



Preventing/countering violent extremism programming on men, women, boys and girls

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Question

How has P/CVE programming engaged men, women, girls and boys differently and what has worked and what were the challenges in gender-responsiveness?

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The K4D helpdesk service provides brief summaries of current research, evidence, and lessons learned. Helpdesk reports are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.

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1. Summary

Gender and age can have a big influence on people's roles in relation to violent extremism: if they are vulnerable to recruitment, if they join violent extremist groups, the driving factors, what their participation in violent extremism entails, and – critically – what approaches should be taken to preventing or countering violent extremism (P/CVE)¹. Hence, it is important not to take a one-size-fits-all approach in P/CVE programming, but rather to differentiate between men, women, boys and girls.

P/CVE and women

Violent extremism is 'highly gendered'; there are strong links between gender inequality and violent extremism. Men and women can have very different reasons for joining/supporting extremist groups, based on their gendered roles; they can participate in different ways; and be impacted by violent extremism in different ways.

The literature stresses the importance of taking a gendered approach in P/CVE programming. Women's participation can bring different perceptions and experiences, and ensure increased effectiveness and broader reach of P/CVE strategies. **Gender equality is a powerful tool in P/CVE**, though it is important not to instrumentalise this, as in the long run this could undermine women's rights. In recent years there has been a **significant shift towards adopting a gender perspective in P/CVE frameworks and strategies.**

There are lots of gender stereotypes about women in relation to violent extremism: they tend to be **viewed either as victims** (particularly of sexual violence) **or as potentially able to stop it** through their position as mothers, sisters, etc. Far less focus is given to their potential role as perpetrators of violent extremism. The reality is that many women have been drawn of their own free will to join violent extremist groups, and have played multiple roles within such groups.

Such stereotypes have led to P/CVE programming largely involving and targeting men. Women's involvement in decision-making is secondary at best, and in terms of role in P/CVE the focus is on women within their family circles being able to promote tolerance and detect radicalisation. Some writers question whether women can be that influential, given the high levels of gender inequality many face. Others challenge the notion that women cannot have wider influence.

Examples of wider roles for women in P/CVE include: providing vital information to security actors; providing input to make P/CVE strategies and programmes more effective; joining the security services themselves and working on law enforcement and P/CVE; and having a role in policy-making.

This review found examples of **diverse interventions in relation to women and P/CVE.** Examples are: **economic, political and social empowerment of women in Morocco** and promotion of female religious preachers; the **Mothers School initiative** which gives women skills and knowledge to counter extremist narratives; and the **'Let's live in peace!' project in**

¹ *Countering* violent extremism implies that violent extremist organisations are already present and must be counteracted, while *preventing* violent extremism points to proactive work taking place in areas where such groups are not active – but have the potential to enter the scene (Sommers, 2019: 22).

Pakistan which supports both economic empowerment of women, and knowledge/capacity development to recognise and tackle radicalisation.

Recommendations for P/CVE programming and women fall into three broad themes: conduct more research and gendered analysis; involve women and women's organisations in all aspects of programming; and mainstream gender into all P/CVE work, whilst promoting gender equality in its own right.

P/CVE and men

Gender is not the same as women. However, there is a **tendency to equate gender with women and overlook men and male youth**. One consequence of this is a lack of focus and research on men, male youth and masculinity in the context of violent extremism.

Gender roles, and patriarchal notions of masculinity in particular, can fuel conflict and insecurity, and be a driver of violent extremism.

Violent extremist organisations use notions of masculinity to appeal to men and male youth. ISIS, for example, uses hypermasculine images to portray its fighters, and uses a combination of masculinity and humiliation to secure male recruits. Women can reinforce gender perceptions and expectations, persuading or goading male relatives to join violent extremist groups.

The inadequacies men and male youth feel in their lives can also be a driving factor in them turning to violent extremism. When males find it difficult to achieve social status and adulthood through the traditional routes (employment and marriage) they can seek alternative ways, including violent extremism.

Finally, **gendered perceptions of men can make them targets of counter-terrorism and hard-line security measures** by governments and security services, which can be counterproductive.

Key recommendations include: the need to understand gendered push and pull factors behind violent extremism, and not make assumptions about men's roles; greater research and focus on notions of masculinity in the context of violent extremism; and promotion of 'positive' notions of masculinity (not based on violence).

P/CVE and youth

The **majority of people who become violent extremists are youth** but only a tiny proportion of youth populations end up in violent extremist groups. The **factors driving youth involvement in violent extremism are complex, diverse and often mutually reinforcing**. Common '**push**' factors include: marginalisation and exclusion; a sense of injustice; lack of access to education and employment opportunities; lack of future prospects and sense of social and personal worth and purpose; and disruptive social context and experiences of violence. Common '**pull**' factors are: ideologies answering grievances and offering new forms of identity; sense of purpose; camaraderie and friendship; material incentives; empowerment and adventure.

Despite the central role of youth in violent extremism, there is **little understanding of what it is like to be a youth** and how to engage effectively with those vulnerable to recruitment. In the

context of violent extremism and P/CVE, **youth tend to be perceived either as perpetrators, or as victims who are forced to join violent extremist groups.** This limited narrative fails to capture the fact that young people can be and are part of the solution. Government responses to violent extremism (VE), often hard-line security approaches, are counterproductive. **To be effective P/CVE programming must have youth participation.**

Approaches to engaging and targeting youth in P/CVE efforts fall into four broad categories, with diverse interventions under each:

- Preventing violence and recruitment into violent extremist groups;
- Facilitating young people's disengagement from violent extremist groups;
- Producing and amplifying new narratives;
- Fostering effective and meaningful partnerships.

This review found a range of interventions focused on youth and P/CVE. Examples include: **Pakistan's Peace Rickshaws campaign** which puts messages of peace on rickshaws to counter extremist narratives; **Youth-Waging Peace**, a youth-led guide to PVE through education which offers perspectives on violent extremism from the lived experiences of young people across different backgrounds; the **'Drop the Gun, Pick Up the Pen' initiative** by the Elman Peace and Human Rights Centre in Somalia, which aims at the disarmament, rehabilitation and reintegration of young women and men who had been co-opted into clan-based militias by warlords; and **Youth Against Terrorism in Tunisia**, which seeks to reduce the influence of violence, extremist radicalisation and terrorism in Tunisian society.

However, systematic data and evidence on youth-inclusive/youth-focused PVE programming and the positive role of young people in PVE are rare.

The literature clearly stresses the importance of youth participation in all aspects of P/CVE programming. **Key recommendations** are: carry out **thorough analysis** on violent extremism in each localised context, who's involved/vulnerable, driving factors, and determine interventions accordingly; **involve youth** in data collection and analysis, and design and implementation of programmes; **promote multi-stakeholder partnerships with youth at the forefront**; engage in advocacy and **awareness-raising on the positive role and needs of young people for PVE**; promote **young women's empowerment** and gender-sensitive youth and PVE approaches; and try to reach 'unreachable' youth.

This review drew on a mixture of academic and grey literature. Gender issues were addressed in much of the literature.

2. P/CVE programming and women²

Importance of engaging with women

Need for gendered approach to P/CVE

The literature describes violent extremism (and terrorism) as ‘highly gendered activities’ (Ndung’u & Shadung, 2017: 2). Men and women can have similar reasons for joining/supporting extremist groups, but they can also be very different: for women such groups can represent opportunities to escape gendered expectations and, ironically, be free of traditional cultural-religious restrictions and norms and feel empowered (Holdaway & Simpson, 2018). Myers (2018: 1) stresses that gender inequality and violent extremism are strongly linked: ‘gender inequality predicts, serves, and propagates violent extremism (VE)....Gender inequality is fundamental to the proliferation of VE, as an indicator, a weapon, and a principle reason women support violent extremist movements’. Ndung’u and Shadung (2017: 10) argue that it is becoming increasingly evident that extremists actively exploit gender dynamics in their recruitment methods and in the roles assigned to both genders in such organisations. Similarly, the impact of violent extremism can be very different on men and on women.

Given the above, the literature stresses the importance of taking a gendered approach in P/CVE programming. Ndung’u and Shadung (2017: 2-3) highlight the benefits:

A gendered analysis gives equal consideration to the differing experiences of women and men...*(it)* could provide insight on how women and men are likely to be impacted by responses to violent extremism; how PVE and CT (*counter-terrorism*) efforts may challenge, maintain or reinforce existing gender inequalities; and how more effective PVE and CT responses may be constructed.

Conversely, ‘PVE interventions that fail to incorporate a gendered perspective risk bolstering regressive and stereotypical gender norms, which can cripple the quality of such interventions’ (Ndung’u & Shadung, 2017: 12). Patel and Westermann (2018) stress that CVE initiatives must engage women at all stages including design, implementation, operation and evaluation. This is echoed by True and Eddyono (2017: 7): ‘women bring perspectives and experiences to the perception of ‘security’ that encompass the wellbeing of the family and the community – something distinct from – and frequently absent from – male-dominated conceptions of the purpose and maintenance of security’. Women’s participation can improve the effectiveness of PVE strategies and their broader reach.

Gender equality as tool for P/CVE

The literature identifies gender equality as a powerful tool in P/CVE (Myers, 2018). ‘Gender equality is not only a moral imperative: it is a strategic necessity....Women’s equality is not peripheral to peace - it is fundamental’ (Myers, 2018: 3). Referring to gender inequality as a driver for women’s radicalisation, Ndung’u and Shadung (2017: 12) explain that, ‘PVE strategies that are designed to ensure women’s inclusion and participation also become crucial in addressing the factors that motivate them to search for inclusion and relevance in extremist

² This section should be read in conjunction with Idris, I. & Abdelaziz, A. (2017), *Women and Countering Violent Extremism*, GSDRC Helpdesk Report 1408, University of Birmingham. This section focuses on the literature since that report was written, though also reflects many of its findings.

groups'. Hudson (cited in Patel & Westermann, 2018: 56) points out that, 'Countries where women are empowered are vastly more secure, whether the issue is food security, countering violent extremism or resolving disputes with other nations peacefully'. A study of PVE in Indonesia (True & Eddonyo, 2017: 8) found that promoting gender equality was potentially the single most powerful counter-discourse to extremist interpretations of religious teachings.

However, the literature also cautions against the instrumentalisation of gender equality – using this simply as a tool for P/CVE and counter-terrorism – warning that in the long-term this could undermine women's rights (GAPS, 2018: 7-8). It stresses that gender equality is a goal that should be promoted in its own right (GAPS, 2018: 12):

The political, social and economic empowerment and realisation of the human rights of women and girls are ends in themselves and not means to bolster national security, prevent violent extremism or indeed to further any other agenda.

Inclusion of gender in policy frameworks

In initial approaches to P/CVE links between gender equality and peace and security were conspicuously absent (GAPS, 2018). This has changed in recent years with a significant shift towards adopting a gender perspective (GAPS, 2018). P/CVE frameworks and strategies now recognise the importance of a gendered approach and the role of women (Ndung'u & Shadung, 2017).

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (SCR 1325)³, approved in 2000, was the first to recognise the specific risks to and experiences of women in armed conflict and the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace-building, and in post-conflict reconstruction (Idris & Abdelaziz, 2017; Patel & Westermann, 2018). It calls for equal participation of women in decision-making related to peace processes, protection of women from violence, in particular sexual violence in armed conflict situations, and gender mainstreaming in conflict management and peace building efforts. A series of subsequent Security Council resolutions have reinforced the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda laid out in SCR 1325. Notable among these is UNSCR 2242 (2015) which explicitly addresses the harmful impact of VE on women. It also stresses the need for gender-sensitive research and for increased consultations with women's organisations affected by violent extremism (Ndung'u & Shadung, 2017: 4).

The 2016 UN Plan of Action for Preventing Violent Extremism dedicates significant attention to women and the importance of gender considerations when developing PVE strategies (Ndung'u & Shadung, 2017). It calls on states to place the protection and empowerment of women at the centre of efforts to address terrorism and violent extremism, and to ensure that these do not impact adversely on women's rights (Ndung'u & Shadung, 2017). Most recently, in June 2018, the Sixth Review Resolution of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy urged member states and UN entities to integrate a gender analysis on the drivers of radicalisation of women to terrorism into their relevant programmes, and to seek greater consultations with women and women's organisations when developing CVE strategies (True et al, 2019: 7).

³ Full text of UN SCR 1325 available at: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N00/720/18/PDF/N0072018.pdf?OpenElement>.

Challenges

Gender stereotyping of women in relation to violent extremism

There are lots of gender stereotypes about women in relation to violent extremism: they tend to be viewed either as victims (particularly of sexual violence) (GAPS, 2018), or as potentially able to stop it through their position as mothers, sisters, etc. (see below). Far less focus is given to their potential role as perpetrators of violent extremism: women are seen as ‘innately maternal, domestic and non-violent’ (Patel & Westermann, 2018: 76). Where women are involved in violent extremist groups such as Daesh, this is assumed to be either because of manipulation by recruiters or force against their will – notions which deny seeing women as independent agents, and subordinate and patronise them (Patel & Westermann, 2018; GAPS, 2018). Prevailing gender stereotypes position women as less dangerous than men (Strommen, cited in Patel & Westermann, 2018: 70).

The reality is that many women have been drawn of their own free will to join violent extremist groups. Women have played multiple roles within terrorist organisations from facilitators and recruiters to suicide bombers and frontline fighters (Patel & Westermann, 2018). There are an estimated 600 Western female ISIS recruits (Myers, 2018: 1). In addition, numerous women support violent extremist groups without formally joining, e.g. through spreading their messages, networking, finding recruits, financial assistance.

P/CVE programming: focus on men

Given the above stereotyping of women, it is not surprising that P/CVE programming is largely targeted at men (Ladbury, 2015). ‘To date, CVE programming has overwhelmingly been designed for and directed at men, because VE is believed to be a primarily male endeavour’ (Myers, 2018: 1).

Even where women are involved, they are ‘often consulted as an afterthought in planning for PVE/CVE work and in many other security processes, to the point that if they are involved at all, they are relegated to secondary processes and structures’ (Freeman & Mahmoud, cited in Ndung’u & Shadung, 2017: 8). ‘Decision-making on security-related issues, including P/CVE, comes from patriarchal and male-dominated structures.....This results in the systematic marginalisation of women’s and girls’ perspectives’ (GAPS, 2018: 9). The problem is exacerbated by the lack of evaluations of gendered approaches to P/CVE and gendered impacts of P/CVE programmes (Ndung’u & Shadung, 2017: 7).

Approaches

Patel and Westermann (2018: 73) identify two aspects to integrating gender perspectives within CVE: one, dealing with the security challenges posed by women who are involved in violent extremism and terrorism; and two, understanding the range of roles that women can and do play to prevent and counter the threat of violent extremism and terrorism. Programming to date has focused on the latter (Idris & Abdelaziz, 2017).

Roles for women in P/CVE

Women can play important roles in preventing and countering violent extremism. However, the stereotyping of women in relation to VE is reflected in the ‘dearth of knowledge on the

relationship between gender, agency and P/CVE' and leads to assumptions about the role they can play in P/CVE programming (GAPS, 2018: 5). Notably, programmes 'assume that women will utilize their clout to fight *against* violent extremist groups when some women choose to fight *for* violent extremist groups' (Myers, 2018: 1). Secondly, the literature focuses on women's role within the family circle as especially conducive to P/CVE, both in promoting tolerance and in detecting radicalisation (GAPS, 2018). Ndung'u and Shadung (2017: 7) note:

As mothers, wives, caregivers, partners and sisters, women are thought to be in a position to be the first to detect and influence extremist thinking and behaviour in their families and communities. They are considered to have a unique position in 'early warning' and 'early response' as they are perceived as 'non-polarising' in families and communities, and as potentially helpful in developing young people's self-esteem and social cohesion.

However, a number of writers also question the widespread idea 'that in many cultures women may not be very visible in the public sphere, but wield significant power and influence in the private sphere and hence can counter violent extremism early on' (Oudraat in Fink et al, 2016: 19; also, Ndung'u & Shadung, 2017; GAPS, 2018).

Others challenge the notion that women cannot have wider influence. Patel and Westermann (2018: 76-77) argue that the focus in P/CVE programming on women's position within the family circle:

does not incorporate women into the public sphere as functioning citizens of society. Instead, it restricts women's roles to the private sphere. The valuable roles played by women around the world in all kinds of family, community, society and government efforts in building resilience, peacekeeping and peacebuilding thus go unnoticed and ineffective CVE processes are created based on inaccurate understandings of women's participation in violent extremism.

The influence of women extends beyond their families to their communities where 'women can play an important role as mediators as well as authors of counter-narratives challenging violent extremism and terrorism' (OSCE, 2013: 7). Moreover, 'their voices may be especially compelling when they speak out as victims or survivors of terrorist attacks' (Fink et al, 2013: 4). Additional roles women can play in P/CVE efforts are (Idris & Abdelaziz, 2017):

- Supporting security actors and those engaged in P/CVE through provision of vital information and intelligence that might not otherwise be accessible to security actors;
- Informing P/CVE strategies and programmes to make these more effective. 'Women are frequently victims of both terrorist attacks and counter-terrorism measures, and as such they can point out when preventive practices are counterproductive and cause backlash in their communities. This type of information can be decisive to avoid creating or sustaining conditions conducive to terrorism' (OSCE, 2013: 5).
- Women can join security agencies and work on law enforcement and P/CVE themselves. Female law enforcement officers, for example, are often better at building trust with the community and at community-oriented policing – vital elements of P/CVE. Okenyodo (in Fink et al, 2016: 13) draws on the Nigerian context and women's participation in law enforcement and military agencies to argue that 'women are effective at CVE efforts in circumstances where men may not be able to intervene due to gender differences and cultural expectations'.

- Finally, women can play a wider role in policy-making, both in public service and as political leaders.

Diversity of programming

A previous review of women and CVE found a number of programmes, taking very different approaches (Idris & Abdelaziz, 2017: 4):

- **Morocco** has sought to empower women economically, politically and socially and give them a voice in religious structures. The latter has been promoted through a training programme for women *murshidats* (preachers), who then work as religious guides within their communities spreading moderate Islam.
- The **Mothers Schools initiative** has been implemented in a number of countries. It builds women's self-confidence and gives them the skills and knowledge to counter extremist narratives and change mind-sets in their families and communities.
- **Bangladesh** sees poverty reduction and gender empowerment as key to CVE, and has sought to promote girls' education, jobs for women in the garment industry, and provision of microcredit to women.
- **PAIMAN's 'Let's live in peace!' project in Pakistan** combines both approaches: It first raises the status of women by giving them skills to earn a livelihood, then equips them with the knowledge and capacity to recognize and tackle radicalization to violent extremism in their families and communities.

Case Study: Empowered Women, Peaceful Communities

The 'Empowered Women, Peaceful Communities' regional programme was developed by UN Women to test the idea that when women are empowered economically and included as part of decision-making in their communities, societies will be more cohesive, resilient and peaceful (True et al, 2019: 8). 'Economic empowerment programmes are conceived as an entry point for engaging and bringing together women to increase their confidence, self-efficacy, and skills to take part in family decision-making and to resolve community problems and conflicts' (True et al, 2019: 8). The programme is being implemented in a number of countries including Indonesia and Bangladesh. Research conducted in these two countries six months after implementation began found that the programmes were contributing directly to women's confidence and their subsequent contribution to PVE in four distinct ways:

- a) Greater individual empowerment – women were both more confident in joining P/CVE initiatives and in reporting violent extremism and knowing what to do to counter or prevent violent extremism;
- b) Increased awareness – women were much more aware of the problem of violent extremism and how their roles in the family and in the community could contribute to P/CVE;
- c) Economic empowerment – both men and women recognised that greater economic empowerment of women decreased tensions within the family and community and thereby contributed to more peaceful and resilient societies;
- d) Community engagement – this was a key factor in P/CVE, given that 'aloofness' was frequently said to be an indicators of potential development of extremist attitudes or

behaviours: increased awareness and opportunities for community engagement, outreach and inclusion were thus especially important.

Overall, the programme was found to have been particularly successful in catalysing changes in important dimensions of P/CVE.

Recommendations

Recommendations for P/CVE programming and women fall into three broad themes: more research and analysis, involvement of women and women's organisations, and mainstreaming of gender whilst promoting gender equality in its own right. The following have been collated from Ladbury (2015), Idris and Abdelaziz (2017), Ndung'u and Shadung (2017) and GAPS (2018):

Research and analysis

- Invest in gathering data and information about women and girls.
- Develop a comprehensive understanding of the diverse roles women, girls, men and boys may take in conflict, of pre-existing gender norms, and of the specific gendered impacts of conflict.
- Use this information to inform gender-sensitive P/CVE policy and programming

Mainstream gender

- Integrate a gender dimension in all P/CVE work.
- In contexts where gender dynamics play an important role in recruitment and radicalisation to violent extremism, introduce CVE programmes specifically focused on women.
- Monitor CVE programmes from a gender perspective, looking at the extent of women's participation and their roles in such initiatives, and the impact on women. Include specific gender benchmarks.
- Promote gender equality in its own right: empowerment of women is an important goal in the context of promoting human rights and sustainable development, irrespective of P/CVE.

Participation by women and women's organisations

- Promote dialogue and participation of women and women's organisations in discussions about CVE policies and strategies, and seek their input in the design of CVE programmes.
- Promote partnerships with and between local women's organisations and build local ownership – this is key to effective programme implementation. Support community outreach programmes that raise awareness and inform women on identifying and responding to violent extremism and terrorism.
- Build capacity of local women's organisations and of women to promote CVE and implement CVE programmes. This includes capacity building for mediation, community engagement, communication, monitoring and evaluation, administration and programme management.
- Avoid using women and women's groups solely for P/CVE purposes, as this can lead to negative consequences for those groups, e.g. facing threats from extremist groups, undermining efforts to promote gender equality (if these become equated with a security agenda).

- Increase recruitment and training of women in the security services, including as police, investigators and interrogators, and remove obstacles to their retention and career advancement; carry out gender sensitisation of all security sector personnel.

3. P/CVE programming and men

Issues

Gender is not the same as women. However, the literature highlights a tendency to equate gender with women (Pearson, 2019) – ‘often to the near or complete exclusion of men and male youth’ (Sommers, 2017: 26). Using ‘gender’ synonymously with ‘women’ carries risks, e.g. sexual and gender minorities are ignored, and the different roles that men and women can play are overlooked (Holdaway & Simpson, 2018).

One consequence of this is a lack of focus and research on men, male youth and masculinity in the context of violent extremism. ‘The study of male youth and masculinity is alarmingly inadequate given that male youth dominate the ranks of VEOs and exploiting masculine vulnerabilities is a VEO speciality’ (see below) (Sommers, 2017: 35). ‘Men’s vulnerabilities have not been given the same degree of consideration as those of women and girls, who tend to be seen theoretically as the most vulnerable’ (Holdaway & Simpson, 2018: 21). Khattab and Myrntinen (2017: 11) echo this:

Men and boys make up the vast majority of combatants and military leaders globally. However, despite this, the attitudes and behaviours of men and boys in conflict-affected situations are rarely examined from a gender perspective, meaning that they are too often not considered in terms of their socially constructed masculine identities.

A growing body of research suggests that gender roles, and patriarchal notions of masculinity in particular, can fuel conflict and insecurity (Khattab & Myrntinen, 2017). In the context of Syria, Khattab and Myrntinen (2017: 12) note:

Too often, men aged 15–55, but especially young men, are seen by virtue of their gender as potential combatants. This demographic characterisation means that even if a man does not have weapons and is not engaged in fighting, he is assumed, at the very least, to be willing to fight and is therefore viewed either as an asset or as a threat (*depending on who’s looking: armed groups or the government*).

Violent extremist organisations use notions of masculinity to appeal to men and male youth (Sommers, 2017: 28):

ISIS notably employs hypermasculine images to portray its fighters, as well as promised access to sexual gratification, marriage and guaranteed income as a reward for the glory of fighting. These motifs have proven indisputably alluring to marginalised men whose capacity to access any similar social capital or status in their own communities will be extremely limited.

ISIS pays particular attention to using a combination of masculinity and humiliation in its recruitment work (Sommers, 2017). Messages about Muslims’ collective humiliation at the hands of the West are tied in with challenges to men to ‘man up’ and ‘take action’; the Taliban have also used this approach (Sommers, 2017: 28).

Women can reinforce gender perceptions and expectations, persuading or goading male relatives to join violent extremist groups (Sommers, 2017). '(W)omen also often reproduce patriarchal notions of masculinity, for example, by encouraging or expecting men to join armed groups or by shaming those who choose not to take part in the fighting' (Khattab & Myrntinen, 2017: 12). Among the tactics used by ISIS is to employ 'women and children as messengers of shame and emasculation' (Beutel & Perez, cited in Sommers, 2017: 28).

The literature also identifies the inadequacies men and male youth feel in their lives as a driving factor in them turning to violent extremism. Pearson's study (2016) highlighted the role of social status (and the desire to attain this) as a driver of violent extremism. 'The difficulties that male youth face in gaining social acceptance as men is directly connected to recruitment into VEOs' (Sommers, 2017: 14). In the context of Syria, Khattab and Myrntinen (2017: 6-7) note that:

The drastic demographic, socio-economic and infrastructural changes in Syria mean that achieving 'manhood' through traditional means, including marriage and fatherhood, is made more difficult. This, in turn, opens the door for alternative ways to potentially achieve status and privilege, including through gaining positions of power in armed groups, but also through fulfilling male breadwinner expectations by earning a salary in the armed group and thus being able to provide for their families.

Finally, just as violent extremist groups exploit notions of masculinity to secure male recruits, so the same gendered perceptions of men can make them targets of counter-terrorism and hard-line security measures by governments and security services. Holdaway and Simpson (2018: 21) note that counter-terrorism measures often disproportionately target men based on age, class, ethno-racist, political and religious profiling. This can be counterproductive (see below in 'P/CVE and youth').

Recommendations

The following recommendations emerge in relation to men/male youth and CVE:

- Rather than making assumptions about men's and women's roles, it is important to understand gendered push and pull factors for joining or not joining VE groups, and to investigate the role of gender in creating various kinds of pressures and vulnerabilities – for both women and men (Holdaway & Simpson, 2018: 22).
- More research and focus is needed on gendered expectations for men, and the role of masculinity in violent extremism.
- However, it is also important to consider factors other than gender in the context of violent extremism, 'such as age, ability/disability, class, geographic location and marital status. Pay attention to how VE and PVE impacts on *different* men and women at different times' (Holdaway & Simpson, 2018: 22).
- 'Positive' notions of masculinity should be promoted: 'The best protection against these emotional predations (facing male youth) are when communities and male leaders within them promote and sustain healthy notions of masculinity and manhood, and notably healthy notions feature removing the common use of violence as a demonstration of masculine strength' (Beutel & Perez, cited in Sommers, 2017: 29).

4. P/CVE programming and youth

Importance of engaging youth and challenges

Youth involvement in violent extremism

The majority of people who become violent extremists are youth (UNDP, 2019: 13; Sommers, 2019: 7). ‘Youth is implicit in CVE work because they are the ones who are vulnerable to recruitment’ (expert cited in Sommers, 2019: 7). However, only a tiny proportion of youth populations end up in violent extremist groups (UNDP, 2019: 13). The challenge is to identify the relative handfuls who are vulnerable to violent extremist recruitment: one expert likened this to ‘searching for needles in a haystack’ (cited in Sommers, 2019: 7).

Factors driving youth violent extremism

Young people can be driven to support violent extremism by many factors, and these will vary from one context to another, and from one individual to another. Common factors include: a sense of disengagement and marginalisation; in reaction to corruption and/or real/perceived injustice; a desire to feel part of something larger than themselves; or manipulation or fear (where people are coerced to use violence) (Youth Action Agenda, 2015). Youth exclusion can be due to diverse structural factors: un- and underemployment and lack of livelihood opportunities; insufficient, unequal and inappropriate education and skills; poor governance and weak political participation; gender inequalities and socialisation; and legacy of past violence (conflict situations) (Hilker & Fraser, 2009, cited in Sommers, 2019: 18). These are echoed by Slavova and Simpson (2018: 2) who list the following vulnerability factors: sense of political marginalisation, unequal treatment by security forces; sense of social and economic injustice; lack of access to education and employment opportunities; lack of future prospects and sense of social and personal worth and purpose; and disruptive social context and experiences of violence.

An analysis based on interviews with 21 experts and a review of over 400 publications on violent extremism, CVE and youth (Sommers, 2019: 24-25) identified a number of relevant themes: a) relative deprivation: it is not poor socioeconomic status itself, but relative deprivation – the absence of opportunities relative to expectations – that is significant; and b) sense of purpose – those who join violent extremist groups are motivated by a search for companionship, esteem, meaning, empowerment, glory and the thrill of action.

A USAID policy brief on approaches to youth and PVE distinguishes between push factors for youth in OECD⁴ countries and those in non-OECD countries (USAID, 2017: 2):

- Youth in OECD countries – socioeconomic factors such as injustice, youth identity, corruption, early marriage, youth unemployment, confidence in the press, faith in democracy, drug crime, and attitudes towards immigration;
- Youth in non-OECD countries – push factors stem from a history of armed conflict, grievances, ongoing conflict within the country, corruption and a sense of injustice, lack

⁴ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

of opportunity or services in under-governed areas, weak self-identity, and a weak governance environment.

The USAID brief (2017: 3) also points out that many youth who participate in violent extremist groups have not necessarily been radicalised: 'they participate for material reasons, including personal and/or familial safety, a stable income, or the promise of marriage'.

In sum, the factors driving youth involvement in violent extremism are complex, diverse and often mutually reinforcing. Understanding these factors and the local context 'is critical for developing comprehensive solutions that properly address the myriad of problems young women and men face across the globe' (USAID, n.d.: 3).

Lack of understanding of youth and stereotyping

Despite the central role of youth in violent extremism, there is little understanding of what it is like to be a youth and how to engage effectively with those vulnerable to recruitment. 'Extremist violence thrives in our ignorance about young peoples' lives and about their voices and aspirations' (Sommers, 2019: 4).

In the context of violent extremism and P/CVE, youth tend to be perceived either as perpetrators, or as victims who are forced to join violent extremist groups. 'Despite strong evidence supporting the idea that most youth are peaceful, the perception that male youth citizens constitute a unique threat to their own societies nonetheless persists' (Sommers, 2019: 11). Youth tend to be treated as a problem to address instead of actors with whom to engage (Sommers, 2019: 12). This limited narrative fails to capture the fact that most youth are not involved in violent extremism, and that young people can be and are part of the solution: 'Young people around the world are working to build peace and prevent violent extremism' (Youth Action Agenda, 2015: 1). UNDP's *Frontlines* report echoes this: 'Engaged as activists, students, researchers, community organizers, leaders, civil servants, entrepreneurs and politicians, young people worldwide are attempting to find ways to prevent the rise and influence of violence and violent extremism by taking direct action, promoting development and fostering peace' (UNDP, 2019: 14). Systematic data and evidence on youth-inclusive/youth-focused PVE programming and the positive role of young people in PVE are still rare (UNDP, 2019: 17).

Counter-productive government responses

Stemming from the common perception of youth as the problem in relation to violent extremism, is the use of hard-line security responses. Compared to traditional security and hard-edged responses to violent extremism, preventative initiatives, projects and programmes still receive a small fraction of funding, of which youth-inclusive initiatives represent an even smaller fraction (UNDP, 2019: 14).

The literature highlights the fact that these are often counterproductive (Youth Action Agenda, 2015: 1):

this approach only tackles the symptoms of the problem rather than addressing the factors driving participation in violent extremism. In many instances, security responses by governments further aggravate tensions and trigger more support for violent ideologies. This approach often adds to the feeling of exclusion and fails to engage youth as key allies in building resilience against violent extremism.

UNDP (2019: 13) argues that such counter-productive measures 'have increased the stigma and public mistrust of young people, especially of those from marginalized or minority communities'. In addition, many young people have been harmed by hard-edged state CVE responses, including surveillance, arrest, injury or death (UNDP, 2019: 13). According to one expert, 'CVE is doing too little to transform the hard security approaches that drive many into the arms of violent groups' (Sommers, 2019: 21).

Need to engage and involve youth

Sommers (2019: 23) notes that, even though stopping youth from joining violent extremist groups is a fundamental aim of CVE, 'explicit mention of youth as the primary target group – much less partners in CVE – remains infrequent'. The Youth Action Agenda (2015: 1) stresses that: 'More than ever before, the response to violent extremism needs meaningful youth participation at all levels. ...To effectively address the drivers of violent extremism and promote peace, youth must be engaged as partners in the design and implementation of relevant programs and policies'.

This is reflected in international policy frameworks, including the 2016 UN Plan for Action on Violent Extremism which makes clear that an effective and sustainable response to violent extremism requires a dramatically changed approach to youth (cited in Sommers, 2019: 23):

We will not be successful unless we can harness the idealism, creativity and energy of young people and others who feel disenfranchised. Young people....must be viewed as an asset and must be empowered to make a constructive contribution to the political and economic development of their societies and nations.

A UNDP study of young people and PVE identifies a number of relevant skills and talents they possess (UNDP, 2019: 25):

- On-the-ground knowledge and reach – In close contact with their peer communities, young people can be better attuned to the shifting dynamics of marginalisation and vulnerability among their peers and the broader community. In many instances, they can also have access to hard-to-reach youth groups.
- Engagement in crisis – It is young people who are often at the forefront of activism in addressing the challenges of their communities and the root causes of extremism. They show the positive forms of resilience that can help support communities during times of crisis and accelerate development.
- Creativity, know-how and mobilisation – Young people, typically working with limited support, have been particularly creative in addressing the challenges of their communities and involving their peers using innovative forms of mobilisation, communication and advocacy, including through new media.youth peacebuilding organizations ...promote various forms of knowledge-sharing and skills-building among their peers.
- Inclusivity and influence – youth-led organisations often use open organisational models built on volunteerism, trust, shared values and a common activist spirit. They tend to be more gender-balanced and work with more diverse groups that are often not fully engaged by other actors. These organisations can have more influence and credibility with other young people ...compared to more authoritarian forms of rapport.
- Defining youth and wider community priorities – Youth organisations can also play a role in collecting, defining and amplifying the views of a diversity of young people as well as

their wider community, including in priority-setting and decision-making, and can play an important advocacy role in reaching out to, and working with, marginalised groups in their societies. They can also act as bridge-builders between broader youth groups and official institutions.

Approaches

Approaches to engaging and targeting youth in P/CVE efforts fall into four broad categories (Youth Action Agenda, 2015; USAID, 2017):

- a) Preventing violence and recruitment into violent extremist groups;
- b) Facilitating young people's disengagement from violent extremist groups;
- c) Producing and amplifying new narratives;
- d) Fostering effective and meaningful partnerships.

Preventing violence and recruitment into violent extremist groups

The aim here is to work across communities and religious groups to foster trust, dialogue, and mutual understanding, building social cohesion and decreasing marginalisation and injustice (Youth Action Agenda, 2015). Young people need to be able to address grievances constructively, without violence, by building skills in communication, advocacy, and collaborative problem solving. It is also important to focus on the distinctive needs of women and girls. Interventions under this category include (USAID, 2017: 4-6):

- National development planning and youth policy - incorporating youth into national development planning strategies and developing national youth policies, which lay the groundwork for all initiatives that encourage peacebuilding through youth empowerment. Engaging youth to design policies and corresponding action plans creates a sense of agency and voice that deters extremism and empowers social inclusion.
- Youth leadership trainings - investing in training youth leaders of marginalised communities, with an emphasis on peacebuilding practices, creates positive youth role models that are prepared to mitigate conflict in their communities. Most effective is to support long-term leadership initiatives that are youth-led, connected to youth organizations, and create practical learning experiences for youth. Enhancing youth's conflict mitigation skills as well as pride for their community and culture increases social cohesion and addresses issues of community conflict and well-being.
- Gender-focused programming – this tackles the pull factors created by early and forced marriage and long-term deficits of girls lacking equal access to education.
- Youth-led organisations - providing technical support and capacity building to youth-led organisations creates authentic young leaders that are prepared to encourage peacebuilding, counteract conflict and advocate for youth oriented projects.
- Youth civic engagement - building opportunities for youth to develop a sense of purpose and meaning through civic engagement increases their sense of self-efficacy, leading to resilience.
- Employability, entrepreneurship and life skills - structured programmes that teach vocational and soft skills to ensure that youth have the self-awareness and aptitudes to seek meaningful employment, in combination with job placement, are critical elements for PVE/CVE. Research has found that the five most important soft/life skills positively

impacting outcomes in violence prevention programmes are: social skills, empathy, self-control, self-concept, and higher-order thinking skills.

- Focus on mental health - supporting at-risk youth to be conscious of their biases and decision-making processes, as well as to learn impulse control through cognitive behavioural therapy, can help decrease impulsivity and decision-making difficulties amongst troubled youth.

Facilitating disengagement from violent extremist groups

The aim here is both to engage with young people who have joined violent extremist groups and enable them to leave; and to reach out to former violent extremists and help them (re)build healthy relationships with their families and communities and give them education and employment opportunities (Youth Action Agenda, 2015). Interventions under this category include (USAID, 2017: 6-7):

- Driver analysis and short-listing programme components - to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach, analysis of the drivers of violent extremism is conducted through localised research that takes into account structural motivators, individual incentives, and enabling factors. Drivers are then matched with proven P/CVE responses. For example, the individual incentive driver of “revenge” could be addressed by messaging initiatives, support for moderate religious leaders, civic and peace education, or psychosocial support.
- Community-led disengagement - initiatives to disengage youth from violent extremist activities are found to be most effective when led by other youth, former violent extremists, religious leaders, and parents who have their own experiences.
- Engaging families of youth - Engaging families, particularly mothers, plays an important role in P/CVE. Recommendations include strengthening family-based social networks, encouraging families to work with authorities, empowering mothers as prevention protagonists, and supporting family development of VE prevention.

Producing and amplifying new narratives

Extremist groups have been particularly adept at creating and disseminating messages and narratives that aim to generate support for their cause and gain new recruits (UNDP, 2019: 26). Many of these narratives have purported to offer explanations and solutions for many young people’s sense of exclusion, disempowerment and social isolation by providing a captivating vision of empowerment and community through commitment to a bigger cause. Counter-narratives seek to combat this messaging by highlighting the drawbacks of joining extremist groups, the specific values of peace, and/or on an alternative unifying identity (UNDP, 2019: 28). In order to reach all those vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist groups such counter/alternative narratives must be propagated online and offline. Interventions under this category include (USAID, 2017: 8-9):

- Engage youth in governance - ensuring representation of youth in policy-making processes through the creation of youth councils creates a political outlet for youth sentiments and serves as a branch for advocacy.
- Youth-oriented communications strategies – media gives youth an opportunity to share knowledge and overcome exclusion. Youth are engaged to use media as a means to support policies and programmes and as a vehicle for peacebuilding. Experience shows

that positive messaging is more effective than counter-messaging, especially through radio and online platforms that are most utilised by youth in key areas.

- Sustained dialogue initiatives - programmes that facilitate inter-group contact between youth in conflict, combined with long-term sustained dialogue initiatives, can significantly decrease the likelihood of participants joining extremist groups and create positive shifts in attitude towards the other.
- Reshaping youth identities through opportunities - research shows that it is critical to understand how the formation of identity, particularly social identity, relates to violent behaviour. Changing the narrative on youth in their society can provide opportunities for youth to be productive members of society, thus decreasing the likelihood of radicalisation.
- Spaces for expressiveness - creating both physical and virtual environments for at-risk youth to express their opinions and have their voices recognised empowers youth to be agents of change in their communities. Youth centres create communal environments for trainings, dialogue, and educational and civic engagement activities.

Fostering effective and meaningful partnerships

The aim here is for youth and youth organisations to engage with other youth, civil society organisations, research institutions, religious leaders, and governments to identify and address drivers of conflicts and marginalisation. A key aim is to build trust with police and other security forces, promoting collaborative approaches that enhance community security and build trust between youth and security actors (Youth Action Agenda, 2015). Interventions under this category include (USAID, 2017: 7-8):

- Enhance cooperation with religious leaders – engagement of religious leaders and institutions is an extremely important entry point for championing peace-making and conflict resolution. Training religious leaders to work with youth can support counter radicalisation.
- Sports for development and peace - Using sports as a vehicle to teach peace and conflict resolution and leadership skills is a relatively recent but promising approach. Behaviour-based messaging and skills development woven into broader sports (or cultural) activities has been shown to be key to successful programmes.
- Inter-generational dialogue – incorporating intergenerational dialogues into leadership programmes helps to give young people positive role models to learn from and share with as an alternative to violence and crime. These models can also address issues of youth voice, grievance, and variance in narratives.

Case studies

Street advocacy campaign in Pakistan⁵

The Peace Rickshaws campaign was conceived by a youth activist in Pakistan and was implemented in Karachi. It sought to creatively counter the messages of extremist groups by placing messages of peace on a popular mode of transportation, rickshaws. The project's founder explained that right-wing organisations often paid rickshaw drivers to use their vehicles

⁵ Write-up from UNDP, 2019: 27.

to spread their messages on the streets; this project sought to use the same medium, transforming the message to one of peace and tolerance.

Promoting dialogue and peacebuilding in marginalised communities in Yemen⁶

The Abyan Youth Foundation is a community-based organisation that promotes Yemen's development and seeks to change perceptions of its young people. The Foundation participated in several awareness campaigns against youth recruitment in militias in Abyan and has a dedicated project for strengthening the skills of young people in dialogue and conflict resolution, including through workshops with mosque leaders on mediation. The organisation also works on peacebuilding, employment and substance abuse. It has established a youth council for peace, which aims to spread the concept of peace, in coordination with a women's association and other partners in Yemen. A notable success story cited by the organisation was the work carried out to establish a theatre troupe with disaffected youth who were known to be among the most marginalised groups in their community. Expanding their educational efforts through traditional media, the group has spread peacebuilding messages across the district that were broadcast by Aden Radio, which promotes discussions on youth development issues, such as the rise in drug abuse.

Using extracurricular activities to prevent violent extremism in Pakistan⁷

The Pakistan Youth Alliance has been implementing informal education and recreation projects aimed at reducing the influence of extremism in local communities. The projects begin with local needs assessments and are then tailored to the needs of specific contexts. Similarly, projects organized by the FACES Pakistan initiative engaged interfaith communities by bringing young people from different ethnic backgrounds together to put on short plays. Street theatre has become an increasingly popular form of extracurricular activity, and the FACES activities have integrated counter-narratives. This initiative first started as an informal education campaign at the college and university level, and has now been successfully expanded to a number of local communities.

Global youth-led guide on preventing violent extremism through education⁸

#Youth-Waging Peace is a youth-led guide to PVE through education. Developed and written by young people, who drove the scope, perspective and structure of the publication, this comprehensive guide offers a textured look at the multiple connections between education and PVE. Comprising 150 youth contributors from 58 countries, the guide offers perspectives on violent extremism from the lived experiences of young people across different religions, regions, races, and socio-economic backgrounds. It contains action items for teachers, school administrators, local community leaders, and policymakers in the education sector. The guide calls for: increased opportunities for young people to practise emotional competencies such as empathy, kindness and mindfulness in experiential settings, which adds greater scope and depth to interventions designed to create a PVE culture; and recognition of the importance of taking action now.

⁶ Write-up from UNDP, 2019: 28.

⁷ Write-up from UNDP, 2019: 32.

⁸ Write-up from UNDP, 2019: 32.

Disengagement and reintegration for former Somali young combatants⁹

The Elman Peace and Human Rights Centre, Somalia is an independent, non-profit, non-political NGO focused on human rights, gender justice, the protection of civilians, CVE, peacebuilding and social entrepreneurship for peace in Somalia. Co-led by a young person, it engages in several initiatives to address the needs of the most vulnerable members of Somalia's communities. Its 'Drop the Gun, Pick Up the Pen' initiative aims at the disarmament, rehabilitation and reintegration of young women and men who had been co-opted into clan-based militias by warlords. Over 3,500 individuals have participated in the Centre's programme. The Centre has also productively collaborated with the Ministry of Security on a National Action Plan for CVE and on disengagement programmes.

Tunisian youth preventing extremism and fostering trust¹⁰

Youth Against Terrorism is an organisation in Tunisia that seeks to reduce the influence of violence, extremist radicalisation and terrorism in Tunisian society. It has been active in building a wide range of partnerships with both other civil society organisations and with the government. It has adopted a notably flexible advocacy approach to engage the government in formal fora as well as backchannel discussions with willing officials in informal places such as cafes and squares. It has worked with the Ministry of Youth as well as with a broad range of government partners including representatives of political parties and the Ministries of Education and the Interior. It has also staged demonstrations and awareness campaigns to respond to the influence of violent extremism. Its efforts have led to revision of curricula manuals to expand their focus on the peaceful tenets of Islam and on critical thinking. It has also addressed community trust with security forces by helping improve Tunisia's community policing projects through more rigorous training.

Expanding young people's economic opportunities in Kosovo¹¹

With low economic opportunities cited as one of the drivers that had led to the rise of foreign fighters to Syria, youth councils in Kosovo teamed up with UN partners to run a youth employment project in five municipalities in Kosovo. The Councils view their work as directly related to wider efforts to address local root causes of violent extremism. In each of the municipalities, up to 20 young people are selected and receive skills and employment training in a sector of their choice, typically one in which the municipality has a comparative advantage. Following the training, the Councils provide seed funding to the group to jointly start-up initiatives. Although, relatively small-scale, the project has had success in generating income for participants, which in turn has garnered interest of young people for the second round of training.

Recommendations

The literature clearly stresses the importance of youth participation in all aspects of P/CVE programming.

⁹ Write-up from UNDP, 2019: 33.

¹⁰ Write-up from UNDP, 2019: 35.

¹¹ Write-up from UNDP, 2019: 30.

USAID (2017: 3) identify the following six programming steps for effective programming on youth, peace, security and P/CVE:

1. Determine the characteristics of the VE or violence phenomenon in the setting being analysed.
2. Assess whether prevention or mitigation is the main task and whether recruitment, community support, or an enabling environment that permits VE or violent groups to operate are the most pressing concerns.
3. Identify which populations, geographical areas, and/or institutions are particularly vulnerable and why.
4. Ascertain those social processes and group dynamics that are critical to facilitating or undermining recruitment and/or community support.
5. Determine the political, socioeconomic and cultural drivers (especially those affecting youth) at work and assess their salience after reviewing the analysis in steps one through four.
6. Prioritise drivers and locations, and determine development assistance and strategic communications interventions.

Applying a youth lens to these steps can take many forms, such as (USAID, 2017: 3):

- Involving youth in the design of assessment questions, data collection, analysis, and reporting;
- Identifying credible youth to speak to other youth in their terms (using slang and neighbourhood dialect and adhering to localised gender norms) rather than relying on the most educated youth from the capital city;
- Ascertaining which youth are peer influencers and building capacities for youth to be positive role models with their peers.

The UNDP (2019: 87-89) study of youth and PVE makes the following recommendations:

- Engage in advocacy and awareness-raising on the positive role and needs of young people for PVE to secure political commitment and support.
- Systematise youth participation in PVE policy and programming, using a human rights-based, 'no harm' approach.
- Ensure the adoption of youth-inclusive and youth-focused national action plans (NAPs) on PVE and other national policy frameworks, addressing young people's holistic needs and establishing coordination mechanisms at the national level on youth and PVE.
- Establish and foster multi-stakeholder partnerships for PVE, with youth at the forefront, ensuring coordination and coherence among relevant actors.
- Significantly invest in integrated, multi-sectoral approaches to youth empowerment.
- Support the action of youth organisations, movements and networks for PVE and peacebuilding.
- Promote young women's empowerment and gender-sensitive youth and PVE approaches.
- Encourage and enable context-specific, disaggregated and youth-led data collection, analysis and research on PVE.

Sommers (2019: 40-41) makes the following key recommendations for programming on youth and CVE:

- Tackle specific local challenges - what CVE does should emerge from what specific local contexts require. In fashioning their customised responses, programme personnel should explore partnering with youth to design initiatives.
- Partner with youth - considering creative, youth-guided approaches to local programming is strongly advised. Emphasising partnership with youth, recognising the positive contributions of youth to CVE and peacebuilding, and promoting peaceful masculinities are all recommended.
- Use a gender lens - never overlook the gender-specific concerns, priorities, and vulnerabilities of female and male youth.
- Try to reach 'unreachable' youth - most youth will never participate in a youth programme: their populations are far too large, differentiated, and dispersed. Since the numbers of excluded youth also can be huge, it is crucial programmes strive not to make things worse by unintentionally exacerbating youth exclusion and alienation. Including 'unreachable' youth will take time, require patience, and a lot of assessment and adjustment. Linked to this is the need to promote a learning environment for CVE programmes.
- Encourage programme implementers to advocate with government counterparts - on-the-ground CVE and PVE practitioners should be empowered to draw from their networks and knowledge of local context to help craft and apply sustained advocacy efforts with government counterparts. Reversing the self-destructive policies and practices of states with regard to youth (such as state corruption and repression) and making it easier for governments to partner with young citizens are urgent needs.

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