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Research report

Forum: UNICEF

Issue: Enhancing Educational Approaches to Prevent Youth
Radicalization

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Introduction

Youth radicalization is a gradual process in which young people grow to adopt and support increasingly extreme beliefs, identities and political or religious views which increases the chances of growing support for violence or violent extremist groups. While resorting to violence is not always the case, youth radicalization is a serious issue in today's world where they may be exposed to propaganda, manipulation, discrimination, social exclusion or recruitment networks both through online and offline means. Young people are specifically vulnerable to this when they are faced with a lack of belonging and positive opportunities or exposed to injustice, isolation or conflict.

Education plays a significant role in the prevention of youth radicalization as inclusive and high-quality education shapes and strengthens critical thinking, media literacy, empathy, etc which makes the youth more resistant to extremist propaganda. Schooling also influences young peoples understanding of identity, difference, conflict and their position within society along with creating a safe environment where students can discuss controversial issues, seek support and participate meaningfully in their communities and discussions.

However, in some cases education systems can fail to address or prevent the conditions that allow radicalization to develop. Poorly trained teachers, discrimination and limited participation within school or a curriculum that does not reflect diversity can make the issue worse. Hence, it is crucial education should avoid stigmatization of any ethnic, social or religious groups and instead promote respect for diversity and human rights.

Definitions of key terms

Radicalization

Radicalization is the gradual process through which an individual or group of people adopt increasingly extreme political, social, or religious beliefs. However, this does not always lead to the person committing violence. However in some cases, a person can begin to accept or support violence as a legitimate way to achieve political, ideological or social change.

Extremism

Extremism refers to the beliefs or actions that are not tolerant and reject pluralism, democratic participation or the equal rights of others who do not believe or support the same belief.

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Extremist Organizations

An extremist organization is a group that holds firm radical ideologies and uses or advocates for violence, terror or unlawful coercion to achieve its political, religious or ideological goals.

Hate Speech

Hate speech is any form of communication online or offline that attacks, insults, demeans or incites discrimination and violence against a person or racial, religious, ethnic group including people of a specific nationality, gender or sexual orientation.

Terrorism

Terrorism usually targets civilians and intentionally uses or threatens to use violence to achieve political, ideological or religious objectives.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking refers to a person's ability to carefully analyze information, and form reasoned judgements,

Digital literacy

Digital literacy refers to the ability to use digital technologies safely and responsibly involving both technical skills along with cognitive skills like identifying misinformation and bias.

Extremist recruitment

Extremist recruitment refers to the process both online and offline, through which individuals or organizations seek to persuade, influence or mobilize people to support their extremist ideology and participate in extremist activities.

General Overview

Youth radicalization has become a major child protection concern along with an international security concern as increasing numbers of adolescents and young adults continue to be recruitment targets by extremist organizations through online and offline propaganda. Historically, recruitment by extremist groups took place through political movements, religious networks and personal relationships. However, over the past decade this had undergone major changes as extremist organizations have expanded their methods and now use promises of belonging or purpose, peer-influence, identity based narratives and propaganda to more effectively target vulnerable youth. The internet has worsened the issue and further changed recruitment as extremist actors can now directly contact young people through social media, online games etc. making their reach broader.

The causes of radicalization remain complex and cannot be directly linked to only one community, religion, or political belief. However, instability, conflict, poverty, social exclusion can make a young person more exposed and vulnerable to radicalization. Moreover, lack of

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education and economic opportunities are also significant factors that do not automatically cause radicalization but enhance conditions that extremist groups can take advantage of by offering recognition, belonging or simple and violence based solutions or explanations to complex problems.

Radicalization has grown to become more challenging to prevent as online young people are more exposed to propaganda, conspiracy theories, discriminatory narratives and content that shows violence as heroic or necessary. These are often made to be seen as socially acceptable through the use of memes, videos or private chat by extremist groups. Online communities also make users isolated from opposing viewpoints and reinforce a shared belief making it feel more normal and acceptable. Since it is online, knowing when ordinary online activity has developed into extremist influence or recruitment is difficult for parents, schools, governments or child-protection organizations.

Currently, the evidence shows that young people are being targeted across a range of ideologies while particular vulnerabilities can be seen in conflict affected regions. However, there remains no single profile of a radicalized young person or no certain one type of behaviour that a person is becoming radicalized.

Hence, international efforts towards preventing youth radicalization have shifted from focusing only on policing and anti-terrorism towards addressing the factors that contribute to increased vulnerability to radicalization in youth.

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Major parties involved

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

Serves as the primary child-protection body of the United Nations. It views radicalization as a form of exploitation. It focuses its effort towards training teachers, providing mental health support for vulnerable youth and ensuring proper education in conflict prone regions.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO is the leading international body which shapes global educational policies and drives the implementation of the Global Citizenship Education (GCED) along with media literacy frameworks to make the youth more resilient towards extremist ideologies.

The European Union (EU)

The EU focuses on connecting educators, social workers, and policy makers across Europe by utilizing the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). It also funds extensive digital literacy research and classroom-based programs to spot early signs of vulnerability among youth.

The United States of America

The USA is heavily focused on public-private partnerships with technology companies to limit online recruitment that focuses on American youth. It also prioritizes countering violent extremism (CVE) strategies that integrate the local school districts with community leaders.

The Republic of Singapore

Singapore uses the Ministry of Education to embed mandatory cyber-wellness and national harmony curricula into all schools as a means to counter targeted online disinformation and maintains a highly structured and strict state approach to intervene early in cases of youth radicalization.

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The Islamic Republic of Pakistan

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan solves complicated educational problems as it has differences between public schools, private schools and informal religious schools (madararas) which are being used by extremist groups. It is actively making efforts to reform the national curriculum to foster social cohesion.

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL / ISIS)

A non-state extremist organization that pioneered advanced digital recruitment; uses social media, online gaming platforms, and tailored propaganda to isolate vulnerable youth by promising them a sense of identity and purpose.

Al-Qaeda and Associated Networks

Uses fragmented education systems and regional poverty to operate through localized transnational networks. It relies on informal community spaces and alternative education to radicalize and recruit young people in unstable areas.

Timeline of Key Events

20th November, 1989 - The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations, establishing children's right to education, protection, and non-discrimination which was an essential step towards preventing youth radicalization.

11th September, 2001 - Terrorist attacks faced by the United States draw more attention toward terrorist and extremist organizations and their recruitment of young people. This led to more recognition of the importance of education, youth participation and human rights.

2005 - An international framework that combined security measures with prevention, international cooperation and protection of human rights was established through the adoption of The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

October 2015 - Decision 197 EX/46 which called for stronger education-sector responses to address violent extremism was adopted by UNESCO.

24th December, 2015 - the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism which called for a comprehensive approach to address the factors that make the youth more vulnerable to radicalization was published by the UN Secretary-General.

10th January, 2024 - To help educators in addressing the educational needs to prevent youth radicalization UNESCO publishes a Teacher's Guide on the Prevention of Violent Extremism.

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Previous attempts to solve the issue

UNESCO's Strategy on Preventing Violent Extremism through Education (PVEE)

Starting in 2015, UNESCO began to develop an education-focused approach to address violent extremism. It aimed to prevent it by supporting education systems in building young people's resilience to extremist ideologies through teaching Global Citizenship Education, Media Literacy, critical thinking, and human rights. This also included developing guidance for policy makers and educators to help improve education and make it more capable of addressing violent extremism.

The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Education Working Group

In 2011, the European Commission established RAN which connects frontline practitioners like educators, social workers, policymakers and researchers to work collaboratively and develop approaches for preventing radicalization. This is mainly focused on Europe and hence its methods are limited to being integrated in members of the European Union.

UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security

The Security Council resolution 2250 was unanimously adopted on 9th December, 2015. It acknowledged the youth as an important part in contributing towards peacebuilding and preventing violent crimes. Its implementation however depends on national governments political will, available funding and current education systems.

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Possible solutions

To address the circumstances and factors that make youth more vulnerable to radicalization. Schools should promote and establish peer-led programs in which trained student volunteers can promote media literacy, toleration, critical thinking etc among peers to make it more effective and help detect signs of early radicalization.

Moreover, policies should be made and put in place that require for education curriculums to be checked regularly to ensure they teach respecting diversity, critical thinking etc and no not promote discrimination or exclusion.

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