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## Engaging women in countering violent extremism: avoiding instrumentalisation and furthering agency

Sophie Giscard d'Estaing

### ABSTRACT

Currently, women are on the frontlines of violent extremism, as recruiters, propagators, suicide bombers, and targets, as well as leaders working on de-radicalisation, counter-messaging, and peacebuilding. It is crucial that the international community and governments engage with women in preventing violent extremism, and focus on the gender-related reasons why women become involved as protagonists and supporters of violent extremism. This article examines the limitations of prevention and countering violent extremism programmes and policies in engaging with women, their roles, and gender-sensitivity. Recognising women's agency, diversity in voices and experiences, and knowledge is fundamental to ensuring their rights and sustainable peace. Their full participation at all levels of decision-making in the design and implementation of preventing and countering violent extremism (PVE/CVE) contributes to the effectiveness and sustainability of these efforts.

Actuellement, les femmes sont en première ligne de l'extrémisme violent, en tant que recruteuses, propagatrices, kamikazes et cibles, mais aussi en tant que leaders travaillant sur la déradicalisation, le contre-message et la paix. Il est essentiel que la communauté internationale et les gouvernements s'engagent avec les femmes avec pour but la prévention de l'extrémisme violent, et qu'ils se concentrent sur les raisons, liées au genre, pour lesquelles les femmes s'impliquent en tant que protagonistes et adeptes de l'extrémisme violent. Cet article étudie les limites des programmes et des politiques de prévention et de lutte contre l'extrémisme violent dans leurs efforts pour engager le dialogue avec les femmes, leurs rôles et la sensibilité au genre. La reconnaissance du pouvoir des femmes, ainsi que de la diversité de leurs voix et de leurs expériences, et de leur connaissance, est fondamentale afin d'assurer leurs droits et la paix durable. Leur participation complète à tous les niveaux de prise de décision sur la conception et l'implémentation de la prévention de l'extrémisme violent et de la lutte contre l'extrémisme violent, contribue à l'efficacité et à la durabilité de ces efforts.

Actualmente, las mujeres se encuentran en la primera línea del extremismo violento, sea como reclutadoras, difusoras, atacantes suicidas, como blancos de la violencia o bien como líderes, promoviendo la desradicalización, la divulgación de mensajes alternativos y la construcción de la paz. Por ello, resulta crucial que tanto la comunidad internacional como los gobiernos caminen en el sentido de involucrar a las mujeres en la prevención del extremismo violento, examinando al mismo tiempo aquellas razones vinculadas al

### KEYWORDS

Women, violent extremism, Women, Peace, and Security, prevention, agency, rights, instrumentalisation, radicalisation

género que determinan que las mujeres se vuelvan protagonistas y defensoras de dicho extremismo. El presente artículo analiza las limitaciones de los programas y políticas que actualmente se orientan a prevenir y contrarrestar el extremismo violento, centrándose en su rol y su sensibilidad de género, particularmente en términos de su trabajo con mujeres. En este sentido, resulta fundamental reconocer la autonomía de las mujeres, así como la diversidad de sus voces, vivencias y conocimientos, para asegurar sus derechos y lograr una paz duradera, partiendo de la premisa de que, a la hora de diseñar e implementar acciones encaminadas a prevenir y combatir el extremismo violento, la plena participación de las mujeres en todos los niveles de la toma de decisiones potencia su eficacia y su sostenibilidad.

## Introduction

In August 2015, *Foreign Policy Magazine* published an article entitled ‘To Fight Extremism, the World Needs to Learn How to Talk to women’. It pointed out that not only violent extremists, but the forces that seek to prevent and counter extremism, draw on essentialised ideas – or ‘gender myths’ (Cornwall *et al.* 2007) about women’s roles in society. In it, a prominent female Pakistani activist asserted the importance of talking to women to gain a full and accurate picture of women’s role in combating violent extremism and preventing radicalisation: ‘As violent extremist movements have strengthened, the international community needs to engage more intentionally with women in countering violent extremism’ (Koppell 2015).

Women’s rights and peace activists are actively engaged in preventing extremism and promoting peace, focusing on women’s human rights, and pluralism, as a response to extremism and the growth of fundamentalisms. This work is commonly referred to as countering violent extremism/preventing violent extremism (CVE/PVE). Women in countries including Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Nigeria, Mali, and Libya are on the frontlines of women’s efforts to build peace, ‘not only countering (violent) extremism, but providing positive alternatives and challenging state actions’ (Ní Aoláin 2015).

At a United Nations (UN) side-event on engaging with women in preventing violent extremism at the Commission on the Status of Women meeting in March 2016, Susan Tahmasebi, co-founder of the International Civil Action Network (ICAN) pointed out that women seeking to build peace and tolerance and prevent extremism are caught between repressive governments and extremist groups as ‘the civil society space is shrinking and for women groups in particular’ (‘Outside Our Silos: The Power of Inclusive Engagement to Prevent Violent Extremism’, UN side-event, New York, 15 March 2016). The civil society space in which women are working is also highly dangerous. A respondent to the civil society survey for the Global Study on the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), based in Libya, stated:

women’s groups are trapped between terrorism and countering terrorism ... working in very dangerous context[s] where terrorists [exist] and on the other hand their chances to deliver their voice ... [are] shrinking in the name of countering terrorism. (UN Women 2015, 224)

Despite the importance and call to include women in all levels of official peacebuilding and reconstruction processes, women remain marginalised from these. Their expertise is not always noted or understood, and takes place in a context of shrinking space for civil society debate and activism (*ibid.*), and in particular a shrinking space for women's rights work. In peacebuilding and reconstruction, women are often presented as 'subjects, not agents, and their ways of knowing and being are ignored' (Brown 2013, 51).

The aim of this article is to look critically at how the international community is currently engaging with women in programmes to counter and prevent violent extremism. Violent extremism was seen as the key issue for 84 per cent of the women's organisations consulted for the UN's Global Study on UNSCR 1325, but how have women and gender-related concerns and initiatives been taken into account in these programmes? As this article shows, women and gender have to an extent been addressed, but the ways in which this has happened fall far short of the aims of participation and leadership voiced in UNSCR 2242.

To shed light on this issue, I draw on semi-structured interviews with key informants and an extensive desk-based research to consider feminist critiques of current programming to counter and prevent violent extremism, focusing on how this incorporates essentialised thinking about women and gender relations. I ask how the international community could better engage with women in designing, supporting, and implementing prevention and countering violent extremism programming through a human rights-based approach, to achieve better outcomes: more effective programming, women empowerment, and more inclusive and peaceful societies. Key informants are employed as experts in countering and preventing violent extremism, and in implementing the UN's Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda.<sup>1,2</sup> All interviews quoted and cited here come from this process, and took place during 2016 at various times in various locations, in person or on the phone. Budget and time restraints did not allow me to interview directly women on the frontlines of prevention programmes nor government representatives and donors. Their perspectives should be taken into account in future research as well.

### **PVE and CVE: a gendered agenda**

Currently, PVE/CVE programmes vary across the spectrum from increasing education, cultural outreach, and counter-messaging, to prevent radicalisation at the individual and community levels through social media or imams. Some countries have undertaken inter-religious and inter-communal dialogues to engage with citizens as part of their national action plans for PVE/CVE, while others focus more on socioeconomic development for youth and marginalised groups. Prevention is loosely defined as a concept, but the aim of PVE is also used to justify strict rule-of-law and policy measures to control, repress, and track terrorist activities, sometimes at the cost of human rights and civil and political freedoms for the sake of security. As a result, as Youssef Mahmoud, senior adviser at the International Peace Institute (IPI) has noted, 'there is a greater militarization

of public security and diminished equality before the law' although security and human rights should work hand-in-hand (Mahmoud 2016).

As discussed in this section, this work may target women in specific and limited ways. The international community needs to do much more, and much better, on the gender and women's rights dimensions of peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and PVE/CVE. Building on UNSCR 1325, UNSCR 2242 was adopted in October 2015. It specifically recognises the need to engage with women on CVE/PVE, and urges Member States and the UN:

to ensure the participation and leadership of women and women's organizations in developing strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism which can be conducive to terrorism, including through countering incitement to commit terrorist acts, creating counter narratives and other appropriate interventions, and building their capacity do so effectively, and further to address, including by the empowerment of women, youth, religious and cultural leaders, the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism and violent extremism ... ; calls for adequate financing in this regard and for an increased amount, with the funding of the UN for counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism which can be conducive to terrorism, to be committed to projects which address gender dimensions including women's empowerment ... (Paragraph 13)

In the next section, I explore a key way in which gender concerns and women are currently appearing in the policy discourses and approaches to PVE/CVE. In this approach, women are often seen in essentialised (stereotyped) ways, in their existing gender roles within marriage and the family.

### **Instrumentalising women: seeing them as assets to fight extremism**

While recognising that women's roles vary across communities and families, certain qualities tend to be highlighted in PVE/CVE which depict women's and wives' role in relation to extremism as 'unique' (Quilliam Foundation 2015). Security decision-makers are currently interested in women as potential de-radicalisers, positioning them as embedded security allies and 'early warning systems'. Women are understood in this discourse as assets for fighting extremism; often because of a role they are perceived to have as 'inside mediators' in families and communities. They are understood to have the ability to influence and 'help change the social mechanisms that guide individuals into violent extremism' (*ibid.*). Women within the family sphere are defined as 'emotional leaders, platforms for stability, support, and compassion, as well as a social authority for husbands and children who may be prone to extremism' (*ibid.*).

For policymakers, they present an entry point to the private sphere of the home, through their role as mothers, wives, and sisters, enabling PVE/CVE programming to reach individuals and groups that are often difficult to access and influence them away from extremism. The UK's 'Prevent' Strategy, one of the four work streams of the UK counter-terrorism strategy, reflects this thinking in its view of women as 'a particular effective voice, as they are at the heart not only of their communities but also of their families' (Ní Aoláin 2015). This utilisation of women's 'relational capacities' has also been used by violent extremist groups working with women as recruitment tools. Such approaches,

feminists highlight, risk essentialising them and confining them to pervasive and entrenched gender stereotypes.

Another example of such programming is Mothers' Schools, a programme run by the NGO Women Without Borders.<sup>3</sup> This programme aims to provide skills-training to mothers who live in communities at risk from radicalisation and violent extremism. The aim of the model, developed in 2013, is to help mothers recognise signs of radicalisation in their children, and to work with young people feeling marginalised from society to help them build a sense of identity. The programme aims to:

empower and enable mothers to become agents of peace and stability in their families and communities as cornerstones of an embedded security paradigm ... a needs-based response to support women's roles in safeguarding their children [that] emphasizes the distinctive role women can play in the security sphere by facilitating constructive communication and thoughtful authority in their families. It promotes using open dialogue, listening, and empathy with one's children, which not only allows mothers to have a deeper understanding of a child's emotional and psychological state, but also lessens the need for children to seek out external methods of coping with the turmoil of adolescence. (Women Without Borders n.d.)

These aims are laudable, and the programme's perceived empowering effects on mothers have been described by Edit Schlaffer, Founder of Women Without Borders. By building the skills of mothers to recognise early warning signs of radicalisation, mothers are said to have gained confidence, and have become determined to move beyond the family sphere by engaging with the community, the media, and technology such as internet and radios (United States Peace Institute 2015, 26).

However, there are drawbacks for women themselves, as well as for the success of PVE/CVE itself, in the policy approach underpinning such programmes. It has a narrow, instrumentalist focus on women as mothers and wives in the private sphere of the home, and in some cases actually shifts responsibility in discourses around extremism from states to civil society – and in particular to mothers, who are assigned responsibility for the potential radicalisation of their children.

By associating women with the state and PVE/CVE activities, this policy approach potentially places women at risk of exclusion or threats within their own communities. The programmes informed by it also imply a potential shift of responsibility from the state to mothers, blaming them if their children or husbands are recruited by violent extremist groups. Such programmes oversimplify 'the personal and social contexts in which these women live in ways that fail to appreciate the complexity of the roles they play in their families and communities' (Ní Aoláin 2015). The growing visibility of women's engagement in work to counter or prevent violent extremism risks exposing them to violent reprisals from violent extremist groups and a backlash on women's rights. At worst, ill-conceived interventions which stigmatise Muslim communities and women put their rights and themselves at risk of exclusion or targets of extremist groups.

Feminist critiques of such policy approaches are proliferating. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin has warned that 'the state has a utilitarian interest in harnessing the "motherhood" card to its own political ends' (*ibid.*), but risks putting women's lives and rights at risk. The risks of participation in programmes of this type can be highest for women in lower social,

economic, and cultural statuses. Jennifer Freeman, Senior Program Officer in Women, Peace and Security and Director of the award-winning Women PeaceMakers Program, argued that women's security is most at risk when their power is less (interview, 5 April 2016).

When women are not participants at levels of decision-making, design, and implementation of programmes and policies, including CVE/PVE, their rights and lives are more at risk. In contrast, the WPS agenda highlights the very different effects that can be achieved by empowering women to participate in the public sphere (UN Women 2015). This perspective was echoed by Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, co-Founder and Executive director of ICAN.

Responsibility for PVE/CVE has 'traditionally been placed on governments, security officials and private corporations' (Quilliam Foundation 2015). In PVE/CVE discourses, recent positioning of women, in particular mothers and wives, as key vehicles to counter radicalisation seems to shift the state's responsibility to protect and prevent violent extremism to the shoulders of women. Underpinning the focus on mothers and wives is the notion that perceived poor parenting, including failure to provide a good religious education, or failure to live up the ideals of a good wife, correlates to radicalisation of sons or husbands (Brown 2013). The view is that good mothers do not produce radicals, a view which may put women at risk within their communities and the government if they fail to be 'good mothers'.

Over-focusing on the role of women as mothers in PVE/CVE is based on a narrow and over-simplistic understanding of the causes of extremism, and the solutions. In addition, it takes the focus away from the business of good governance and the role of the state in preventing violent extremism. As the Quilliam Foundation (2015) has noted, 'efforts required to effectively counter radicalisation goes far beyond the role of women in families and communities. Public safety efforts require a unique collaboration of a number of social, economic, and security initiatives to incite notable change'.

In his interview, Youssef Mahmoud, Senior Adviser at the IPI, argued that other areas, such as the rule of law, education, employment, human rights, and health, amongst other areas, fall under the responsibility of the state, and women should not be blamed for good governance failures (15 April 2016). By focusing on mothers to prevent violent extremism, governments are treating the symptoms of the failure rather than the causes, he argued. In fact, women (together with men) have the right to ask the state to provide the necessities of life. Thinking of them as citizens is very different from the way that women appear in PVE/CVE discourses, where 'we think about women's duties as mothers, rather than their rights' (*ibid.*).

### **The 'securitisation' of women's rights**

There is another very important risk of essentialising ideas about women. It is welcome to feminists that gender and women's rights are recognised as key issues for the peace and security agenda. However, ideas about protecting women and women's rights can be used to justify extraordinary political and security measures and interventions. Such a

‘securitisation’ of the women’s rights agenda does not necessarily support women and equality; rather, it may put the equality agenda at risk, and may provoke a backlash against women’s rights activists (Giscard d’Estaing 2015).

This point of view echoes a point made by Margaret Satterthwaite and Jayne Huckerby, in their book *Gender, National Security and Counter Terrorism*:

The idea that counter-radicalization measures and women’s empowerment are best served through a few days of ‘leadership’ training ... is optimistic at best. At worst it demonstrates that the rights of women are usually only incorporated as a means of justifying national security policy, rather than as part of an endeavor that acknowledges their political agency. (Satterthwaite and Huckerby 2013, 50–1)

Nahla Valji, Deputy Chief of the Women Peace and Security section at UN Women, spoke at a New York University event, ‘The “War on Terror” and Extremism: What is the Relevance of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda?’, 3 March 2016. She commented:

We talk about the risks of involving women, but we do not talk about the risks of not involving them.

### Avoiding instrumentalisation, supporting participation and leadership

How should policymakers address the risk and concern of instrumentalising and securitising women, avoiding essentialising women and entrenching gender stereotypes?

Different aspects of similar concerns are addressed by different international bodies and institutions and this makes global and national governance complex. Nika Saeedi, from the UN Development Programme (UNDP), stressed that each of the four pillars of the WPS agenda (prevention, participation, protection, and relief and recovery) needs to be reinforced and sustained in PVE/CVE strategies. Interviewees stressed the importance and relevance of the WPS agenda to support and frame efforts to increase women’s active participation in peacebuilding and PVE/CVE. This is needed at all ranks of decision-making, and at national and international levels.

Interviewees stressed the need for inclusive and qualitative participation and leadership. The bottom line is to ensure programmes do no harm by engaging with women already on the frontlines in all decision-making processes to design and implement PVE/CVE programmes and understanding the environment in which they operate through participatory and inclusive risk assessments.

Nahla Valji recalled that ‘there is an empirical record of improved results’ in peace processes when women are directly involved, as demonstrated by research from Marie O’Reilly, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin and Thania Paffenholz (2015) and the findings of the Global Study on the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in 2015 (UN Women 2015). PVE initiatives should be contextualised in the WPS agenda, highlighting the need to not only have security actors learn about WPS, but also to have women’s organisations and activists share their knowledge and have their role acknowledged by all (New York University event, ‘The “War on Terror” and Extremism: What is the Relevance of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda?’, 3 March 2016).

The Institute for Inclusive Security recommends that national action plans for the implementation of the WPS agenda, adopted by 50 countries, should hold governments and institutions accountable for integrating women into processes to counter and prevent violent extremism (Peters 2015).

Allison Peters, Senior Policy Adviser at The Institute for Inclusive Security, has noted that so far there are few women involved in the drafting of strategies and frameworks on security and peace, and that inclusion doesn't just mean consultation with civil society and women; it also involves hiring women at all levels to draft and drive the strategies. Countering and preventing violent extremism at the national level has been mostly under the authority of the government and the defense and security industries, areas where women are often underrepresented. Women in security services are better able to access marginalized groups and communities, including women and girls, and tend to limit the use of 'excessive force'. (Peters 2015, 3).

A gender-sensitive paradigm shift in preventing and countering violent extremism would also integrate different perspectives from the beginning of the design of policy and measures, to include women, but also youth and religious leaders (Freeman, interview, 5 April 2016). Integrating all these voices in the decision-making processes, the design and implementation of policies, programmes and measures of CVE/PVE, is a way of ensuring women and others are not instrumentalised.

A critical point is to include women as agents, not subjects, in PVE/CVE policymaking and programming. Interviewees were clear that women must be allowed to take over the driver's seat in PVE/CVE work. As interviewees Jennifer Freeman and Youssef Mahmoud noted, women are often consulted as an afterthought in planning for PVE/CVE work and in many other security processes, to the point that if they are involved at all, they are relegated to secondary processes and structures. At all levels and in all policy agendas, women need to be recognised as more than wives and mothers: they are agents and activists.

The two roles of mother and activist can combine. Nika Saeedi, a gender expert from UNDP, felt that programmes focusing on mothers could go further to recognise women in their role as mothers, but also the links between this role and other roles, including that of activist. An example of a mother involved in activism stemming from her experience as a mother but extending far beyond the household and the maternal role itself is Latifa Ibn Ziaten, whose son was killed in violent extremist attacks perpetrated by Mohamed Merah in France, and who has since created a foundation working with children and youth in marginalised communities, as well as religious leaders, to discuss religion, hope, and the future, to prevent radicalisation (Ziaten 2015) Similarly, Mossarat Quadeem, in Pakistan, building on her experience in dissuading youth from joining violent extremist groups has created a network of women and mother activists and provides alternative solutions to the youth subject to joining or leaving violent extremist groups (Hunt 2012).

Focusing on parenting rather than motherhood is also important. Alison Davidian, Policy Specialist in the UN Women Peace and Security team, argued that programmes should engage with fathers too, framing their work as family-focused and addressing violence and

gendered social norms. This would both contribute to peace and stability, as well as improving women's rights and lives in a transformative way (*ibid.*).

A specific issue of critical importance in relation to participation and leadership is increasing the number of women in security forces, the police, and law-enforcement bodies. Including more women in security should be a priority for governments. Allison Peters, writing in 2014 for The Institute for Inclusive Security,<sup>4</sup> noted that:

civil society leaders in many conflict-affected countries say that lack of trust and negative experiences with law enforcement drive the corrosion of state legitimacy and generate grievances that contribute to radicalization. (Peters 2014, 2–3)

There are many reasons why security and peace processes do better when women are fully involved in every aspect, including decision-making. Research reveals that women in the rule of law sector have significant effects on building trust with the communities by reducing the cases of ignored human rights abuses. Yet, the need to recruit and retain women to these bodies still remains largely unrecognised and unprioritised.

In Pakistan, international donors, particularly the United States, have invested US \$6.9 billion in security-related assistance in 2002 (Peters 2014, 2), however, 'none of the funding prioritises the recruitment and retention of women in Pakistan's police forces' (*ibid.*). Women remain vastly under-represented in the police (only 0.89 per cent of the total police strength) and are rarely in decision-making positions (Peters 2015, 2–3).

The lack of gender-sensitivity and inclusion of women in the security sector, at all levels, reflects in Fionnuala Ní Aoláin's (2016, 281–2) review of 43 Security Council Resolutions broadly addressing terrorism and counter-terrorism between January 2013 and May 2015 which shows that only 15 mentioned women or sexual violence, of which only two mentioned the WPS agenda.

To summarise, it is not sufficient to simply advocate for greater inclusion and participation of women in all sectors and decision-making levels. Words must be put into action. The environment in which women live should allow them to participate fully in governance and decision-making about their lives and that of their communities, at all levels. Women should not be consulted only on the issues seen as their domain – within the private sphere – or mobilised solely to support de-radicalisation programmes within the family sphere. As Youssef Mahmoud noted, there is a need to implement a broader gender equality agenda to support women in countering and preventing violent extremism – and this includes addressing gender inequality and male power (interview, 15 April 2016). He noted:

Women's roles [in PVE/CVE] will not be sustainable if we do not help build a society where they can be empowered in other areas, beyond the family sphere. (*ibid.*)

As more funding flows to PVE/CVE programmes, it is essential that this funding ensures women have access to education, and the economic, political, and security spheres, to ensure women are treated as equal citizens, with constitutionally delineated rights, and gender-specific allocations in the budget, in health and education amongst other areas.

## Researching the link between gender inequality and violent extremism

In addition to the above recommendations, we need more research into the relationship between gender (in)equality and violent extremism.

In a study of gendered strategies to counter and prevent extremism in Morocco and Bangladesh, Couture, Krista London (2014, 3) affirmed that in these cases, it seemed that 'an increase in female empowerment and gender equality reflect[ed] positively in the peace-building and conflict prevention realm' and that 'the same correlation exists for the success, impact and sustainability of countering violent extremism programming' (*ibid.*).

In Bangladesh, the government identified poverty and political turmoil as sources of radicalisation, and developed programmes of education (including for girls), micro-lending for women, and the provision of security agencies with training and equipment to reduce insecurity, improve governance and accountability, secure borders and prevent attacks (*ibid.*). Article 28 of Bangladesh's Constitution guarantees that women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of state and public life. Comparing women's literacy levels, maternal and infant mortality rates, education levels, and empowerment in the public space, she argues that it appears that improvements in these indicators in Bangladesh appeared to coincide with increased security and stability (Couture 2014, 21–2).

In Morocco, the government's CVE strategy focuses on political and religious spheres. The study noted that women were empowered in the family and religious spheres through changes in the *Moudwana* (Family Code). The changes in the law empower women by situating them as equals to their husbands in the home, enabling them to request a divorce, to receive financial support after the divorce, gain custody of their children in case of a divorce, and to inherit money. The link with PVE/CVE strategies' effectiveness was argued to be because it 'affords women a more robust standing in the family to address issues that have potential to materialise into catalysts of radicalisation' (Couture 2014, 30).

While the negative correlation between gender equality and violent extremism in this study does not specifically mean there is a direct causation, it is an interesting example of a PVE/CVE approach that deserves further research. Such a PVE/CVE rights-based approach echoes the argument that women's socio-economic rights and empowerment contribute to the effectiveness of their roles in preventing and countering violent extremism and engaging with communities to build peace. This empowerment also lessens the risks women may face from domestic violence. This does not occur in PVE/CVE programming which sees women's empowerment only in the sense of building skills or training them to whistle-blow or influence family members away from extremism.

Supporting women in public life is also a part of one of the Moroccan strategies for countering violent extremism mentioned in Couture's study. The strategy has been to increase the number of *Mourchidates* (female preachers) to promote religious moderation and toleration, receiving training and certificates (*ibid.*). *Mourchidates* have the same responsibilities as men. They have been very successful in reaching out to at-risk communities, youth, and prisoners, and address topics beyond religion, such as health, violence, and marital life. There is a lack of empirical data to measure the success of these specific programmes and advancements, but they should not be disregarded as such.

Couture concludes that:

when empowered in relevant and culturally appropriate ways, women can serve as extraordinarily effective bulwarks against extremism. (*ibid.*, 50)

Couture's findings can be subject to criticism for not having been grounded on the perspectives of beneficiaries and for having limited empirical data. It is critical to remember that CVE/PVE programmes are context-specific and that prevention entails a wide array of types of programmes with both direct and long-term impacts. Moreover, gender equality is not sufficient to end extremism. Rule of law, good governance, access to education, grievances, employment, and many other root factors and drivers are related to both gender equality and/or absence of violent extremism. In addition, as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe argued, 'gender equality and women's empowerment should not be valued only to the extent that it helps national security and counter-terrorism. Gender equality should be promoted in its own right and women should be empowered to participate fully in society' (Couture 2014, 17).

In the final section, I focus on some key aspects that have arisen from the interviews and that must be taken into account in future programming and policymaking.

### **Ways forward: improving PVE/CVE responses in ways which support women's rights**

While more research into different contexts is needed, certain aspects of inclusive PVE/CVE programmes and policies help to create peaceful, just and equal environments. However, other aspects risk backlash on human rights.

#### ***Expanding space for civil society activism***

Currently, space for civil society activism and for women's voices to be heard is increasingly shrinking in some contexts due to harsh security and measures to counter terrorism, or repressive governments (Geuskens *et al.* 2015). It has been noted that PVE/CVE strategies and funding have mostly been under the authority of defense and security agencies and institutions, not leaving much space or recognition for the role of civil society preventing or countering extremism.

At an event in 2016, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin noted the importance of discussing who mandates and implements the programmes and the potential risks involved with the labelling of programmes, and emphasised the importance of localised implementation to address grievances and understand the complexities of radicalisation (presentation at the New York University event, "The "War on Terror" and Extremism: What is the Relevance of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda?", 3 March 2016). It is important for governments and international institutions working on extremism to work in coalition with women's movements.

Examples of such coalitions include ICAN's Global Alliance of Women Countering Extremism and Promoting Peace, Rights and Pluralism, including over 25 women's

groups and NGOs from across the world which aim to have a strong political voice and central presence in decision-making processes related to CVE/PVE. Some of the members are working on the frontlines, directly with militias or at-risk communities. The coalition has expertise, alternative ideas and solutions to tackle the root causes of violent extremism. It can inform and guide national and international programmes (Deen 2015).

Similarly, the Sisters Against Violent Extremism was the first female countering violent extremism platform. Launched by Women Without Borders, it brings together a spectrum of women with a common goal to end violent extremism. The platform provides a safe space where women can share ideas, concerns, and lessons learned, as well as have access to funding and skills training.

### ***The importance of terminology: terrorism, extremism, and peacebuilding***

Insights came out of several interviews about the importance of terminology in protecting women working for peace. As Jennifer Freeman noted:

women's groups and NGOs on the ground are dealing with PVE, sometimes in at-risk communities, or risky spaces, but do not call their work PVE as the label would put them at risk.

Moreover, the labelling and association of individuals and organisations to international donors and institutions may bring risks to local activists, Jennifer Freeman noted. For example, the names of Western countries or the government, or international organisations, or use of their logos on shared communications, can be dangerous. Allison Peters warned that in some contexts:

the amount of misinformation and distrust in the community spreads very fast, and government and international military operations can drive grievances and create conditions conducive to violent extremism and radicalisation at the local level. It helps to fuel all that.

Women peace activists may be targeted by violent extremist groups trying to interfere with their work, and may not gain the trust or have access to certain people if they are associated with preventing violent extremism. In fact, Youssef Mahmoud noted that prevention of violent extremism is often associated with counter-terrorism, which has negative associations for local populations (interview, 15 April 2016). Cécile Mazzacurati, Youth and Gender policy advisor at the UN Peacebuilding Support Office, noted that the risks differ when programmes are labelled and categorised as countering or preventing extremism, as opposed to being labelled as peacebuilding. The first may identify women as informants or allies of the state, while the second framework is designed to be inclusive and participatory, limiting – at least in theory – the risks of instrumentalisation and securitisation (interview, 12 April 2016).

### ***Addressing the potential implications for funding of women's organisations***

A Women Peacemakers Programme report, gathering data from civil society organisations across ten countries, stated that 'direct access to funding is getting more difficult for women's organizations (Geuskens *et al.* 2015, 6), due to 'donors' growing preference to channel funds via large organizations' (*ibid.*). In addition, funding for women's

organisations or programmes that improve women's security are being cut or diverted in some contexts, in favour of funding 'high-profile counter-radicalization work' (Satterthwaite and Huckerby 2013, 40–1).

In her interview with me for this article, Nika Saeedi, Policy Specialist in Gender, Peacebuilding Governance at UNDP, noted that the UN cannot provide grants to individuals and that grassroots organisations do not always have the capacity to report and manage large amounts of funding. She proposed that by connecting women and women's organisations together, creating a network would ensure a better use of resources as well as less visibility for individuals on the ground working in dangerous areas. This is a recommendation also advanced by the Women PeaceMakers Program report (Geuskens *et al.* 2015, 10). On a similar note, Jennifer Freeman proposed the development of an 'anonymous solidarity fund for women's organizations', which would fund women-led organisations working in that space, limiting the risks involved with labelling and donor association (interview, 5 April 2016). This would also increase women's agency and decision-making in PVE programmes, as donors would be less involved (*ibid.*).

The question of the labelling of programmes using different terminology is closely linked to funding trends, and the responsibility of donors in shaping responses. As Nahla Valji explained, donors who provide funding under the label of preventing violence extremism provoke a wave of attempts to re-cast local programmes on the ground which were originally formulated in other terms, to fit the donors' terms and receive funding (New York University event, 'The "War on Terror" and Extremism: What is the Relevance of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda?', 3 March 2016). This has serious implications, she warned, both for individuals on the ground and women's rights and organisations (*ibid.*).

In her interview, Jennifer Freeman noted that: 'where organisations have done very good work that we would identify as preventing violent extremism, [they are] now being watered-down with more people coming and saying what to do' (interview, 5 April 2016). General trends are not taking into account and recognising locally grown solutions to violent extremism. This disjoint between local context-specific analysis, and generalised solutions defined from the outside, undermines existing organisations working on PVE, not always labelled as such, including its funding. Sanam Anderlini also raised the issue, noting that instead of recognising what women have been doing in the past years already to prevent violent extremism, funding is being directed to research (interview, 19 April 2016). She criticised attitudes determining whether or not women are relevant, instead of enabling women to have a voice and to support their work on the ground with funding.

## Conclusion

This article has highlighted how existing approaches to security tend to focus on women in their role as mothers and wives at home, mere subjects and vehicles of programmes, and not as rights-holders and activists with complex identities who operate in different public and private spheres. It stated concerns that currently, international institutions, governments, and donors often engage with women countering and preventing violent extremism in ways that understand their roles in traditional and conservative terms, ignore their activism,

and ultimately fail women as well as failing to counter and prevent extremism. Interviewees stressed the link between gender equality and peace, recognised in the WPS agenda, calling for greater inclusion of women and a gender-sensitive approach in the design and implementation of peacebuilding and CVE/PVE programmes and policies. When donors or agencies mention they consulted women in the process of planning programmes, it does not mean that they put women in the driver's seat. It is critical that they start to do this better: ensuring women's participation and inclusion is not simply a 'tick-box'.

## Notes

1. The WPS agenda aims to address the disproportionate consequences of conflict on women's and girls' lives, their protection from violence and discrimination, and to support women's engagement in all aspects of peace processes, including to prevent and resolve conflicts without violence. The WPS agenda was crowned over 15 years ago when the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1325 (2000), which formally recognised women's full and meaningful participation in peace and security processes as necessary to prevent and resolve conflict effectively. The first WPS resolution was the culmination of many years of activism, spearheaded by women's organisations. It recognised at the highest international security level that gender equality and women's leadership are inextricably linked to international peace and security. Since then, seven supporting WPS resolutions were adopted, including most recently UNSCR 2242 adopted in October 2015. For more information, see UN Women (2015).
2. Women are also participating and supporting violent extremism, on the frontlines as recruiters, propagators, suicide bombers, and targets. Indeed, part of the expertise and importance of working with women's movements in countering extremism is rooted in their knowledge of women's motivations for participating in – and supporting – violent extremism. Violent extremism can appear to offer women an escape route from lives constrained by complex pressures arising from gender, race, and class, even though in supporting and participating in violent extremism, women are required to renounce basic human rights and freedoms.
3. Women Without Borders is an international advocacy and research organisation for women. It is based in Vienna, Austria, and works with international partner organisations around the world. For more information, see [www.women-without-borders.org/](http://www.women-without-borders.org/) (last checked by the author 14 October 2016). For more information on Mothers' Schools, see [www.women-without-borders.org/projects/underway/42/\(Mothers](http://www.women-without-borders.org/projects/underway/42/(Mothers) (last checked by the author 14 October 2016).
4. Inclusive Security's mission is to increase the participation of all stakeholders – particularly women – in preventing, resolving, and rebuilding after deadly conflicts by strengthening the will and capacity of those who shape peace and security policy; providing research on why inclusion matters and guidance on how it can be achieved; equipping women to contribute effectively to peace processes; building coalitions of diverse leaders who offer practical solutions to intractable conflicts ([www.inclusivesecurity.org/about-us/our-mission-vision-and-goals/](http://www.inclusivesecurity.org/about-us/our-mission-vision-and-goals/), last checked by the author 9 February 2017).

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