

Women, Gender and Terrorism: Policies and Programming

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In recent years, policymakers and international actors have begun to recognize the important role of women and women's organizations in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). In October 2015, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2242, which linked the women, peace and security (WPS) and the P/CVE agendas and called for synergies between efforts aimed at countering violent extremism and those furthering the WPS agenda. In 2016, the US government incorporated P/CVE in its National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

The idea that women can be powerful allies in the fight against violent extremism is based primarily on two interrelated observations. First, women often function at the heart of their communities and are thus best placed to recognize early warning signs of radicalization. Effective P/CVE programs will capitalize on this. Second, a community that hopes to address extremism effectively must include the broadest possible range of perspectives in its programming. Because society, economies, and war affect them in gender-specific ways, women bring different perspectives to discussions and plans affecting security.

That said, women-centric P/CVE programming is in its infancy. An initial review of these programs points to five main problems.

First, many of the women-centric P/CVE programs do more harm than good by neglecting to integrate a gender perspective and reinforcing gender stereotypes. For example, many programs often depict women as helpless victims and overemphasize the roles that women play as mothers. The nascent gender-based programs that focus on women as agents of peace and change tend to be one-dimensional, restricting the agency of the women they target and thereby limiting the scope and potential of these programs. Experts in

the WPS community have also expressed concerns that many women-centric programs tend to make nods to the WPS and gender equality agendas without bolstering women's voice or agency.¹ For example, women's groups in Pakistan advocated for decades for reserved seats in the national and provincial assemblies, ostensibly to ensure female representation in formal politics. However, even though the Musharraf regime authorized reserved seats in record numbers during the 2000s, women who occupy these reserved seats have limited powers: They often cannot propose legislation, must adhere to the goals of the political party to which they belong in order to retain their seats, and are consistently ignored, sidelined, and subject to the same discriminatory practices that their fellow female citizens face. In short, they are toothless and are often viewed as tokens. Programs that target political inequality by trying to place women into political office need to account for cultural and structural conditions that will limit the effects or exacerbate the problem.²

Second, the blurred lines between radicalization and terrorism make it hard for policymakers to fashion appropriately scaled responses to extremism. Leaders and policymakers have tended to lean heavily toward military and law enforcement responses and have been slow to recognize their inefficacy. As a result, the work of many women and women's organizations active in conflict prevention has not gained the much deserved recognition and traction it deserve.³

Third, policymakers continue to search for one-size-fits-all policies and programs—the “silver bullet” that can be applied across cultures and conflicts. Ongoing research and anecdotal reports of small, tailored P/CVE programs suggest that this silver bullet does not exist and that successful programs reflect the cultures or states that they target. Similarly, gender relations differ widely across the globe and cultures. For example, the advocacy of the Northern Ireland Women's

Coalition played a pivotal role in building the governance structure and relationships that have reduced violence levels and overall terrorism in Northern Ireland.⁴ Despite continuing discrimination and concerns over inequality, women in Northern Ireland do not necessarily suffer the same degree of discrimination and cultural oppression as women in states like Pakistan or Saudi Arabia. Thus forming a Women's Coalition in other states is not likely to have the same impact on violence as it did in Northern Ireland. Even if such a coalition formed organically, it would face different obstacles to becoming a potent force.

Fourth, the parochial nature of major government agencies means that intelligence is not easily shared, communication networks are rough and evolving, and old habits die-hard. The lack of interagency cooperation and communication are formidable obstacles to the development of effective, more flexible programming, and improvements in this area have come in starts and stops. A whole-of-government approach that has integrated gender perspectives and the WPS agenda is still far off.

Fifth, preventative local programming, particularly programs carried out by women's groups, is often not recognized as part of a whole-of-society approach to prevent and counterterrorism and violent extremism. As a result, very little funding is available for such groups, and the inputs of the many elements of government and community needed to craft effective solutions are lacking. In addition, big donors such as the U.S. often make unrealistic demands with regard to monitoring and evaluation, given that the local actors developing and running these programs do not have the staff or budgets to meet these requirements. Too often local initiatives are therefore stifled.⁵

As coherent responses are considered and developed in response to violence in places as diverse as Belgium, France, Iraq, Syria, and the United States, leaders and policymakers should address all five problems.

Future Programming

These guidelines can help transform future P/CVE programming and increase the chances for its success.

First, responses to violent extremism should reflect broad understanding of how both men and women are radicalized and the varied yet overlapping ways in which men and women are vulnerable to extremist messaging. Policy responses should recognize the increasing body of research that points to gender inequalities as a root cause of radicalization.⁶

Second, effective P/CVE policies should be tailored to the cultural characteristics that enable extremism, as well as those cultural and structural characteristics of conflicted states that could affect or inhibit any P/CVE programming. Future responses should take into account the suspicion or ill will that outside attempts to change norms will likely face from those most affected by ongoing violence, especially U.S. attempts. International institutions should be involved to the greatest extent possible. Furthermore, the ideal programs will envision eventual leadership by local and national governments, including civil society actors. The inclusion of local leaders and agencies from the start should be encouraged.

Third, programs should emphasize prevention versus prosecution and should incorporate gender analyses.⁷ A focus on prevention will necessarily involve a greater number of actors, including civil society and women's organizations.

Fourth, governments should develop clearer, cleaner interagency communication and cooperation. Successful programs build on one another and are tech-savvy and fluid, with the potential for full interagency communication and coordination. Gendered empowerment, economic growth, education, and youth engagement should all be components in programming, which calls upon the strengths of different agencies. Such programs will also recognize that the challenge of violent extremism has both domestic and international dimensions.

Fifth, preventive programming requires resources. It will also require a different approach—one that is less hands-on and displays a willingness to take chances and trust that local actors and communities might know best. In addition, local civil society organizations often do not have the capacity to deal with large grants and their accompanying reporting requirements.

Useful programs start from a solid base of conflict diagnosis and analysis, an understanding of the varied experience of women and men, and an acknowledgment of the frequent tension between the goals of P/CVE and the role of the United States in the world.

While developing tailored, holistic P/CVE programming in this multidimensional, conflict-ridden world is a complex task, overarching guidelines and contemporary research point toward a path that encourages greater dialogue between the traditional security and counterterrorism sector and the WPS community. Such dialogue will decrease stove-piping in programming and bring to bear the necessary diversity of expertise to help the U.S. and others develop transformative programming. Incorporating these lessons will change the way the U.S. and other governments combat terrorism and violent extremism. It will cost time, energy, and money, but the situation demands it.

Finally, combating terrorism and preventing violent extremism is both a foreign policy and a domestic issue. The principles that work abroad also work at home. Effective P/ CVE policies require cooperation and coordination not only among foreign policy, intelligence, and law enforcement communities but also with the health and education sectors and those involved in the life of communities, including local religious and political leaders, youth, and women's organizations. These organizations have broader interests and hence should not be coopted for a narrow counterterrorism objective. But it is crucial that they are involved. They are key to building the resilience of local communities in the face of threats and challenges, and they are key to ensuring their communities succeed and thrive.

References

- 1 See for example, Belquis Ahmadi and Sadaf Lakhani, "Afghan Women and Violent Extremis: Colluding, Perpetrating, or Preventing?," *USIP Special Report 396* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, November 2016); and Chantal de Jonge Oudraat, "Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: The Role of Women and Women's Organizations," in Naureen Chowdury Fink, Sara Zeiger, and Rafia Bulai, eds., *A Man's World: Exploring the Roles of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism*, (Washington DC: Center for Global Cooperative Security 2016).
- 2 See Rashida Patel, *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Pakistan* (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 3 See Sanam Anderlini, Chantal de Jonge Oudraat, and Leila Milani, "Violent Extremism and the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda: Recommendations for the Trump Administration," *USCWG Policy Brief* (Washington, DC: Women In International Security, January 2016).
- 4 See Kate Fearon, *Women's Work: The Story of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press Ltd, 1999).
- 5 See Jumaina Siddiqui and Sehar Tariq, "Supporting Civil Society to Combat Violent Extremism in Pakistan," *Peace Brief 204* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2016).
- 6 See, for example, Lindsey A. O'Rourke, "What's Special about Female Suicide Terrorism?" *Security Studies* 18, no.4 (2009): 681-718; S.V. Raghavan and V. Balasubramaniyan, "Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups: Progression or Regression?" *Journal of International Women's Studies* 15, no. 2 (July 2014):197-211; and Ahmadi and Lakhani, "Afghan Women and Violent Extremis."
- 7 See also Eric Rosand and Stevan Weine, "5 Pragmatic Ways Trump Can Prevent Radicalization at Home," *The Hill* (December 8, 2016).

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 counterterrorism communities to share insights and perspectives on these critical national and international security issues.

This Policy Brief draws on the third roundtable discussion, held June 20, 2016. This roundtable featured: Ms. Susan Markham, Senior Coordinator for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); Ms. Trisha Ripley, Senior CVE Officer, National Counterterrorism

*Center (NTCTC); Mr. Irfan Saeed, Director for CVE, Bureau of Counterterrorism at the, U.S. Department of State; and Ms. Pamela Faber Center for Naval Analyses. For more on this event, see wiisglobal.org/events. See also Chantal de Jonge Oudraat and Michael E. Brown, "Women, Gender and Terrorism: The Missing Links," *WIIS Policybrief*, July 2016 and Jeannette Gaudry Haynie, "Women, Gender and Terrorism: Gendered Aspects of Radicalization and Recruitment," *WIIS Policybrief*, September 2016.*

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