International Centre for Counter Terrorism Analysis*, 20 November 2024, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/assessing-mobilisation-dynamics-violent-extremist-organisations-through-gender-lens>.

Methodology

We reviewed academic literature produced between 2014 and 2024 (up to October 2024), and concentrated on the last ten years as they have been marked by a significant increase in research output on female radicalisation,³ which has generally been associated with the concept of ‘gender’. This included only journal articles in peer-reviewed journals, books, or book chapters. Grey literature, PhD theses and other publication forms were excluded. The majority of the literature reviewed was in English, however, to allow for variation, we searched for literature in German, Dutch and Spanish to account for broader research across Europe. The literature was identified through a search on Google Scholar using the English keywords “gender” AND “radicalisation” as well as the equivalent words in Spanish, Dutch and German. Ultimately, we included only German literature, as – in contrast to Dutch and Spanish authors who predominantly publish in English – German authors publish in both English and German. We included publications if both keywords appeared either in their title/keywords as this signalled a prominent focus on radicalisation and gender, and not on men or women solely. In cases where keywords were not provided, the authors reviewed the abstract and self-identified five keywords. Overall, we identified 42 publications that matched our criteria, while well over one hundred articles were excluded based on these strict criteria. Ten of these were in German.

The literature was then coded for several aspects, such as year of publication, keywords, stated contributions to the literature, and the gaps in current research identified by the respective authors. We systematically reviewed and divided these according to three stages of the radicalisation process outlined above, which comprise the main body of this report. This helped us see, for example, how knowledge on ‘gender’ and ‘radicalisation’ evolved year by year regarding entry/support for violent extremism, roles/participation in movements, and exit/disengagement processes. The overarching aim was to determine 1) how key themes relevant to gender and radicalisation evolved year by year, 2) how identified gaps evolved, and 3) what new knowledge was produced. Overall, this picture helped us see how scholarship has evolved in relation to gender and radicalisation between, for example, 2014 and 2015.

Attentive readers might notice some prominent studies and authors frequently associated with this field are absent: this resulted from our search focus on gender and radicalisation, which led to the exclusion of works that deal with radicalisation but either only with men and women and not with gender dynamics as a primary focus. It is worth mentioning that despite the general search term of “gender”, an overwhelming majority of the articles identified and analysed in this report focus on women. This demonstrates an ongoing equation of “gender” with “women”, which is a notable barrier to the meaningful inclusion and understanding of different gender roles in radicalisation processes more broadly.

³ See, for example: Margolin, Devorah, and Joana Cook. “Five Decades of Research on Women and Terrorism.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2024): 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2024.2357178>.

Topical Focus of the Literature on Gender and Radicalisation

Between 2015 and 2024, based on our search criteria above, it is not surprising that ‘gender’ and ‘radicalisation’ were the most common terms for every year for which literature was produced. Yet, it is notable what key topics were focused on alongside ‘gender’ and ‘radicalisation’ at this time. Islamism in various guises (Daesh, ISIS, Salafism, Jihadism) is most frequently mentioned in the years between 2015 and 2020 and again in 2023, which shows the continuous relevance and scholarly interest in Islamist movements. The topic of ‘women’ is recurrently mentioned in 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020 and 2022, but no more in 2023 and 2024. This can be interpreted as a growing tendency to no longer conflate gender with women while, at the same time, some research continues to focus on women. Since 2021, the topic of ‘masculinity’ has recurrently appeared in the literature. This speaks of the very recent calls by some authors that research on gender and radicalisation needs to pay more attention to masculinities in extremism.⁴ Youth and online themes, like online radicalisation, online forums, and social media, both generally appear in the years between 2015 and 2024 to differing extents. This highlights the interest of research in the vulnerability of young individuals, in particular to the recruitment narratives spread online on different platforms. In line with our observations below, topics related to gender and the disengagement/exit stage are only addressed from 2020 onwards. The topics that have only been mentioned once a year highlight the particular – often topical and empirically-driven – interests of authors. This explains the mentioning of different groups and ideologies (FARC, Boko Haram, al Shabaab, far-right extremism) or different regions (South Asia, Germany, Turkey) as well as different theoretical or methodological approaches (intersectionality, feminist scholarship or content analysis) and aspects relating to the exit from extremism (reintegration, deradicalisation or disengagement). For clarity, the keywords are presented in Table 1 (see below).

⁴ Cf. Elizabeth Pearson, “Beyond women: Rethinking gender and radicalisation.” in *Radicalisation: A global and comparative perspective* (2022); Joshua M Roose and Joana Cook. “Supreme men, subjected women: Gender inequality and violence in jihadist, far right and male supremacist ideologies.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2022): 1-29 . doi:10.1080/1057610X.2022.2104681

Table 1: Keywords per Year

Year	Word 1 (Most frequent)	Word 2	Word 3	Word 4	Word 5
2015	Radicalisation	Gender	Online	Women	Choudhry
2016	N/A				
2017	Radicalisation	Gender	Daesh	Women	Youth
2018	Radicalisation; Gender (2x*)		Single mention: Online radicalisation; Violent extremism; Kenya; Higher learning institutions; Recruitment; Female Jihadist; Indonesia; IS		
2019	Gender	Women	Islamic State	Radical	Social Movements
2020	Radicalisation (7x)	Gender (3x)	Salafism; Extremism; Youth culture; Terrorism; Deradicalisation; Women (2x)	Single mention: Boko Haram; Gender norms, Gender dynamics, Gender perspectives; Political violence; ISIS; CVE; Narratives; Colombia; FARC; Disengagement; Female violence; non-Muslim Background; Politicisation; Femininity; Masculinity; Attraction; Recruitment; Human rights; Girls; Islamism	
2021	Radicalisation (4x)	Gender (4x)	Masculinity (3x)	Single mention: Boko Haram; ISIS; Jihadism; Religious emotions; Terrorism; Intersectionality; Deradicalisation; Reintegration; Recruitment	
2022	Gender (9x)	Radicalisation (5x)	Women (4x)	Extremism; Masculinity (2x)	Single mention: Violent radicalisation; Violent extremism; Youth; Adolescence; Salafism; Islamism; Terrorism; Turkey; ISIS; Femininity; Social Media; Online Forums; prevention; Content analysis; Civil Society; De-Radicalisation; Disengagement; Transformation; Sustainable patriarchy; Conflict, Discrimination; Violence; Conspiracy Theories; Psychological Distress; COVID-19 Pandemic
2023	Radicalisation (5x)	Gender (4x)	Islamism (3x)	Disengagement; Extremism (2x)	Single mention: Violent Radicalisation; Gender Dynamics; Gender-Sensitive; Gender Gap; Gender Identity; Counselling; Prevention; Germany; Reintegration; Defectors; Feminist Scholarship; Social Construction; Mental health; Discrimination; Bullying; Deradicalisation; Biography; Young; Dynamics; Practices; Women; Social Media; Online Forums; Al Shabaab; Salafism
2024	Radicalisation (6x)	Gender (4x)	(P)CVE (4x)	Deradicalisation; Security; Masculinity (2x)	Single mention: Gender-sensitive; Gender-blindness; Femininities; Terrorism; Islamic State; Al-Qaeda; South Asia; Patriarchy; Femininities, Intersectionality; Far-Right Extremism; Pathways; Foreign Fighter; Patriarchy

* #x indicates the number of references across the literature from that year. In cases where multiple words were referenced the same number of times, this has been clearly indicated.

Publications per Year

Between 2015 and 2024, there was a notable uptick in publications on ‘gender’ and ‘radicalisation’ particularly from 2020. This reflects not only the more contemporary focus on this theme but also mirrors the growing societal use and focus on ‘gender’ as an analytical category which also affects scholarship.⁵

Table 2: Number of Publications per Year

Year of publication	Number of publications
2014	0
2015	1
2016	0
2017	1
2018	2
2019	1
2020	9
2021	4
2022	9
2023	8
2024	7
Total	42

⁵ For example, the word of the year for 2020, according to the American Dialect Society, was ‘they’, which highlighted an increasing focus on gender identities and how these were recognised and expressed in society. “Singular ‘they’ voted word of the decade by US linguists” *The Guardian*, 4 January 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/04/singular-they-voted-word-of-the-decade-by-us-linguists>.

Gender across the Three Stages of Radicalisation

This section will now focus on three general stages associated with radicalisation: the entry/radicalisation stage, roles in group/support for the movement, and exit/disengagement processes to assess how research has evolved in key stages of radicalisation processes.

Onset of Radicalisation Processes/Pathways into Radicalisation

Radicalisation processes are complex and multi-layered and can differ per individual. Many studies, theories, and models exist that aim to understand how these processes take place. To what extent radicalisation processes can differ between men and women and to what extent gender and gender dynamics play a factor in these processes has been less explored. This section aims to uncover which themes have been outlined in the literature on gender and radicalisation so far and what gaps still remain.

The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), followed by women travelling from different parts of the world to Syria and Iraq, has led to an increased research interest in women and (jihadist) radicalisation. In 2015, the predominant focus was on drivers of radicalisation of specifically women, and on understanding which recruitment messages resonated with these women. As of 2018, the focus shifted more towards gendered aspects of recruitment, with research on whether and how recruitment of men and women into groups such as ISIS differs. Studies point out that groups like ISIS utilise gendered messages to appeal to men and women differently.⁶ Oftentimes, such gendered messages include narratives around traditional gender roles. In the case of women, such messages referred to narratives around female empowerment within the context of Islam, juxtaposed against Western narratives of femininity, including feminism that are portrayed as a perversion of ‘true’ femininity.⁷ For men, such narratives are often built around messages of heroic and protective roles. Such constructions of femininity and masculinity play important roles in radicalisation processes and relate to how men and women perceive potential benefits in their status through joining extremist groups.⁸ From 2021 onwards, studies point to the relevance of an intersectional approach in understanding processes of radicalisation, including the need to integrate gender-based considerations in existing models that aim to understand and explain processes of radicalisation.

The literature also points to existing gaps in research on gender and radicalisation. For example, studies identify a need for a better understanding of the role of the internet in radicalisation processes. Specifically, the impact of new/emerging/evolving technologies that are quickly shaping our world, such as AI and social media, on gendered processes of radicalisation, appears to remain underexplored.⁹ In addition, studies point out the continuous risk of gender stereotyping in explaining radicalisation processes. Furthermore, research highlights that while a gender perspective to understand radicalisation processes is more frequently included, there

6 Elizabeth Pearson, “The case of Roshonara Choudhry: Implications for theory on online radicalization, ISIS women, and the gendered jihad.” *Policy & Internet* 8, no. 1 (2016): 5-33, <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.101>; Elizabeth Pearson and Emily Winterbotham. “Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation.” *The RUSI Journal* 162, 3 (2016): 60–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2017.1353251>; Fatuma A. Ali, “Understanding the role of Gender Relations in Radicalising and Recruiting Young Muslim Women in Higher Learning Institutions in Kenya”, *The African Review: A Journal of African Politics, Development and International Affairs* 45, 1, Special Issue: gender and violent extremism in Kenya (June 2018), pp. 70-95; Meltem Kulaçatan, “Geschlechterrelevante Attraktivitätsmerkmale im Kontext islamistischer Radikalisierung”. In *Musliminnen auf neuen Wegen: Interdisziplinäre Gender Perspektiven auf Diversität*, edited by Katajun Amipur. Baden-Baden: Ergon-Verlag. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783956507106>

7 Bidisha Biswas and Shirin Deylami. “Radicalizing female empowerment: Gender, agency, and affective appeals in Islamic State Propaganda.” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 30, no. 6-7 (2019): 1193-1213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2019.1649831>

8 Eva Herschinger, “Radikalisierung als weibliche Subjektwerdung? Die Bedeutung von Geschlecht im Kontext von Politisierung.” In *(Ent-) Politisierung?: Die demokratische Gesellschaft im 21. Jahrhundert*, edited by Andreas Schäfer and David Meiering, Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748904076>

9 Shafi Md Mostofa, “Redefining gender roles: women in South Asia’s Jihadist Movements.” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (2024): 1-11 <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2024.2312112>; Elizabeth Pearson, “The case of Roshonara Choudhry”.

still remains a lack of understanding of the relevance of gender in such processes. This research points out the need for an intersectional, long-term, and holistic approach, that includes a psychosocial lens and recognises men and women as subjects affected by gender orders and structural conditions in their societies.¹⁰

What furthermore stands out is that a large part of the literature concerning gender and radicalisation focuses on jihadist groups such as ISIS. There seems to be less (comparative) research on radicalisation processes within other extremist groups or ideologies. While some studies in our dataset look at other ideologies¹¹ or include a comparative element,¹² the predominant focus of studies on gender and radicalisation processes seems to have been on ISIS. There remains very little research, if no research at all, on gender and radicalisation processes in far-left extremist groups, or anti-government groups. According to our dataset, only four studies look at gender and radicalisation processes of the far-right, and none at the far-left or anti-government groups. There are also limited studies of the impact of new/emerging/evolving technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and social media, which are quickly shaping our world. Noteworthy here is that a (large) body of (historical) literature exists on why and how women support terrorist- or violent extremist groups across different ideologies. Yet these studies have not been integrated into broader contemporary understandings, models and theories of radicalisation.¹³

In sum, studies on gender and processes of radicalisation so far highlight that gender stereotypes prevail in understanding the entryways into radicalisation and violent extremism. They emphasise that pathways into violent extremism have proven to be complex for both men and women and that culturally determined gender expectations lead to differences in mechanisms and messages through which males and females are recruited.¹⁴ Constructions of femininity and masculinity play an important role in the radicalisation process of men and women.¹⁵ Studies so far have pointed out that radicalisation processes are complex, multi-layered and gendered.¹⁶ However, while some studies have explored the issue in more general terms or studied radicalisation processes in extremist groups other than jihadi groups, many of them have focused on ISIS, particularly on Western supporters of ISIS. There remains a lack of research on gender and radicalisation processes in other groups, including the far-right and ethnonationalist groups, and in particular on the far-left, hybrid and anti-government movements, as well as of research on these (gendered) processes in a non-Western context.

10 Umut Akkuş, Ahmet Toprak, Deniz Yılmaz, and Vera Götting. *Zusammengehörigkeit, Genderaspekte und Jugendkultur im Salafismus*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS. 2020; Meltem Kulaçatan. "Geschlechterrelevante Attraktivitätsmerkmale"; Sune Qvotrup Jensen and Jeppe Fuglsang Larsen. "Sociological Perspectives on Islamist Radicalization – Bridging the Micro/Macro Gap." *European Journal of Criminology* 18, no. 3 (2019): 426–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370819851356>; Awino Okech. "Governing Gender." *Africa Development/Afrique et Développement* 46, no. 3 (2021); Nora Fritzsche, "Konfliktreiche Geschlechterdynamiken in der Adoleszenz als Faktor in islamistischen Hinwendungs- und Radikalisierungsprozessen." In *Handbuch Radikalisierung im Jugendalter. Phänomene, Herausforderungen, Prävention*. Edited by Björn Milbradt, Anja Frank, Frank Greuel and Maruta Herding. Berlin, Toronto, Opladen: Budrich. 2020; Eva Herschinger. "Mutter, Mädel und Muhajirah: Gender und seine Bedeutung für Radikalisierung". In: *Radikalisierungsnarrative online*, edited by Reinke de Buitrago. Wiesbaden: Springer VS. 2022. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-37043-5_7; Elizabeth Pearson, "Beyond women"; Elizabeth Pearson. "Gendered Reflections? Extremism in the UK's Radical Right and al-Muhajiroun Networks." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46, no. 4 (2023): 489–512. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1759270>.

11 Jessica Sciarone, "Radicalization Pathways among Women in US Far-Right Extremist Networks and Implications for Deradicalization." *Journal for Deradicalization* 38 (2024): 81-121.

12 Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, Alexandra Phelan, and Ayse D. Lokmanoglu. "Gendered radicalisation and 'everyday practices': An analysis of extreme right and Islamic State women-only forums." *European Journal of International Security* 8.2 (2023): 227-242, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2022.32>

13 As pointed out by Pearson, "Gendered Reflections?"

14 Pearson and Winterbotham, "Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation."

15 Herschinger, "Radikalisierung als weibliche Subjektwerdung?"

16 Pearson, "The Case of Roshonara Choudry"; Pearson and Winterbotham, "Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation."; Nava Nuraniyah, "Not Just Brainwashed: Understanding the Radicalization of Indonesian Female Supporters of the Islamic State." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, 6 (2018): 890–910. doi:10.1080/09546553.2018.1481269.; Biswas and Deylami. "Radicalizing female empowerment"; Herschinger, "Radikalisierung als weibliche Subjektwerdung?"; Katherine Brown, *Gender, Religion, Extremism: Finding Women in Anti-Radicalization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Roles in group/support for the movement

A key aspect of the radicalisation process is the time spent within a violent extremist movement or supporting a violent extremist movement. Such periods can serve to intensify one's commitment to a group or cause, or increasingly alienate the individual from that group or cause, thereby leading to disengagement or deradicalisation processes. The gendered aspects of this - how men and women, boys and girls, may experience this stage - have been a growing area of focus, but many gaps still exist. This section will discuss what the literature that has prioritised gender and radicalisation processes between 2014 and 2024 observed about gender-based considerations within or supporting movements.

Much of this research has focused on the roles of men and women within groups, why these roles may evolve (and under what circumstances), and gaps in knowledge about these roles for women in particular. For example, early literature from 2015, which looked at a female al-Qaeda supporter, noted the limited understanding of how norms change within groups, and how these affect non-violent to violent roles for men and women.¹⁷ Literature from Germany has also noted the gap in research around gender dynamics in Salafist groups, where some members radicalised to violent extremism.¹⁸ A consistent theme in this literature is trying to highlight the disproportionate focus on male actors in terrorist groups, even while they continue to be overrepresented as perpetrators of violence. This has largely acted as a critique of the research and practitioners' work, which focuses largely on perpetrators of violence instead of the broad range of roles which support the day-to-day function of terrorist and violent extremist movements. This has been particularly emphasised with ISIS, where women too have been highlighted as playing a variety of roles which contributed to the 'caliphate'.¹⁹ Due to their often lesser presence in terrorist groups, there has been a lack of research on the roles of women, which also has had implications for security actors and biases they may have when assessing actors within a group or movement.²⁰ Common tropes around women who join these groups have also been noted along this same vein.²¹

This literature has also focused on certain ideologies, such as jihadism, to consider what roles women should be allowed to play based on strict interpretations of that ideology.²² Gaps have also been identified in relation to why some combatants may choose to stay in groups, as well as the gendered aspects of this.²³ Other critiques around existent literature on gender dynamics within movements also note the lack of comparative studies between groups and their perceptions of gender,²⁴ as well as the long-term effects of involvement in extremist groups on one's (gendered) identity.²⁵ Though much of this literature has focused on Islamist groups, gaps around knowledge of women's roles in far-right extremist movements have also been noted.²⁶

17 Pearson, "The Case of Roshonara Choudhry".

18 Herschinger, "Radikalisierung als weibliche Subjektwerdung?"; Akkuş and Toprak "Jugendkulturelle Dimension des Salafismus aus der Genderperspektive".

19 Mostofa, "Redefining gender roles".

20 Pearson and Winterbotham, "Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation."; Also note this same critique by Schmidt, in "Duped"; Zainab Usman, Sherine El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, Khadija Gambo Hawaja, Abdul Raufu Mustapha, and Kate Meagher. "Gender norms & female participation in radicalization" in *Overcoming Boko Haram: Faith, Society and Islamic Radicalization in Northern Nigeria* (2020): 193-224; Gülriz Şen, and Başak Yavçan. "Gender, radicalization, and patriarchy in Turkey: an analysis of women's motivations and constraints when confronted with ISIS and the al-Nusra front." *Turkish Studies* 25.2 (2024): 257-279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2022.2159390>

21 Schmidt, "Duped".

22 Nuraniyah, "Not just brainwashed".

23 Rachel Schmidt. "Contesting the fighter identity: Framing, desertion, and gender in Colombia." *International Studies Quarterly* 65.1 (2021): 43-55. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa075>

24 Herschinger, "Mutter, Mädel und Muhajirah";

25 Katrin Maier, Kört Möller, Florian Neuschler, and Bart Kopftuch, "Geschlechtertrennung"? Gender-Aspekte im Zusammenhang mit der Involvement in 'islamische' Kontexte und der Distanzierung von ihnen [Headscarves, Beard, gender segregation? Gender-aspects in connection with the involvement in 'Islamic' contexts and the dissociation from them], in: Joachim Langner, Maren Zschach, Marco Schott, Marco and Ina Weigelt (eds.) *Jugend und islamistischer Extremismus. Pädagogik im Spannungsfeld von Radikalisierung und Distanzierung*. Opladen, Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2023. pp. 89-106

26 Sciarone, "Radicalization Pathways".

Gender dynamics within these groups have also been a key area of focus over the last ten years, specifically where ISIS has so directly affected the terrorism space.²⁷ This includes, for example, where ‘traditional’ roles directed at females in the group have been framed in terms of an Islamist interpretation of women’s empowerment and contrasted against those of ‘Western values’.²⁸ This has thus served to highlight the importance of framing such debates about women’s (and men’s) roles against those of the society from which they originate. This literature has also considered, for example, different forums for members and supporters of ISIS and far-right groups, where everyday gendered dynamics can be expressed and reinforced,²⁹ one rare but notable example of contemporary literature which assesses gender, radicalisation, and online communities.

Noting the above, there has been some notable progress in this literature. For example, while identifying the continuous gaps around women’s roles in terrorism, much work has been done that assesses their roles within specific groups, such as ISIS (yet the same cannot be said for gendered roles of males within the same groups, or for gendered roles within other ideologically-driven extremist groups). Particularly in groups with strong gender hierarchies, there has been increasing analysis of gendered roles within other Islamist organisations, such as al-Shabaab³⁰ or Boko Haram.³¹

Yet, several notable gaps still exist. Much of the discussion around gender and roles/participation within a group has focused on women, particularly women associated with ISIS. This means that gendered assessments of the roles of males, how or why their roles may evolve over time, or gendered stereotypes or tropes about supporters or actors in these groups may also extend to males. Furthermore, due to the predominant focus on ISIS, there is a gap in the gendered analysis of the roles of males and females in other long-standing ideologies, particularly the far-right and far-left. With the far-right being a growing ideology of concern, as well as the ongoing presence of far-left, gendered analysis would be crucial to better understanding the roles of men and women across these different ideologies. Such literature could also engage a cross-comparative lens across ideologies to see where/how they may approach gendered roles and dynamics similarly, even if from different ideological backgrounds.³² It also means that new and emerging ideological trends or issues, such as incels, male supremacists, anti-government extremism, or ‘hybrid extremisms’, have not yet sufficiently considered the gendered roles of supporters and members. Where and how these roles in groups can be expressed or demonstrated both online (such as in online forums, social media and publications) and offline (in physical spaces and environments at home and abroad) would also benefit from further analysis.

Exit/disengagement processes

It has only been since 2020 that gender has become a focus in the literature on exit processes, with few studies in the preceding years.³³ Most notably, scholars call for a gendered approach to deradicalisation and disengagement. Four topics are increasingly discussed in the literature, deemed beneficial to a gendered approach to exit: the influence of gender stereotypes, the need to recognise men’s and women’s unique experiences in extremist groups (and how this affects their exit/disengagement processes), as well as the need to integrate more female perspectives in exit programmes and to address patriarchal structures.

27 Akkuş and Toprak “Zusammengehörigkeit, Genderaspekte und Jugendkultur im Salafismus”

28 Biswas and Deylami. “Radicalizing female empowerment”; Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg. “ISIS and the allure of traditional gender roles.” *Women & Criminal Justice* 33.2 (2023): 150-170.

29 Veilleux-Lepage, Phelan, and Lokmanoglu. “Gendered radicalisation”.

30 Fathima Badurdeen, “Returning home: the reintegration dilemmas of female Al-Shabaab defectors in Kenya.” *Journal of British Academy* 11.1 (2023): 37-62.

31 Usman, et al. “Gender norms & female participation in radicalization”.

32 See, for example: Roose and Cook. “Supreme men”.

33 Pearson and Winterbotham, “Women, Gender and Daesh”.

When it comes to disengagement, authors acknowledge several general themes as they pertain to gender. First, research has analysed how gender norms influence pathways out of extremism. As Schmidt, who interviewed former Colombian male and female FARC combatants, highlights,³⁴ they do not fully capture the complexities of why some individuals seek disengagement while others stay. This is even more difficult when it comes to women, it is argued, as they have been invisible in deradicalisation programmes for the longest time. These deradicalisation programs which work with women tend to be based on stereotypes, often reducing women's roles to passive or victimised positions, overlooking the reasons that lead women to exit extremist groups.³⁵ Second, research claims that most programmes fail to recognise the complexity of women's roles and unique experiences within extremist groups, from voluntary involvement to forced participation.³⁶ Studies argue that effective reintegration must consider social, political, and economic needs while addressing trauma and social stigmatisation, moving beyond stereotypes to better address these drivers of exiting extremist groups.³⁷ Third, studies consider the need for structural changes to fully integrate women into deradicalisation processes.³⁸ This involves creating female-led programmes, adopting policies to reduce stigma post-disengagement, and implementing frameworks that address gender-based trauma.³⁹ Lastly, the literature observes that patriarchal social structures hinder male and female reintegration by amplifying social stigma.⁴⁰

In the literature on gender and exit/disengagement, three gaps stand out. First, there is a lack of recognition of gendered experiences on how men and women may be prompted to or experience exit/disengagement from a group/movement. Considering many female returnees from ISIS, the literature highlighted a need for an understanding of the unique experiences of women in extremist contexts to inform rehabilitation programmes.⁴¹ This gap was addressed with contributions from scholars stressing the importance of reintegration programmes addressing women's specific social and economic barriers beyond merely noting their participation.⁴² From 2020 on, the literature notices a second gap: gender-sensitive deradicalisation programmes at the time were criticised for reinforcing existing gendered stereotypes and biases, in particular with regard to women.⁴³ Contributions focused on female empowerment to address the gap, with an emphasis on structural barriers, tying in with the hindering effects of the patriarchy.⁴⁴ Thirdly, in 2022, calls for frameworks to evaluate gender-sensitive deradicalisation strategies arose.⁴⁵ Publications aimed to close the gap with gender-sensitive frameworks advocating for intersectionality, thus refining deradicalisation approaches to be more contextually responsive.⁴⁶ Today, the literature identifies a new gap concerning the absence of gendered disengagement programmes specifically for women in far-right movements

34 Rachel Schmidt. "Contesting the Fighter Identity".

35 Vielleux- Lepage, Phelan and Lokmanoglu. "Gendered Radicalisation".

36 Brown, "Gender, Religion, Extremism; Speckhard and Ellenberg. "ISIS and the allure of traditional gender roles."; Okech, "Governing Gender."

37 Schmidt, "Duped"; Brown, "Gender, Religion, Extremism" chapter 7 and 8; Badurdeen, "Returning home"; Gülriz Şen and Başak Yavçan. "Gender, radicalization, and patriarchy in Turkey: an analysis of women's motivations and constraints when confronted with ISIS and the al-Nusra front." *Turkish Studies* 25, no. 2 (2024): 257-279.

38 Muhammad Ejaz, Adil Khan, and Tauqeer Iqbal. "Civil society, gender and de-radicalization programs: A case of PAIMAN Alumni Trust." *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 6, no. 2 (2022): 492-502 [http://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2022\(6-II\)42](http://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2022(6-II)42); Usman et al. "Gender norms & female participation in radicalization."

39 Badurdeen, "Returning home"

40 Şen and Yavçan. "Gender, radicalization, and patriarchy in Turkey"; Ann-Kathrin Rothermel and Megan Kelly. "'Outsourcing patriarchy' in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE)." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2024): 1-30.

41 Maier et al., "Geschlechtertrennung".

42 Brown, "Gender, Religion, Extremism".

43 Schmidt, "Duped", p.12..

44 Şen and Yavçan. "Gender, radicalization, and patriarchy in Turkey"

45 Ejaz et al., "Civil society, gender and de-radicalization programs".

46 Hanna Baron, Imke Haase, Eva Herschinger, and Britt Ziolkowski. "„Gender Matters“?! Zur Bedeutung von Gender in Der Distanzierungs- Und Deradikalisierungsarbeit Im Bereich Des Salafismus." ["Gender Matters"?! On the importance of gender in distancing and de-radicalization work in the field of Salafism] in *Deradikalisierung und Distanzierung auf dem Gebiet des islamistischen Extremismus*. (Springer, 2023).

In *Deradikalisierung Und Distanzierung Auf Dem Gebiet Des Islamistischen Extremismus : Erkenntnisse Der Theorie - Erfahrungen Aus Der Praxis*, edited by Samira Benz and Georgios Sotiriadis, 317–38. Wiesbaden: Springer VS. 2023. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-39807-1_17.

broadening the focus from Islamist extremism,⁴⁷ while studies on anti-government movements or left-wing extremism are still absent. In consequence, scholars suggested that countering violent extremism (CVE) programmes should also critically examine how societal norms and domestic patriarchal structures in Western societies may impact deradicalisation.⁴⁸

In sum, the literature emphasises that effective deradicalisation requires moving beyond men and women and acknowledging the intersecting social factors that shape their exit experiences. This progression marks a shift toward a holistic, gender-sensitive understanding of disengagement, with sustained support and structural changes that address the unique needs of men and women exiting extremist groups.

47 Sciarone, "Radicalization Pathways among Women".

48 Biswas and Deylami. "Radicalizing female empowerment"; Baron et al. "Gender Matters"

Discussion and Conclusion

While the body of literature on gender and radicalisation has evolved and grown notably over the last ten years, there are several significant ongoing gaps in the literature. Mirroring developments across the globe, the majority of research on gender and extremism has focused on the experiences of those associated with violent Islamist extremism, specifically ISIS. This has left a large gap in understanding the gendered dynamics, roles, and experiences of individuals associated with other groups and ideologies, including both long-standing ideologies (for example, far-left, far-right, ethno-nationalist) and important new ideological trends, such as hybrid ideologies. This is also reflected in the practical realm, with frontline practitioners uncertain about the spectrum of extremist ideologies and the gendered dimensions within.⁴⁹

Another significant gap identified in this research is the prevalence of gendered stereotypes and biases in the literature on gender and radicalisation. The literature repeatedly highlights the need to move beyond the consideration of normative assumptions of women's and men's experiences throughout radicalisation processes and to consider the varied intersectional identities that different individuals hold. Research conducted in consultation with practitioners also supports this. Interviews demonstrate that gendered norms and stereotypes are still prevalent and even perpetuated and upheld by public institutions.⁵⁰

Research into practice on exit programming echoes the findings from the literature. In our linked report, interviews with practitioners working on the ground demonstrate that the gaps outlined above continue to dominate the practical sphere of work on disengagement.⁵¹ Practitioners remain largely unaware of the gendered stereotypes, biases, roles, and experiences of individuals in radicalisation, thus continuing to perpetuate them within systems that neglect the complexity of gendered radicalisation. Accordingly, P/CVE strategies and rehabilitation/exit work are needed to address these structures. Some initial recommendations are outlined below to address these significant gaps.

- **Recommendation 1: Gender-based analysis in the literature on radicalisation should also focus on men and masculinities.** This includes both scholars and practitioners, who would ultimately benefit from a more nuanced and detailed assessment of gendered pathways into, within, and out of violent extremist and terrorist groups for men.
- **Recommendation 2: Ensure there is continued development of gender-based analysis in both theory and practice.** This would further serve to break down harmful stereotypes and dichotomies, which otherwise continue to be perpetuated within broader narratives of radicalisation. Despite growing recognition of the varied roles played by individuals (irrespective of gender), stereotypes continue to pose barriers to the effective implementation of programming, as well as limit comprehensive understanding of radicalisation processes.
- **Recommendation 3: More comparative studies are needed - whether between different groups/ideologies or across the same ideology and different regions.** Currently, much of this literature (with the exception of global cases and analysis of ISIS) does not apply gendered analysis across ideologies or unique regional contexts. This lack of comparative studies limits knowledge of shared and distinct trends across ideologies, which would have to be adapted into P/CVE and exit/rehabilitation work.

⁴⁹ Andreeva, et al., "Assessing gender perspectives".

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

- **Recommendation 4: Integrate gender-based analysis into research on all stages of radicalisation processes.** This includes pathways into groups, roles within groups, and exit processes out of groups/movements. Researchers and practitioners should ensure that such analysis is done thoroughly and consistently across researched and contemporary phenomena. This is especially pertinent given the complexity of each stage of radicalisation, as well as the variety of roles and spaces individuals take up.
- **Recommendation 5: Keep up with new trends and technologies.** Our world is evolving at a very fast pace, and issues that affect radicalisation processes, such as new and emerging technologies like AI, large language models, chatbots, etc., are not reflected in current literature. Emerging themes of the day that relate to violent extremism, including misogyny, hybrid ideologies, anti-government extremism, etc., are also currently neglected. Yet it should be obvious how gender-based analysis is imperative for better understanding why men and women may participate in or support such movements.

If both scholars and practitioners reflect on the recommendations above, future research and practice are primed to be conducted in a more gender-sensitive fashion, rich with new research findings and directions, which can directly enhance practices and policies that seek to counter-radicalisation in our societies.

About the Authors

Dr. Joana Cook is a Senior Research Fellow at the International Center for Counter-Terrorism, and an Assistant Professor of Terrorism and Political Violence at Leiden University.

Dr. Eva Herschinger is Head of the Research Programme on Security and Intelligence and Senior Researcher at the Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies at the University of the Bundeswehr Munich.

Seran van de Leede is a Researcher and PhD candidate at Leiden University and works at the Research Programme for the Dutch Police.

Anna-Maria Andreeva is a Researcher in the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism pillar and Managing Editor at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism.



International Centre for
Counter-Terrorism



Universiteit Leiden

International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)

T: +31 (0)70 763 0050

E: info@icct.nl

www.icct.nl