

1325 And Beyond – Essay Contest

HONORABLE MENTION

UNSC Resolution 1325 and Beyond: Engagement of Women in Dialogue with Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups

Tabitha W. Mwangi

Global terrorism and violent extremism remain a transnational peace and security threat.¹ United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and subsequent resolutions on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) recognized the role of women in countering and preventing violent extremism. At the same time, women's involvement in violent extremist groups poses a grave threat, with serious implications for security and counterterrorism strategies.² Hard-power approaches to dealing with this challenge remain unsustainable and ineffective. As such, dialogue will need to be more prevalent and the inclusion of women in negotiations more instrumental in achieving the objectives of UNSCR 1325.

I argue that deliberate inclusion of women in dialogue processes with extremist groups will be instrumental in countering terrorism and violent extremism effectively. Furthermore, it will bring women from the periphery to central positions in shaping future peace, which adding them as an afterthought cannot achieve. Token inclusion of women has been one of the main barriers to effective implementation of UNSCR 1325.³ Given that the fields of peace, security and counterterrorism remain male dominated, engaging women more in counterterrorism presents numerous opportunities to gain unique gender perspectives on peace and security.⁴

Although inclusive dialogue has long been advanced as a long-term solution to countering terrorism and violent extremism, this essay looks at how women can be deliberately involved in these processes globally. I also make recommendations to the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee's Executive Directorate (CTED), which is in a unique position to advocate for the acknowledgement, recognition and appreciation of women's role in dialogue processes with violent extremist groups through engaging UN member states. Successful implementation of these recommendations would lead to successful implementation of critical aspects of the WPS agenda related to violent extremism.

Women, Violent Extremism and Terrorism

I adopt Charles Townshend's definition of terrorism : "the use or threat, for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, or ideological course of action, of serious violence against any person or property."⁵

Violent extremist groups are those that are motivated by a fundamental leaning toward use of violence to pursue ideological goals. Given similarities in their modus operandi, operations, links to transnational and organized crime and threats to international security, this essay will group jihadist and white supremacist groups together in this definition.⁶

The recent US announcement that it will recognize white supremacy violent extremists as terrorists comes after pressure from experts who assert that these groups are a grave security threat.⁷

Women are involved in terrorism. According to the 2019 Global Terrorism Index, female suicide attacks are five percent more deadly than those executed by males given their capability to circumvent security scrutiny, and they are becoming more common. About 13 percent of foreigners who joined the ISIL violent extremist group were female, some 6,900 in total. More than 4,000 women who had joined ISIL remain in the Syrian Al Hol camp awaiting potential return to their home countries, despite the security threat they pose. Some are unapologetic about their engagement with ISIL and are likely to use violence against other groups.⁸

Women play different roles in terrorist organizations. According to Michèle Coninsx they collect intelligence and conduct surveillance on potential targets, recruit young people, carry out suicide attacks, finance terror operations and take care of group members' needs, such as cooking and cleaning.⁹ Mia Bloom argues that women in many cases are the source of radicalization, urging others to join as part of their duty to carry out jihad.¹⁰ While on one end of the spectrum, there are women who believe they should support extremist organizations by marrying other members, bearing their children, and sometimes engaging as active combatants, on the other end of the spectrum, there are women working to eradicate violent ideology, having seen firsthand its terrible effects.¹¹

Terrorist organizations recognize and tap into women's diverse roles. Katharine Petrich and Phoebe Donnelly detail how al Qaeda affiliate al Shabaab, a terrorist group operating in the Horn of Africa and known for its strict interpretation of Islamic law, collaborates with commercial sex workers to collect intelligence from security personnel in Nairobi.¹² Ironically, the same group punishes Somali women engaged in this profession on the basis of Islamic law.

Recommendations

- **Involve women in dialogue to bridge the gap between states and violent groups.**

Because of the growing gap between state security (security of privileged elites, often in positions of economic and political authority) and human security (the aspirations of citizens to have their basic needs met, access social services, enjoy economic security and personal safety from harm), violent extremism has become more widespread.¹³ The current approach to dealing with this security challenge—through exclusive use of force in state self-defense, as permitted by Article 51 of the United Nations Charter—has proved counterproductive and unsustainable. Thus, it is necessary to also adopt soft-power approaches such as

deradicalization and reintegration of individuals who have joined extremist groups. The continued exclusive use of hard power creates cycles of violence, with disenfranchised, marginalized communities prone to engage in revenge attacks and erosion of state legitimacy because the state is seen as a source of insecurity.¹⁴

Dialogue is effective. As was the case in Northern Ireland, government engagement in dialogue with violent groups can lead to cessation of hostilities.¹⁵ Dialogue can effectively address the root causes of conflict such as structural violence, widespread unemployment and gender inequalities, so it should not be perceived as weakness or as legitimating the activities of nonstate entities. Engagement in dialogue embodies the willingness to bridge the gap between the state and the individual, which is a step toward resolving conflict in the long term.¹⁶

UNSCR 1325 seeks to include gender perspectives in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. Engagement of women in dialogue would help protect women, prevent armed conflict and increase participation of women in peace and security—all of which will contribute to countering terrorism and violent extremism.¹⁷

CTED should spearhead this process: 1) because women who feel secure are less likely to be radicalized, join extremist groups, or to become militants' brides, kidnap victims or suicide bombers, 2) because women can perceive signs of radicalization in their communities so that interventions can be made before individuals turn to violence, and 3) because involving women in dialogue ensures their continued engagement in political processes such as voting, running for political office and other forms of grassroots leadership that can influence action at the international level.¹⁸

- **Acknowledge women's leadership.**

Women's leadership is overlooked in many societies. Recognizing and appreciating it will be important for engaging women in dialogue. Leadership is understood in this case as the process by which leaders achieve goals, which happens when an individual shares ideas to meet specific social needs that others accept as potential solutions.¹⁹

As women are constantly negotiating for what they need, whether by pushing for revenge or an end to structural violence, they should be involved in dialogue processes.²⁰ State collaboration with women to fight violent extremism is not new, as women's role as mothers and primary care givers has been leveraged to such ends in the past.²¹

However, I advocate for involvement of women and engagement beyond their socially assigned gender roles as mothers and primary care givers. CTED should involve them as axis points in dialogue to ensure that gender issues are prioritized and women's needs addressed so as to resolve underlying drivers of conflict.

- **Conduct more research on women and terrorism.** Policymakers seeking to effectively deal with violent extremism must avoid oversimplification. Women are not homogenous; they have individual agency.²² After identifying the right women to partner with, CTED and governments must work with them as equal partners. They must avoid pushing gender inequality to the margins of peace and security discourses or including gender perspectives or gender quotas for declaratory purposes, to meet donor requirements or out of political correctness.²³

Every community exists in a unique context informed by cultural, social, geopolitical and economic factors, thus a one-size-fits-all approach to the engagement of women in dialogue would be problematic. Therefore, researchers must draft recommendations tailor-made for different stakeholders in CTED collaborations. These stakeholders should include public- and private-sector actors and civil society partners, because they have different strengths and operate in different contexts.²⁴

Conclusion

Because women's involvement in terrorist and violent extremist groups poses grave threats to peace and security and will continue to affect counterterrorism strategies, it is important to involve women in dialogue. Dealing with the violence from extremist groups using only force remains unsustainable because of its expense and its cost in lives lost—it is also largely ineffective in preventing repeated violence.

Policymakers should draft specific recommendations for the different stakeholders with which CTED works as they involve women in dialogue with violent groups. They must avoid the assumption that women share a homogenous perspective. Moreover, they should recognize women's leadership in formal and informal spaces. Dialogue as an alternative to counterterrorism and violent extremism is worthy of exploration, in keeping with the aims of UNSCR 1325, which seeks to protect women, prevent violence and guarantee increased involvement of women in peace and security processes. Engaging women in dialogue will help address the root causes of conflict, thus contributing to sustainable peace and development.

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1325AndBeyond – Essay Contest

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