

The Countering Violent Extremism Agenda Risks Undermining Women Who Need Greater Support

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Women's vital role in efforts to prevent and resolve conflict is increasingly recognised. They should be supported and empowered to challenge violence – by all actors – that threatens their communities. However, there is a risk that their efforts could be undermined by the countering violent extremism (CVE) agenda. It is critical that the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda is prioritised and implemented in its own right, says Anna Möller-Loswick.

In 2015, [UN Security Council Resolution \(UNSCR\) 2242](#) was adopted, which sets out to increase women's role in CVE and to mainstream gender in the activities of Security Council counter-terror and CVE bodies. The UN Secretary-General's [Action Plan on Preventing Extremism \(PVE\)](#) also states that counter-terror and CVE strategies should protect and empower women. Yet attempts to deliver on the [CVE agenda](#) risk instrumentalising the broader [WPS agenda](#) and undermining women's rights.

The CVE/PVE agenda is presented as a ‘softer’ approach than counter-terror efforts, focused on [addressing](#) the reasons people may join ‘terrorist’ or ‘violent extremist’ groups. Yet hard security measures by both national and international actors to combat such groups remain dominant. These include the [use of force](#), [covert killings](#), and [proxy wars](#) carried out via [partners](#).

The violence generated by such responses [undermines](#) efforts to build [sustainable peace](#) and promote [gender equality](#), and have particular impacts on women and girls. Counter-terror agendas have been used to justify heavy-handed crackdowns on civil society, including [women’s rights activists](#). In particular, human rights abuses are being [committed](#) in the name of counter-terrorism, leaving women and girls particularly vulnerable to increased insecurity and violence. Furthermore, in Somalia, efforts by the [United States](#) to prevent humanitarian aid from being diverted to violent groups have meant that less aid is reaching those in need. This has particularly negative impacts on women and girls who are already struggling to access available assistance due to security concerns.

Co-opting women’s rights movements

The CVE/PVE agenda also generates specific risks and negative impacts on women’s rights and the WPS agenda. Conflicts are increasingly viewed through a narrow CVE/PVE lens, with international actors favouring simplistic [counter-radicalisation measures](#) rather than holistic strategies that prioritise peace, good governance and gender equality. The WPS agenda is increasingly being used as a tool for CVE/PVE purposes, instead of being seen as a critical agenda in its own right. Specifically, CVE/PVE strategies often have a [narrow focus](#) on the role of women in preventing ‘violent extremism’, by for instance expecting women to report if they think anybody in their family or community is being radicalised.

Women’s rights activists already face violence in many societies as a result of their work on gender inequality, as seen in [Afghanistan](#), where they have been targeted by the Taliban. Expecting women to play an [‘intelligence-gathering’ role](#) in their communities can increase risks for them and their families. It can also undermine the work of women’s activists on gender equality by focusing on women’s [roles](#) as mothers and sisters, rather than promoting the empowerment of women in the variety of roles they play in society. In addition, with increasing [CVE](#)

[funding](#) available, and strict [anti-terror funding rules](#) in place, the CVE agenda risks becoming imposed on women's rights organisations who struggle to find [funding](#) for WPS work.

Women's organisations that do local peacebuilding work increasingly face the dilemma of either refocusing their work towards CVE or not being able to access funding at all. The instrumentalisation of women and women's rights organisations is thus a [real concern](#) and risks undermining human and women's rights.

Failing to support women's participation in peace efforts

This trend also has implications for women's participation in peace and security efforts at all levels. UNSCR 2242 calls for women to take a leadership role in developing strategies to 'counter violent extremism'. Yet women remain overwhelmingly [underrepresented](#) in influential security institutions such as the Counter-Terrorism Committee – a subsidiary body of the Security Council – limiting their ability to effectively influence the formulation of relevant definitions, strategies and approaches. At the local and national levels, women often already bear the brunt of violence by so-called extremist groups and may also feel pressured to take sides for or against certain groups. Any outside support to women on the basis that they are able to identify signs of radicalisation within their communities therefore needs to recognise the risks and vulnerabilities they face. Despite the challenges, there are women's organisations that work to counter violent groups which they view as threats to their communities. In Libya, [The Voice of Libyan Women](#) creates dialogues with those who consider joining violent groups as a way to voice their grievances. Yet these initiatives are driven by the women themselves and are not imposed on them by external actors with their own military-security agendas.

CVE strategies risk working on the basis of simplistic assumptions about the different roles that women and men play in countering or participating in violent movements. As a result, such strategies often reinforce existing gender stereotypes. While men are often profiled as potential '[violent extremists](#)' women are often viewed as either victims or peacemakers who can help prevent 'violent extremism' – for example by persuading their relatives not to join violent groups – without enough attention being paid to the [diverse roles](#) they play in countering, mobilising against, or participating in violent movements. Meanwhile, the roles and experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or intersex (LGBTI) people remain poorly understood.

And while the role of [gender norms](#) in driving conflict is increasingly recognised, insufficient attention has been given to their [interplay](#) with violent movements such as Al Shabaab or ISIS, although there are some [exceptions](#).

In light of the risks and negative impacts outlined above, it is clear that more work is needed to ensure that the WPS agenda is prioritised and not instrumentalised.

Supporting women to promote peace rather than counter terrorism

As a first but important step, policy actors need to ensure that their strategies are underpinned and guided by [conflict and gender analysis](#). This will ensure the identification of all conflict drivers and actors, and enable them to better understand and address the reasons why people choose to join violent groups, the different roles that women, men and LGBTI people play in conflicts, and the gendered impacts of counter-terror, stabilisation and CVE measures. We also need to better understand the [interplay](#) between patriarchal gender norms and violent movements, and how such norms can be challenged.

In addition, the WPS agenda should be prioritised and implemented in its own right. In practice, this means ensuring the political, social and economic empowerment of women and girls as an end in itself rather than a means to serve CVE purposes. It is difficult to end conflicts and build peace without empowering society to pressure [all conflict actors](#) to improve their behaviour. Under the CVE agenda, the risk is that women are being co-opted into the struggle against particular non-state groups, without being empowered to challenge national governments and the international community about their roles in violence, abuse and corruption. Instead, women at all levels should be supported to develop and drive their own agendas, and to challenge *all* actors who are responsible for violence and inequality. Organisations working to promote gender equality and build peaceful and resilient communities require sufficient funding that is not tied to international and national security agendas. Finally, [women's agency and leadership](#) in shaping broader stabilisation strategies and peace processes should be respected and promoted.

It is high time that international actors prioritise efforts to build sustainable peace by addressing structural drivers of violence and insecurity, including gender inequality. This is not about trying to [ensure that CVE programmes understand conflict and address their causes](#) but about

investing in existing efforts to build [sustainable peace](#) and promote [gender equality](#). The [2030 Agenda](#) – the world’s framework for sustainable development – and the [WPS agenda](#) both include strong commitments to conflict prevention, gender equality and women’s empowerment. Turning these frameworks into projects and programmes that deliver tangible improvements in people’s lives will help create more peaceful, just, and gender-equal societies, and help address the [grievances](#) that allow violent groups to grow.