

# Women In International Security

## POLICYbrief

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## *Women, Gender, and Terrorism: The Missing Links*

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In October 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which recognized the critical roles women can and must play in advancing international peace and security. Subsequent UN Security Council resolutions on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) strengthened the protection of women, particularly with regard to conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, and they reaffirmed the important roles of women in restoring and maintaining peace. In October 2015, the UN Security Council marked the 15th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 by adopting a new resolution – UNSCR 2242 – that focused on the rise of violent extremism as a key challenge to and for the WPS agenda. The Security Council called on UN member-states and the international community to do more to integrate WPS and counter-terrorism policies.

With this in mind, Women In International Security (WIIS) has launched a series of roundtable discussions to bring together the WPS and counter-terrorism communities. Although both communities have been deeply concerned about international peace and security for decades, they have had little interaction with one another.

The counter-terrorism community, which is comprised mainly of men and is anchored in the policy establishment, has largely failed to focus on the role of women and gender in terrorist groups and counter-terrorism efforts. Until recently, it has treated women and gender as peripheral issues in the fight against terrorism.

At the same time, the WPS community, which is comprised mainly of women and is anchored in civil society, has largely failed to focus on terrorism and counter-terrorism. Many in the WPS community worry that the high-profile, heavily-resourced counter-terrorism agenda could overwhelm and subsume the broader WPS agenda.

The counter-terrorism and WPS communities have much to contribute to the other – in terms of both policy analysis and policy actions. Three steps are needed.

First, the counter-terrorism and WPS communities need to do a better job of engaging each other – not just occasionally and randomly, but routinely and systematically. The expansion of the global terrorism problem – which was galvanized by but is not limited to the rise of ISIS – has led to an expansion of the counter-terrorism agenda. Much more attention is now being paid to the radicalization and recruitment of people, including women and girls, to violent extremist and terrorist groups. This expansion of the policy agenda opens up new areas for substantive dialogue and policy development involving the WPS and counter-terrorism communities. There is now more to discuss and more to do together.

Second, the counter-terrorism community needs to recognize that gender isn't a marginal issue in the terrorism arena; it is a central issue. The counter-terrorism community focuses on gender from time to time; it needs to focus on gender all of the time. The growing number of women joining violent extremist and terrorist groups should be a great concern. The counter-terrorism community needs to think more regularly and more systematically about women, gender, and counter-terrorism.

Third, the WPS community needs to redouble its efforts to focus on violent extremism and terrorism. The WPS community cannot neglect these issues, which are some of the most critical international security challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In addition, violent extremist groups pose some of the greatest threats to women and girls worldwide. This has to be a central element of the WPS policy agenda. Violent extremism and terrorism should be paramount concerns of the WPS community.

## ***New Opportunities for Engagement, Analysis, and Action***

Terrorist threats have evolved and grown in recent years. Al-Qaeda was initially quite centralized and hierarchical, and the Taliban provided it with a base of operations in Afghanistan. Other terrorist organizations (Hezbollah and Hamas, for example) have received state support as well.

Over the first decade and a half of the 21st century, terrorist organizations and terrorist threats have become more decentralized and diffuse. Al-Qaeda “franchises” appeared in Yemen, the Sahara, and elsewhere. The development of ISIS and its 2014 declaration of a caliphate dramatically expanded the problem. In addition to controlling a substantial amount of territory in Syria and Iraq, it embarked on a worldwide recruitment drive. Thousands of people – men and women, mainly young – traveled from dozens of countries to the Middle East to join with ISIS. Many others became stay-at-home radicals. Groups and individuals who declared their loyalty to Al-Qaeda and/or ISIS popped up in dozens of countries around the world. Many newly-radicalized individuals have undoubtedly kept their heads down, at least for now.

The counter-terrorism community has always worked to prevent future terrorist attacks. For many years, it focused on known or suspected terrorists, tracking these targets with the goal of interdicting any impending attack. We would call this “tactical prevention.” The counter-terrorism community is now focused more than ever on preventing the radicalization and recruitment of people into violent extremist and terrorist groups – “strategic prevention.”

This new, expanded set of concerns is much more challenging. Strategic prevention involves many more audiences and potential targets, including more women and girls, in more countries. It involves a much broader set of problems – including the political, economic, social, and personal problems that can lead to estrangement, alienation, anger, and ultimately radicalization and violence. To be effective, strategic prevention requires an understanding of the complex, underlying motivations that lead individuals to identify with and join violent extremist and terrorist groups.

This new, expanded set of concerns is an area where women and gender must be taken fully into account. We need to develop a better understanding of how women and girls are targeted for recruitment into violent extremist and terrorist groups, and why some women and girls become self-radicalized. We need to understand how violent extremist and terrorist groups use gender-based appeals to recruit men and boys. We also need to learn how families – mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, daughters and sons, aunts

and uncles – can be more effective in spotting the signs of self-radicalization, guided radicalization, and organized recruitment.

In his December 2015 *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*, the UN Secretary-General correctly observed that international efforts to prevent and combat terrorism will have to include both security-based and non-security measures. He placed special emphasis on the latter, including the importance of gender equality and empowering women. International efforts involving non-security measures will generally be led by civilians. This will also facilitate interaction between the WPS and counter-terrorism communities. Many in the WPS community had been unwilling to engage with the counter-terrorism community because of the latter’s emphasis on military responses to counter-terrorism.

The expansion of the counter-terrorism agenda to include strategic prevention and non-military measures also provides opportunities to link this agenda to the work of women who are already on the frontlines of the fight against violent extremism in countries around the world, especially in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

In sum, this expanded counter-terrorism agenda provides both an opportunity and an imperative for the counter-terrorism and WPS communities to work together – on a systematic, sustained basis. Since the counter-terrorism community has vastly more resources than the WPS community, it would be good for the former to take the lead on some initiatives. For example, every counter-terrorism center or agency at the local, national, regional, and international levels should have a high-level Gender Advisor and a permanently-funded Gender Office. Existing programs focused on gender should be expanded. Gender analysis should be institutionalized – mainstreamed, in WPS terms – in global counter-terrorism efforts. Similarly, the WPS community should mainstream terrorism and counter-terrorism as analytic and policy priorities within the context of the WPS agenda.

## ***The Counter-Terrorism Community: Think Harder and Smarter About Gender***

Although the counter-terrorism community has always worked to prevent future terrorist attacks, its initial focus was relatively narrow. For understandable reasons, it focused at first on the clear and present dangers posed by active terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda. Its prime directive was to find, track, disrupt, and destroy terrorist operations. This naturally involved an emphasis on intelligence gathering and analysis, followed by police and military actions. The overall orientation was security-based action.

Until recently, the counter-terrorism community did not prioritize what we are calling “strategic prevention” – the radicalization and recruitment of individuals to violent extremist and terrorist groups – and it paid even less attention to the gender dimensions of the problem. Gender issues were peripheral in the counter-terrorism community, if they were in the policy world’s field of vision at all.

This has started to change, but progress has been slow and uneven. ISIS’s dramatic success on the battlefield and its declaration of a caliphate in 2014 was a turning point. Its conquest and control of territory gave it a base of operations and credibility that previous extremist organizations lacked. Its recruitment efforts became energetic and sophisticated. Thousands of people – men and women – traveled to ISIS-held territory to join the cause.

The counter-terrorism community has recognized that its counter-terrorism efforts must include initiatives to prevent the radicalization and recruitment of women and girls. This means paying more attention to the special social, economic and political conditions of women and girls who may be susceptible to violent extremist ideologies as well as the recruitment messages that are targeted specifically at women and girls.

In addition, the counter-terrorism community now recognizes that women can and do play multiple roles in the terrorism equation – not just as victims. Women have also been enablers, supporters, and members of violent extremist and terrorist groups, and they have been perpetrators of terrorist attacks. On the positive side of the equation, women have been dissuaders and preventers of radicalization and recruitment.

More progress is needed. In particular, the counter-terrorism community needs to develop more sophisticated gender perspectives. For example, it tends to equate “women” with “gender,” and it often – mistakenly – uses these terms interchangeably.

The counter-terrorism community also tends to depict women as actors who are devoid of agency – as young, naive dupes of clever (male-designed) recruitment campaigns or as victims of (male-led) aggression. It is simplistic to leave female agency out of the equation. Many women are supporting ISIS and other extremist groups of their own free will – just like their male counterparts. To be more effective at strategic prevention, the counter-terrorism community needs to recognize this, understand female radicalization and recruitment better, and devise more effective, female-specific counter-measures. The counter-terrorism community’s lack of a well-developed gender perspective creates analytical blind spots. This, in turn, produces sub-optimal policies and strategies.

Groups such as ISIS are intently focused on gender and gender dynamics. ISIS recognizes that female members

have many operational and tactical advantages. Women can play important roles in the organization as support staff. Women can strengthen the internal cohesion of the group. As operational agents, women are useful because they can fly under the radar of gender-blind security forces. ISIS actually uses gender to appeal to women: it emphasizes the important roles women can play in building the caliphate; for women who have been marginalized in their home countries, this appeal appears to be empowering. ISIS is not feminist-friendly, of course, and the reality for women and girls in ISIS-held territory is not the empowered nirvana it is said to be. ISIS’s recruitment pitch is nonetheless appealing to some women and girls.

ISIS recruitment campaigns aimed at men are also highly gendered. These recruitment efforts emphasize hyper-masculine ideals, the glorification of violence and danger, male empowerment and patriarchy, and endless opportunities to have sex. Also virgins in heaven.

In sum, ISIS is more active and more advanced in thinking about gender than the international counter-terrorism community. To put it bluntly: If you are behind ISIS when it comes to thinking about gender, you are not in a good place.

### ***The WPS Community: Think Harder and Smarter About Terrorism***

The WPS community needs to redouble its efforts to focus on violent extremism and terrorism as paramount international security concerns. The WPS community cannot neglect some of the most critical security challenges on the international policy agenda. This is self-marginalizing behavior. Male-dominated analytic and policy communities have been marginalizing women forever; they don’t need any additional help from the WPS community.

In addition, violent extremist groups pose some of the greatest threats to women and girls worldwide. Many violent extremist groups employ and openly advocate sexual and gender-based violence. These groups systematically repress and attack the rights of women and girls. They espouse highly regressive gender norms, to put it mildly. Violent extremism and terrorism should therefore be paramount concerns of the WPS community.

The WPS community has been wary of engaging on violent extremism and terrorism for two main reasons. First, the WPS community worries that the WPS agenda – which is just starting to receive some of the attention it deserves – could easily be overwhelmed and subsumed by the counter-terrorism tsunami. The counter-terrorism community is massive, rich, powerful, and an integral part of the policy establishment. The WPS community is none of the above: It is relatively new, small, resource-poor, and connected to civil society.

Second, the WPS community has mainly focused on non-military aspects of international security. Many in the WPS community have been put off by the counter-terrorism community's long-standing emphasis on military action and the military aspects of security. In sum, the WPS community has kept the counter-terrorism community at arm's length due to both a desire for self-preservation and, for some, ideological alienation.

The WPS agenda and the WPS community are now sufficiently well-established to become involved in counter-terrorism analysis and policy development. The WPS community has much to contribute. It knows how to think about gender and the gender dynamics of problems better than any other part of the policy community. It understands how gender inequality and gender problems can contribute to extremism.

The WPS community also has extensive networks of contacts with women leaders and women's organizations around the world. This expertise could be tapped for ideas to counter extremist radicalization and recruitment. Many of these women's organizations are active, engaged, and effective on an array of political, economic, and social issues in their countries. Some of these organizations are already active in the fight against radicalization, violent extremism, and terrorism in their countries.

Furthermore, it isn't possible for the WPS community to keep terrorism and counter-terrorism at arm's length indefinitely. Some governments in Africa, Asia and the Middle East are

using the fight against violent extremism and terrorism as an excuse to restrict the space for civil society, including women's organizations. In some cases, governments are claiming that nongovernmental organizations – including women's organizations – are agents of western powers, and they are restricting NGO access to external financial resources. Some women's organizations are being attacked by both extremist groups and governments that claim to be fighting extremist groups. Some women's organizations on the frontlines in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East do not have the option of staying on the sidelines: they are already under siege. Staying on the sidelines is no longer an option for the WPS community.

To date, the WPS community has tended to focus its operational activities on outreach and connections to local, grassroots women's organizations in various countries. With the expansion of the threats posed by violent extremism and terrorism, the WPS community should now build on its local, bottom-up focus on organizational activism and combine this with a global, top-down focus on preventing and countering violent extremism and terrorism.

Instead of being pulled into the fight reactively and defensively, the WPS community should proactively and deliberately dedicate itself to engaging on violent extremism, terrorism, and counter-terrorism issues. It is the smart thing to do – and it is the right thing to do.

WOMEN IN INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

*Women In International Security (WIIS) launched a roundtable series on Women, Terrorism, and Violent Extremism in March 2016. The goal of the series is to bring together experts from the Women, Peace, and Security and the counter-terrorism communities to share insights and perspectives on these critical national and international security issues.*

*This Policy Brief draws on the first roundtable discussion, held on March 20, 2016. This roundtable featured four noted experts: Ms. Sanam Anderlini, Co-founder and Executive Director of the International*

*Civil Society Action Network (ICAN); Dr. Kathleen Kuehnast, Senior Gender Advisor at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP); Dr. Paul Pillar, former official of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and now a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution; and Dr. Lorenzo Vidino, Director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University's Center for Cyber and Homeland Security. For more on this event, see [wiisglobal.org/events](http://wiisglobal.org/events)*

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ABOUT WIIS

Women In International Security (WIIS) is the premier organization in the world dedicated to advancing the leadership and professional development of women in the field of international peace and security. WIIS (pronounced "wise") sponsors leadership training, mentoring, and networking programs as well as substantive events focused on current policy problems. WIIS also supports research projects and policy engagement initiatives on critical international security issues, including the nexus between gender and security.

To learn more about WIIS and become a member, please visit <http://wiisglobal.org/>.



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