Introduction

Policymakers, practitioners, and scholars are increasingly aware of women's participation in terrorist and violent extremist groups; this affects how members of the international community attempt to mitigate risks tied to these threats. Growing concerns about women's interactions with groups like the Islamic State (IS) and Boko Haram appear to have instigated this shift, despite a long and dynamic history of women's participation in terrorism, violent extremism, and insurgencies around the world. Although the intersection of women, gender, and terrorism recently became a higher priority to stakeholders tasked with addressing these threats, international organizations, governments, and civil society groups are still grappling with what it means to pursue this multifaceted agenda.[1] This paper series adds to a small but growing body of research on the topic and highlights some considerations regarding the future of women, gender, and violent extremism.[2]

Before exploring how matters concerning women, gender, and violent extremism intermingle, it is essential to contextualize terminology and to situate this series within the broader discussion of conflict and security. A wide range of analyses examines how sex and gender intersect with political violence and peace.[3] Terrorism, violent extremism, and responses to these challenges represent a small segment of the broader conversation. In the discussion that follows, gender pertains to "how women, men, and nonbinary persons act according to feminine, masculine, or fluid expectations of men and women."[4] Since factors such as culture, personal preference, and time shape conceptions of gender, it is dynamic and highly context-specific.[5] To complicate matters more, "terrorism," "violent extremism," and "extremism," as well as the policies made to address them, are prone to semantic ambiguity. Instead of attempting to pin down elusive terminology, this series embraces the imprecision of these terms to allow the editor and contributors to pull from a more extensive body of research and present a range of perspectives. While imperfect, the priority of this series is to confront the countless ways gender weaves into these challenges and vice-versa.

To lay the groundwork for this series, it is important to emphasize that matters concerning the links between women, gender, terrorism, and violent extremism are a relatively recent endeavor in the field of national and international security.[6] Historically, five main barriers have constricted the field's recognition of these links. First, while women's participation in violent political movements is not unique to the twenty-first century, documentation of group membership, specifically women's involvement, remains inconsistent and unreliable.[7] Second, although there is a propensity to cast individuals as either victims or perpetrators of terrorism and violent extremism, these experiences are not necessarily mutually exclusive.[8] Third, the emphasis on combatants and attackers within much of the academic literature eclipses the non-violent contributions of many participants, especially women, but also men and minors. Fourth, research circles devote disproportionate attention to select conflicts and demographics, which leaves other conflicts understudied. Fifth, Western perspectives and stereotypes dominate discourse on the topic, drowning out a range of alternative assessments of matters concerning sex, gender, and violent extremism.[9] Ultimately, since these barriers make data on men and women's participation difficult to trust, trace, and interpret, it is unsurprising that the security community insufficiently integrates dimensions of gender in contemporary policies. In sum, these challenges make it difficult to learn from the past to inform efforts to cope with the present and prepare for the future.

Today, these barriers endure because latent misconceptions about gender and violent extremism oversimplify complex movements and trends. By dividing experiences into black and white, the security community struggles to see shades of gray. For example, appraisals tend to entangle an individual's motives for participation with the role an individual assumes, without weighing the different opportunities afforded to men and women in violent extremism. To date, there is still "little to no evidence that male and female terrorists are fundamentally different in terms of their recruitment, motivation, ideological fervor, and brutality,"[10] even if there are slight variances from case to case.[11] Validating these claims, a range of scholars note that women's and men's motives for participation in terrorism and violent extremism appear similar.[12] While individual reasons for participation do not vary significantly by gender, men and women's opportunities to serve in select roles are not always equal. Terrorist and violent extremist groups selectively delineate appropriate roles for their members, particularly based on factors like gender and age. Even when organizations draw parameters for engagement, they are not always static, clear-cut, or enforced.[13] One analysis poignantly notes that "while violence and violent actors are easily visible, the norms permitting violence… are less apparent."[14] Whether male or female, the factors shaping an individual's interactions and role within violent extremist movements tend to derive from organizational, ideological, religious, cultural, personal, and logistical considerations. Gender is one dimension that crosscuts all of these factors, touching processes from radicalization and recruitment to detection, disruption, and demobilization.

Despite these nuances, challenges arise as latent gender stereotypes tint contemporary perceptions of women in terrorism and violent extremism. For example, a range of analyses finds that portrayals of women in terrorism tend to be misleading, reductive, and often emphasize personal reasons for participation.[15] Conversely, although little research discusses media portrayals of men in terrorism,[16] men's motives are conventionally assumed to be political rather than personal.[17] If gendered stereotypes like these inform perceptions of the threats posed by violent extremists, additional risks may arise when policymakers and practitioners inadvertently translate misguided views into policies and legal responses.[18] This dynamic is detrimental to security, stability, and human rights for myriad reasons.

As one example, gender stereotypes can weaken security by creating strategic, operational, and tactical benefits for terrorist and violent extremist groups that integrate women. Some analysts posit that since "women are not considered credible or likely perpetrators of terrorist violence, they can more easily carry out attacks and assist their organizations."[19] Scholars believe the practice of recruiting women is spreading as terrorist and violent extremist organizations embrace the "potential of women" members, who better circumvent detection by authorities,[20] but eventually garner more media attention for their actions.[21] In other words, if the opportunity exists, terrorist groups can "exploit gender stereotypes and cultural clichés to their advantage."[22] In some cases, researchers note that women aligned with terrorist groups also appear to leverage gender dynamics for their benefit by claiming ignorance in an attempt to minimize their culpability.[23] Ultimately, creating security gaps is just one of many ways misconceptions about women and gender hinder efforts to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism.

In addition, misinformed perceptions can negatively influence formal responses to terrorism and violent extremism. When officials view men and women adherents as distinct threats bearing different degrees of risk, such perceptions may translate into flawed policy design or implementation. In a preliminary assessment of how gender affects the treatment of terrorists, for example, one study notes that "from arrest to sentencing to post-conflict reintegration and

disarmament programming, evidence suggests that governments tend to be less responsive to women in terrorism" compared to men.[24] Some data show that terrorism-related offenders who are women "are less likely to be arrested, less likely to be convicted, and receive more lenient sentences compared to men."[25] Women, like men, are not monolithic in the ways they contribute to terrorist and violent extremist groups.[26] Consequently, it is vital for justice systems and counter-extremism programs to push against stereotypes and recognize the spectrum of agents who support terrorist and violent extremist groups. Doing so can improve the state's abilities to cope with the range of circumstances that arise from conflict, including stereotype-defying cases where men serve in support roles or women more actively facilitate or perpetrate violence.

Assumptions about gender and political violence are not unique to the study of terrorism, and it is useful to discuss how these premises play out in other security arenas.[27] Beyond the criminal justice system, these factors influence counter-insurgency strategies and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programming. Research on the national DDR program in Sierra Leone, for instance, finds that the effort was "effective in reaching out to male combatants," but ultimately, "women and children were underserved."[28] As an initial condition for entry into the program, individuals had to surrender a weapon and sometimes demonstrate their ability to disassemble and reassemble a gun.[29] While disproportionately affecting women and minors, this standard likely excluded a wide array of people who served as combatants without owning a weapon, as well as those who assumed auxiliary roles such as care providers, facilitators, and spies.[30] Even though the program eventually afforded limited opportunities for "wives" to participate in its final phase, women still faced overwhelming barriers to entry.[31] As demonstrated by the case of Sierra Leone, among others, state-led responses to political violence that chronically fail to see gender as a serious dimension of the conflict are inadequate for security, stability, and post-conflict reintegration.[32]

While perhaps overly optimistic, increasing awareness of the gap between assumptions and reality may help calibrate responses to terrorism and violent extremism. Evolving discourse among policymakers, practitioners, and scholars on how to gender DDR programming, for example, offers some hope to the overlapping community of stakeholders working to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism. Comparatively, the research, analyses, and recommendations concerning DDR programs benefit from more time, experience, and opportunities to reflect on missteps and failure. In many ways, the body of literature on the DDR process offers a greater number of nuanced perspectives on the importance of addressing gender dynamics beyond sex, like masculinity and femininity.[33] Even though the focus of DDR is largely on the post-conflict phase, research on these initiatives may help flag more context-specific, tailored ways to gender counter-terrorism and P/CVE efforts.

Over the last ten years, the international community's thinking on the role of women and gender in terrorism and counterterrorism changed in significant ways.[34] Today, experts note that entities like international organizations and states broadly "know they have to gender their counter-terrorism and P/CVE approaches, [but] there is very little idea of what this actually means in practice."[35] While likely unintentional, this often results in policy measures that synonymize "women" and "gender," and subsequently try to gender approaches to counter-terrorism and P/CVE by integrating women as part of the process.[36] This logic leads to an "oversimplified and instrumental strategy to just 'add women and stir.'"[37] While it is necessary for women to participate in the counter-terrorism and P/CVE agenda, there is no consensus that this approach is a sufficient or productive way to gender policy design and implementation. Some critics argue that integrating

women in counter-terrorism and P/CVE efforts is a facile approach to gender mainstreaming.[38] Others suggest that the approach of leveraging women to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism rests on a lack of evidence and enduring assumptions that women are more peaceful than men.[39] These points, among others, highlight the complexity of the challenges facing stakeholders tasked with addressing the intersection of gender, terrorism, and violent extremism.

Although there is not complete agreement within the field on what should be done, who should do it and how, this lack of consensus may actually improve decision-making. Evidence-based perspectives hailing from different vantage points serve as a critical strength to policy design and implementation in different regions, nations, communities, and networks around the world. Diverse perspectives may help hold governments accountable for balancing priorities like international law, national security, human rights, and gender equality. Ultimately, if gender, terrorism, and violent extremism are relatively context-specific and dynamic phenomena, perhaps approaches to these threats might benefit from adopting some of the same characteristics. It is crucial to see the challenge of integrating gender into counter-terrorism and P/CVE strategies as a work-in-progress designed to enhance mission effectiveness while practicing good governance.

Since matters concerning women, gender, and violent extremism warrant further study, this series adds to the slight but meaningful body of evidence-driven policy work by experts and leaders in the field.[40] The contributors to this series navigate their respective topics in nuanced and purposeful ways. In the first essay, Sara Mahmood shows that viewing violent extremism through a gendered lens hinders practical understanding of people's contributions to violent extremist organizations, and weakens effective policymaking in Indonesia and Pakistan. Turning to mobilization trends in the Western Balkans, Vesë Kelmendi highlights the effects of regional dynamics on women with ties to the conflict in Iraq and Syria, and advocates for context-specific approaches to prevent and counter involvement in violent extremism. Next, Julia Ebner and Jacob Davey posit that while many far-right militant movements in North America and Western Europe remain predominantly comprised of men, the landscape is transforming as women take more responsibility for spreading messages across the spectrum of worldviews that comprise the international far-right. Lastly, Devorah Margolin explores how violent Islamist groups struggle to find consensus on the appropriate roles for women within their ranks, particularly during times of duress. While still directing much of the conversation towards women and their experiences with different organizations, these papers take a more holistic approach in highlighting the various ways in which dimensions of gender affect organizations. A better comprehension of these trends helps policymakers and practitioners anticipate new and evolving threats concerning women, gender, and violent extremism.

By investigating key knowledge gaps and learning from the past to prepare for the future, cross-cutting, evidence-based analyses can help inform responses to emerging challenges. As a research product that is meant to engage a range of stakeholders, particularly those tasked with preventing and countering violent extremism, this series is designed to stimulate thinking and discussion among policymakers, practitioners, and scholars alike. While the collection of papers undoubtedly demonstrates that women make dynamic contributions to their respective movements, it also works to integrate additional perspectives on how gender dimensions affect violent extremism and responses to violent extremism.

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