



# Rethinking Rehabilitation: New Imaginations and Narratives

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## Rethinking Rehabilitation: New Imaginations and Narratives

*By Noor Huda Ismail*

### SYNOPSIS

*The release of former Jemaah Islamiyah leader Para Wijayanto in May 2025 has reignited debate over radicalisation, reintegration, and the shifting nature of violent extremism in Indonesia. His transformation underscores not only a generational rift between old and new jihadists but also the underexplored role of masculinity in the radicalisation process. A gendered approach offers vital insights into both the pull of extremist ideologies and the possibilities for sustainable disengagement.*

### COMMENTARY

When [Para Wijayanto walked out of prison](#) after serving a sentence for reviving Jemaah Islamiyah's (JI's) clandestine operations and sending fighters to Syria, his public remarks were notably reformist. He spoke of rehabilitation, civic responsibility, and peaceful reintegration. But his about-turn raised an important question: is this a sincere ideological reorientation or a strategic recalibration?

Para's message may resonate with his ageing peers, men who have faced the costs of conflict, time in prison, or familial strain, but not younger recruits for whom violence remains appealing, even redemptive. For them, jihad is not a memory but a real-time cause, validated by global grievance narratives and live-streamed conflicts.

### A Generational Divide in Jihadist Networks

The divide between veteran leaders like Para and today's digital-age recruits is increasingly stark. Older jihadists often framed their actions through disciplined clandestine operations, organisational loyalty and physical training. Their ideological journeys were gradual and rooted in personal relationships within [pesantren](#) or underground cells.

In contrast, today's recruits are shaped by online ecosystems. They are not primarily drawn in by face-to-face religious persuasion but by emotional, visual content distributed via social media. Gaza, Kashmir, and Syria are framed not just as conflicts, but as global injustices demanding direct, often violent, responses. Their radicalisation is fast, emotional, hyper-individualised and marked by [mixed, unstable or unclear](#) motivations.

This shift in how jihad is imagined and enacted complicates the rehabilitation landscape. While older leaders may advocate de-radicalisation, their narratives may appear outdated or irrelevant to a younger generation hungry for action and identity.

### **Masculinity: The Missing Piece in Narratives**

To bridge this gap, analysts must move beyond doctrinal explanations and examine the role of [masculine identity](#). In many extremist circles, masculinity is central to recruitment and radicalisation.

Militant groups craft a potent narrative of what being a “real man” means: dominant, fearless, and willing to sacrifice. Violence is framed as both a rite of passage and a moral imperative. Martyrdom, framed as the pinnacle of devotion, also becomes the ultimate masculine achievement.

Global security frameworks increasingly recognise the gendered nature of violent extremism. [UN Security Council Resolution 2242 \(2015\)](#) explicitly links rigid gender roles – particularly those promoting aggression and emotional suppression – to increased conflict risk. Extremist groups exploit this by offering not just ideology, but identity: a blueprint for manhood that offers purpose, power, and belonging.

### **The Private Sphere of Radicalisation and Deradicalisation**

While public messaging such as sermons, school curricula, or counter-narratives remains a key pillar of countering violent extremism (CVE), Para's transformation story reveals the overlooked power of the private sphere.

Based on [the author's interviews with Para, his wife, and children](#), it is clear that his ideological shift in prison was catalysed not only by formal engagements with Detachment 88, Indonesia's elite counterterrorism unit, but also by intimate conversations with his wife and mother. These emotionally resonant dialogues, unfolding in private spaces and shaped by love, trust, and concern, had a more profound impact than any theological debate.

This underscores the critical interplay between public ideology and private influence. Radicalisation may begin in the mosque or online, but de-radicalisation often starts at the dinner table or when a loved one raises doubts. The emotional sanctuaries of family – pillow talk, late-night reflection, and moral reckoning – are where rethinking often begins.

CVE strategies must therefore expand to incorporate emotional and relational components. Families should be supported not merely as collateral stakeholders but

as central agents of change. Counselling, peer support networks, and safe spaces to explore alternative masculine roles are essential.

## **Re-Imagining Masculinity**

What is missing in many CVE strategies is an alternative script for [masculinity](#). Extremist groups offer clear, albeit destructive, ideals of strength and honour. State responses, by contrast, often fail to provide compelling counter-models. Telling young men what *not* to do – “don’t join extremist groups” – is insufficient if we don’t also show them what *to be* instead.

CVE must promote a broader and healthier vision of masculinity: one where restraint is strength, empathy is courage, and care is honourable. This does not mean softening men but rather expanding what it means to be a man in today’s society. [Reframing male identity](#) is not ancillary to de-radicalisation – it is central to it.

The [digital environment](#) is where today’s radicalisation is taking place. Extremist recruiters understand that identity is formed not just by ideology but also by immersive media. Videos of bombings, suffering in Palestine, and heroic martyrdom clips are edited to evoke moral outrage and activate emotional commitment.

[The Gaza war](#), in particular, has become a powerful narrative for radicalisation. For disaffected youth – especially those struggling with alienation or lack of belonging – these images serve as both justification and a call-to-arms. Recruitment becomes less about persuasion and more about emotional synchronisation.

## **From Programmes to Paradigms: Rethinking Rehabilitation**

The author and his production team have produced more than 10 documentary films exploring identity crises – what it means to be a good woman or man in specific cultural contexts. These have served as strategic communication tools for governments in Indonesia, [Singapore](#), [Malaysia](#), and [the Philippines](#).

Indonesia’s CVE efforts led by [BNPT](#), [Detachment 88](#), and NGOs have made notable strides. Yet, shifting from isolated interventions to broader strategic communication paradigms is essential. Effective CVE must move beyond correcting beliefs to reshaping narratives about masculinity, belonging, and purpose.

Cases in Bali and [Malang](#), East Java, show that absent or disengaged fathers leave emotional voids filled by extremist [content online](#). This highlights that radicalisation stems not just from ideology but from unmet identity needs. Strategic communication must engage families and communities to promote healthier, culturally grounded masculine identities and counter extremist narratives.

In this context, counter-narratives alone are insufficient. *Proactive engagement* on digital platforms is essential. [Civil society groups](#) and influencers can co-create relatable content – short videos, memes, or podcasts – that resonates with youth and promotes alternative visions of strength, faith, and identity.

It must also *preemptively shape how young people interpret global crises*, such as the

Israel-Palestine conflict or wars in the Middle East, by producing accessible explainer videos, interactive media, and dialogue forums that contextualise these issues through the lens of peacebuilding and critical thinking rather than victimhood or revenge.

### **Conclusion: Reframing CVE Through a Gender Lens**

Para Wijayanto's release offers a reflective moment for Indonesia's CVE landscape. While his reported transformation may suggest a shift, it also prompts caution: emotional and relational factors clearly influence ideological change, but such shifts are complex and not always enduring. This underscores the limitations of traditional belief-correction models that fail to address deeper identity and relational crises.

As the 2018 [ASEAN Plan of Action to Prevent and Counter the Rise of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism](#) emphasises, integrating a gender perspective is crucial to addressing vulnerabilities linked to masculinity. Younger generations are radicalised less through old networks and more via digital platforms saturated with narratives of outrage and distorted heroism.

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