"Feeling of isolation makes marginalized groups more vulnerable to extremist propaganda."

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1. What impact has COVID-19 had on your work?

As a research unit, we were affected by changes in travel and movement. Part of our work includes attending workshops and conferences, and while in the past these could be held in person, it became very difficult to do during Covid. However, using online tools has helped us cut down on travel expenses and increased the number of virtual events we can attend. This is something that we should continue to do even after the pandemic.

2. How has COVID-19 affected your research?

COVID-19 has added new complexity to issues and questions we were already facing. For example, the pandemic, and the measures used to curb it, have brought to our attention the issue of bioterrorism. We noticed that people's awareness of health and safety measures was very weak in Egypt. For example, physical distancing has proven to be very challenging to respect. This has made us think about how the average Egyptian family would react in the event of a bioterrorist attack. We also started researching how the pandemic has shifted extremist narratives and how terrorist groups, across the region, have been able to utilize the pandemic and its measures to advance their rhetoric and agenda.

3. How has COVID-19 impacted violent extremism and radicalization?

We have yet to see the full implications of COVID-19 on violent extremism. But social distancing and quarantine measures have increased people's reliance on social media. Isolation and loss of social contact can have a deep impact on people and make them more vulnerable to extremist propaganda.

In Egypt, there have been several extremist *Fatwas* (a non-binding Islamic judgment) that came out after COVID-19. For example, some called for the separation of men and women during lockdown in their own homes starting from a very young age. This presents an example of how religious extremist rhetoric can distort government health guidelines and highlights potential problems that can arise.

Terrorist groups were also able to expand their activities, particularly in earlier days, by taking advantage of the security gaps left the governments that were too busy trying to contain pandemic. For example, to rally popular support, Al Qaeda declared that they would not engage in any terrorist activities, and instead would dedicate their efforts to fundraising to support people impacted by the pandemic.

4. Is COVID-19 disproportionately impacting women and how?

Due to lockdowns, family members are now staying home for longer periods of time, increasing household chores for many women. Most women in Egypt also take on the role of caregiver as well as that of the intermediary between the isolated members and the rest of the family.

COVID-19 has made women's hardships even harsher. Many of people who work in the informal economic sector do not have access to health insurance, making it very difficult and expensive to access health and medical services.

5. What impacts has COVID-19 had on the broader gender dynamics?

The pandemic has reinforced existing gender inequality in Egypt. We see how the gendered role of women, particularly at home, has been reinforced by COVID-19. Women were already expected to be the caretakers and managers of the household, but the pandemic has dramatically increased their household chores as well as their economic hardships.

Over the past few years, UN Women and CTED have partnered to establish an Expert Platform on Gender and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in North Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted research, and civil society and governments' action aiming to prevent violent extremism. To shed light on the consequences of COVID-19 on violent extremism in North Africa, UN Women and CTED give a voice to members of the Platform, in order to better understand how the pandemic has changed their work.
Find out about the Expert Platform on Gender and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in North Africa, and read other experts' interviews.