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Published online: 03 Nov 2020.

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# Gender in the United Nations' agenda on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

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**ABSTRACT**
The United Nations (UN) policy agenda on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) promotes a "holistic" approach to counterterrorism, which includes elements traditionally found in security and development programs. Advocates of the agenda increasingly emphasize the importance of gender mainstreaming for counterterrorism goals. In this article, I scrutinize the merging of the goals of gender equality, security, and development into a global agenda for counterterrorism. A critical feminist discourse-analytical reading of gender representations in P/CVE shows how problematic imageries of women as victims, economic entrepreneurs, and peacemakers from both the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the Women, Peace and Security agenda are reproduced in core UN documents advocating for a "holistic" P/CVE approach. By highlighting the tensions that are produced by efforts to merge the different gender discourses across the UN's security and development institutions, the article underlines the relevance of considering the particular position of P/CVE at the security–development nexus for further gender-sensitive analysis and policies of counterterrorism.

**KEYWORDS** Counterterrorism; gender mainstreaming; security–development nexus; discourse; United Nations; feminism

## Introduction

Initially emerging from the ruins of the US-led wars against Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Afghanistan, the policy agenda on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) has in recent years been promoted by heads of state and civil society actors, and been included in the United Nations' (UN) Global Counterterrorism Strategy (Ucko 2018). The move toward P/CVE has led to two changes regarding the constitutive logic of global counter-terrorism. First, the novelty of P/CVE is that it promotes a globalized and "holistic" approach to counterterrorism, which combines traditional security policies

with what are commonly referred to as "soft" preventive development policies (Chowdhury Fink and Bhulai 2016). This positions P/CVE at the center of the so-called security–development nexus and demands an "all-of-UN" approach that connects a range of existing UN activities in both policy areas. Second, following a variety of publications on the importance of women for both terrorism and counterterrorism, the UN's P/CVE agenda has increasingly considered and included women as part of its efforts to address the root causes of terrorism and prevent radicalization.

Taken together, these developments have led to efforts to increase the connection between several existing UN gender agendas, such as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the context of P/CVE. Considering and including gender is often presented as contributing to the smooth integration of security and development into the "holistic" aspirations of the P/CVE agenda. While the integration of gender has been both applauded and met with suspicion by feminist researchers and activists alike, I argue that so far this literature has not paid enough attention to the importance of the security–development nexus for representations of gender in P/CVE. Representations ascribed to set gender and/or women in relation to other goals and discourses can give insights into the gendered power relations and obstacles that structure the political context. Connecting current discussions on gender and P/CVE with critical feminist discourse-analytical practices, in this article I show how representations of gender in P/CVE "are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated and challenged" (Lazar 2007, 142). The article adds to a gender analysis of the UN's P/CVE agenda by drawing explicit attention to the tensions between different representations of women and gender that arise from the agenda's unique position between security and development discourses.

The article proceeds in three parts. I begin by introducing recent policy changes and discussions on the relevance and importance of considering representations of women and gender in the context of P/CVE. The next section develops the central argument of the article by connecting discussions and policy developments in P/CVE with an analytical review of representations of women and gender equality[1] in existing UN security and development agendas. Reading these agendas together, existing feminist scholarship exposes how two different discursive logics of representations of gender have developed in line with the UN's division of labor into security and peace and sustainable development respectively. For example, feminist security scholars have drawn attention to the problematic but persistent imagery in the UN's security discourses, which casts women as passive victims and "natural" peacemakers to be protected by the state (see for example Puechguirbal 2010; Shepherd 2008). Scholars working on gender and development, on the other hand, have problematized the notion of women as economic investments and entrepreneurs (see for

example Peterson 2012). Introducing two key agenda-setting UN P/CVE documents, which advocate for a merging and broadening of P/CVE from both a security and a development perspective, I argue that it is important to look at how existing representations of gender overlap in the UN's P/CVE agenda setting.

In the third part of the article, I therefore conduct a critical feminist discourse-analytical reading of the Secretary-General's *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* and the 2016 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) agenda on *Preventing Violent Extremism*. Following Lazar's (2007) concept of gender relationalities, I pay particular attention to how the themes derived from feminist literature on gender in the UN's security and development discourses are set in relation, as expressed through co-constructions between the location of men and women as well as through dynamics of hierarchies between masculinities and femininities.[2] The results show that the UN-level discourse on P/CVE contains representations of the role of women for counterterrorism from both security and development discourses. Through their grounding in the different discursive terrains, these representations are however based on different assumptions about women's resources, agency, power, and broader characteristics, which lead to important tensions.

The article contributes to the current discussion on the role of gender in P/CVE in three main ways. First, by exposing the continuities and discontinuities of representations of gender in UN discourses, the article advocates for the consideration of insights from feminist analyses of the UN's security and development agendas in analyses of the current developments toward a "holistic" ideal of counterterrorism. Second, by exposing the discursive logics structuring representations of gender in P/CVE at the security–development nexus, the article illustrates the tensions inherent in the UN's discursive construction of a smooth merging of security, development, and gender equality norms. It thereby questions the assumption popular among P/CVE advocates and UN practitioners that such a merging will lead to the largely unproblematic and ultimately beneficial empowerment of all women affected by violent extremism and P/CVE. At the same time, the article also calls into question the "securitization" frame popular among civil society actors and activists by showing how both securitized and developmentalized representations of gender are reproduced in P/CVE. Third, the resulting picture of gender in P/CVE is a complex context of converging and competing constructions of the role of gender for counterterrorism, security, and development goals. This complexity should be taken into consideration by both scholars and activists in order to better account for contradictions in agenda setting and implementation as well as to better utilize the role of gender in shaping the future trajectory of the UN's "holistic" counterterrorism agenda and its real-life impacts for those affected by P/CVE policy making.

## Gender and the P/CVE agenda: counterterrorism at the security–development–gender nexus?

The P/CVE agenda is commonly said to have emerged as an approach after the first years of the US-led War on Terror showed only limited success in preventing the increasing number of attacks (see for example Borum 2011). While the exact definitions of both violent extremism and the measures taken against it continue to be debated today, the agenda broadly encompasses "policies and practices directed toward countering and preventing violent extremism" (Stephens, Sieckelinck, and Boutellier 2019, 1). In response to a range of criticisms leveled at early Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs, recently there has been increasing focus on the preventive aspect of counterterrorism, captured in Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE). However, while some distinguish between countering and preventing interventions against violent extremism, drawing a clear distinction has proven problematic. As a result, many recent contributions have begun to refer to the agenda as "P/CVE," which will also be used throughout the rest of this article.

The novelty of the P/CVE agenda, vis-à-vis traditional counterterrorism, is two-fold. First, P/CVE supporters emphasize the expansion of coordinated counterterrorism efforts to a "globalized" scale, including enhanced multilateral cooperation under the auspices of the UN, as well as greater involvement of civil society and other non-state actors (Aly, Balbi, and Jacques 2015). Second, P/CVE interventions are not primarily meant to react to and preempt terrorist activities, but to counter their very emergence by focusing on the socio-economic and macro-political root causes commonly identified as potential drivers for radicalization (Ucko 2018; UNGA 2015). This change of focus strongly binds the effectiveness of security-related measures against terrorism to social and development policies. P/CVE programs and projects are therefore part of a security–development nexus and are said to combine in a complementary way the objectives of development assistance and terrorism prevention (Chowdhury Fink and Bhulai 2016; Kessels and Nemr 2016). This understanding of counterterrorism and P/CVE as a global "holistic" agenda has led to a range of reforms of the global counterterrorism architecture. At the UN, P/CVE has become linked to the ideal of an "all-of-UN" approach, which has led to the establishment of the UN Office for Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) in 2017 and the Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact (GCCC) in 2018. The GCCC in particular represents the cross-cutting quality of P/CVE in its mandate to coordinate counterterrorism efforts "across the three pillars of work of the United Nations: peace and security, sustainable development, human rights and humanitarian affairs" (UNOCT 2018).

Despite the goal of a "holistic" P/CVE approach, feminists soon diagnosed a gender blindness in P/CVE. As early as 2013, an analysis of the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) P/CVE programming by

Satterthwaite (2013) drew attention to a lack of gender-sensitive indicators and evaluations. Two years later, the topic of women and terrorism was forcefully pushed to the fore of international politics due to the participation of (Western) women in the terrorist movement Daesh. Multiple publications by foundations, UN entities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and others[3] began to highlight the importance of women in P/CVE efforts. In the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review in 2016, the General Assembly called upon member states and UN entities "to integrate a gender analysis on the drivers of radicalization of women to terrorism into their relevant pro-grammes" (UNGA 2016, §6).

The reaction by feminists and gender equality advocates to this rather speedy incorporation of women and gender perspectives into counterterrorism efforts can broadly be summarized as cautious celebration. The move to include women in counterterrorism has been celebrated by many as a necessary and long overdue aspect of any "holistic" vision (Haynie and de Jonge Oudraat 2017; Ní Aoláin and Huckerby 2018). In fact, since P/CVE is situated at the inter-section of development, peace and security, and human rights, many have drawn attention to the previously developed UN gender agendas in these areas: the UN's development goals and the WPS agenda. Launched in 2000, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) included "equal rights and opportunities of women and men" (UNGA 2000, §6). In 2015, the MDGs were extended into the SDGs. In addition to the stand-alone SDG 5, which aims to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls," the SDGs include gender-related indicators across the other 16 goals. In peace and security, UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) and sub-sequent resolutions on WPS have advocated for "equal participation of women in peace and security decision-making, a gender approach to policy analysis, and sex-specific data and research on peacekeeping and peace-building operations" (True 2016, 308). In P/CVE, both of these agendas come together, which has led some to state that gender equality is not only a cross-cutting issue but may even be a suitable "connector," able to "marry" (Strasser 2015; UN Women 2015) the best gender-sensitive approaches from peacebuilding, counterterrorism, and sustainable develop-ment into a "holistic," "all-of-UN" vision.

At the same time, gender policies are often associated with the "soft" side of counterterrorism – that is, the preventive, development, and human rights perspective. Some activists and NGOs with a focus on development or women and human rights agendas have been more hesitant to embrace the P/CVE agenda, worried that it will lead to a securitization and de-funding of other concerns (McGrane 2017). While the majority of publications advocating for gender equality and women's empowerment in the context of P/CVE focus on the importance of including women as central yet underrepresented stakeholders in counterterrorism (see for example Mlambo-Ngcuka and

Coomaraswamy 2015; True and Eddyono 2017), some have pointed to the danger of reproducing problematic representations of women's roles in P/CVE (Ní Aoláin and Huckerby 2018; Winterbotham 2018). Such contributions are closer to a critical feminist perspective on gender. Critical feminists argue that a gender analysis has to go beyond bringing women into consideration with regard to certain policies – a move that has become (in)famous as "add women and stir." Rather, following a Foucauldian tradition whereby discourses "constitute the social world by bringing certain phenomena into being" (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004, 154), critical feminist analyses have long highlighted different ways in which gendered discourses produce and reproduce human relations and political practices of violence, security, and economic governance (see for example Boserup [1970] 2011; Tickner 1992). With regard to P/CVE, feminist scholars have emphasized the danger of essentializing, instrumentalizing, and securitizing representations of women in P/CVE programming, which could trigger further marginalization and disempowerment (Brown 2013; Giscard d'Estaing 2017; Meger 2018). In particular, scholars working on the WPS agenda have considered the increasing focus on counterterrorism and P/CVE as a potential danger for existing UN agendas because it threatens to override the stand-alone goals of gender equality with (national) security considerations (Heathcote 2018; Shepherd 2017).

Existing feminist discussions have pointed to potential positive and negative effects of the integration of gender equality goals into P/CVE agenda setting and programming. While there are some critical feminist analyses of P/CVE, they have mostly focused on either the security or development aspects of the agenda. However, I argue that the particular position of gender in P/CVE between security and development agendas and discourses has so far remained underexamined. The next section provides a brief analytical review of representations of gender that have been previously identified by feminist scholars as central to the security and development agendas of the UN, before bringing them together in the analysis of two documents that were central to establishing P/CVE as a cross-cutting, "holistic" agenda.

## Representations of women and gender in the UN's P/CVE agenda between security and development

With the move to shift counterterrorism from a security realm toward the security–development nexus, gender considerations are not only increasingly acknowledged in the P/CVE context but have become a central component in the "holistic," "all-of-UN" approach. As far back as 2013, UNSCR 2122 expressed the intention to extend the focus of WPS to include terrorist acts as relevant threats. The role of women in violent extremism was first discussed in an open session briefing of the Counter-Terrorism Committee in 2015 (Ní Aoláin 2016). UNSCR 2242 (2015) extended this engagement,

explicitly referencing P/CVE (Heathcote 2018). It also mentioned the 2030 SDG agenda, which has itself been connected to both P/CVE and the WPS agenda (Naraghi Anderlini and Rosand 2019).

That the relevance of gender for counterterrorism has been highlighted increasingly in the context of P/CVE is not a coincidence. Instead, it is closely connected to the constitutive logic of P/CVE as located at the intersection of development, peace and security, and human rights, which is similar to the understanding of gender as a cross-cutting issue to be mainstreamed across "all policies and programmes" both within and beyond the UN system (Krook and True 2012, 116). While there have been significant contributions on the integration of gender into P/CVE as a potential "connector" between existing UN agendas and as being "in danger of securitization" (Giscard d'Estaing 2017; Strasser 2015), so far there has been less focus on the particular position of gender at P/CVE's intersection of security and development discourses. This is surprising given a rich feminist literature on representations of gender in both the UN's WPS and MDG/SDG agendas.

An analytical review of feminist contributions on both WPS and MDGs/SDGs exposes three broad and recurring representations of gender. First, economic empowerment and access provided for women is presented as a means to unleash their "natural" *entrepreneurial* productivity and agency in order to achieve economic growth and sustainable development. This is particularly evident in studies on the MDGs, which have shown how women are represented as "more hard-working, more caring, more responsible and more mindful of the environment than men" (Cornwall and Rivas 2015, 399), and thereby as "untapped resources" and viable "investments." Second, women's "natural" peacefulness and therefore aversion to violence, as well as their potential role as *peacemakers*, are pictured as a way to secure and build peace. For example, feminists have shown how UNSCR 1325 prescribes a link between women's roles as mothers and as advocates of peace (Puechguirbal 2010, 177; Shepherd 2008, 119). Third, while the attention that has been paid to sexual violence not as a by-product but rather as a weapon of war within the WPS agenda has been lauded by feminists (Pratt and Richter-Devroe 2011), the related theme of protection and *victimhood* of women has been shown to reduce women's agency and entrench existing gender-based restrictions placed on women and other non-hegemonic genders (Puechguirbal 2010; Shepherd 2008).

These three representations converge in the commonly criticized reduction of gender to women as a homogeneous group, disregarding intersectionalities between gender, class, race, and other categories, as well as the subordination of gender equality to the achievement of the assumedly greater goals of (peace and) security and (economic) development. At the same time, however, they also expose how the discourses of development and security are based on rather different gendered logics and power relations, which have developed as dominant in the context of WPS and

the SDGs. Since both agendas are commonly referenced in the context of P/CVE, these representations and logics matter because they form and legitimate politics and policies and (re)produce gendered power hierarchies, which are likely to reverberate in and influence the process of integrating gender into P/CVE. In the context of establishing P/CVE as a cross-cutting, "holistic" agenda from both a security and a development perspective, two UN documents stand out: UN Secretary-General (UNSG) Ban Ki-moon's 2015 *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* (henceforth: the *Plan*) and the UNDP agenda on *Preventing Violent Extremism* (henceforth: the *Agenda*).

In his analysis of the effects of the P/CVE agenda in and on the UN, Ucko (2018) argues that the introduction of the *Plan* turned P/CVE into a veritable "meeting point" (Ucko 2018, 257), bringing together the UN's diverse pillars of work and existing agendas. Indeed, the *Plan* is not as much a concrete plan as it is an attempt to reframe the UN's counterterrorism agenda and to encourage member states to rethink their "security-based counter-terrorism measures" (UNGA 2015, §4). It emphasizes the need to

> take a more comprehensive approach which encompasses not only ongoing, essential security-based counter-terrorism measures, but also systematic preventive measures which directly address the drivers of violent extremism that have given rise to the emergence of these new and more virulent groups. (UNGA 2015, §6)

Similarly, the 2016 Agenda, which is subtitled *A Development Response to Addressing Radicalization and Violent Extremism*, can be characterized as one of the first documents that promoted the integration between security and development issues as crucial to P/CVE from a UN development perspective. In it, UNDP argues that development and peacebuilding have "a critical role in providing the foundation for preventing violent extremism" (UNDP 2016, 5). The report highlights the ways in which development and peacebuilding practices are relevant to P/CVE as both a justification for UNDP to take on a leading role in the advancement of the agenda (Rosand et al. 2018) and as a call for the development sector to engage with the problem of violent extremism (UNDP 2016, 25).

While the analysis of two documents necessarily only offers a snapshot of the broader UN P/CVE discourse, both the *Plan* and the Agenda are uniquely suitable for assessing the representations of gender in P/CVE between security and development discourses. As two of the first agendas published by UN entities, they both helped to establish a frame for P/CVE as a cross-cutting issue that is influenced by and affects "peace and security, human rights and sustainable development" (UNGA 2015, §1). Notably, both documents include multiple references to the importance of gender in several parts of the text, and each contains one gender-specific paragraph. In addition to their emphasis on the cross-cutting nature of P/CVE, they simultaneously

represent the previous division of labor across different departments and entities, as they outline broad agendas for P/CVE from the perspectives of both the UN's leading development agency UNDP and the Secretary-General addressing the Security Council. Given this position between existing security and development discourses together with their attempt to provide an agenda that merges these discourses in the context of P/CVE, the documents are likely to be the outcome of contested debates within the traditional security (UNSG) and development (UNDP) arms of the UN, which means that the representations, wordings, and frames can be assumed to be intentional rather than accidental.[4] In turn, tensions evident within them likely indicate broader tensions about the relationship of gender to broader goals of development, security, and counterterrorism.

The following sections present the findings of the analysis, focusing on continuities and discontinuities with existing UN discourses and their role in constructing gendered power relations in P/CVE, as well as the inherent tensions and contradictions that come with P/CVE's position at the security–development nexus.

## Continuities and discontinuities in representations of gender in the UN's P/CVE agenda

Both the *Plan* and the Agenda broadly cover three main themes: the challenges of terrorism (UNDP 2016, 8–12; UNGA 2015, 4–6), the drivers of violent extremism (UNDP 2016, 17–25; UNGA 2015, 6–10), and the agenda for the future of UN P/CVE (UNDP 2016, 26–39; UNGA 2015, 10–22). The representations of women and gender in the documents are structured into two main areas of concern. In the first two parts of the documents on terrorism and violent extremism, women are considered as particularly vulnerable to violence by violent extremist groups. Second, the agenda-setting parts of the documents represent women and women's groups as part of an informal force for P/CVE that can assist international actors through their particular qualities and experiences. The specific paragraphs on the role of women and gender equality are each located in the agenda-setting parts of the documents (UNDP 2016, 30; UNGA 2015, 18).

### *Of victims, perpetrators, and saviors: representations of gender in the context of violent extremism*

In both the *Plan* and the Agenda, in the context of violent extremism, women are mentioned as among the (primary) victims of violent extremist groups' human rights abuses, including through sexual and gender-based violence and the derogation of gender equality. The *Plan* points to gender-based violence, among other human rights abuses, as "systematic" and "widespread"

(UNGA 2015, §19) in relation to violent extremism. The Agenda repeatedly identifies sexual and gender-based violence as a key component of extremist ideologies through detailed images of "systematic discrimination and abuse of women and their subordination through rape, enslavement, abduction, denial of education, forced marriage, [and] sexual trafficking" (UNDP 2016, 13). UNDP further claims that the erosion of and disregard for women's and girls' rights are "key indicators of the spread of extremist ideologies" (UNDP 2016, 29, 30). At the same time, gender inequality is also mentioned as being among the conditions conducive to the rise of violent extremism (UNGA 2015, §26). This means that gender inequality is represented as both a cause and a direct effect of violent extremism.

Women thus figure primarily as victims of violent extremism; their role as actors with regard to such extremism remains limited. Both documents mention women's potential to assume active roles in violent extremism only with qualifiers. While in the *Plan* they are only mentioned as playing an active role "sometimes" (UNGA 2015, §53), the Agenda refers to gender in relation to radicalization as affecting "uneducated, unskilled, rural and unemployed men (and increasingly also women)" (UNDP 2016, 20) and "men as well as women (although more men are involved than women)" (UNDP 2016, 9). Thus, while women are acknowledged in parentheses as potential perpetrators of violent extremism, they are predominantly represented as victims, whereas "most violent extremist fighters" are represented as male (UNDP 2016, 13).

This discourse of predominantly female victimhood and predominantly male violent extremism has two important implications, which have been highlighted by feminist analyses of earlier security discourses: a binary division between passive feminine victims and active masculine perpetrators, and another between local perpetrators and global saviors.

With regard to the first binary, because women's vulnerability and powerlessness are the main aspect of representations of gender in the context of violent extremism, women are reduced to passive, helpless "natural victims" (Enloe 2014). Feminists have shown that obscuring women's roles as violent actors has been a pattern throughout history (Elshtain 1995). In her analysis of the discourse underlying UNSCR 1325 on WPS, Shepherd (2008) has shown how this powerlessness tends to become amplified by discursively grouping women with other vulnerable groups such as children and girls. In the *Plan*, this trope of "women and children" (UNGA 2015, §6) is reproduced, thereby creating a "gendered discourse of innocence and vulnerability" (Carpenter 2003, 674). In combination with this supposedly "natural" vulnerability, the repeated representation of sexual-based violence as among the main and most horrific human rights abuses perpetrated by violent extremists serves to recreate and heighten the threat that emanates from violent extremism. Producing this threat as gendered obliterates not

only differences between women but also between able-bodied, middle-aged men, who are indirectly signified as ("natural") aggressors. Thus, pointing to continuities with previous security discourses, the reproduction of violent extremism as a gendered threat to a homogeneous group of powerless and vulnerable women "serves to reinforce the primacy of particular forms of masculinity while subordinating most women and femininity itself" (Enloe 2014, 40).

With regard to the second binary, the reproduction of the gendered division between passive female victims and aggressive male perpetrators in turn creates the impetus to "respond to the imminent threat that violent extremism poses and to reassure fearful populations" (UNDP 2016, 27) on the part of member states and the UN. Locating this threat, both documents reproduce racialized notions of violent extremism. The *Plan* in particular almost exclusively mentions Islamic extremist groups such as Boko Haram, Daesh, and Al-Qaeda rather than, for example, right-wing violent extremist groups in the Global North. Despite the acknowledgment that violent extremism is not exclusive to any region, the repeated association of sexual violence with extremist groups in the Global South (UNGA 2015, §19) rather firmly locates the (gendered) threat of violent extremism there. This is reinforced through simultaneous references to violation of human rights, lack of good governance, and lack of freedoms (UNGA 2015, §3), which connect violent extremism to other challenges predominantly associated with the Global South through previous development discourses. In the Agenda, UNDP states that its P/CVE programming aims to protect human rights not only from the threat of violent extremism (of any kind) but also from potential human rights abuse through security-based (domestic) counterterrorism efforts (UNDP 2016, 27). Through these associations, the gendered threat of violent extremism is identified predominantly with the Global South and with the domestic rather than the international. These associations have been criticized by feminists previously for constructing women in the Global South as primarily constrained by their local patriarchal systems, which prevent their empowerment and make them more vulnerable to the effects of (even more patriarchal) ideologies of violent extremists (see for example Abu-Lughod 2002). While these constraints are of course real, their location in the Global South, rather than globally, reproduces a racialized, securitized representation of "oppressed Muslim women … in need of rescuing from 'unenlightened' Muslim men" (Leigh and Weber 2019, 86). This gendered and racialized juxtaposition of local masculine threat, through both violent extremist groups and local or national governments, and female victims in turn constructs a legitimate role for global P/CVE (rather than member-state) policies as saviors. Feminists have pointed out that such gendered protection claims can and have been used as justifications for wars, which are "*fought for* 'our' or 'innocent' women and *fought on* the bodies and

lives of 'their' women" (Sjoberg and Peet 2011, 176, emphasis in original), while "the actual protection of women is secondary or even irrelevant" (Sjoberg 2019, 60). This role of gendered victimhood as a means of legitimating security intervention is continued in the P/CVE agenda.

Representations of gender in security discourses have often been shown to be key to legitimating interventions, while also retaining unequal gender and other power relations through the central association of femininity with vulnerability and peace, vis-à-vis masculinity with protection and violence (Elshtain 1995). The documents address some of the criticisms by acknowledging women as potential perpetrators and the importance of human rights and development discourses. However, the way in which women's human rights violations and development discourses of good governance are connected to representations of gender traditionally associated with security discourses tends to reinforce rather than break with a range of problematic racialized and securitized notions of victims, perpetrators, and saviors.

## Of women, peace, and empowerment: two representations of gender in the context of P/CVE

In relation to counterterrorism and prevention, both the *Plan* and the Agenda highlight the important role of women in countering violent extremism. In particular, two different representations of women stand out, which construct them as particularly pertinent agents for P/CVE through their peacefulness and their community-based position in society. Similar to the context of violent extremism, these representations point to continuities with existing UN security and development discourses. However, their overlap in the context of P/CVE also exposes tensions between responsibilities and resources associated with women's agency in several ways.

First, in the two documents, there is a representation of women as "powerful" (UNDP 2016, 30), and "critical" (UNGA 2015, §53; UNDP 2016, 30) peacemakers and moderators. Feminist analyses have shown that this discourse has also been actively used by women's rights advocates in the WPS framework, as it has shifted attention away from women's victimhood and led to greater integration and participation of women in peacebuilding efforts (Gibbings 2011; Heathcote 2018; Shepherd 2011). However, scholars have warned that connecting women to peacefulness often relies on stereotypical images of women as passive non-fighters. While gender roles have meant that women in modern history have often not been allowed to fight in wars or conflicts, being a non-combatant does not automatically mean being a pacifist (Elshtain 1995). In the P/CVE documents, the stereotype of women as non-fighters is repeated through the discursive representation of women as a "naturally" peaceful buffer against violent extremism. In the

*Plan*, this is particularly obvious in the contrast between women and youth as groups to empower. While it does mention that women *can* be perpetrators and youth *can* be peace activists, the discourse relates youth empowerment particularly to the need to prevent their radicalization (UNGA 2015, §52); women, on the other hand, are included as "a critical force for sustainable peace," with the reasoning that "societies for which gender equality indicators are higher are less vulnerable to violent extremism" (UNGA 2015, §53). Gender equality is thus set in a direct relationship with peace and P/CVE because gender inequality is set in a direct relationship with violent extremism.

While the perception of women as peacemakers opens pathways for greater female agency, in the P/CVE documents this role remains centrally related to their vulnerability. The implication is that because women are generally non-fighters who are particularly vulnerable to violent extremism, it is in their interest to promote peace and become involved in P/CVE. This stereotypical depiction of women as a "homogeneous group whose interests are essentially peaceful and socially beneficial" (Shepherd 2008, 162) exposes parallels and continuities with problematic securitized representations of women's passivity in other security discourses. Reproducing images of women as vulnerable and therefore peaceful tends to reinforce their status as victims whose power has to be unlocked by outside saviors/protectors and therefore likely provides no break with the subjugation of gender equality under security logics. Instead, assuming peaceful agency can place an additional burden on women to promote peace, while having little to no power over the decisions of war making (Runyan and Spike Peterson 2013).

A second representation in the two documents is the focus on women as mostly informal actors, including "youth; families; women, religious, cultural and educational leaders; civil society organizations; the media; and the private sector" (UNGA 2015, §44, §51). Both documents highlight the importance of collaboration with "women's organizations" (UNDP 2016, 6, 16, 30; UNGA 2015, §2, §5, §11, §12, §13, §51), which are to be included in P/CVE. Indeed, in the context of P/CVE, women's civil society activism has been found to "moderate violent extremism, strengthen peacemaking, promote dialogue, build trust, bridge divides, mobilize coalitions and broaden societal participation" (Nwangwu and Ezeibe 2019, 185). However, while this inclusion of women in UN P/CVE discourses certainly makes women's activities more visible, the repeated (and almost exclusive) representation of women as part of informal, community-based organizing rather than state-led P/CVE reproduces previous gendered assumptions and power dynamics from development discourses.

Representations of women as predominantly informal, community-based agents have been previously analyzed in the context of the MDGs. This discourse implicitly sets women apart from men, presenting them as "more hard-working, more caring, more responsible and more mindful" (Cornwall

and Rivas 2015, 399; Peterson 2012) agents whose interest in community cohesion is "naturally" higher than men's (Gibbings 2011, 531). This potential of women, combined with their previous exclusion from consideration, leads to their portrayal as "untapped resources" (Shain 2012). In this view, women should be considered on the basis that they will provide more economic output, which in turn positively impacts on economic and social development (Aikman and Unterhalter 2005; Marchand 2009, 932). Similar representations are present in the context of P/CVE, whereby the Agenda's discourse on women as counterterrorism agents centers crucially on their particular agency in different areas and aspects of community life. In addition to merely their peacefulness, the understanding of women as being "among the most powerful voices of prevention … at the forefront of efforts to counter the political, social and cultural factors that enable violent activism" is attributed to their role "in their homes, schools and communities," which is claimed to position them as ideal advocates for "inclusion and tolerance" (UNDP 2016, 30). The Agenda therefore highlights the need to invest in "women's economic autonomy … as women's economic status builds their own resilience, as well as that of their families, against joining extremist groups" (UNDP 2016, 30). Through this frame, UNDP's discourse builds a chain of representations of gender, whereby the additional empowerment of/investment in "naturally" productive women generates previously unrealized returns in terms of resilience to violent extremism and thereby contributes to the overarching goal of security and peace.

While this discursive chain insinuates a harmonic merging of the goals of security, development, and gender equality, it reproduces three problems highlighted in previous feminist analyses. First, the idea of economic empowerment as the solution to violent extremism has been criticized for disregarding the fact that economic means do not necessarily translate into well-being and power if the deeper-seated global structures of inequality persist (Struckmann 2018). Second, the representation of women as powerful agents for P/CVE can result in adding yet another obligation of (mostly unpaid) P/CVE activism to their lives without recognizing or alleviating existing burdens. Third, positioning women's empowerment as primarily motivated by the expected outcomes of preventing violent extremism, creating peace, and promoting economic development means that gender equality as a goal in itself is subordinated to greater goals of security and development, reducing it to one instrument for counterterrorism among many. Moreover, this discourse separates and essentializes subjectivities in the sense that by empowering "'their' women" and "promoting 'their' development, 'our' security and indeed global security might be achieved" (Khalid 2019, 43).

## Of passive victims and resourceful agents: gendered tensions between security and development

Prominent discourses from feminist security and development scholarship about "vulnerable victims," "protected peacemakers," and "productive entrepreneurs" persist in the P/CVE-related representations of gender in both the *Plan* and the Agenda. Analyzing how these are reproduced in the context of P/CVE has exposed how some of the problems that feminists have highlighted in relation to the WPS and MDG/SDG agendas have been transferred to the context of P/CVE. In addition, paying attention to both representations predominantly associated with security discourses (WPS) and development discourses (MDG/SDGs) sheds light on some tensions that arise through their merging in P/CVE. In particular, the different representations carry different assumptions about women's agency, resources, and power, as well as their responsibility in the context of P/CVE.

Most strikingly, there is a tension between the absolute lack of power ascribed to women as "natural" victims of violent extremism and their simultaneous representation as among the "most powerful" agents for P/CVE. In her analysis of women's inclusion in counter-radicalization measures, Brown (2013) identifies these as two contradictory yet complementary logics: a *maternalistic* logic that constructs women as agents due to their role as good mothers who "do not produce radicals" (Rashid 2016, 108) and a *paternalistic* logic of protection. While these logics draw on different essentialized characteristics, both make women the objects of policies rather than agents in their own right. The tension can therefore be partially resolved because the "power to empower" still rests with formal agents, including both member states and UN agencies. In the *Plan* and the Agenda, this supposedly complementary logic is reinforced through their division into separate sections on terrorism (victimhood) as representing the current state of challenges (how it is) and on counterterrorism (agency) representing the ideal future (how it should be), in which the rather vague agentic potential of peaceful women is unlocked to successfully counter and prevent violent extremism. Despite this attempt to resolve the tension, there are still two different gendered imageries at play, whereby women are constructed as simultaneously without resources and as resources for counterterrorism themselves.

In the P/CVE discourse, these two states are complemented by an additional and persistent representation of women as informal activists. While this representation of women as part of civil society and informal organizing rather than of governmental P/CVE reinforces power-laden and gendered dichotomies between public and private, paid and unpaid, and formal and informal (Peterson 2012), it also taps into a relatively new understanding in development discourses that depicts informal organizing as a

particularly useful complement to state action. While it is often assumed that the transfer of "other" politics into a security arena inevitably leads to securitization, the analysis thus shows that there are also certain elements of "developmentalization" present in P/CVE, whereby aspects from economic development discourses complement the security logics of P/CVE. This is particularly visible in the emphasis on informal power, which represents a shift in responsibility from masculine state actors toward feminine community actors. Through their economic productivity and "self-sacrificing" strength (Peterson 2012, 22), women are no longer reduced to passive protection roles. Instead, they are granted a higher level of responsibility with regard to achieving P/CVE as the "most powerful voices of prevention" (UNDP 2016, 30), thereby reducing the agency of the outside "savior" to the mere provision of economic access and introducing a neoliberal investment logic in addition to a securitized protection logic.

While both discourses are problematic from a feminist perspective, as they tend to undermine gender equality and women's empowerment as goals in themselves, they show that the position of gender in P/CVE, produced through importing different representations of gender from security and development contexts, results in a rather complex interplay between security and development logics and goals. The dichotomies and contradictions in the representations of gender in both the *Plan* and the Agenda oscillate between women *without resources* and *as resources*, as well as between women as *passive victims* and as *active peace entrepreneurs*. The resulting tensions thus highlight the importance of considering the particular discursive logics of gender in security and development when analyzing P/CVE at the security–development nexus.

## Conclusion

While the move to empower women and ensure their participation in P/CVE has been assessed as a positive shift in the UN's gender discourse, in this analysis I have shown that both current narratives of a smooth integration and a progressive securitization of gender in security and development discourses are too simplistic. Instead, focusing on the ways in which gendered security and development discourses converge and compete within the context of "holistic" P/CVE exposes a more complex dynamic, which should be taken into account when analyzing gender in counterterrorism.

On the one hand, by decoupling women's victimhood and vulnerability to violent extremist groups from their agency in the context of P/CVE's quest for a "holistic" agenda, different representations of women as vulnerable victims, peaceful moderators, and economic entrepreneurs stand side by side. While expanding traditional security discourses, these representations have exposed continuities with existing development and security agendas of

the UN that have been criticized for instrumentalizing (Global South) women and subordinating gender equality as a goal to the (supposedly) broader goals of security and development.

On the other hand, the simultaneous representations of women as victims, peacemakers, and entrepreneurs create certain tensions stemming from the overlap of previously separate security and development discourses on gender, which imply different levels of power, resources, and agency for presumably the same women. The move to simultaneously decouple and merge different representations crucially relies on the production of the violent extremist threat as local. This discourse allows the P/CVE agenda to become the legitimate outside intervention of third-party international actors, who simultaneously protect and empower women and other informal agents. Women tend to be constructed as objects of (international) policies rather than as agents in their own right.

These findings suggest a need for feminists to further engage with, shape, and critique the P/CVE agenda. Theoretically, the analysis points to an interesting dynamic in P/CVE, whereby gender plays a crucial role in the establishment of a security–development nexus as well as in uncovering the tensions that go with the establishment of such "holistic" aspirations. This analysis could be developed further by tracing the future trajectory of genders in P/CVE or by examining other entities in the UN system. In practice, the tensions between the different representations in the UN's P/CVE discourse, which I have found to act as constraints to women's agency, might also open up spaces for renegotiation at different levels of engagement. Acknowledging the multiplicity of roles for women in P/CVE, as well as the very different levels of power and means of empowerment, the UN discourse potentially enables a more realistic engagement with the diversity of lived experiences. Further analysis should therefore also focus on how the agenda is lived, experienced, and potentially resisted, contested, and (re/de)constructed by those who are often considered to be the peacebuilders, community organizers, enablers, de-radicalizers, victims, economic facilitators, and protectors at its margins.

## Notes

1. In the UN policy discourse, "gender" is commonly equated with "women." This usage disregards the complexity and intersectionality of gender as the "ideological structure that divides people into two classes, men and women, based on a hierarchical relation of domination and subordination, respectively" (Lazar 2008, 7), based on archetypes of femininity and masculinity. In this article, I pay attention to representations of both women and gender equality, through which I assess the gendered discourse of P/CVE. When I speak of "gender" outside of the reproduction of specific documents, I refer to this complex, non-binary, and intersectional understanding of gender.

2. The analysis followed a discourse-analytical tradition, focusing on how different representations of women in the UN's gender policies have resulted in the (re)production of particular relationships between women and the goals of security (and peace) and development. The analytical process was based on a reiterative thematic coding, identifying themes and their relevant stakeholders for each paragraph of the texts and particularly focusing on the ways in which these themes are set in relation to one another and to the goals of security and development. The identified themes ranged from violence through religion to democracy, and also included particular references to security, development, WPS, the SDGs, and gender equality. Stakeholders mentioned ranged from communities through youth and religious organizations to specific UN agencies and member states, and there were also specific references to children, women, men, girls, and the family. The full codebook is available upon request.

3. Publishers of studies and recommendations include international organizations and their agencies (for example, UN Women, UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (UNCTED)), foundations (for example, Berghof, Quilliam, and the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change), NGOs (for example, Saferworld and Futures Without Violence), NGO networks (for example, the Alliance for Peacebuilders), development consultancies (for example, Creative Associates and Governance and Social Development Resource Center (GSDRC)), practitioners' and states' networks (for example, the Global Counterterrorism Forum and Hedayah), national and international think tanks, policy institutes and university research centers (for example, Brookings, the Global Center for Cooperative Security, the United States Institute for Peace, and the Institute for Security Studies Africa), and more.

4. I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for highlighting this aspect in their comments.

## Acknowledgments

## Disclosure statement

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