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# Introduction: gender and the governance of terrorism and violent extremism

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## ABSTRACT

Several global governance initiatives launched in recent years have explicitly sought to integrate concern for gender equality and gendered harms into efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism (CT/CVE). As a result, commitments to gender-sensitivity and gender equality in international and regional CT/CVE initiatives, in national action plans, and at the level of civil society programming, have become a common aspect of the multilevel governance of terrorism and violent extremism. In light of these developments, aspects of our own research have turned in the past years to explore how concerns about gender are being incorporated in the governance of (counter-)terrorism and violent extremism, and how this development has affected (gendered) practices and power relations in counterterrorism policymaking and implementation. We were inspired by the growing literature on gender and CT/CVE, and critical scholarship on terrorism and political violence, to bring together a collection of new research addressing these questions.

## KEYWORDS

P/CVE; terrorism; counterterrorism; gender

## Introduction

Gendered power relations are one of the potentially most significant, yet still largely under-recognised, aspects of terrorism and political violence. The gender dynamics of terrorism and political violence are visible in how such violence affects people differently depending on their gender identity. Similarly, the ways in which individuals are differently mobilised in both prevention and perpetration also frequently depends on their (actual or assumed) gender identity. Further, assumptions that are made about gender – about how bodies relate to behaviours and vice versa – inform how policymakers attempt to counter terrorism, extremism and political violence. These assumptions therefore influence and shape the global governance of terrorism and violent extremism.

The 2016 *Global Terrorism Index (GTI)* suggests, for example, that “*Lone actors tend to be male and motivated by an ideological driver*” (Institute for Economics & Peace 2016, p.45, emphasis added). Moreover, some recent attacks by such “lone actors” have been explicitly connected to male supremacist online spaces, such as “the Manosphere”, whose ideologies primarily centre on issues of hegemonic masculinity and a patriarchal “gender

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order". This suggests a need to ask questions about masculinity and ideologically motivated violence, about the gendered patterns of socialisation, which could help us explain better why some men perpetrate this kind of violence. More recently, the 2020 GTI report comments specifically on the recruitment of women and children as suicide bombers by Boko Haram, a terrorist group active in Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger (Institute for Economics & Peace 2020, p.16, p.21). There are clearly gender dynamics at play here, as "women and children" are often assumed to be innocent victims rather than perpetrators of political violence. This assumption may account in part for the strategic inclusion of women and children in bombings. Both of these observations emphasise the need for a gendered approach to preventing and countering political violence in all forms.

In recent years, a growing body of research has developed with the goal of providing a fuller account of the gender dynamics at work in the recruitment, radicalisation and perpetration of terrorist acts (Gentry 2022; Johnston, Iqbal, and True 2020; McCulloch et al. 2019; Meiering, Dziri, and Foroutan 2020; Phelan 2021; Pearson 2019; Sjoberg and Gentry 2015). This research has also translated into a growing awareness by policymakers that gender matters for understanding dynamics of terrorism and violent extremism. Several global governance initiatives launched in recent years have explicitly sought to integrate concern for gender equality and gendered harms into efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism (CT/CVE). Commitments to gender-sensitivity and gender equality in international and regional CT/CVE initiatives, in national action plans, and at the level of civil society programming, seem to have become a common aspect of the multilevel governance of terrorism and violent extremism.

In light of these developments, aspects of our own research have turned in the past years to explore how concerns about gender are being incorporated in the governance of (counter-)terrorism and violent extremism and how this has affected gendered practices and power relations in counterterrorism policymaking and implementation. We were inspired by the growing literature on gender and terrorism and violent extremism, and critical scholarship on terrorism and political violence, to bring together a collection of new research addressing these questions to be published as a Special Issue of *Critical Studies on Terrorism*.

In this brief introduction, we first outline the empirical background for the endeavour, before sketching out our rationale for bringing together the collection, including a discussion of the literature to which we hope the essays in this collection contribute. In the final section, we provide an overview of each of the essays in turn before exploring the links between the various contributions, both to give a sense of how the special issue coheres as a whole and to illustrate the breadth and depth of insights offered by the contributing authors on the topic of gender and governance of terrorism and violent extremism.

## Background

The global governance of terrorism and violent extremism cohered as a site of practice at the turn of the millennium with the establishment of several United Nations Security Council Committees, most notably the Counter-Terrorism Committee (UN CTC) in 2001 tasked to monitor and support the security-heavy, "super" resolution 1373 (De Londras 2019). A follow-up resolution of the UN Security Council in 2004 provided the mandate for

the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED) to assist the work of the CTC, conducting reviews and assessments in UN member states. Following the emergence of increasing evidence that security-heavy approaches to counterterrorism (CT) had only limited success at preventing the increasing number of attacks, the following decade saw the emergence of a paradigmatic shift away from militarised and securitised counterterrorism towards approaches aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE). PCVE brought “soft” preventive means and strategies previously relegated to the spheres of development cooperation and social policies to the fore of global governance of terrorism and violent extremism. This shift was accompanied by elevated international concern about ISIL, ANF and Al Qaida; the ISIL seizure of territory in Iraq and Syria in 2014, for example, brought concerns about foreign fighters and “jihadi brides” to the forefront of discussions about CT/CVE at United Nations Headquarters. Together, the shift towards prevention and the involvement of women in these conflicts, as both perpetrators and victims of violence, motivated state representatives who were highly engaged in the UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda to seek to establish a formal link between WPS and CT/CVE. Security Council resolution 2242, adopted in 2015, forged such a framework.

The WPS agenda as an instrument of global governance engages questions about women’s participation in peace and security initiatives, the prevention of conflict, and the protection of women’s rights and bodies in conflict and conflict-affected settings. Resolution 2242 includes three paragraphs ensuring the recognition of terrorism and violent extremism as spheres of governance activity to which the agenda is applicable, outlining a series of provisions and expectations regarding the integration of a gender perspective, and a concern for women’s rights, in the global governance of terrorism and violent extremism. There has emerged a small body of literature focused on the impact of resolution 2242 and its articulation within international and domestic policy frameworks (Aroussi 2020; Asante et al. 2021; Asante and Shepherd 2020; Heathcote 2018; Ní Aoláin 2016; Nwangwu and Ezeibe 2019). Further, in the years since the adoption of resolution 2242, there has been increasing engagement in domestic and international policy circles with the gender dynamics of terrorism and political violence, drawing on the wealth of research going back several decades on the roles that women play in political violence, the gendered dynamics of such violence, and the need for attention to both gendered power and the positioning of women in initiatives to prevent or counter such violence. This is the context within which we brought together this collection.

## Rationale

As discussed above, the integration of counterterrorism and countering violent extremism with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is a relatively recent development. There is an intuitive utility in bringing efforts to counter violent extremism into alignment with efforts to implement the WPS agenda, which harnesses energy from civil society in pursuit of gender equality and gender justice, because the impacts of terrorist attacks are felt in communities. Many scholars, however, have written about the problems inherent in the instrumentalisation of women and the WPS agenda in service of CT/CVE, of assuming that women can be treated as vessels of information with their utilisation as agents of “human intelligence” legitimised under the auspices of the WPS agenda as “participation” in security practices.

From another vantage point, while the integration of gender into CT/CVE has been taken up by scholars working on WPS, despite the rising attention by policymakers, more often than not literature on counterterrorism in IR and terrorism studies has arguably remained gender-blind. While there has been increasing attention by terrorism scholars to the gendered drivers of *terrorism*, recent efforts in *counterterrorism*, including the turn to right-wing extremism and the development of new technologies for counterterrorism, have often lacked an explicitly gendered lens. Moreover, emerging studies have suggested that even where CT/CVE initiatives do attend to the inclusion of women and gender, they tend to reproduce problematic assumptions and stereotypes (Ní Aoláin and Huckerby 2018; Winterbotham 2018, 2020).

In this Special Issue, we aim to combine both lines of inquiry, on WPS and critical terrorism studies, by specifically focusing on examining how and with what effects gender is both explicitly and implicitly part of the *governance* of terrorism and violent extremism in practices of, and research on, counterterrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism. We have chosen to focus specifically on the governance of terrorism and violent extremism in this collection, because the arrangement and architecture of counterterrorism initiatives and efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism deserves as much critical scrutiny as the acts themselves. The study of governance and the use of governance as a concept to leverage understanding of the events and phenomena of world politics has been a preoccupation of scholarship on world politics since at least the 1980s (e.g. Ruggie 1980; Mendlovitz 1981; Kratochwil and Ruggie 1984). At its inception, governance was “associated with the concept of international regimes, occupying an ontological space somewhere between the level of formal institutions on the one hand and systemic factors on the other” (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1984, 760). By the early 21st century, much intellectual attention was paid to mapping out the actors and processes engaged in governance practice (Wilkinson 2002, 1–4; Barnett and Duvall 2005, 1; Rai and Waylen 2008, 1–2; Weiss and Wilkinson 2014, 2019). The various contributions to this collection bring that analytical attention to bear on governance practices related to terrorism and violent extremism, to augment and contribute to the existing research on gender and political violence discussed above.

This Special Issue thus focuses on the effects of the increasing inclusion of gendered drivers of terrorism and violent extremism by policymakers on different levels. We ask how exactly gender has become included in the governance of CT/CVE regarding practices of agenda-setting, policymaking and implementation. How, if at all, have global, national and non-state actors and institutions and their various approaches to CT/CVE changed through this inclusion of gender considerations? What new gendered practices have emerged and how have they influenced global policymaking in and beyond the governance of CT/CVE? At the same time, we pay attention to the gendered gaps that have emerged in the context of such inclusions. How do gendered assumptions and stereotypes continue to influence policymaking and research on gender and (counter-)terrorism? What are the effects of these assumptions on the lived experiences of those subject to counterterrorism practices? How do they intersect with other exclusionary and power-laden practices? Whose gendered experiences are heard and whose are silenced? The Special Issue brings together contributions exploring these questions at different levels of inquiry, engaging with the practices of different actors and institutions, examining different types of extremism, and ranging across different

regions of the world. The following brief section provides an overview of the essays featured in this collection and outlines the thematic and empirical contributions that they seek to make.

## Overview

Focusing attention on the global level, in the first article in our collection, “Gender at the crossroads: the role of gender in the UN’s global counterterrorism reform at the humanitarian-development-peace nexus”, Ann-Kathrin Rothermel uses a feminist institutionalist perspective to assess the United Nations’ reform process on counterterrorism policymaking, in particular the Global Counterterrorism Coordination Compact (GCCC), which brings together the work of 39 UN entities on CT/CVE. Rothermel finds that while the UN has become more aware of the importance and nuance of gender in CT/CVE, the reform process, which is geared towards harmonisation across the United Nations system is influenced by different institutionalised assumptions about the role of women and gender in political violence, which hold both opportunities and challenges for a more gender-sensitive global governance of terrorism and violent extremism.

Similarly locating P/CVE at the intersection of development and security regimes and discourses, in the second article of the Special Issue, Penny Griffin and Maryam Khalid trace how the gendered and racialised assumptions and representations in the UN’s global discourse of P/CVE are reproduced at the national level of Australian P/CVE policymaking. Showing how both global and local P/CVE discourses are based on a positioning of the gendered and racialised “Other” as threat to both peace and prosperity, the authors argue that “race and gender together mold the governance of terrorism and violent extremism and its range of practices” (Griffin and Khalid, this issue).

Offering a third perspective on how the inclusion of gender in P/CVE programming has changed over time, Jessica White’s article “Finding the right mix: Re-evaluating the road to gender equality in countering violent extremism programming” offers unique and original insights from a “pracademic” (practitioner-academic) perspective. White traces how gender has been included into the CVE practices in two phases of the European Union’s flagship programme STRIVE, uncovering both important progress as well as major challenges to the meaningful inclusion of gender, including a better translation between academic insights and practitioners’ practices on the ground.

The fourth article explicitly engages the WPS agenda and community organisation in Kenya. In this contribution, titled “Beyond Instrumentalization: Gender and Agency in the Prevention of Extreme Violence in Kenya”, Elizabeth Mesok also sheds light on gaps between feminist research and practical concerns. Drawing on interviews with Kenyan civil society actors involved in P/CVE, she shows how Western feminist concerns about the instrumentalization of WPS in the context of counterterrorism are built on liberal notions of “agency as resistance”, which run the risk of excluding alternative local agentive capacities and political subjectivities.

In their article, Katherine E. Brown and F. Nubla Mohamed make an important intervention in debates about the governance of returnees from Iraq and Syria. Brown and Mohamed focus on the screening, prosecution, reintegration, and rehabilitation (SPRR) processes that determine the dynamics of return to Europe. Based on participant

observation, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews with key practitioners, Brown and Mohamed develop an innovative theoretical framework that brings scholarship on care and care labour into the analysis of governance practices. Their analysis reveals not only that the management of returnees is governed by gendered assumptions about risk and radicalisation, but also that the operation of care logics creates hierarchies that further subordinate the returnees, constructing them as subjects to be “cared for” and “taken care of” rather than agents capable of care themselves.

The sixth article explores gender dimensions of CT/CVE policies in Mali. In an analysis based on extensive fieldwork, Laura Berlingozzi discusses the gaps between different conceptualisations of empowerment driven by EU interventions and Malian civil society. In particular, Berlingozzi focuses on the different perspectives of rural and urban women, showing that the lived experiences, priorities, and perspectives of women in rural areas are often silenced by homogenising treatments of gender and women in P/CVE interventions.

The seventh article is by a team of Australian-based researchers, and is titled “Anti-feminism, gender and the far-right gap in C/PVE measures”. Christine Agius, Lucy Nicholas and Kay Cook argue that the growing threat of far-right terrorism demands that scholars and practitioners alike endeavour to understand how masculinism (which they define as “an implicit gendered ethos or ideology that values masculinised attributes”, Agius et al., this issue) and political opposition to feminism and gendered analyses fuels and informs far-right extremism. Exploring the case study of Australia, Agius, Nicholas and Cook build on research that has drawn attention to the “manosphere” and “incel” extremism as dimensions of gender and political violence to trace masculinism in far-right ideology and extremist violence. The authors argue that the “blind spot” in governance practices to masculinism as a driver of such ideology limits the purchase of efforts to prevent and counter far-right extremism and terror.

Following on from Agius, Nicholas and Cook’s critique of politics on male supremacy, the eighth article in the collection offers a parallel analysis of scholarly engagements with masculinism and so-called “gender ideology”. In “Interrogating the ‘Incel Menace’: Assessing the Threat of Male Supremacy in Terrorism Studies”, Julia DeCook and Megan Kelly explore research on right-wing and white supremacist terrorism and violent extremism, arguing that the literature falls short in interrogating the gender dynamics of such violence. DeCook and Kelly focus analytical attention on the co-constitution of misogyny and racism in US-American society, linking these everyday power dynamics to their expression in acts of politically motivated violence. The authors conclude that “the best way to combat ‘incel terrorism’ is to challenge white supremacy and cisheteropatriarchy in our societies and cultures” (DeCook and Kelly, this issue) and create new “scripts” and “roles” for gendered identities and behaviours.

The ninth and final article picks up on the theme established by DeCook and Kelly to examine shortcomings in feminist engagements with terrorism and violent extremism. Laura Shepherd centres and draws upon Black, decolonial, and intersectional feminist theory to draw attention to the epistemic whiteness of governance feminism, which she argues is the form of feminism that has integrated smoothly into security and P/CVE institutions. Situating governance feminism as a form of white feminism, Shepherd develops a critique of the ways in which even gender-sensitive P/CVE interventions frequently and problematically ignore the operation of racialised power, arguing “that

even critical feminist interventions can be interpolated into structures of governance in ways that erase Black, decolonial, and intersectional feminist knowledge, and which reproduce the operation of racialised and gendered power in limiting and harmful ways" (Shepherd, this issue).

The Special Issue thus brings together a multiplicity of novel insights into the role of gender in the governance of terrorism and violent extremism. Empirically, the collection provides insights on the global (Rothermel, Griffin/Khalid), regional (Brown/Mohamed, White), and national (Berlingozzi, Mesok, Agius et al.) levels of agenda-setting and implementation. The contributions explore how gender considerations have become included in counterterrorism discourses and practices by international organisations (White, Rothermel, Berlingozzi, Griffin/Khalid, Shepherd), governments (Brown/Mohamed, Agius et al. Griffin/Khalid) and within academia (DeCook/Kelly, Shepherd). Authors focus on the governance of different types of extremisms, not only including violent Islamist groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Al Shabaab (Brown/Mohamed, Mesok, White, Berlingozzi), which have traditionally received most attention in the context of CT and CVE, but also covering recent shifts by policymakers to include white supremacism (Agius et al.) and male supremacism (DeCook/Kelly) into their CT and CVE approaches. The articles also explore a range of different aspects of CT/CVE, including global coordination and reform processes (Rothermel), capacity-building (White), national action plans (Griffin/Khalid) and prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration (Brown/Mohamed). Finally, running counter to a general overemphasis on the North American context, the Special Issue engages questions of CT/CVE governance in diverse settings, from the European context (Brown/Mohamed), Kenya (Mesok), Mali (Berlingozzi), and the Sahel (White), to Australia (Agius et al., Griffin/Khalid).

Drawing together the generated insights on gender and the governance of terrorism and violent extremism from these different vantage points, there are several recurring themes in the contributions of the different articles. First, the articles uncover a diverse set of gendered assumptions which underlie and influence the governance of CT/CVE. In particular, the articles by Brown/Mohamed and Rothermel explore how transnational counterterrorism agendas navigate the tensions resulting from different ingrained and essentializing representations of women as victims, villains and community organisers. The contributions by both Griffin/Khalid and Rothermel highlight how these assumptions can be related to the particular position of P/CVE at the intersection of security and development discourses, while Griffin/Khalid and Shepherd pay particular attention to the intersections between race and gender, which underpin such assumptions and oversights in P/CVE. Calling out one such oversight in particular, the article by Agius et al. shows how in the Australian governance of far-right extremism, governments are still failing to adopt a gender lens to include analysis of the role of masculinity. Moreover, where masculinity is taken up as a factor in the research of and CVE practices on male supremacist incel networks, DeCook and Kelly argue that these tend to be based on reductive and securitised notions of incels that neglect broader misogynist structures of society.

Second, the collection draws attention to the challenges that arise when CT/CVE agendas are translated into practices: the process of implementation. The article by Berlingozzi focuses on the discrepancies between regional governance and local voices and shows how the EU's approach in Mali relies on an idealised notion that does not



correspond with the local context and silences in particular rural women, thereby ending up reproducing rather than challenging gender hierarchies. Zooming into the practices that guide implementers themselves, the contribution by White shows that such practices often rely on a trial-and-error strategy, rather than an integrated gender mainstreaming strategy calling attention to the fact that the wealth of knowledge developed by feminist academics and practitioners is not frequently or well integrated into implementation plans and programme delivery.

A third set of struggles over gendered power occurs within and between global and local or community-based feminist discourses about gender in CT/CVE. In particular, Mesok's, Shepherd's and Berlingozzi's contributions focus on how feminist responses to terrorism and counterterrorism rely on white and liberal logics which may be at odds with and silencing local approaches and lead to a perpetuation of racialised logics in counterterrorism.

Thus, by focusing on the challenges and assumptions that underpin agenda-setting, policymaking and implementation practices related to gender and CT/CVE, the collection as a whole acknowledges the progress that has been made in regard to making gendered governance practices, and gendered actors, visible in both acts of political violence and efforts to prevent and counter such acts. The contributions collectively also expose the importance of an ongoing critical focus on how exactly gender is included. By critically reflecting on the gendered practices that guide the governance of terrorism and violent extremism, we can shed light on what is still missing. In particular, the special issue overall suggests that we still need a more thorough engagement with local approaches to CT/CVE, better integration between academic knowledge and practices on the ground, and more nuanced reflection on underlying and flawed conceptions of gender and race in governance theory and practice.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

**Laura J. Shepherd** is a Professor of International Relations at the University of Sydney, Australia. Her primary research focuses on the United Nations Security Council's Women, Peace and Security agenda, and attendant dynamics of gender, violence, and security governance. Laura is author/editor of several books, including, most recently *Narrating the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Logics of Global Governance* (Oxford University Press, 2021), and *New Directions in Women, Peace and Security* (edited with Soumita Basu and Paul Kirby; Bristol University Press, 2020). She spends too much time on Twitter, where she tweets from @drjlshepherd.

**Ann-Kathrin Rothermel** is a Research Associate and PhD candidate at the University of Potsdam in Germany and Research Affiliate at the Berlin Graduate School for Global and Transregional Studies. For her PhD, she investigates the gendered dynamics in the inter-institutional reform process of the UN's counterterrorism agenda. She is also a research fellow with the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism and academic advisor to the German Federal Agency for Civic Education on online radicalization, and has published multiple articles on the rise of anti-feminist online communities ("The Manosphere") and the overlap of male supremacism with white supremacism and right-wing extremism.

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