KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE MAY 30-31, 2023 VIRTUAL WORKSHOP ON

YOUTH, GENDER, AND PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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INTRODUCTION

This virtual conference, held over May 30-31, 2023, was the first event in the **Youth, Gender, and Preventing Violent Extremism in Southeast Asia** event series, organized by Pacific Forum and the US Indo-Pacific Command. The overarching goal of the series is to build relationships between civil society organizations and security personnel that are focused on addressing extremism in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The series aims to connect civil society and security institutions, bringing together actors working to prevent & counter extremism (P/CVE) at the local, national, and regional levels.

The conference allowed security personnel to engage with grassroots organizations dedicated to countering extremism through gender and youth-focused approaches. In turn, these grassroots organizations offered actionable policy recommendations for security personnel on how they can work more effectively together in future. Discussions that took place during the virtual conference will be continued through the in-person workshop held in November 2023.

WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

1. Educate security personnel about the importance of integrating gender and youth into P/CVE.
2. Forge closer ties between security personnel and grassroots organizations.
3. Provide a platform for grassroots organizations to voice challenges, concerns, and recommendations directly to security personnel, fostering open and effective communication and knowledge-sharing.
4. Encourage knowledge-sharing between security personnel and grassroots organizations from different countries in Southeast Asia, allowing for regional cross-fertilization of knowledge.
3. Enable the creation of a comprehensive strategy that outlines collaboration between security personnel and civil society organizations going forward.

PARTICIPANTS

Participating Defense Force Branches
The National Counter Terrorism Agency in Indonesia (BNPT)

Malaysia Maritime Enforcement
Royal Malaysia Police

Philippine National Police
The Philippine Army

Participating Civil Society Organizations:
Malaysia:
IMAN Research
Initiate.MY

Indonesia:
SeRVE Indonesia
Yayasan Empatiku

Philippines:
Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy
Gagandilan Mindanao Women Inc.

KEY FINDINGS

Research: Women, Gender, and P/CVE

In the first session of the conference, researchers from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia discussed recent findings. Their presentations highlighted themes including women's roles in extremist networks, the drivers of women's extremism, and the radicalization of women.

Women's roles in extremist networks: All three speakers emphasized the importance of considering gender stereotypes that may cloud our understanding of women's participation in extremism. Women have played diverse roles in extremist networks across the region: as educators, mothers, and perpetrators of violence. Women have executed terrorist attacks in Indonesia and the Philippines, and they have attempted attacks in Malaysia.

Drivers of women's extremism: Researchers offered a gendered perspective on drivers for extremism across the three countries. In Mindanao, Philippines, local extremist networks play on the unique needs of women and girls to recruit them, including by offering security, stability, and better livelihoods. Extremist organizations in the Philippines emphasize women's roles as central to group missions, and in joining, women serve as "active agents of change" within their communities. In Malaysia, monetary gain and personal relationships appear to drive women's radicalization.

How can we address the radicalization of women? Despite the different contexts, researchers from the three countries underscored the importance of a holistic (whole-of-society) response to preventing extremism and in reintegrating former women extremists. Examining the drivers of women's extremism can help provide targeted preventive measures. For instance, research into Mindanao, Philippines, shows that women are drawn to extremist networks for empowerment and in order to obtain provision of basic services that are lacking due to ongoing instability in the region. The upshot is that responses to preventing recruitment need to enable women to feel like agents of change within their communities, as well as provide practical assistance, such as healthcare and humanitarian aid.

Reintegration of former women extremists: Research from Indonesia highlighted that reintegration of former women extremists requires an extensive program. Such a program should include counseling, economic assistance, and support for family members of women extremists. In particular, children of extremists may face stigma and therefore need additional support. In other words, reintegration does not stop at simply releasing individuals back into society without further assistance. As pointed out, prevention is not complete without rehabilitation, because only through rehabilitation can prior detainees or released prisoners avoid relapse and reoffense.

Balancing democracy and P/CVE: Another point raised specifically in relation to Indonesia was the need to be cautious regarding *who* is the target of P/CVE efforts. P/CVE efforts need to be balanced with democracy, as well as gender perspectives. That is, measures should ensure that no group is targeted or marginalized disproportionately and continued diversity of voices in decision-making. It is important to ensure P/CVE remains detached from a polarizing discourse.

To read more about these topics, please see the following articles written by our speakers from this session:

- Dr Kiriloi M. Ingram (2023) "Boulders of Strength and Pillars of Hope: Exploring Gender and Violent Extremism in Southeast Asia," Australian Institute of International Affairs
- Nava Nuraniyah (2018) "Not Just Brainwashed: Understanding the Radicalization of Indonesian Female Supporters of the Islamic State" Terrorism and Political Violence

Grassroots Organizations: Their Work, Needs, and Collaborations

We heard from eight grassroots organizations from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines about the vital work they are carrying out in the area of P/CVE, their current needs, and the collaborations they have pursued with security personnel. From Indonesia, speakers joined from Yayasan Empatiku, SeRVE Indonesia, the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN), and the Indonesian Ulama Council. From Malaysia, speakers came from IMAN Research and Initiate.MY. Finally, from the Philippines, the Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy and Gagandilan Mindanao Women Inc. had speaker representatives.

Vital efforts performed by grassroots organizations: Representatives from grassroots organizations discussed the work of their organizations in the area of P/CVE. Some organizations research and monitor extremist activity. This can range from recording online trends in extremism (INITIATE.MY) to harnessing connections with local communities for potential outbreaks of extremist violence, like Yayasan Empatiku, which has been using early warning systems in local villages since 2018.

Assisting with the reintegration of former extremists, particularly women, is a key focus of many of these organizations, like SeRVE Indonesia, Gagandilan Mindanao Women Inc. (Philippines), Indonesian Ulema Council, and Yayasan Empatiku. Acceptance from the community is extremely important to the reintegration of former violent extremists, and these organizations facilitate this process by introducing trust-building exercises, financial capacity-building practices, and sustainable livelihood programs.

Many organizations focus on peacebuilding by empowering local peacebuilders, especially women and young people (Yayasan Empatiku). INITIATE.MY has a "peace lab" that brings together youth advocates from across the region and trains them in activism. The Center for Islam and Democracy works in local communities to build peace also by working with local CSOs. In addition, Gagandilan Mindanao Women Inc. has actively brought together key stakeholders from opposing sides for dialogues.

Other activities include conducting interfaith dialogues and providing a platform for religious leaders, including women religious leaders, who can promote powerful counter-narratives to extremist recruitment messaging.

Many of these organizations work tirelessly with their respective governments to establish formal mechanisms to prevent extremism and promote peace through a gendered lens (e.g., AMAN Indonesia; Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy; and Gagandilan Mindanao Women Inc. Philippines). These organizations work with the government to create national action plans on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and counterterrorism, ensuring that security mechanisms incorporate gender mainstreaming and women's perspectives.

Despite the vital work these organizations carry out, many of them are facing challenges that could hinder their work. In particular, many cited a need for adequate funding, which has declined since the COVID-19 pandemic. Obtaining funding requires support from the national government or development partners.

Relationship with police, military, and counterterrorism personnel: Representatives discussed the importance of building strong ties with police, military, and counterterrorism personnel, addressing barriers to building connections, and demonstrating positive examples of collaboration. Some representatives discussed the need for more information sharing to effectively fulfill their role. For instance, some grassroots organizations need to know who former extremists are and where they live to conduct effective reintegration.

However, it is not just that grassroots organizations need support from security personnel; when security personnel collaborate with these grassroots organizations, they can gain support and invaluable intelligence, such as information about local communities and early warning intelligence. Representatives also cited that grassroots organizations and security institutions typically work in silos. This is particularly the case in Malaysia, where civil society is not as well connected with defense, despite both tackling a common cause. Another more general challenge is that bureaucratic institutions can hinder timely

collaboration between grassroots organizations and the security sector. Some representatives pointed out that bureaucracies can make it extremely time-consuming to work with the military, the police, and counterterrorism branches; even when a rapid response is necessary.

Despite barriers to collaboration, grassroots representatives cited numerous positive examples of government-civil society collaboration on WPS and P/CVE. For instance, some organizations have formed task forces with police or been consulted by them. Organizations have also provided guidance on working with the families of former terrorists and local communities on early warning. In addition, organizations have offered training to local police on how to effectively conduct community policing.

A recurrent theme was the need to ensure both the defense and security sector and civil society have a clear understanding of their respective areas of responsibility so that they can optimally work together, while ensuring grassroots organizations have enough funding available to continue their programs. It is also essential to build trust between the two sectors for them to work effectively together.

Intersection of Youth and Extremism

Factors such as unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, social exclusion, socioeconomic background, and exposure to radical ideologies through social media can contribute to the youth's susceptibility to extremist recruitment efforts. To normalize a wider culture of tolerance, interfaith and intercultural dialogues are essential in educating young people in Southeast Asia. Many people have political grievances or frustrations, and these sentiments can quickly isolate them socially and emotionally, leading them to turn to insurgent groups as a way to find community, purpose, and even identity. To prevent youth radicalization, it is important that young people are educated on the dangers of violent extremism, get involved in communities, challenge extremist narratives with peace and tolerance, and become role models to each other for alternatives to violence. Young people are also often seeking an outlet for their political ideologies, and the government and CSOs can join hands in building platforms for advocacy, which can go a long way to making young people feel supported, heard, and important as community members.