Role of Women in Preventing Radicalization and Violent Extremism that Leads to Terrorism in Albania

Merita Poni
Evisa Kambellari
Merushe Zeneli
Rozana Baci

University of Tirana,
Fakulteti i Shkencave Sociale,
Bulevardi "Gjergj Fishta", Tirana 1023, Albania

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to inform the reader about the role of women in countering violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism (VERLT). Women's role represents a growing interest for policy makers in addressing the rising concern for youth engagement in violent extremism. The study applies a gender perspective to analyzing the role of women in preventing and countering radicalization and violent extremism. In depth interviews were conducted with thirty-one women to reveal their opinions, attitudes and experiences with prevention of VERLT. The study covers three regions: Tirana, Elbasan and Pogradec, which are identified as hot spots for violent extremism. The study has found that women have a crucial role in preventing and countering violent extremism, given their access in family and community. Women's role is especially relevant in keeping young people safe from extremists' radicalization attempts. Women civic engagement increases community resilience against violent narratives and contributes to peace perseverance. Women front-line activism is primordial for countering extremism that leads to terrorism.

Keywords: prevention, radicalization, violent extremism, women, Albania

1. Introduction

Violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism (VERLT) is a growing concern on a global level. Violent extremism consists of promoting, supporting or committing acts which may lead to terrorism and which are aimed at defending an ideology advocating racial, national, ethnic or religious supremacy, or opposing core democratic principles and values; while radicalization represents a dynamic process whereby an individual increasingly accepts and supports violent extremism (Council of Europe, 2016). Roots of violent extremism lay on different grounds. There is no single cause of radicalization and extremism (Allan et al, 2015). Push and pull factors have a direct influence on an individual level. The reasons behind this process can be ideological, political, religious, social,
economic or personal. Marginalization, abandonment and lack of professional opportunities can be drivers towards extremism (Botha & Abdile, 2014). A lack of adequate employment for educated individuals may lead to supportive attitudes for violent extremism among the general population (Bhatia & Ghanem, 2017). However, some terrorists have solid education and good economic backgrounds, which contradicts the stereotyped opinion that only the unemployed and the poorly educated can be driven by extremism (Krueger & Maleckova, 2003). Social isolation contributes further to a less culturally integrated community (Baarsen et al, 2001). The need to belong to a social group (Koole et al, 2006) makes isolated individuals an easy target for extremists.

Violent extremism and radicalization are two concepts seen associated with one another, and tend to be used interchangeably, as if they mean the same thing, but they are different concepts. However, despite the existence of controversial arguing about the exact definitions, there exists a consensus on the diversity of pathways leading to radicalization and violent extremism (Hassan, 2012). The diverse array of political, economic, psychosocial, cultural, and ideological factors can contribute to varying degrees at varying stages to an individual’s radicalization and adoption of violent extremism (Deebjeffrey, 2016). Radicalization is often associated with terrorism but is not equal to it. Most people who hold radical ideas do not engage in terrorism and many terrorists, even those who claim to fight for a “cause”, are not deeply ideological and may not be “radicalized” in a traditional sense. Radicalizing by developing or adopting extremist beliefs that justify violence is one possible pathway into terrorist involvement, but it is certainly not the only one (Borum, 2012). Radicalization starts when individuals are frustrated with their lives, society and foreign policy of their government. A typical pattern is that these individuals meet other like-minded people, and all go through a series of events and phases that can ultimately result in terrorism. However, only a few of them end up becoming terrorists. Terrorist radicalization is a dynamic process whereby an individual comes to accept terrorist violence as a possible, perhaps even legitimate, course of action (OSCE, 2014). Violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism (VERLT) represent a serious threat for security in many countries around the world.

Gender is becoming a relevant topic in social research about radicalization and extremism, given the multiple roles and levels of engagement of women and men in VERLT (Couture, 2014). Usually, men are more invested in VERLT activities, while women support these men in violent extremist and terrorist attacks. Recently, radical and extremist groups have made extensive use of women for terrorist attacks. They use them as propagators and potential elements for recruitment (Bloom, 2013; Blaskie, 2016). However, women who joined terrorist groups on many occasions have suffered tragic atrocities (Barnett, 2014; HRW, 2017). Women’s physical integrity and life is put in danger by terrorist attacks, as they are targeted by extremists in the same way that other potential victims would be. For that reason, women have a personal and collective interest in preventing violent extremism. Through playing a protective role in family, they can ensure the community’s safety, as well as preventing disastrous events (Kirschenbaum, 2004). Through acting in a ‘non-coercive’ manner, they prevent and reduce the involvement in radicalization and violent extremism. Women build up community resilience among populations which are prone to radicalization (Harris-Hogan et al., 2015).

Concepts such as violent extremism and radicalization have become popular in Albania after the military conflict in Syria, when several Albanians engaged in jihad. The term “jihad” refers to the obligation incumbent on all Muslims, individuals and the community, to follow and realize God’s will: to lead a virtuous life and to help grow the Islamic community through preaching, education, example, etc., and the obligation to defend Islam and the community from aggression (Esposito, 2011, pp. 134). According to the Albanian Prosecutor’s Office, until 2016, 100 Albanian citizens joined jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, including 13 women and 31 children (Bogdani, 2015). Citizens involved in terrorist activities in Syria and Iraq originate from the Muslim communities of Pogradec, Librazhd, Bulqize Elbasan and Tirana (Hide, 2015). Forty-six returned to the country before the Albanian government passed the new amendments of Criminal Law that prohibits participation in armed conflicts in a foreign country. After the new law on anti-terror was adopted in 2014, the number of Albanian foreign fighters in Syria declined. Despite the repressive measures taken by the Albanian government to punish the
illegal activity of joining wars in foreign countries, the problem of radicalization was not eradicated. Islamic charity organizations and self-declared imams have tried to indoctrinate poor families with Islamic propaganda, conditioning financial and material aid with obedience and submission to the Islamic ideology. Additionally, these charities invested in Mecca pilgrimages, religious courses and scholarships in the Arab world (Lederer 2005; Blumi, 2003; Blumi 2005). Furthermore, extremists have been attempting to radicalize young people online as well (Michael, 2012). The path to youth radicalization is different, but they are all submitted to the recruitment process which happens when they listen to recruiters and act (Neumann & Rogers, 2007).

The family role in this process is central and might change an individual’s inclination to engage with violent organizations. Women have a prominent role to play in applying the preventive soft measures at all private and public levels (Schlaffer & Kropiunigg, 2015). They can detect the first signs of radicalization in family, school, work and neighborhood. As mothers, they can come across factors that contribute to the radicalization of their children and pull them out from influence of the extremists’ ideologies. Moreover, women are critical in transmitting ideals and values to their children. Obviously, they are among the first persons to come across deviant behavior in family members. Women have a crucial role in the prevention of violent extremism, as they are effective influencers in their communities and can discourage people from embracing the merits of violent extremism (Niglia et al, 2016; Fink et al., 2016; Arriaga, 2017). Women’s social roles are important for youth disengagement from violent extremism (OSCE, 2016). Education, economic empowerment, religious information and political representation are critical for women’s involvement in their communities.

2. Methodology

This research has employed the qualitative methodology, based on semi-structured interviews as the main method for data collection. Thirty-one women, interviewed in Pogradec, Elbasan and Tirana, contributed to the study. The qualitative method assisted in the exploration of opinions, feelings and experiences of women on radicalization and violent extremism. In order to grasp a wider picture of the areas under study, the researchers combined the interviews with data from secondary sources, such as: reports, studies and articles on the topic. The secondary data helped in understanding the situation of VERLT and the role of women in Albania. The triangulation of different sources enriched the pool of data and informed researchers on relevant aspects of the socio-economic and cultural profiles of the population of the research areas. Interviews allowed women to explore their position and capacity for VERLT prevention themselves, providing them space for discussing personal perceptions and experiences. Face to face interviewing helped in building trust amongst the women and the researchers. Concepts like radicalization and violent extremism have a recent history in Albanian public discourse. Women constructed their meaning of the concepts by explaining the reality in their own words. Moreover, given the concepts’ short time in use and the strong reaction against the perceived labeling as “radicalized” and “extremists” in the hot spot areas, the pre-destined use of terms was avoided.

3. Data Analysis

3.1 Awareness about radicalization and violent extremism

Radicalization and violent extremism are new concepts to women. Generally, they have heard about these concepts from media and less form institutions or organizations. A participant mentioned media and institutions as a primary source of information stating: “I am a high school teacher and I have heard about violent extremism from media and my school, when the Ministry of Education organized a seminar for teachers on how to detect signs of Violent Extremism and Radicalization. Before, I had no idea.” There is a widespread opinion that the country is not exposed to the risk of violent extremist threats and that terrorist attacks are an outside reality. A woman stated: “Violent extremism is an alien risk for Albania. I do not think that there is a real danger of VERLT. Even the tendencies that have been noticed in these
recent years are mostly the result of the sporadic activity of some radical groups that have misused religion to achieve their goals”. The interviews inform that the level of awareness is low. The only information comes from news provided by media outlets, while public institutions and civil society are almost completely silent. Women are confused about and tend to deny the existence of VERLT altogether. Given the low level of awareness about violent extremism, extremists may take advantage and threaten religious harmony. Women expressed concern that extremist hate speech and fanatic religious attitudes can risk the status-quo. As one woman stated: “Albanians are not aware of radicalization and violent extremism, because they are tolerant towards believers and nonbelievers alike. Violent extremism is imported from outside, it never existed before, it has no roots in society because of interreligious harmony. Those who spread it do so for political and economic interests, rather than for religious motives.”. Even though the general public believes that VERLT is associated with Islam, participant women do not share this opinion. In contrast to that, they state that there are multiple reasons, beside religion. This consideration is expressed by a 60-year-old woman stating: “Albanian fighters who joined the War in Syria are not believers. They pretend to be religious, wear Islamic clothing and use religious words to look like Muslims, but they are terrorists. They are killers masked behind religion. They kill for other purposes, not for religion.” There isn’t always a straight link between radicalization and violent extremism. Not every radicalized person ends up an extremist. Some may not act in the same manners as extremists; although radicalized, while others become extremists. When asked about the process of being radicalized and rendered into an extremist, women think that the transformation takes time to happen in a step-by-step approach. In the women’s view, radicalization is a threat to society if connected to violence or other unlawful acts, such as incitement to hatred. However, to them radicalization seems to be a preliminary step towards violent extremism and terrorism. One woman said that: “Radicalization is related to ideology and requires time to happen. Violent extremism occurs when someone uses physical and psychological violence to forcefully impose personal beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies on others. It is more dangerous when undertaken by organized groups”. The women admitted that the risk of radicalization is present in their regions, and they have identified a few cases involved in the war with ISIS. They stated that the community is divided when it comes to accepting those who return from the war, but in general those who return are not welcomed. The neighborhood is afraid of their radicalized behavior. The women reported that: “The individuals who joined the war in the Middle East are perceived as a potential threat to community safety”.

3.2 Perception about pushing factors of VERLT

When asked about pushing factors leading Albanian citizens to join the war in Syria, the women listed as main factors poverty, education, marginalization, patriarchal beliefs on men as bread winners and fighters. Likewise, these women noticed that the misuse of religion and low level of religious background, compound with propaganda of self-declared imams, have contributed to the increase of violent extremism and radicalization. Additionally, amplification of the Internet’s usage has decreased the need for physical contact, and radicalization has occurred online as well. Religious ideology is also seen as an influential factor for those who are emotionally weak and vulnerable, and consequently manipulated by religious fanatics. The women’s accounts reveal the complexity of VERLT factors in their communities. Economic factors, such as poverty, unemployment and sub-minimal living standards are mentioned as reasons for low esteem which is perceived as a personal failure. These psychological feelings of failure have developed an inferiority complex, which pushed some individuals in these communities towards social isolation, followed by depression and identity crises. Respondents gave information on the complexity of the interrelated factors that lead to VERLT. The causes of radicalization and extremism are multiple. Amongst the reasons, the respondents singled out the economic insufficiency as the leading cause, with direct effects on socialization and education. Women reported that: “Single mothers ask religious institutions for financial and material assistance due to the bad economic situation and receive very little pension for their children, for which they are thankful. In turn they and their children must show obedience to Islam”. Such economic schemes are known to be
used by extremist groups as an alternative for economic constraints. They are offered under the guise of solidarity. Economic constraints lessen education opportunities for young people. The lack of education is rated as the second factor leading to radicalization. To these women, insufficient education means being unable to identify good intentions from bad ones and being unable to determine right from wrong. They go on to clarify that such deficit can be a tool on recruiters’ hands to defraud and mislead people into unknown paths. Furthermore, the women consider these trends to be culturally affiliated with patriarchal norms. “The dominance of a masculine mentality makes the men leaders and the women followers. Uneducated women are not aware of their rights and are subjugated to their husband’s authority. What is right and what is wrong is only stated and approved by men and women cannot do much to oppose it.” said one participant. Women noted that men are valued to be the economic driving force, and should have a paid job, while women are destined to stay confined in-home, performing chores and providing care for their children. This disbalance of the work force between men and women affects the power relationship within the household. However, the situation in urban areas has changed because of economic demands, which require both men and women to work.

According to these women, social isolation contributes further to a less culturally integrated community. They stated that “in absence of care and protection from family, school and community, young people replace their figure of attachment with someone that shows empathy for them and who they create intimate bonds with, which can expose them to radicalization from violent extremists”. Young people resort to “anti-social behavior to contradict conventional norms.” and when excluded, they are isolated and need psychological support. In the women’s view: “radicalization is more present in environments dominated by antagonism rather than cooperation, where people feel bullied and intimidated”. Social isolation is misused by recruiters to convince isolated individuals to submit to them for a total change in thoughts, beliefs, and lifestyle. The process of radicalization has happened inside and outside the country. One respondent recounted: “My cousin who migrated in United Kingdom transformed into a ‘devoted believer’ and found virtue in radical thoughts after meeting a Muslim family that influenced him to convert. He drastically changed his lifestyle and detached from his family. He changed his clothing and appearance to identify with the Islamic culture and propagated radical Islam”. The fact that social isolation facilitates the process of indoctrination by radical activists is well evidenced by women.

Bad governance is considered the third drive to radicalization. A corrupted administrative, judicial, political system and law enforcement has diluted citizens’ trust in government and opened the path to outside radical influences. The communities facing radicalization suffer economic scarcity and poor public services infrastructure. Members of these communities are isolated from the rest of society. People in remote and isolated villages are at higher risk of disengagement from public interests. The insufficient presence of government structures gives faith based Islamic organizations from Arabic countries advantages, allowing them to come closer to people through provision of material support. Islamic charity organizations channel funds to build mosques, offer family aid and summer camps for young people. Women consider the misuse of Islam as an additional factor to the structural factors leading to VERLT. They informed that some self-declared imams misuse Islam to propagate hostile attitudes and justify “holy war”. Women report that “the lack of religion history and culture in the school curriculum has made it possible for the most ignorant and fanatic persons to talk about religion and to misinform young people”. The dominant opinion among the respondents is that young people are the most vulnerable to radicalization. In this respect, they share the view that the young generation is more prone to embracing certain models of conduct, including violent extremist acts, as they tend to be more attracted by strange and non-conformist ideas. In a broader perspective, the women attribute the risk of radicalization to the scarce opportunities for personal development, weak social cohesion, obstructed economic perspective and poor governance.
4. Discussion

Among all respondents there was a consensus that women have a preventive role in VERLT. The general idea underlying all the interviews was that women are closer to their families and communities; therefore, they are better equipped to detect early signs of violent extremism and to fight the phenomenon. Within families, mothers hold responsibility for the education of children. Additionally, mothers are important agents in conflict resolution, promoting dialogue in the family and avoiding the spread of violent extremist ideas. Mothers can lead the disengagement processes of their children who are already radicalized. As sisters, women also have great potential to promote positive attitudes and fight any trend of violence manifested by their brothers. As some of the respondents noted, their brothers were more confident when talking with their sisters rather than with the parents. Women agency in prevention of violent extremism is obstructed by systemic and cultural marginalization. The respondents noted that it is essential to improve women’s status within their families and communities. They said they should be aware that they are equal to men in rights and dignity. It is necessary to challenge the conventional dominant mentality, especially in rural and suburban areas where women have no role outside of their home. Civil society has a special role for empowering women to organize and coordinate responses to counter violent extremism. Many respondents made the case that gender inequality has a negative impact on women’s response against VERLT. They noted that Albanian society is very patriarchal, and the role of women is underestimated. Especially in rural remote areas, where men hold authority and decide within the family, while women are primarily seen as caregivers. It is important to change the mentality of people in remote areas, raise women awareness on the rights and duties as citizens and empower them to challenge violent extremism.

A few respondents knew about women who left the country to join the armed conflict in Syria. In contrast to the women that joined the conflict as foreign fighters, or as supporters to the Islamic ideology, Albanian women went to war accompanying their husbands, forced by patriarchal heteronormativity, not because they were willing to go. The economic dependency on their husbands and the lack of support from community and state pushed women to leave their country and face the risk of war. Moreover, not knowing about violent extremism, these women could not identify the signs of radicalization and prevent their husbands from taking part in the armed conflict. They had no information and no support from other women, religious institutions, communities or state institutions to avoid participation in war.

5. Conclusion

Women play a crucial role in the prevention of VERLT, but they lack information on radicalization and violent extremism. Although the phenomenon of VERLT seems to be present, the level of awareness, even among well-educated women, is low. The lower the awareness, the higher the risk of radicalization and violent extremism. A lack of information creates confusion about violent extremism and denial of VERLT. The only information comes from sporadic news, while public institutions and civil society are silent. VERLT leading causes are related to economic factors and poverty, low level of education, social isolation, and poor services and infrastructure. Additionally, abuse of religion, compound with propaganda from radicalized imams, contribute to violent extremism and radicalization. Women who joined the armed conflict in Syria and Iraq followed their husbands. They were domestically abused and subordinated to husbands. The vulnerable position of women in their families is worsened by the significant presence of a patriarchal structure. In rural areas, the socio-economic status of women, whose husbands left the country to join the war, deteriorated. The lack of substantial means of survival forced them to join their husbands in war. Considering the role of women in preventing and countering violent extremism, necessary steps are needed to strengthen their position in family and community. Women in hotspot areas need accurate and relevant information about violent extremism from official sources. Women can counter extremist views if they are aware of them and trained to identify early
signs of radicalization. If trained on VERLT prevention, women can counter terrorist narratives and build community resilience against violent extremism.

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