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Women, Peace and Security: The Sexism and Violence Nexus

2010 Thai political protests. A Thai protester hurls a molotov cocktail at the police. The smoke from the burning tyres prevent the security forces getting a clear view of the "Red Shirt" barricades further down Rama 4. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

JOINT BRIEF SERIES: NEW INSIGHTS ON WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY (WPS) FOR THE NEXT DECADE

On 31 October 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Several other resolutions followed, which together constitute the normative framework for the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. This brief series was initiated in connection to the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 and promotes the realization of the WPS agenda through evidence-based policy and practice. It is the result of a collaboration between the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), the Peace Research Institute Oslo(PRIO), and UN Women.

The editorial board has consisted of Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Sophia Wrede from FBA, Louise Olsson from PRIO, and Katarina Salmela and Pablo Castillo Diaz from UN Women. The views and opinions expressed in the brief series are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the collaborating partners.

INTRODUCTION

The connection between gender equality and violence may not be evident at first glance. One simplified interpretation has been to assume the peacefulness of women. Another interpretation has been to take for granted that most violent acts are carried out by men, without explicitly analysing what this means from a gender perspective.[1] The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, however, encourages us to challenge such gender stereotypes that disempower both women and men and undermine the goal of conflict prevention. WPS is not a niche agenda for women; it is a gender equality and peace agenda that seeks to mainstream gender perspectives to better prevent and respond to insecurity.[2]

The research presented in this brief shows that there is a need to focus our attention on sexist attitudes as well as on discriminatory gender norms. Attitudes matter when it comes to individual decisions to use or support violence. Individuals – both men and women – with hostile attitudes towards women, and towards gender equality in general, are not just more prone to violent extremist views and to intolerance towards other nationalities and religious groups[3]; they are also more likely to actually support violent groups and to participate in political violence. These results demonstrate

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that a gender perspective is sorely needed in order to better understand the dynamics of political violence and extremism. The WPS framework is crucial to address these dynamics and the attraction of violent extremism, especially the sexist attitudes and socially-constructed masculinities and femininities that provide fertile ground for radicalization towards violence.[4]

The findings presented in this research brief draw on recently published survey research about participation in violence by male political activists in Thailand, as well as large-scale research on the attitudes and activities of both men and women carried out in Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines and Libya. This new body of research reveals strong associations between sexist attitudes, on the one hand, and violent attitudes and support for or participation in political violence, on the other. Indeed, attitudes towards gender equality seem to matter more than many factors commonly thought to drive political violence and extremism, such as religiosity or religious ideology, poverty, education levels, age or marital status. Taken together, these studies show that sexist attitudes, usually deeply embedded in social structures, are integral to people's support for violent extremism and their participation in political violence. The insight that sexism and political violence go hand in hand is not new; it has been voiced by feminist peace activists for more than a century.[5] But the research presented here provides empirical evidence for this relationship and how it works, drawing on this feminist thinking, as well as insights from areas of study such as psychology and anthropology.

This research brief untangles the sexism-violence nexus in two steps. First, we address the question of how sexism can explain individual support for violent extremism and participation in political violence. Second, we look closer at why societies that have greater gender equality are less violent than other societies. These two questions are key to operationalizing the prevention of conflict and violence, a major pillar of the WPS agenda and the fundamental mandate of the United Nations. Lastly, we conclude by outlining practical recommendations for moving forward on this major pillar of the WPS agenda.

HOW DOES SEXISM LEAD TO EXTREMISM AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE?

A large body of research suggests that people's support for violent extremism and participation in political violence are the result of structural macro-level factors such as poverty, religious structures or semi-democratic political institutions.[6] But these explanations cannot explain individual variation within a country, society or movement. They pertain to many more individuals than the very small number who actually choose to join violent extremist groups or engage in political violence. Among those scholars who do focus on individual-level explanations, factors such as grievances, religiosity, personal gain and social networks are often highlighted, but there is little consensus on which factors matter the most and how they interact. A small body of research has also investigated individual-level causes of political violence and extremism by comparing those who have used violence with those who have not.[7] Such studies have found that young men are overrepresented in the limited group of people who participate in political violence. But these studies rarely expand on the role of gender or they reduce the phenomena to stereotypes pertaining to biological sex.

Taking these gaps in our knowledge as a starting point, our studies instead build on research which has begun to uncover important associations between sexist attitudes and violence. For example, it has been found that perpetrators of so-called lone-wolf terror attacks are often perpetrators of violence against women.[8] Research on protest movements has found that sexist ideology distinguishes organizations that commit violent acts from those that engage in non-violent protest only.[9] A number of studies have demonstrated how ideals of manliness encompassing sexism are associated with a variety of destructive behaviours and attitudes.[10] We advance this knowledge further by investigating the effects of sexism on individuals' support for and/or actual participation in political violence.

In the first study, a survey was carried out in Thailand in 2012–2013.[11] This was before the military coup in 2014, but not long after outbursts of political violence which claimed more than a hundred lives in riots and a military crackdown in 2010. We investigated whether there was any difference in attitudes towards gender roles among men who had taken up arms in political uprisings compared to those who had

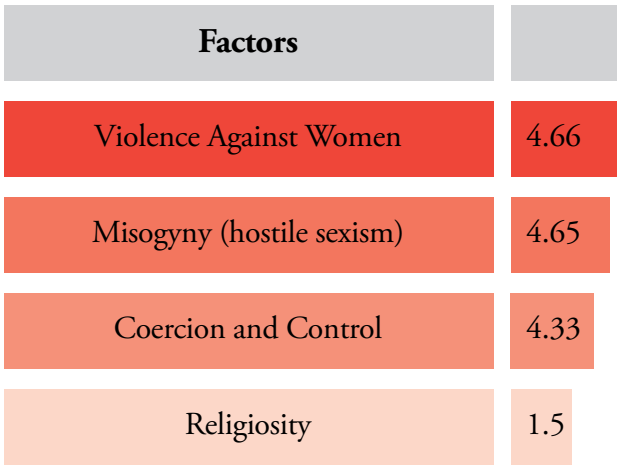
Figure 1. Masculine Honour Ideology

Masculine Honour Ideology		
	Patriarchal Values	**Ideals of Masculine Toughness**
What it is	The belief in male privilege and male dominance in society as well as in the family, extending to control over female sexuality	The belief that a man's reputation and social status is upheld by emotional detachment and displaying signs of strength, including threats of violence, in response to insults and disrespect
How it is linked to violent behaviour	Patriarchal values reinforce a tendency for 'othering': assigning less value to certain individuals on the basis of a perceived group identity	Ideals of masculine toughness provide the impetus to respond and act violently on the basis of 'othering'
How it is measured in our research	Extent of agreement with statements such as: "It is a man's duty to protect his family's dignity by watching over his woman's chastity and ethics"	Extent of agreement with statements such as: "It is fair for a man to assault anyone who has spread a rumour that he is a coward"

not. As illustrated in figure 1, we defined masculine honour ideology as the product of two separate but related aspects of honour that apply primarily to men. The first aspect is patriarchal values: i.e., that men should be privileged in society and have control over female sexuality. The other is ideals of masculine toughness: i.e., that men must be fierce and willing to use violence to defend their status. Taken together, masculine honour ideology comprises sexist attitudes relating to expected gender roles of both women and men. In order to capture the voices of those few who engage in violent political uprising, we interviewed members of the two conflict parties in the recent political violence in Thailand: the so-called red-shirts and yellow-shirts. The results were in line with our expectations: male political activists who subscribed to the masculine honour ideology had participated in political violence to a much larger degree than those activists who did not embrace such values.

In the second study, surveys and interviews were carried out in four countries: Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines and Libya, focusing on regions that had experienced violent attacks during 2018–2019.[12] We investigated whether sexist ideas about masculinity and gender inequality and attitudes toward violence against women were associated with both men and women's support for violent extremism in those countries. As illustrated in figure 2, among a wide range of factors thought to affect support for violent extremism, we found that sexist attitudes and support for violence against women were the factors most strongly associated with both men and women's support for violent extremism. However, men were more likely than women to concur with sexist attitudes and justify violence against women. People espousing hostile sexist attitudes were more than two and a half times more likely to support violent extremism than people who strongly disagreed with these attitudes. Individuals who stated that they supported acts of violence against women were also three times more likely to support violent extremism than

Figure 2. Factors Influencing Support for Violent Extremism



those who did not. Follow-up interviews confirmed these results by connecting sexist attitudes to participation in acts of political violence. This study highlighted the role of sexual and gendered violence and threats of such violence in motivating individuals to join extremist groups – for women, to escape violence, and for men, to attain manliness and status.[13]

Sexism exists on a continuum and is not confined to violent extremists. Likewise, conflicts over women's rights involve broad groups in society. But it is striking that in both these studies described above, sexism was found to be a more powerful predictor of an individual's participation in and support of violence than other factors such as religiosity, education or age.

HOW IS GENDER EQUALITY CONNECTED TO PEACE?

These research findings are also important for our broader understanding of the relationship between gender equality and peace, which underpins the WPS agenda. Numerous studies have shown that societies with greater equality between women and men tend to be more peaceful, but research has been less conclusive when it comes to understanding why this is so. In some cases, it has been naively suggested that the relationship exists because women are inherently more tolerant and peaceful than men. At other times it has been posited that since women have greater power in societies that have more gender equality, their predisposition toward tolerance and peace will bring about more peace. Such simplistic explanations are problematic for several reasons, not least because they reinforce a stereotypical gender division between peace-making women and warlike men. They also ignore the hurdles that any peacemaker – male or female – faces in a society in which norms of violence and conflict prevail.

Our research shows that a more convincing explanation involves attitudes and norms linked to sexist ideals of dominant masculinity and subordinate femininity[14] as drivers for violence and extremism. In societies with a stronger masculine honour ideology, for instance, women will be more oppressed, and conflicts will be handled with more violence. Similarly, women's activism in patriarchal societies is often seen as a threat and met with increased sexism and violence. This, in turn, contributes to normalizing violence and extremism, with repercussions both domestically and internationally. As the ideals and behaviours of individuals accumulate in societies with less gender equality, leaders can gain respect and popularity by acting warlike and seeking to undermine women's rights. Prevailing social norms among both men and women about equality and violence are decisive. Our research suggests that this is a more plausible explanation for why more gender-equal societies tend to be less violent and more peaceful. Sexism, and not just gender inequality as a structural condition, is a crucial, overlooked factor in motivating people to support violent extremism or engage in political violence.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The research presented in this brief demonstrates that the connection between the agendas of WPS and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) lies in the sexism-and-violence nexus. This has not been well understood or translated into practical action in existing policy frameworks. Our empirical findings regarding misogyny and honour ideology provide concrete insights into the composition of such attitudes. This is not to say that strengthening women's rights and participation is not crucially important to transforming sexist attitudes and stereotypes and preventing political violence. However, given the emerging research evidence presented here, approaches that respond to sexism in both men and women should be considered imperative.

One set of recommendations stemming from these research insights concerns the usefulness of identifying certain types of individuals as part of security risk assessments. Potential and actual participants in violence and extremism should be sought among people with sexist attitudes, who embrace notions of manliness who stress fierceness, honour and female subordination. These are likely to be men, but more research is needed on the driving forces for women's participation, as we know that women can be vociferous supporters of extremist violence and may perpetrate political violence.[15] On a cautionary note, only a fraction of people who hold sexist views will participate in political violence or promote extremism, and conversely, some perpetrators will not hold these views. Nevertheless, the associations seem to be so strong that this insight should make security risk assessment work more efficient.

It is sometimes suggested that organizations such as the military, police or peacekeeping units need individuals who value fierceness, bravery and other elements of traditionally masculine "warrior" culture. Our results strongly caution against such thinking. Traits such as fierceness and bravery can and should be delinked from biological sex and gender identity, so that all individuals who qualify can participate on equal terms. In addition, this can assist us in efforts to reduce sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment, as organizations actively try to counter sexist views and masculine honour ideologies. This, in turn, should increase the capacity to recruit and retain qualified women and minority members, who tend to be disproportionately targeted by such behaviours, and create more diverse and inclusive organizations.

Our research further underlines the key role of leadership in creating such organizations. Men and women's leadership and attitudes and gender balance in leadership are crucial.[16] All people can hold pro–gender equality or feminist attitudes and support these ideas through their behaviour. Male champions of gender equality, however, are particularly important in societies where gender discrimination is entrenched, such as in those we surveyed. Men can lead by example, by role-modelling gender equality and by challenging sexist attitudes and practices. In these societies, men are also more likely to be in influential positions of power and authority that enable them to enact change.

Finally, for more long-term effects, we recommend efforts to reduce sexism, impunity for gender-based violence and masculine honour or other gendered ideologies in organizations, as well as in societies at large. For example, pairing young men with positive male role models and mentors and providing young women with opportunities to effectively participate in the political life of their communities may be good ways of preventing political violence and extremism in the long run. Gender equality awareness in the family and in religious and secular teaching and texts to which children are first socialized may be preventative factors for extremism. As the WPS agenda is fundamentally about preventing and addressing the factors that fuel conflict and violence, action could also be taken to operationalize gender-sensitive early warning systems that explicitly target sexist attitudes and operationalize sexism as a factor in early warning indicators.

The purpose of the WPS agenda is to rebalance our approach to peace and security for all. To move this agenda forward beyond the twentieth anniversary will require that more men, as well as women, become WPS champions. For WPS, this means shaping women and men to hold inclusive attitudes and promote inclusive behaviours in peace and security in addition to increasing the meaningful participation of women at the peace table, in post-conflict governance and in peace operations and decision-making. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Gender is not a synonym for biological sex but rather refers to identities, attributes, constraints, and opportunities associated with masculinity and femininity. Gender is about learned behaviour and actions. It is socially constructed and thus changeable. The research presented here focuses on the effects of ideas and attitudes about gender that exist among both women and men.
2. See Sara E. Davies and Jacqui True. 2019. eds. *The Oxford Handbook on Women, Peace and Security.* New York: Oxford University Press.
3. Elin Bjarnegård and Erik Melander. 2017. 'Pacific men: how the feminist gap explains hostility' The Pacific Review 30: 478–493.
4. See UNDP and UN Women. 2020. eds. *Conflicting Identities: The Nexus between Masculinities, Femininities and Violent Extremism in Asia.* United Nations.
5. See e.g. Betty A. Reardon. 1985. *Sexism and the War System.* Teachers College Press; see also Judith Ann Tickner and Jacqui True. 2018. 'A Century of International Relations Feminism: From World War One Women's Peace Pragmatism to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda' *International Studies Quarterly* 62(2): 221–233.
6. For example, see: Daphna Canetti, Stevan E Hobfoll, Ami Pedahzur and Eran Zaidise. 2010. 'Much Ado About Religion: Religiosity, Resource Loss, and Support for Political Violence' *Journal of Peace Research* 47(5): 575–587
7. See e.g.Omar Shahabudin McDoom. 2013. 'Who killed in Rwanda's genocide? Micro-space, social influence and individual participation in intergroup violence' *Journal of Peace Research*, 50(3): 453–467.
8. Jude McCulloch, Sandra Walklate, JaneMaree Maher, Kate Fitz-Gibbon and Jasmine McGowan. 2019. 'Lone Wolf Terrorism Through a Gendered Lens: Men Turning Violent or Violent Men Behaving Violently?' *Critical Criminology*, 27(3): 437–450.
9. Victor Asal, Richard Legault, Ora Szekely and Jonathan Wilkenfeld. 2013. 'Gender Ideologies and forms of Contentious Mobilization in the Middle East' *Journal of Peace Research* 50(3): 305–318.
10. For just one example, see Collin D. Barnes, Ryan P. Brown,

Lindsey L. Osterman. 2017. 'Don't Tread on Me: Masculine Honor Ideology in the U.S. and Militant Responses to Terrorism' *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 38(8):1018–1029.

11. Elin Bjarnegård, Karen Brounéus and Erik Melander. 2017. 'Honor and Political Violence: Micro-Level Findings from a Survey in Thailand' *Journal of Peace Research*, 54(6): 748–761.
12. Melissa Johnston, Jacqui True, Eleanor Gordon, Yasmin Chilmeran and Yolanda Riveros-Morales. 2020. *Building a Stronger Evidence Base: The Impact of Gender Identities, Norms and Relations on Violent Extremism*. UN Women; Melissa Johnston and Jacqui True. 2019. 'Misogyny and Violent Extremism: Implications for Preventing Violent Extremism'. Research Brief, UN Women; Jacqui True, Eleanor Gordon, Melissa Johnston and Kerry O'Brien. 2019. *Building an Evidence Base for Empowering Women for Peaceful Communities: A Case Study of Bangladesh and Indonesia.* UN Women; Melissa Johnston, Jacqui True and Zineb Benalla. 2019. *Gender Equality and Violent Extremism: A Research Agenda for Libya*. Monash Gender, Peace and Security Centre and UN Women; Melissa Johnston, Jacqui True, Imen Kochbati, Emna Jeblaoui, Slim Kallel and Farid el Asri. 2020. *Gender, Masculinities and Violent Extremism in North Africa*. UN Women.
13. On the connections between sexual and gender-based violence and terrorism see Jacqui True. 2020. 'Sexual and gender-based violence reporting and terrorism in Asia' in UNDP and UN Women eds. *Conflicting Identities: The Nexus between Masculinities, Femininities and Violent Extremism in Asia.* United Nations, 75–97.
14. See Valerie M. Hudson and Kaylee B. Hodgson. 'Sex and Terror: Is the Subordination of Women Associated with the Use of Terror?' *Terrorism and Political Violence*.
15. See Mia Bloom. 2011. *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
16 Sara E. Davies and Jacqui True. 2017. 'Norm Entrepreneurship in International Politics: William Hague and the Prevention of Sexual Violence in Conflict' *Foreign Policy Analysis* 13(3): 701–721.

The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. FBA has since 2005 supported research primarily through its international Research Working Groups. These are composed of well-merited scholars from universities and research institutes worldwide who conduct scientific research on issues related to FBA's areas of expertise.

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.

UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

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