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## THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN SUPPORTING, JOINING, INTERVENING IN, AND PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN KYRGYZSTAN

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# INTRODUCTION

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This chapter explores the roles of women in supporting, joining, intervening in, and preventing violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan. Counter-terrorism police in Kyrgyzstan report 863 total foreign fighters between 2010 and June 2016, with 188 of them being women.<sup>[2]</sup> ISIS in Syria and Iraq and its local affiliates are the primary groups operating and radicalizing people from Kyrgyzstan into violent extremism. Kyrgyz extremist national groups also exist and have become more powerful in recent years. However, this report is limited to studying the primary dynamics of radicalization and mobilization with reference to ISIS and its ilk in Syria and Iraq, or on the ground in Kyrgyzstan.

For women in Kyrgyzstan, traditional and strongly networked family structures function both to protect and create vulnerabilities for recruitment into violent extremism. In the vast majority of cases when women traveled to Syria and Iraq, they were described as following their husbands and going because they wanted to keep their families intact. In Kyrgyzstan, interlocutors generally found it difficult to describe women as having their own agency, and to analyze the gender dimension of radicalization into violent extremism. Security officials and civil society workers often cited “zombification” as a common female vulnerability, although there were also cases that defied that stereotype. Some state structures and civil society organizations have begun to develop specific programs targeting women, to increase their awareness of violent extremist groups, to gain advice and support if they suspect that family members are turning to extremism, and to re-integrate into society if they are ready to turn back from groups like ISIS. These efforts should be further supported and integrated into the National Strategy to Prevent Violent Extremism (PVE) that the government has begun to work on.

Multiple conditions conducive to radicalization exist in Kyrgyzstan, including high unemployment and large numbers of individuals migrating for jobs to Russia and Turkey. Migrants are particularly vulnerable because upon arrival, they are usually

living apart from family members, overworked, often discriminated against and sometimes abused, offering recruiters a number of potential entry points. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there also have been rapid shifts and changes in ideological, economic, and political structures of Kyrgyzstan, weakening of trust in government and elites, and the opening of an ideological vacuum once filled by the Soviet ideology and rituals. Meanwhile, Arab and Central Asian conservative religious ideologies and funding that propagate strictly conservative practices of Islam, alongside the desire to rebuild the Islamic Caliphate, both in the region and internationally, nurtured a renewed interest in conservative Islamic practices and teachings in the country whose clear majority follows liberal and moderate Hanafi School and jurisprudence. At the same time, even though legislation to advance gender equality in the country is fairly advanced, implementation and progress towards women’s political and economic empowerment is slow. There is a significant gender gap in women’s labor force participation and wages. Following local elections held in March 2016 women hold only 12% of local councils nationwide, while they are 20% in the national parliament.<sup>[3]</sup> Overall, even though women are beginning to play bigger roles in public life, traditional gender roles, especially regarding women’s roles in the family, are extremely strong, leaving women especially vulnerable to violent extremism transmitted through family ties.

The findings herewith are based on field research undertaken in Bishkek and the provinces of Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Issyk-Kul between November 24 and Dec 4, 2016. The primary objective of the research was to understand the extent to which Kyrgyzstan’s national counter-terrorism strategies, programs, and initiatives integrate gender perspectives, including the roles women take as supporters, facilitators, and direct participants in violent extremism. The goal was also to explore women’s current and potential roles in preventing and intervening in violent extremism as well as their role in rehabilitating and reintegrating former extremists.

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<sup>2</sup> Per capita denotes per million of its (country) citizens.

<sup>3</sup> UNDP in Kyrgyzstan, “Combating Gender Inequality in Political Participation in Kyrgyzstan” case study.

Interviews were conducted with government officials, members of international and non-governmental organizations, embassy officials, community leaders, religious scholars, teachers, judges, NGO leaders, students, and ordinary citizens. Interviews were also conducted with family and neighbors of persons who had joined ISIS. The researchers also gained permission to enter a female prison in the village of Stepnoe, near Bishkek, and interview five convicted female extremists, two with ideological ties to a group aligned with ISIS. Although interviews served as a primary data collection method, the authors also relied on secondary sources and secondary data analysis provided by government, international organizations, and civil society organizations. Some Internet content about those involved in violent extremism, posted in their own words (e.g. on their social media accounts) was also collected after returning from Kyrgyzstan to enhance primary

data collection. The entirety was then analyzed to understand better the roles of women in violent extremism, their vulnerabilities and motivations for joining such groups, as well as the potential to involve them in prevention and intervention efforts.

This chapter examines radicalization to violent extremism in general and women's roles in particular within Kyrgyzstan as supporters and perpetrators but also in preventing and countering violent extremism. It describes existing governmental and nongovernmental initiatives engaging with women in preventing and countering violent extremism.

# RADICALIZATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN KYRGYZSTAN: AN OVERVIEW

While it is difficult to accurately estimate the flow of individuals from Central Asia who have traveled to join Sunni militant groups in Iraq and Syria, including ISIS and al-Qaeda, since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Central Asian counter terrorism officials and experts estimate the numbers at two thousand six hundred foreign fighters.<sup>[4]</sup> Others claim the numbers higher, specifically at four thousand foreign fighters to have originated from Central Asia since 2012, with two thousand five hundred reportedly arriving in the 2014-2015 timeframe.<sup>[5]</sup> Kyrgyzstan officials report 863 total travelers to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq between 2010 and June 2016, with 188 of them (23.8%) being women. Of these, one hundred and thirty-five of the travelers are believed to be underage, with 91 departing with family members. The majority of foreign fighters (77.5%) allegedly traveled from the predominantly Uzbek-populated south of the country.<sup>[6]</sup>

As ISIS continues to lose its territory in Syria and Iraq, security professionals expect many foreign fighters from Kyrgyzstan to return home. Moreover, it is also expected that some not originally from Kyrgyzstan may choose to migrate into the country, because they find it more liberal compared to some more repressive neighboring countries, provided they find a way to slip in and live under the radar of a government and security services. Security officials stated that those who are known to the police would be arrested upon their return and subsequently convicted and imprisoned if deemed a threat to society. Some interviewed officials expressed support

for a proposed legislation introduced back in 2015 that would strip Kyrgyzstan foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq of their citizenship.

ISIS returnees from Kyrgyzstan are usually sentenced between 3 to 20 years, depending on circumstances and consequences of criminal acts.<sup>[7]</sup> The rates of women returning from ISIS are lower than that of men, likely reflecting the difficulties for women to escape —unable to travel without a chaperone, they have to have access to cash to pay a smuggler, and they risk sexual violence and death for having betrayed the ISIS cause. The authors learned of only three women who had returned, one in prison and the other two living freely.<sup>[8]</sup>

Demographic data on foreign fighters from Kyrgyzstan are incomplete, making it difficult to provide any solid analysis. Some cases may be hidden from authorities given that men and women are often able to hide their travel to Syria and Iraq as work migration or other travel, or they may simply have gone unnoticed by the authorities and been unreported by their families. While official statistics are lacking, interview data suggests that the age range of foreign fighters from Kyrgyzstan is between 22-27, and most, if not all, are underemployed or unemployed. Interviewed Kyrgyzstan law enforcement officials, say that foreign fighters drawn into Syria and Iraq, including the women who join them, may be characterized as young, lacking education, and coming from poor economic backgrounds.<sup>[9]</sup> However, more detailed data, especially on women, such as the number of them who were married when they left Kyrgyzstan and their education, is not available.

<sup>4</sup> Regional anti-terrorist structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, based on the data provided by the anti-terrorist bodies of Central Asian states for the period of 2013-2015. <https://riss.ru/analytics/26820/>

<sup>5</sup> F. T., Bouffard, M., King, K., & Vickowski, G. (October, 2016). "The return of foreign fighters to Central Asia: Implications for U.S. counterterrorism policy," National Defense University, available at <http://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-21.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Data provided by the 10th department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the UN Kyrgyzstan, valid as of July 2016.

<sup>7</sup> According to data provided by members of the State Service on Punishments Execution.

<sup>8</sup> Data from the interviews with representatives of law enforcement bodies.

<sup>9</sup> Presentation made at the Kyrgyzstan Jalal-Abad Police Conference, November 2016 in Jalal-Abad, Kyrgyzstan.

The main groups operating and radicalizing people from Kyrgyzstan into violent extremism are militant jihadi groups operating in Syria and Iraq, primarily ISIS and its local affiliates, but also groups that have a longer history in the region.<sup>[10]</sup> The State Commission on Religious Affairs of Kyrgyzstan has designated nineteen terrorist groups, including ISIS, al-Qaeda, Jabhat-al-Nusra, the Taliban movement, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the Turkestan Islamic Party, Islamic (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan-IMU), Eastern Turkestan Liberation Organization, Jihad Group, Jaish ul-Mahdi, Jund-al-Khalifat, Jamaat Ansarullah, at-Takfir val-Hidjra, Imam Bukhari Jamaat, Jamaat Oshihklari, and the Kurdistan People's Congress. Extremist groups/propaganda materials designated by the police include Hizbut ut-Tahrir, materials and propaganda of Said Buryatskiy and Akromiya, and the Church of Reverend Moon.<sup>[11]</sup>

The link between nonviolent, but seditious, Islamist groups and violent extremism is highly contentious in the region. Some express concerns over groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), which is considered seditious and has been designated as illegal in Kyrgyzstan,<sup>[12]</sup> as well as religious groups that do not attack the validity of the state, such as Tablighi Jamaat (TJ), but spread a conservative Deobandi version of Islam, including some Salafi groups with teachings close to Takfiri groups.<sup>[13]</sup> According to law enforcement and intelligence operatives these groups have not carried out face-to-face recruitment or facilitated travel to Syria or Iraq, but they have provided ideological and social support for ISIS. For instance, law enforcement claims that Hizb ut-Tahrir's proclamation of the reestablishment and imminent global spread of an Islamic Caliphate, creates a receptiveness to ISIS's proclamation of a Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. At the same time, followers of "conservative" forms of Islam are generally peaceful. Government surveillance and repression of followers of non-traditional (to Kyrgyzstan) conservative Islamic groups, risks encouraging men and women to turn to extremism rather than to prevent it.

External Salafi influences have spread slowly into the country over the past decades, especially through

the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Chechen militant jihadi movement (and its transition into the wider "Caucasus Front") and influences from Afghanistan. Foundations from Turkey and the Gulf States provided funds for building mosques and other places of worship, and have been actively spreading their versions of Islam, with the Gulf influence bringing Salafism which has expanded through community mutual support networks. It appears that these investments may have prepared the ground for well-financed groups like ISIS to be able to successfully call on foreign fighters and workers to travel to Syria and Iraq to assist them in building their so-called utopian "Caliphate." However more research is needed on the links between foreign funding, the influence of older jihadi groups and the ability of ISIS to attract followers in Kyrgyzstan.

Increasingly, law enforcement is concerned not only about persons who choose to fight in Iraq and Syria, but also about persons who may carry out violent acts at home. This was evidenced by shoot-outs between organized groups and police or security officers in Kyrgyzstan in January 2011 and July 2015; the prison escape of 9 prisoners convicted on religious extremism and terrorism-related charges in October 2015; and the 2016 attack on Chinese Embassy apparently organized by Uighur terrorists affiliated with the Syrian Jabhat-al-Nusra. With ISIS losing its ability to hold significant territory in Syria and Iraq, and now calling for domestic attacks as a priority over travel to the conflict zone, the levels of extremism in Kyrgyzstan may soon become more of a local problem versus one of foreign fighter recruitment, especially as trained combat veterans return from the conflict zones. In the future, some may also choose to join ISIS affiliates that have emerged in Afghanistan and other parts of the world.

Based on information from security sources, we know that citizens from Kyrgyzstan who traveled to Syria and Iraq generally joined ISIS rather than competing groups. The first wave of recruitment targeted the south of Kyrgyzstan, where the majority of the population is of Uzbek ethnicity, many of whom feel blocked from participation in government employment and perceive or experience actual marginalization and discrimination. Recruitment was also aimed at migrant workers in Russia and Turkey. The second wave of recruitment built on the first wave's successful methods, but also extended to making use of social networks of those who had gone to Syria and Iraq to seduce others into also joining ISIS.

<sup>10</sup> Kyrgyz extremist national groups, with names such as the "Patriots," "Kyrk-Choro," and "Kyrgyz Choroloru," also exist and have become increasingly powerful in recent years, but this report does not focus on them.

<sup>11</sup> Web-page of GKDR (translated from Russian): [http://religion.gov.kg/ru/religion\\_organization/тыюу-салынган-диний-бирикмелер/](http://religion.gov.kg/ru/religion_organization/тыюу-салынган-диний-бирикмелер/)

<sup>12</sup> HT preaches nonviolent overthrow of existing governments in the Central Asian region in favor of reestablishing an Islamic "Caliphate". Uzbekistan's government under President Islam Karimov was particularly harsh and repressive to HT members, forcing many into exile into neighboring Kyrgyzstan, where the group was not outlawed until August 20, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Dawa groups see their purpose to spread Islam and invite adherents as they propagate the faith.

# PUSH AND PULL FACTORS

Four factors are usually necessary to create a violent extremist/terrorist: a group, its ideology, social support, and individual vulnerabilities which tend to break out by non-conflict and conflict zones.<sup>[14]</sup> In the case of Kyrgyzstan, groups like ISIS have been relying on a massive Internet-based propaganda campaign and face-to-face recruitment networks in Kyrgyzstan and in places where citizens migrate for work. According to interviewed police and security officials, ISIS' Internet-based propaganda and face-to-face recruitment were instrumental for the first wave of Kyrgyzstan citizens who became foreign fighters and who also joined homegrown groups for attacks, for instance, the July 2015 shootout in Bishkek where several Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan citizens, allegedly members of a terrorist group affiliated with ISIS, were shot dead and a number of national security officers were injured.<sup>[15]</sup>

The dismantlement of the long-established state apparatus and loss of faith in the Communist ideology in Kyrgyzstan over the past twenty-five years, alongside weak governance and increasing economic inequalities, has opened the way for spiritual yearnings that were suppressed and redirected under the atheist Soviet regime. Since the fall of the Soviet system, educational institutions have also weakened, and literacy rates fell. Employment and provision of basic services were no longer guaranteed. This, together with decreasing levels of trust in government institutions and allegations of widespread corruption, have increased the legitimacy of religious groups and leaders in part of the population's eyes. At the most extreme of these, ISIS promises a clear Muslim identity, material and spiritual benefits, and the possibility to live an unfettered conservative Islamic life to those who travel to join and live under their so-called Caliphate.<sup>[16]</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Speckhard, A. (February 25, 2016). The lethal cocktail of terrorism: The four necessary ingredients that go into making a terrorist & fifty individual vulnerabilities/motivations that may also play a role. International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism: Brief Report. Available at <http://www.icsve.org/brief-reports/the-lethal-cocktail-of-terrorism/>; Speckhard, A. (2012). Talking to terrorists: Understanding the psycho-social motivations of militant jihadi terrorists, mass hostage takers, suicide bombers and «martyrs». McLean, VA: Advances Press.

<sup>15</sup> For more details in Russian see <https://www.nur.kz/822561-likvidirovannye-v-bishkeke-terrorist.html>, <https://www.nur.kz/821504-v-rezultate-specoperacii-v-centre-bi.html>. Human rights groups have however expressed significant criticisms of the official account of the shootout and the way accused were treated in detention. See for example the Center for Defense of Human Rights Kylym Shamy [www.facebook.com/KylymShamy/posts/750526831821288](http://www.facebook.com/KylymShamy/posts/750526831821288)

<sup>16</sup> Speckhard, A., & Yayla, S. A. (2015). Eyewitness accounts from recent defectors from Islamic State: Why they joined, what they saw, why they quit. Perspectives on Terrorism, 9 (6), 95-117; Speckhard, A., Shajkovi, A., & Yayla, S. A. (2017). Following a military defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq: What happens next after the military victory and the return of foreign fighters? Journal of Terrorism Research, 8 (1), 81-89.

For some, ISIS thereby simplified personal identity conflicts.

According to the ideological narratives propagated by groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIL, Muslims, Muslims lands, and even Islam itself is under attack, and all Muslims have a duty to migrate and fight on behalf of the community. The Islamic *ummah* is considered an extended family, promoting the idea of “fictive kin” ties to all other Muslims and duty to support. Arguably, President Assad's actions in Syria to a certain extent reinforced this narrative and led some from Kyrgyzstan to travel to Syria, as often referenced, to support “their Muslim brothers and sisters.” However, evidence suggests that most went expecting material rewards and a well-paying salary for doing so. ISIS also heavily promoted their “Caliphate” as a place where Muslims of every race and ethnicity would be included and given significant roles—that is, promises of equality and inclusiveness that were particularly attractive to Kyrgyzstan citizens of Uzbek ethnicity who express their feelings, whether perceived of real, of injustices, discrimination, and marginalization.<sup>[17]</sup>

Uzbeks are overrepresented among foreign fighters from Kyrgyzstan. Most Uzbeks interviewed for the project shared strong perceptions of discrimination, although ethnic Kyrgyz disavowed such statements claiming that ethnic Uzbeks limited their opportunities in the public sector by ending their schooling early and avoiding military service. Ethnic Uzbeks interviewed for this project frequently referenced widespread corruption in the country as a contributing factor to discrimination against them, and gave examples such as the need to pay bribes to get health care and official documents, planting of Hizb ut-Tahrir materials on persons in their communities by police and subsequent arrests, etc. However, these are also complaints we also heard from Kyrgyz ethnic respondents.<sup>[18]</sup>

<sup>17</sup> According to the MIA 10th department's data for the period of early 2010-June 2016, 863 Kyrgyz citizens left to Syria, among them 658 are Uzbeks (76%). Statistics by province are as follows: Osh province – 407 (389 Uzbeks); Batken province – 93 (64 Uzbeks); Osh city – 105 (102 Uzbeks); Jalal-Abad province – 111 (97 Uzbeks); and Issyk-Kul province – 47 (1 Uzbek)

<sup>18</sup> Analyzing the degree to which ethnic Uzbeks are discriminated in Kyrgyzstan and how this contributes to their vulnerability to violent extremist groups is of great interest but beyond the scope of this research. However, this question serves to highlight that ethnic division continue to effect the country where in 2010 ethnic clashes erupted between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the south leading to some 400 deaths, for which there has been little accountability. .



Poor economic conditions, high unemployment, and under employment remain a serious concern for especially Kyrgyzstan youth, and may make some particularly susceptible to recruitment into violent extremist groups. ISIS foreign fighters are promised salaries, free housing, food and propane allowances, the possibility of cars, arranged marriages, and sex slaves.<sup>[19]</sup> Average monthly salaries in Kyrgyzstan can be as low as \$15 to \$433, while ISIS defectors informed of us salaries above the \$200 range per month, with thousand dollar bonuses paid for involvement in raids and the ability to loot homes and steal with impunity.<sup>[20]</sup> Unmarried men and women with poor prospects of marriage due to lack of funds might be allured by ISIS' powerful gender-specific propaganda which promises wives to men and traditional Islamic lifestyles for both.<sup>[21]</sup> At the same time, divorced women from traditional families who are economically dependent and under constant social pressure may similarly fall a prey to recruiters. The brutality of ISIS and the dangers of living in a conflict zone may all counter balance the material rewards, but not enough may be known in Kyrgyzstan, making it critical that those who return disillusioned or discontented are supported in sharing their stories and experiences to help demystify life under ISIS.

Gendered recruitment narratives are directed at men and women. Social expectations about their roles as providers and protectors can make unemployment or under-employment especially challenging when it prevents men from meeting these expectations or achieve the social status they expected. ISIS promises men and women the possibility of financial remuneration and significant, although gendered, leadership roles in what appeared for some time to many vulnerable persons as a realistic emerging Caliphate. Women are promised high status and salaries if they decide to join the ISIS hisbah or Islamic police, which creates an opportunity to take on more proactive security roles, even if not frontline combat and they are increasingly now being trained for operative roles. Likewise, they are invited to become Internet recruiters of other women.<sup>[22]</sup> Yet, it is important to understand that while frustrations

with the economic situation and high youth unemployment is an important vulnerability leading to radicalization, these factors are not enough on their own to create a terrorist. Exposure to a terrorist group, their ideology, and social support to exploit this vulnerability for violence and terrorism are also essential to explain pathways into violent extremism.

Ignorance about political and social developments abroad, limited education and low literacy levels also make young people from Kyrgyzstan vulnerable to ISIS' Internet-based messages. Despite poverty and low education, a majority of Kyrgyzstan citizens, including girls and young women, are said to have ready access to Internet on their phones and are exposed to conditions in other parts of the world, where people appear to benefit from greater material comforts and benefits ISIS propaganda can quickly propel them into new worldviews by providing them a very deceptive view of the material benefits and dangers of joining ISIS.

In Kyrgyzstan, several interlocutors blamed labor migration to Russia, and to a lesser extent to Turkey, as a significant cause for violent radicalization.<sup>[23]</sup> They claimed that the common practice of male migrants taking "second wives" while abroad, and women leading "loose lives," created extra vulnerabilities. The hardships of working as a migrant can be favorably compared by an ISIS recruiter to the financial and housing conditions offered by ISIS while dismissing dangers and brutality, making travel to Syria appear as a positive rational choice to a lonely man or woman who is feeling financially distressed and suffering emotional despair. The April 2017 bombing in Saint Petersburg, Russia, by a Russian citizen originally from Osh re-ignited much debate about the link between labor migration and vulnerability to violent extremism.<sup>[24]</sup> However, field research in Russia (and Turkey) is needed to validate any hypotheses.<sup>[25]</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Speckhard, A., & Yayla, A. S. (2016). *ISIS defectors: Inside stories of the terrorist caliphate*: Advances Press, LLC; Unpublished Kosovo interview June 2016

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> See for example Louisa Tarras-Wahlberg's January 2017 report on the Seven Promises of ISIS to its Female Recruits; <http://www.icsve.org/research-reports/seven-promises-of-isis-to-its-female-recruits/>

<sup>22</sup> Speckhard, A., & Yayla, A. S. *ISIS defectors: Inside stories of the terrorist caliphate*; Asaad H. Almomhammad, and Anne Speckhard. «The Operational Ranks and Roles of Female Isis Operatives: From Assassins and Morality Police to Spies and Suicide Bombers.» ICSVE Research Reports (April 23, 2017). <http://www.icsve.org/research-reports/the-operational-ranks-and-roles-of-female-isis-operatives-from-assassins-and-morality-police-to-spies-and-suicide-bombers/>.

<sup>23</sup> Approximately fifty-eight percent of migrant workers from Kyrgyzstan travel to work in Russia while 3.5% choose Turkey as a destination. Results of the public opinion survey conducted by the sociological company "El-Pikir" in 2014, available at <http://easttime.ru/news/kyrgyzstan/statistika-trudovoi-migratsii-iz-kyrgyzstana/6923>. According to Federal Migration Service of Russia, by the end of December 2015, those working in Russia included: 1,880,547 citizens of Uzbek origin (1,520,539 male and 360,008 female), 670,200 citizens of Kazak origin (398,483 male and 271,637 female), 542,928 citizens of Kyrgyzstan (327,982 male and 214,946 female), 896,159 citizens of Tajik origin (735,672 male and 160,487 female), and 24,724 citizens of Turkmen origin (15,679 male and 9,045 female). See National Institute for Strategic Studies of Kyrgyz Republic (2016), "Kyrgyzstan: Extended migration profile 2010-2015," pp.61-62, available at <http://iom.kg/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Migration-Profile-Extended-Kyrgyzstan-Eng-2010-2015.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> According to the head of the FSB security service, Alexander Bortnikov, the eight people detained in Moscow and Saint Petersburg over the April 2017 bombing that killed 13 are originally from Central Asia. See RIA Novosti news agency, available at <http://www.news24.com/World/News/russia-all-st-petersburg-metro-bombing-suspects-from-central-asia-20170411>

<sup>25</sup> For more on migrants' vulnerabilities, see *Migrant Vulnerabilities and Integration Needs in Central Asia: Root Causes, Social and Economic Impact of Return Migration*, Regional Field Assessment in Central Asia 2016, IOM

# WOMEN AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Estimates are that of the 863 men and women from Kyrgyzstan who have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State, around 188 are females (including minors). Similar to many parts of the world, there is no single explanation on the motivations that drive women to join ISIS, which represents a challenge when it comes to seeking solutions to minimize the risk and recruitment of Kyrgyz women into violent extremism. However, all of the push and pull factors discussed previously are relevant, alongside others specific to women's vulnerabilities.

Nearly all of the women traveling to Syria, according to law enforcement and security officials, were accompanied by their spouses, or were following their spouses, and did not travel alone to be wed there. Likewise, the women in prison who had been part of ISIS-related cells were seduced into terrorism by men they were married to. Kyrgyzstan police and intelligence officials depicted women who traveled to Syria as traditional wives obedient to their husbands and without any personal agency, a common occurrence throughout Central Asia and the Balkans. Police, security officials, and NGO workers all cited "zombification" as a common female vulnerability. Kyrgyzstan law enforcement and intelligence officials referred to the naïveté of poor and rural populations, particularly women, stating that many are unaware of the armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq, the actualities of life under ISIS, or even the geographic location of Syria. Pictures shared over the Internet and second wave recruitment by trusted friends and relatives, which portray coming to ISIS as landing in Paradise, propelled some into travel with a very naïve outlook on their journey towards the so-called Caliphate.

Factors that were cited as causing women's vulnerability, especially among ethnic Uzbeks in the south, include under-age marriage; curtailing education after ninth grade; being expected to bear children immediately when married; being encouraged or coerced into staying at home instead of working outside; moving with in-laws and separation from one's own family; domestic abuse;

being groomed one's entire life for subservience as a wife and mother; religious expectations to obey and follow one's husband's lead; threats of or actual knowledge of polygamy and fear of potential abandonment; financial dependence; and ignorance about the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria. Women left behind by their husbands can face dire economic, social, and legal consequences, and may follow them into ISIS for that reason as well.<sup>[26]</sup>

Although cultural and religious structures appeared to circumscribe women's agency in many cases, law enforcement also shared a number of examples of the opposite. For instance, police in Jalal-Abad informed us about two teenage girls who struck up relationships with ISIS recruiters, allegedly recuperating from wounds in Turkey. The girls were contacted via WhatsApp and over time became increasingly conservative as a result of their encouragement, and even accepted money from them. After exchanging messages and pictures for a period of three months, they agreed to marry and join them in Syria. Similarly, two young women in the Issy-Kul region are credited with recruiting their extended family members—mothers, grandmothers, and grandchildren—to travel to Syria. One woman in Osh wed a migrant worker, moved in with his family but abandoned him for Syria as soon as he left back to his work, ostensibly being in love with someone else already in Syria. Two females also willingly progressed into homegrown extremism with their husbands and pledged to act as suicide bombers wherever necessary prior to their husbands being caught and killed by police and themselves imprisoned. Two women in Jalal-Abad were caught and punished for actively recruiting other women into ISIS.<sup>[27]</sup> Examples such as these suggest that women from Kyrgyzstan share the propensity of women globally to be proactive ideologues and supporters of violent

<sup>26</sup> The legal age of marriage is 18, unless a girl is pregnant, in which case she can legally marry at age 16. However early marriage and bride kidnapping remains a problem country-wide. Government training for imams is said to have curtailed these practices and in December 2016 The Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (Muftiyat) banned religious authorities from performing nikah (marriage ceremony in Islam) with minors.

<sup>27</sup> See for example [http://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi\\_ca/newsbriefs/2016/09/15/newsbrief-02](http://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/newsbriefs/2016/09/15/newsbrief-02)

extremism, and specific prevention strategies need to be designed to reach these women and girls before they turn to violence.

Cultural practices also do not generally favor critical thinking, and encourage a more hierarchical approach to discourse, limiting some women's access to information and debate. However, women were commonly cited as having mobile phones and access to the Internet; therefore, this could be remedied by placing useful and informative information on sites they commonly visit and encouraging critical thinking. A teacher at an all-girls madrasah in Osh commented that while Islam teaches submission to one's husband, it also requires her to speak up against any actions he takes that are in opposition to Islam. Teenage female students in the same madrasah echoed this view saying they would not blindly follow future husbands into such folly and that they understood their duty to take the initiative and argue against violating the basic principles of Islam, which they argued included staying out of groups like ISIS. That said, the school principal noted that ISIS recruitment by spouses had become so prevalent in Osh that the first question a potential bride's parents currently ask a prospective spouse before quizzing him on his education, occupational, or religious credentials reads as, "You won't be taking our daughter to ISIS, will you?"

It may be that males more easily convince less educated and financially dependent spouses that joining violent extremist groups is a good Islamic choice. In addition, it appeared that in all cases the economic rewards of traveling to Syria for poor and rural women in particular were quite salient and equal to ideological motivations for joining, and may have helped to make them acquiesce to their husbands' demands. Financial incentives even encouraged some women to become recruiters. Case in point, a grandmother in Issy- Kul, believing that ISIS would pay a \$3000 signing bonus per family member upon arrival, encouraged nine of her family members

to travel with her. Later, the family managed to smuggle her teenage grandson back out of ISIS, with a message of hopeless despair—that is, that things were far different than they had thought, and they would never be able to escape.

Females may also act as facilitators and encourage travel into terrorist groups. Law enforcement shared the story of two female recruiters active inside of Kyrgyzstan trying to recruit other women through the Internet.<sup>[28]</sup> Family members often say they were blindsided by their sons or daughters leaving for Syria, yet we also found female community members in closed mahala [neighborhood] areas in the south of Kyrgyzstan loath to judge their community members for having joined ISIS. They preferred to say that they did not support the "jihad" in Syria but could not possibly condemn their neighbors' motives for traveling there.

As the ability of ISIS to hold territory in Iraq and Syria continues to diminish, the return of fighters to Kyrgyzstan also means more terrorist convictions and imprisonments. Wives of former fighters, are often judged less severely and are not imprisoned for traveling to ISIS. This means that spouses of imprisoned homegrown extremists and foreign fighters, or women whose husbands were killed in such activities, will live in communities and likely experience backlash from the community or be vulnerable to [re]recruitment. We learned about two women who had returned from Syria and were living freely but declined to speak about their ordeals, likely reflecting the stigma they experienced upon return. Likewise, imprisoned two widowed female extremists expressed concerns about the social stigma they expected to face upon release which would likely preclude remarriage and re-integration into their community.

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<sup>28</sup> See also [http://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi\\_ca/newsbriefs/2016/09/15/newsbrief-02](http://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/newsbriefs/2016/09/15/newsbrief-02)

# RESPONSES

In terms of prevention, engaging women in efforts in Kyrgyzstan is necessary and critical to address the dynamics described above. Governmental bodies, civil society groups and UN bodies have begun to include women more. Women teachers, family members, intelligence agents, psychologists, social workers, health care workers, and clerics could clearly play meaningful and powerful prevention roles addressing the gendered dimensions of violent extremism.

## Legislative Changes

To combat violent extremism and terrorism in the country, the Kyrgyzstan government has not yet developed a comprehensive and coherent program on countering violent extremism. They have, however, adopted a Law on Counterterrorism, enacted in 2006. In December 2013, the Kyrgyz Parliament introduced, and in January 2014 the President signed, amendments to the Law on Counterterrorism, to strengthen counter- terrorism related measures.<sup>[29]</sup> In July 2015, amendments were also made to the Criminal Code, including article 226-4 which made participation in foreign conflicts a crime punishable by 5-8 years in prison.<sup>[30]</sup> Kyrgyzstan has now begun work on a National Strategy to prevent violent extremism.

Currently, The Concept of the State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Religious Sphere for 2014-2020, which defines the principles, priority areas, and implementation mechanisms of the state regulation of the activity of religious organizations and unions, regulates most religious affairs. It is based on the constitutional principle of a secular state. In the Concept, one section describes the state's policy to prevent religions radicalization and extremism. The need to carry out prevention using legal methods and focusing on education and analysis of root causes, is emphasized. There is little reference to women in the Concept besides mention of the lack of regulation and state oversight "of home based religious education for women and

children" and other information religious education platforms.<sup>[31]</sup>

An Action Plan to implement the Concept with 88 activities was passed in 2015. The State Commission on Religious Affairs in cooperation with the working group of the Security Council on the reform of state policy in the religious sphere were given the task to ensure cooperation with the media and other civil society institutions to provide the public and religious organizations with comprehensive information on the concept and its implementation. In addition the Action Plan calls on the state and others to "to design and implement mechanisms to improve the religious literacy and awareness of state policy in the religious sphere for the vulnerable groups, specifically for women and youth who reside in the remote areas." However, this is the only reference to women and overall the Action Plan does not offer recommendations on how to more effectively include women and women's groups in the prevention of violent extremism. There is therefore an opportunity to bring in a more gender sensitive approach as the drafting of the National Strategy to prevent violent extremism is ongoing.

The government of Kyrgyzstan has introduced a set of amendments to the relevant legislation to upgrade normative measures for countering religious extremism and terrorism, but in several cases, these may also restrict rights to freedom of expression and religion. In 2015, the State Commission on Religious Affairs proposed amendments to the Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations which, if adopted, would restrict the right to freedom of religion and belief, for example, by requiring additional licensing and re-registration requirements of religious workers.<sup>[32]</sup> Amendments were proposed to the Law on Countering Extremist Activity (2005) in 2015 to be able to block websites that have content promoting extremism and/or terrorism based on an order by the Prosecutor. The amendment were

<sup>29</sup> For more details also see [http://www.president.kg/ru/news/zakony/3305\\_v\\_zakon\\_o\\_protivodeystvii\\_terrorizmu\\_vnesenyi\\_izmeneniya\\_i\\_dopolneniya/](http://www.president.kg/ru/news/zakony/3305_v_zakon_o_protivodeystvii_terrorizmu_vnesenyi_izmeneniya_i_dopolneniya/)

<sup>30</sup> For 5-8 years in prison in case of the absence of the previous preparatory actions and wage earning intent, and for 8-12 years of punishment if travel is organized by a group, [http://online.adviser.kg/Document/?link\\_id=1000871480](http://online.adviser.kg/Document/?link_id=1000871480)

<sup>31</sup> КОНЦЕПЦИЯ государственной политики Кыргызской Республики в религиозной сфере на 2014-2020 годы, р.22 [Concept of the State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Religious Sphere for 2014-2020]

<sup>32</sup> The alternative report submitted to the implementation of the International Covenant on Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) stated that the law violates the state obligations on the ICESCR by including a number of limitations related to civil and political rights and freedoms

approved by the Parliament and signed into law by the President in 2016, despite the analysis by the international NGO Article 19 which concluded that the language of the amendment was too vague, and could lead to disproportionate restrictions being imposed on freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly, and freedom of religion.<sup>[33]</sup>

## Discrediting and Preventing Violent Extremism

Officials are already using effective counter-messaging tools to undermine ISIS recruitment. National counter-terrorism officers have posted the Breaking the ISIS Brand interviews subtitled in local languages (produced from interviews with ISIS defectors, prisoners and returnees denouncing the group by the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, ICSVE) on their official website and have expressed their desire to use them for denouncing ISIS, with additional training, prevention, and intervention activities.<sup>[34]</sup> The Osh GKNB also shared their efforts at making videos on the impact on families and community members of people's migration to ISIS. The State Commission on Religious Affairs has also produced videos, although mainly cognitive in nature and focused on denouncing ISIS and other violent extremist groups. Officials expressed strong interest in continuing to receive ISIS defector videos subtitled in the three relevant local languages, including seeing Central Asian ISIS defectors as the main actors denouncing ISIS, or segments with Central Asian supplementing the existing videos to be more convincing and relevant to local viewers.<sup>[35]</sup>

In Osh, the GKNB shared that they were working on a "Safe Mahala" project and creatively videotaping family and community members of those who

had gone to Syria to show other communities the repercussions in terms of social stigma and suffering imposed on those left behind. According to the officials, the videos were intended to be used as prevention to provide powerful examples of how families have been largely ostracized and left alone to deal with their grief and confusion when their adult children leave to Syria. Several counter-messaging professionals, both local and international, however, cautioned that within the context of the "Safe Mahala" project repressive measures may also be used, the accuracy of which the authors of this article could not verify.<sup>[36]</sup> One must be cautious as the use of coercive measures in PVE/CVE efforts is likely to backfire and undermine the counter-narrative messaging efforts.

National police also support an anti-ISIS online recruitment group using university student volunteers tasked with identifying and blocking violent extremist YouTube videos and other online recruitment materials. The counter-terrorism officials also managed to takeover URL's for ISIS and other violent extremist recruitment videos, redirecting them to messages from the Kyrgyz mufti denouncing violent extremism. It was promising to find national police and security officials already using creative and ingenious strategies that arguably are far ahead of their [many] Western counterparts to fight ISIS online and face-to-face recruitment in the country. Officials should be encouraged to continue in their creative and youth-culture oriented national counter-terrorism initiatives and strategies that reach the most vulnerable populations.

## Engaging Religious Authorities

The State Commission on Religious Affairs in Kyrgyzstan jointly with the Foundation "Yiman" has also begun testing and training the 2800 existing registered imams in the country on the basic practices of Islam and their knowledge regarding the Hanafi school of Islam (claimed by the commission to be indigenous to the country). Fourteen hundred imams have already been tested, with approximately half having apparently failed their examinations. Those who failed were invited to a ten-day training course carried out by theological faculties in universities in Osh and Bishkek, with the result of a university and religious certificate provided to those who pass their examinations. In addition, those who pass the

<sup>33</sup> See <https://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/38221/Kyrgyzstan-Extremism-LA-Final.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> ICSVE-produced videos have been focus tested worldwide, most recently with a high-profile ISIS prisoner (emir in ISIS military hierarchy) in Iraq who, upon watching the videos, in many instances, admitted to being wrong in his arguments. ICSVE videos can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCumpEsozixbl-PyKw12hmnw>. The State Committee of National Security (GKNB) as well as law enforcement in Osh, Bishkek, Jalal-Abad, and Issy-Kul also expressed interest in using such materials in prevention, education, and intervention work, and enthusiastically received ICSVE ISIS defector videos produced in Kyrgyz, Russian, and Uzbek languages to use for such interventions. Prison officials also expressed interest in using them both for training purposes and rehabilitating former extremists

<sup>35</sup> However, it is essential that no man or woman be forced to take part in these videos under duress or other forms of pressure. This may be a particular concern with prisoners, and international human rights standards for the treatment of prisoners, including interview standards, should be respected. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has developed detailed standards and methodologies to interview prisoners. See also the UNODC, Handbook on the Management of Extremist Prisoners, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Anonymous consultant comments. December 2016.



exam receive certificates from the State Commission on Religious affairs and a stipend is paid by the Foundation “Yiman,” starting from 5000 Kyrgyz soms for imams and up to 15,000 soms (a stipend for the mufti) per month to augment their incomes.[37] Such efforts to resist the “Arabization” or “Salafization” of Islam in Kyrgyzstan and promote a moderate stream of Islam remain controversial, but may be helpful in reducing resonance with extremist messaging coming out of the Middle East.

Some theological faculty members expressed concern over the program, however, stating that a ten-day training course is not realistic and that it would be better for imam salaries to be raised so that four-year graduates of university theological faculties would find it profitable to become imams throughout the country. The prevailing argument was that students trained in four-year university theological programs are trained to be critical thinkers, understand the various forms and schools of Islam, and are highly resistant to being pulled into violent extremist thinking, and thus can also prevent and protect their congregants against such ideologies. The problem, however, is financial—that is, whether national policies will support salaries that make it attractive to university theological graduates to take imam positions around the country. There is also political opposition and resistance from existing imams to this idea, as well as disputes between Tablighi Jamaat, Salafi and Hanafi schools over turf and power. It may also not be possible to drive religious views from the secular government’s position without violating freedom of religious expression.

When it comes to religion and religious issues, another matter of concern is that the government generally invites men to meetings about countering extremism and as a matter of routine does not include female religious experts. The State Commission on Religious Affairs, for instance, has no plans to train or cooperate with women religious experts. In 2014, the Muftiyat terminated its women’s department, which had branches across the country. Allegedly some of the women religious experts are continuing to provide services, but only as volunteers. Rejection of women in organized religious institutions seems counterproductive to preventing violent extremism among both men and women and seems to go along with streams of religious thought that are embraced by violent extremists. A better approach would be to

encourage and include the voices of female religious authorities and encourage their active participation in government-led initiatives to fight violent extremism.

## Rehabilitation and Reintegration

Authorities have also begun to support the rehabilitation of men and women who were in Syria and Iraq. During interviews with the female prisoners housed in the N2 prison located in the village Stepnoe, including with the prison officials there, we learned that psychologists, religious leaders, and prison officials are already reaching imprisoned ISIS supporters. Some who were fanatical in their pro-ISIS beliefs now seem to express regret and are more open to rehabilitation in preparation for their release back into society. The prison officials had already established a good working relationship with two such former ISIS members in the prison and had created an environment of strong rapport, mutual respect, and trust. While there is still a long way to go in their treatment, it was promising nonetheless given that many countries do not yet seek to rehabilitate imprisoned former fighters. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC) will be assisting in the rehabilitation of male prisoners. The discussion is currently underway on how to rehabilitate prisoners and move them safely and productively back into their communities, perhaps involving community police and NGO’s active in the communities as bridges to help reintroduce and reintegrate them.

An overlooked area of concern is that only male travelers to ISIS have been convicted thus far; however, if wives also return and are not imprisoned they also will face issues of reintegration and need for treatment. ISIS members, male and female, have been exposed to multiple traumas (e.g. beheadings, crucifixions) and violence and rejection of anyone not adhering to their violent Takfiri beliefs has become normalized for them. The women whose husbands are in prison also need special programs, as terrorist groups have repeatedly shown their willingness to recruit and use women in suicide missions, particularly when they are angry, desperate, or feel strong grievances, which may be the case for them. As ISIS loses its territory, it has turned increasingly to calling for and guiding homegrown terror attacks, and may also attempt to call such women into action. Women who have lived under ISIS and who are indoctrinated into its thinking and living vulnerable

<sup>37</sup> See for instance <http://rus.azattyk.org/a/27192770.html>

while their husbands are in prison may be the easiest to recruit into terrorist attacks or aid to recruit others.

## Community Level Interventions

At the community level, women and women's organizations are already engaging in prevention work, especially by facilitating discussion and dialogue on violent extremism, and providing awareness on the dangers of groups like ISIS. Mutakallim, a Kyrgyzstan NGO which protects and advances the rights of Muslim women, has been unique in this regard, not only sharing information on the strategies of violent extremists with vulnerable women at the community level, but also combining this with the provision of knowledge on women's rights, women's economic roles, their ability to effect peace and security and participate in political decision making. The group has a track record of positively intervening with women that they have identified as already on the extremist and terrorist trajectory and showing signs of radicalization.[38]

Community involvement and community policing are crucial to fighting violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan. Many respondents stressed how it important for community policing to build trust with local communities and address local needs, rather than just relying on communities for intelligence without offering them much in return. In Issyk- Kul, the police chief shared that crime prevention centers hold meetings that include representatives of local women's groups as well as other community actors. Community policing is crucial for both raising awareness among communities about the threat of violent extremism and empowering communities to prevent its emergence and spread while helping the community to meet needs of those who are vulnerable to recruitment to redirect them to more productive paths. While the Tenth Department of the National Police includes female officers, we did not learn of any initiatives specifically making use of females in counter-terrorism roles.[39] Inclusion of women police officers is nevertheless crucial for effective prevention efforts. According to UN Office for Drugs and Crime data, in 2014 13% of those working in the police system in Kyrgyzstan were

women, but only 6.3% who were certified as police were women, which is not many to support sufficient female policing in community policing.[40] Efforts are still needed to increase female qualified specialists to work as police.

Danish police in Aarhus have developed a good model of community policing, where the police are active in the community and listening to grievances, identifying vulnerable persons targeted for recruitment, and working with all stakeholders in the community who can offer assistance. Kyrgyzstan may also benefit from applying Aarhus' mentoring scheme, whereby community mentors are assigned to work with individuals who seem vulnerable to violent extremism. Mutakallim members appear already to be working toward providing a type of such mentoring.

The aforementioned efforts to counter violent extremism are important. However, more measures should be introduced to ensure that women are involved in PVE/CVE efforts. Women should have opportunities to warn about worrying signs of radicalization amongst members of their community or family without fearing repercussions. Helplines run by trained women—mothers, teachers, lawyers or, female “imams”—can be powerful and effective tools for those who are vulnerable to reach out for help, although the next step is to also create or strengthen existing rapid interventions, either run by voluntary teams or through government interventions as discussed above. Local lawyer groups running helplines for domestic violence and advocacy for sex workers mentioned that it would be possible to add responses for countering violent extremism, and lawyers might be the ideal first person to contact to ensure the caller's rights were protected as they sought avenues of help for themselves or family members. It was notable that one of the violent extremists in prison who had previously been committed to taking a “martyrdom” mission for the group stated that when she became afraid of the seriousness of what she had involved herself in, she might have called a helpline for assistance in exiting the group if she had known of one to which she could reach out. We were informed that there is currently a helpline being set up by the State Commission on Religious Affairs in Bishkek.

<sup>38</sup> They also used the ICSVE counter-narrative videos with success in their PVE activities.

<sup>39</sup> UNODC data for 2014 reveals that 13% in the police system in Kyrgyzstan are women, but those who are certified as police are only 6.3%, which is not many to support much female involvement in community policing. Efforts are still needed to increase female qualified specialists to work as police.

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.unodc.org/centralasia/en/news/gender-balance-in-law-enforcement.html>

Another important policy or programmatic initiative would be to reach out to mothers whose offspring and spouses have died in Syria and Iraq, many of whom still hold strong beliefs and convictions about the involvement of their late loved ones in the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. Such women and their families could help with counter-messaging, and could be helped to constructively deal with their grief and the loss of their loved ones. Such approach is especially necessary to prevent further radicalization cycles within such families and communities that relatives of the deceased may be influencing. Equally important, psychological treatment is necessary to help such women who are struggling to come to terms with the death of their loved ones in the service of terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria.

The United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) through the Gender Promotion Initiative (GPI III) started providing funds in early 2017 to four UN agencies to implement a joint project on promoting women's and girls' participation and engagement in efforts to prevent violent extremism. The 18-month project, which is being run in eight local communities, will be the UN's first attempt to implement gender

specific PVE intervention efforts in Kyrgyzstan, in close cooperation with local civil society, self-government institutions, faith based organizations and the security sector. It will attempt to fill identified gaps such as the lack of knowledge, skills and methods for women to detect vulnerabilities in their communities, and to encourage men and women to steer away from violent extremism. Significantly the project will not only support PVE through awareness raising amongst women but also by empowering them to take part in decision making in their communities and to advocate for their rights.

While Kyrgyzstan women traveled to Iraq and Syria for differing reasons, the research revealed that many of them follow their husbands because of their limited abilities to stand up and resist. Therefore, as some explained during the course of our research, to challenge violent extremism, one must also start tackling traditional patriarchal and traditional gender roles that suppress women participation in private and public life by programs that provide political and economic empowerment to women.



# CONCLUSION

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This chapter addressed the roles of women in supporting, joining, intervening in, and preventing violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan. The main recommendations stemming from the research in Kyrgyzstan include a need for more empirical research that addresses both male and female motivations for joining violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan, as well research that examines the differences in their terrorist trajectories into and out of terrorism. There is also a need to understand better the roles that female family members of extremists played in contributing to their decisions for embracing terrorism, including in intervening to prevent it. Kyrgyzstan police insisted that women played passive roles and followed their men; however, our research also revealed women's active roles in instigating and encouraging travel to Iraq and Syria.

In this regard, there is a need to increase women's knowledge and empowerment to act against the early signs of radicalization, increase their critical analytic skills, and discuss contentious issues with their children and their spouses. As it is apparent that many women who follow their husbands to join violent extremism groups, due so because they feel bound by their family and that they have a few options to take independent decisions, it is important to continue to support women and women's organizations who are engaged in empowerment programs to strengthen vulnerable compatriots sense of agency and self-confidence so that they can refuse pressure to accept radicalization. It is equally important and necessary to conduct research to understand who women trust for solutions and whom they fear. To those who fell prey to violent extremism, there is a need to understand where the points of intervention could have been and then begin constructing interventions that are truly effective. With this type of research, the programming can be fine-tuned to protect both men and women and enhance women's preventative roles.

There should be a clear conceptualization on what the role of Kyrgyzstan women should be in relation to: 1) Challenging violent ideology and promoting moderate teachings and moderate views of Islam, 2) Understanding and being fully equipped to speak back about the false claims of extremist groups, including their materialist and utopian claims, 3) Equipping them with powerful prevention tools and

training, 4) Preventing recruitment, 5) Supporting and engaging directly with those vulnerable through interventions in communities and prisons, and 6) Focusing on community resilience and addressing grievances, real or perceived, that are exploited by extremists during the radicalization process.

Our research revealed both national and international actors' resolve in not only identifying and diverting violent extremism, but also supporting women and their families in disengaging from violent extremism. In the context of the latter, the respondents stressed the need to establish appropriate referral mechanisms for services to help radicalized individuals and the families of radicalized individuals—services that now barely exist. The common theme that emerged during the interviews was that referral mechanisms are important in mobilizing all qualified stakeholders to deliver effective preventative interventions that cater to individual needs. In other words, referral mechanisms allow for mobilizing qualified and credible professionals to deliver effective interventions. This is especially important given that law enforcement and security professionals may not necessarily possess the required skillset and expertise and may require training and support. Equally important, there need to be clear guidelines that spell out the relationship with the government (e.g. law enforcement) and how referral information is shared with them for preventative and investigative purposes.

Lastly, we encourage future research on the topic also to include human rights sensitive interviews with returnees from Syria and Iraq now in prison and their female family members residing in their respective communities to gain additional perspectives on women's roles in these groups. We recommend in-depth and psychological interviews with these populations of returnees and their wives, some of whom also spent time as ISIS members, and their mothers and sisters to learn more details about women's involvement in the groups and how prevention might have occurred and could occur in the future. Likewise, among those returned who are now willing to denounce the group, their stories should be captured—preferably on video—to turn the voices of those who once served groups like ISIS to now speak against it delegitimizing and discrediting both the group and its ideology.

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**The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views and analysis of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women).**



