EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gender Analysis of Violent Extremism and the Impact of COVID-19 on Peace and Security in ASEAN

MONASH University | MONASH GENDER PEACE AND SECURITY

BADAN NASIONAL PENANGGULANGAN TERORISME | BNPT

UN WOMEN

ABOUT
THIS REPORT

This report is the result of the collaborative efforts and partnership of the National Counter Terrorism Agency of Indonesia (BNPT), The Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection (MOWECP) of Indonesia, and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). This research was commissioned by UN Women under the regional project Empowering Women for Sustainable Peace: Preventing Violence and Promoting Social Cohesion in ASEAN with the generous support of the Global Affairs Canada and the Republic of Korea. The research was conducted by the Monash Gender, Peace and Security Centre at Monash University. It was also informed by multi-stakeholder groups, including government and civil society from the ASEAN region. The findings of this research aim to support the implementation of the ASEAN Bali Work Plan 2019-2025, which was developed to operationalize the ASEAN Regional Prevention of Violent Extremism Plan of Action.

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I t is well known that radicalization, a shift towards violent extremism, in Southeast Asia takes place during times of peace, when conflict has been stabilized, and/or even in countries that do not experience internal conflict. Recent studies have also shown that women and men's engagement with both extremist content and organizations differ, particularly in terms of radicalization, recruitment and participation.

This report identifies both the persistent trends and changing gender dynamics of violent extremism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, based on an expert survey and interview research conducted between July and November 2021. It examined how and to what extent misogyny and hostile beliefs are fuelling violent extremism in the Southeast Asian region during the pandemic, the degree to which misogyny and hostile beliefs in the ASEAN region are fuelling violent extremism, and how these manifest themselves in the offline space. The report answers the following questions:

? What have been the key changing trends and dynamics of violent extremism in the context of COVID-19, including as regards recruitment, propaganda, and/or the spread of misinformation and disinformation to fuel misogynist and hostile beliefs (both online and offline) to justify and legitimize violence against women in the ASEAN region?

? To what degree do offline spaces reinforce hostile beliefs and misogyny towards women, potentially in turn further fuelling violent extremism?

? What are the points of contestation among women and men in communities affected by violent extremist groups in the ASEAN region? How are women and men coping or pushing back differently? What are the gender dynamics and what are the consequences?
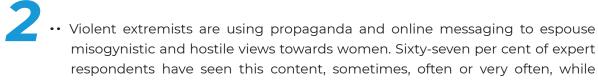
? What can we learn from the regional and national efforts in promoting and implementing P/CVE – Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism – in the ASEAN Member States? What have been key achievements and challenges? What are the key policy recommendations and considerations for P/CVE and the security sector?

? How can the gender perspective be incorporated into policy and practices, including risk assessments, and how can the role of civil society and women's organizations strengthen P/CVE strategies in ASEAN?

OUR PROJECT FOUND THAT:

1 The COVID-19 pandemic has been successfully exploited by extremist actors to strengthen their organizations and intensify violent campaigns. During COVID-19, individuals have increasingly relied on social media and the internet to engage with extremist content, a situation to a great measure exacerbated by the pandemic stay-at-home orders. The research indicates a growing concern among regional experts that violent extremist groups throughout Southeast Asia are espousing and transmitting violent messages online. Forty-four per cent of expert respondents have recently viewed such messages continuously or very often, including calls to violent jihad.

2 Violent extremists are using propaganda and online messaging to espouse misogynistic and hostile views towards women. Sixty-seven per cent of expert respondents have seen this content, sometimes, often or very often, while 65% of experts have observed extremist social media content inciting violence towards women and girls.

3 Appeals to charismatic masculinities are used to attract recruits and legitimize violence, revealing consistency between online and offline channels/sites of radicalization and participation. However, this differs depending on the ideology of the organization and may not apply across the board among different militant organizations throughout the region that can espouse jihadism, ethno-nationalism or far-right extremism. Contestation amongst women and men in communities affected by violent extremist groups in the ASEAN region exists in pockets with some evidence that women are beginning to push back against misogynistic ideologies, including challenging narratives discursively through discussion forums, and challenging violent extremist ideology through appealing to moderation.

4 •• When drafting and implementing P/CVE policies responsive to gender-sensitive approaches, intersectionality perspectives must be embedded/reflected in the substantive conversation of the draft, and meaningful participation must be included during the formulation of policies. The multiplication of concrete National Action Plans (NAPs) P/CVE implementation initiatives at the local level, which signal multilevel coordination between national – local agencies, allows for the broadening of ownership of P/CVE as a shared agenda according to (the VE affected) communities.

As stated by one expert interviewed for the study:

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There is no extremist group that supports the ideology of equality between women and men.

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In their messaging and strategies, "violent extremist groups always place women as saviours or as the cause of conditions that are considered immoral." Yet there are few moderate groups espousing gender equality as a counter-narrative to extremist and violent extremist ideology. Almost all experts agreed that this online intolerant content is dangerous for women in the offline space, and that COVID-19 has resulted in more significant insecurities for women affected by violent extremism in terms of radicalization, recruitment and the effects of online discourse that promotes sexist views, control and the subjugation of women.

This included through the spread of misinformation and disinformation, which participants observed was heightened during COVID-19. Online behaviour not only influences violent extremist roles, practices and recruitment, but also results in insecurities in the offline space, including increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence.

Although there are similarities in the ways in which violent extremist groups use propaganda and social media to recruit and radicalize women and men differently and espouse sexist views towards women, this can differ depending

on the organization itself, the geopolitical environment in which it operates and the ideology it espouses. For example, while existing P/CVE approaches are generally tailored towards violent extremist threats posed by jihadism, interviewees suggested that ethno-nationalist extremism (such as in the case of Malaysia) and communist insurgency (such as in the case of the Philippines) could pose immediate and future risks, but they are not currently integrated into existing policies and programming. Consequently, it is important to consider that while organizations recruit and radicalize women and men distinctly, the gender norms prevalent within espoused ideology can influence processes in different ways. Therefore, avoiding a "one-size-fits-all" approach is recommended.

The findings of this study need to inform current P/CVE policies and programming in the Southeast Asia region. More than half the expert respondents agreed that the growth of online misogyny and hostile beliefs toward women was not reflected in current P/CVE policies and programmes. More gender-responsive policies could address the gender-specific dimensions of increasing online radicalization and its impact on both men and women's offline recruitment to violent extremism.

BASED ON THE RESEARCH STUDY, WE ARE PROPOSING THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS FOR P/CVE POLICY AND PROGRAMMING IN THE ASEAN REGION:

1 **P/CVE policy should be based on gender-sensitive analysis of the causes of individual radicalization which transforms itself into violent extremism. This includes acknowledging that radicalization processes and the drivers towards violent extremism can be distinct among women and men.**

From our survey data and interviews, a common concern was often raised that policymakers must further acknowledge that radicalization processes are distinct among women and men, despite recruitment and participation within the same organization. Put simply, potential differences in drivers that influence women and men's radicalization can not only be distinct, but highly gendered. It is important to note, however, that women and men cannot be treated monolithically, but rather the factors that push men to join a violent extremist group may not be the same factors for women.

Risk assessment should incorporate male and female gender-specific radicalization indicators and indicators of misogyny and hostile beliefs and their monitoring should deem them to be related yet distinct from broader conflict dynamics. This involves identifying individuals, both men and women, with hostile sexist attitudes (which is different than the presence of discriminatory gender norms in a group ideology) as particularly at risk of conducting violence. It is important that these are responsive to differing ideologies throughout the ASEAN region.

2 **Current P/CVE policies should be informed by gender-sensitive analysis of all forms of extremism and violent extremism and should differentiate between ethno-nationalist extremism, far-right extremism and communist insurgency where religion is not a key dimension of the ideology.**

The ideologies of most violent extremist organizations contain inherently gendered dimensions. The way in which violent extremist groups construct gender norms, including how groups can produce masculinities and gender norms that can either enable or limit women's participation, is not only important in understanding violence but also the normalization of certain behaviours. For example, the construction of in-group gender norms can "impact on the likelihood of women's violence being accepted as legitimate by terrorist groups; on the roles imagined for women; on the behaviours normalized for men; and on the treatment of enemy women".

Policymakers need to take into consideration national threat environments in the ASEAN region and the ideologies of extremist organizations and consider how they can appeal to women and men differently. Although jihadist violent extremism continues to pose and enduring threat within the ASEAN region, it is important to consider violent extremism and conflict posed by far-right, ethno-nationalist and communist groups and their respective strategies to recruit and sustain the involvement of women and men differently.

3 **The differential impacts of terrorism on women and girls should be integrated into P/CVE policy and programming.**

It is important that policymakers consider their local contexts throughout the ASEAN region and develop programmes that focus on women and girls that specifically reflect how gender dynamics are playing a role in radicalization, taking care not to perpetuate invalid gendered stereotypes that women are always victims or that someone conned them into joining violent extremist groups. This is particularly the case when thinking about the repatriation of former individuals, who were actively or passively involved with Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) or living in their proto-state areas of influence.

This includes considering that women and girls could be victims, perpetrators, supporters, influencers and active participants in terrorist organizations, which necessitates a complex and nuanced understanding of the range of risk factors. It has further implications for online/offline dynamics particularly heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, where women's increased use of social media and engagement in group chats and forums – including women's online forums – during stay-at-home orders exposed women to incentives for joining violent extremist organizations. Furthermore, gender-sensitive e-safety training could be recommended for security and intelligence officers on how to identify hostile sexist attitudes online.

4 **P/CVE programmes should support the development of counter-narratives to violent extremism that place women's voices and experiences of misogyny in the foreground**

– including those previously involved with extremist organizations and that promote gender equality in contrast to misogynistic narratives. Multiple participants identified in our study that violent extremist organizations throughout the region seek to delegitimize women as leaders. Women's voices and counter-narratives to violent extremism should be amplified by leaders in the community, CSOs and governments, and include their integration into support and referral initiatives and digital gender-sensitive e-safety training.

At the same time, policymakers must acknowledge that counter-narratives can also have the potential to indirectly victimize or create vulnerabilities for women. Policymakers and leaders do not just amplify women's voices and counter-narratives, but they themselves and their organizations are "role-models" in challenging hostile sexist attitudes. As a result, it is crucial that policymakers engage women's CSOs and women's groups in devising these counter-narratives, as they often have extensive knowledge in understanding local grievances that can serve as drivers towards violent extremism and they can offer alternative pathways at the local level.

5 **Policymakers should listen to and involve communities in which violent extremist groups exist.**

It is important to engage women and CSOs that are already at the forefront of violent extremist activity, who understand the local context, have local contacts and understand real and perceived local grievances. Existing P/CVE strategies throughout the region do indeed tend to be general, and our research found the need for these to not only be more specific to the gendered experiences of women and men, but also to the diverse extremist ideologies and the specific environments in which they exist.

Grassroots peacebuilding initiatives and organizations can play a key role in the P/CVE space and provide the opportunity to bridge the gap between government, policymakers and local communities. Indeed, and as previously mentioned, this could simultaneously contribute to higher accountability for government agencies and ministries – including in incorporating gender mainstreaming – and potentially to decrease the vulnerability of communities at risk. Furthermore, this can be expanded to include a specific focus on security sector reform and training.

One of the ways that security sector organizations can challenge hostile sexism and misogyny is by promoting an inclusive workforce, standing against impunity for gender-based violence and addressing sexual abuse and harassment in their own organizations – which is often targeted at women and religious minorities. The community needs to see a security sector that is inclusive and responsive to their concerns and requirements and that does not provoke extremism.

6 **The formulation of NAP P/CVEs can be highly institutionalized, but not necessarily rigid. It can be a participatory process, with engagement not only coming from ministerial organizations but also from CSOs.**

The formulation of P/CVE plans that connect to national Women, Peace and Security (WPS) frameworks is crucial to address misogyny 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. Our case study of Indonesia's NAP P/CVE drafting, and ongoing implementation can provide lessons learned that may inform other action plans throughout the region.

As identified, the multiplicity of NAP P/CVE implementation initiatives at the local level because of multilevel coordination between local and national agencies, allows for the broadening of ownership of P/CVE as a shared agenda between government and grassroots levels. Policymakers need to ensure that intersectionality and the inclusion of diverse perspectives in the drafting of NAP P/CVE's. There must be concrete efforts to ensure the recognition and accommodation of CSOs' representativeness, voices, experiences and contributions in the drafting process. This contributes to meaningful participation, and facilitates opportunities to discuss and debate key concepts, including gender, which are crucial to enhancing the success of P/CVE strategies and tailored P/CVE policies.