# Women, Peace and Security and the Prevention of Violence:

## Reflections from Civil Society in the Context of the Fourth Swiss National Action Plan 1325



Street Art by Swoon. Creative Commons

## INTRODUCTION

In the nineteen years since the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000, the role of women and gender within all realms of international peace and security has steadily gained prominence. UNSCR 1325 and the subsequent resolutions which comprise the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda have called for the greater protection of women from sexual and gender-based violence in conflict settings; the promotion of women's participation in peace processes; the prevention of violence against women through the promotion of women's rights and gender equality; and the mainstreaming of gender throughout all realms of peace and security.

UNSCR 2242, the eighth resolution in the WPS framework, was adopted in 2015. Supported by Switzerland, UNSCR 2242 calls for the UN and Member States to integrate the WPS agenda and the counterterrorism (CT) and the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) agendas. The P/CVE agenda, which evolved to supplement but not to replace CT strategies such as military interventions, surveillance, and law enforcement, is comprised of policies and approaches to identify and address the supposed drivers of "terrorism" and "violent extremism," such as social, political, and economic marginalization, weak state-society relations, lack of rule of law, and human rights violations. Initially, the P/CVE agenda, like the CT agenda, was absent any mention of the WPS agenda. However, as the P/CVE agenda has grown and evolved over the last decade, there has been an increasing focus on the role of women's empowerment and gender equality within P/CVE policy and practice. Following the adoption of UNSCR 2242, there has been a surge in P/CVE policy and programming with a "gender perspective" and an increase in calls to link the WPS and P/CVE agendas.

### A Note on Language

The term "P/CVE" is used in this policy brief to denote the broad field of approaches designed to "prevent and counter violent extremism" as well as the slippage between approaches labeled Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE). While Switzerland intentionally uses PVE to emphasize preventative approaches, we use P/CVE to indicate the difficulty of clearly differentiating whether approaches are intended to "counter" or to "prevent." In addition, we recognize that there are no universally agreed upon definitions of "terrorism" or "violent extremism," and that the range of existing definitions are contested and deeply political. In addition, the negative association of "terrorism" and "violent extremism" with the "global war on terror," military interventions, and Islamophobia make these terms undesirable from a peacebuilding or human rights perspective. Given these and other concerns (as detailed below), we avoid using the terms "terrorism" and "violent extremism," unless referring to a specific policy.

Switzerland has responded to UNSCR 2242 and is considering how best to integrate a gender perspective in its Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) agenda. For instance, Switzerland's _Foreign Policy Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism_ (2016) specifically encourages gender mainstreaming in PVE policy and practice, including a gender analysis of the causes of "violent extremism." In addition, the fourth Swiss National Action Plan (NAP) 1325 moves to strengthen the integration of Switzerland's WPS and PVE agendas as it calls for PVE efforts to take into account the rights, needs, and different roles of women in efforts to prevent violence. According to the Swiss NAP 1325, achieving this requires integrating a gender analysis into prevention efforts, as well as collecting and evaluating the wide range of women's experiences in violence prevention and drawing on the knowledge of women and women's organizations. The identification of PVE as a key priority within the "prevention pillar" of the fourth Swiss NAP 1325 prompted Swiss civil society to better understand the potential ramification of integrating the WPS and the P/CVE agendas.

Globally, calls to integrate the WPS and P/CVE agendas have been promoted as necessary to prevent the harms caused by CT and other gender-blind security strategies, which fail to take gender, women, and women's rights into account. Indeed, there has been a great deal of attention on and concern for the negative impact of CT measures on civil society, women's rights, and human rights. For instance in 2009, the adverse impacts of CT on women and human rights were comprehensively documented and presented to the UN General Assembly. A few years later, a ground-breaking report revealed the gendered impacts of the United States' CT policies in the decade since the September 11th attacks. Other studies have demonstrated how CT measures, including financial regulations, shrink the space for women's civil society activism.

In order to mitigate the potential harm of gender-blind security approaches, the UN and Member States have increasingly called for the integration of gender analysis and the promotion of women's rights and gender equality within CT policy and practice. However, there nevertheless remains a great deal of concern regarding the integration of the WPS agenda with the CT and P/CVE agendas. These concerns are summarized below and explored in-depth in the report, _Women, Peace and Security and the Prevention of Violence: Reflections from Civil Society in the Context of the Fourth Swiss National Action Plan 1325_, which is based on extensive desk-based research, interviews, and continuous dialogue with civil society organizations and experts on WPS and P/CVE in Switzerland and around the globe.

## CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE P/CVE AND WPS AGENDA

This policy brief offers an overview of desk-based research and reflections offered by civil society — and women's rights and women-led organizations in particular — on the topic of women, gender, P/CVE, and violence prevention.

**The Issue of Language**

The P/CVE security architecture risks reproducing the masculinist logic of state-centered security approaches if not interrogated from a feminist and gender perspective. In addition, the lack of definitional clarity as to what constitutes "terrorism" and "violent extremism" enables the expansion of states' legal and political powers which pose risks to human rights and contributes to the narrowing of civil society space. Indeed, the UN's _Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism_ recognizes that "violent extremism is a diverse phenomenon, without clear definition" and that it encompasses a "wider category of manifestations" than the term "terrorism." The _Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism_ raises concern that the broadening of security architecture to address "violent extremism" in addition to "terrorism" might result in a "conflation of the two terms" and "may lead to the justification of an overly broad application of counter-terrorism measures, including against forms of conduct that should not qualify as terrorist acts." As such, the P/CVE agenda arguably contributes to enlarging the scope of CT measures. While both "terrorism" and "violent extremism" are undefined and contested concepts, "violent extremism" is generally conceived of as broader than "terrorism" to include speech, ideas, and beliefs. In this way, the adoption of the P/CVE agenda risks expanding the potential for CT measures to be used against a wider spectrum of action and belief, posing risks to human rights including freedom of expression.

**P/CVE as a Donor Driven Agenda**

There are significant discrepancies in the understanding and enactment of P/CVE between policymakers, donors, and grassroots actors. For instance, field research in Kenya revealed that

> "Women's participation in decision-making on issues related to peace and security is essential for challenging patriarchal and male-dominated structures."

community-based actors differentiate between day-to-day P/CVE practices enacted by community-based actors and the P/CVE agenda as enacted by the state or international organizations. The donor-driven P/CVE agenda is referred to as "an industry" that is largely out of touch with the needs of communities, as made of up international organizations "parachuting in" and imposing "top-down" approaches rather than organic solutions generated from the communities themselves. Community-based actors also expressed frustration that short-term funding cycles and programs without properly designed exit strategies or plans for sustainability lead to community mistrust and resentment. The donor-driven P/CVE industry also has particular impact on women-led and women's rights organizations. The majority of women's organizations around the world remain quite small due to challenges in securing necessary funding and, according to a study for Duke Law International Human Rights Clinic and Women Peacemakers Program, these challenges are exacerbated by donor preferences for granting resources to larger international organizations. In addition, the growing prevalence of the P/CVE funding scheme results in organizations reorienting their activities to attract funding, redirecting financial flows toward state-defined security objectives and away from the development of social infrastructure which could reduce gender inequalities, empower women, and increase safety and security for all civilians.

> "Absent comprehensive analysis of the structural dimensions of gender inequalities, gendered assumptions will continue to shape P/CVE policy and programming."

**Shrinking Civil Society Space and Human Rights Violations**

In 2019, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedom while countering terrorism reported that civil society space has been shrinking across the world since the beginning of the "global war on terror" due to the proliferation of security measures designed to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism. Such security measures, including countering terrorism financing (CTF) laws, have come under scrutiny worldwide for how they curtail the work of civil society organizations and contribute to the violation of human rights. CTF laws, which are designed to prevent funds from reaching non-state armed groups designated as "terrorist organizations," have been shown to disproportionately impact the work of women's organizations. For instance, the study by Duke Law International Human Rights Clinic and Women Peacemakers Program found that 90 percent of women's organizations surveyed across 61 countries reported CT measures as impeding their ability to work for women's rights and gender equality and 60 percent feared

prosecution or harassment under CTF measures. This study finds that the impact of CTF laws "has been to circumscribe how, where, and in some cases, even if, women's rights organizations can undertake their core work on mobilizing human rights, gender equality, and advancing the women, peace and security agenda."

In 2015, the global study on the implementation of UNSCR 1325 argued that women-led, women's rights, and human rights organizations are increasingly "squeezed" between the between the violence perpetrated by non-state armed actors, state security forces, and the restrictions of CT and P/CVE security measures. Indeed, there are growing reports of women human right defenders (WHRDs) targeted by repressive governments in the name of "countering terrorism." A 2017 study found that 85 percent of surveyed WHRDs reported the curtailing of women's engagement in political life and a decrease in funding options for women's organizations. The expansive security architecture designed to combat "violent extremism" and "terrorism" poses serious threats to human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief, and contributes to the narrowing of civic space where activists can operate freely and without government oversight. Further, P/CVE approaches have not replaced or transformed the "hard" security tactics of CT; such tactics are not only not abating, but increasing. States continue to employ coercive and violent security approaches, such as extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances, and secret detention, all which contribute to the shrinking of civil society space and the violation of human rights around the world.

**P/CVE and Islamophobia**

Islamophobia — a form of anti-Muslim racism — has been on the rise since the beginning of the "global war on terror." In Switzerland and elsewhere, domestic P/CVE agendas have come under scrutiny for the ways in which they conflate Islam with "violent extremism" and for their often exclusive focus on Muslim communities, even as violence enacted by right wing nationalists and white supremacists is on the rise. Muslims and ethnic minorities assumed to be Muslim face racial profiling and direct violence from security agents and civilians across the globe. Islamophobia is itself a form of structural violence perpetuated by security narratives which homogenize all Muslims into a singular and distorted stereotype, erasing the nuances and diversity which exist among and across Muslim communities and rationalizing violence and discrimination.

Grassroots women's organizations are particularly wary at their inclusion in the P/CVE agenda given its association with national and international security agendas that are specifically targeting Muslim communities or which violate human rights. In addition, Islamophobia has gendered impacts which produce "Muslim women" as a singular, homogenized category, lacking in agency and in need of "saving." In Western nations, women who wear a hijab or other clothing associated with Islam are increasingly victims of hate crimes and discrimination.

## Women's Access to Decision-Making in Peace and Security

Women's participation in decision-making on issues related to peace and security is essential for challenging patriarchal and male-dominated structures. While there has been a great deal of emphasis on promoting women's participation in P/CVE and CT since the endorsement of UNSCR 2242, there remains a disconnect between such policy commitments and the actual practice of women's participation. Further, WPS actors and feminist scholars argue that the rhetorical promotion of women's inclusion in P/CVE largely happens without addressing structural gender inequality which constrains women's political participation in the first place. Nevertheless, field research in Kenya found that community-based women see UNSCR 2242 as a necessary tool with which to argue for their inclusion in decision-making processes for security policy and approaches. Given the critiques of the P/CVE agenda, women — particularly those in grassroots and community-based organizations — must be part of the evolution and implementation of security strategies within their given context in order to ensure that such strategies are reflective of the gendered realities on the ground and account for the specific gendered harms that women face.

## Instrumentalization of Women's Rights and Gender Equality

While UNSCR 2242 provides women an opportunity to argue for their inclusion in development and implementation of P/CVE security approaches, merely having women part of decision-making processes is not in and of itself transformative. One of the largest critiques of linking the WPS and the P/CVE agendas concerns the instrumentalization of women's empowerment and gender equality as tools for national security, rather than as ends in themselves and without the sustained material support and structural changes actually needed to improve women's lives. Ensuring that women's participation is meaningful and contributes to transforming security approaches in line with WPS objectives of women's empowerment and gender equality requires more than the rhetorical inclusion of women and gender in CT and P/CVE policy. National policy must reflect the needs of communities and promote security as defined by local women peacebuilders and women's rights activists within a given context; having grassroots women both participate in the design and implementation of security approaches and promote feminist objectives can contribute to this goal.

## Gender Stereotypes and the P/CVE Agenda

Programming on women's participation in P/CVE can reaffirm gender stereotypes which constrain rather than expand women's political agency. Absent comprehensive analysis of the structural dimensions of gender inequalities, gendered assumptions will continue to shape P/CVE policy and programming. Assumptions about women's inherent passivity lead to the belief that women, and mothers in particular, are better suited to participate in prevention activities within their homes and communities. However, there are important critiques of programs designed to build the capacity of mothers as agents of prevention. Insisting that women are naturally suited to detect and prevent their children from engaging in violence risks placing sole responsibility on the mother if her child does join a non-state armed group or perpetrate violence. Programs designed to train mothers as P/CVE agents risk instrumentalizing the discourse of women's empowerment without ensuring the structural changes necessary to address gendered power dynamics and underlying gender inequalities. Promoting women's role as P/CVE agents in their homes and communities further relegates their participation to the private, domestic sphere rather than incorporating women in broader political processes which determine the design and implementation of security measures. Arguments for women's participation in political processes and security structures should not reduce women to their utility, but should instead be grounded in their rights as political subjects and human beings, resulting in a widening rather than a narrowing of their political agency.

> "Ensuring that women's participation is meaningful and contributes to transforming security approaches in line with WPS objectives of women's empowerment and gender equality requires more than the rhetorical inclusion of women and gender in CT and P/CVE policy."

## Women's Agency and Gendered Harms in the Context of "Violent Extremism"

Women play diverse roles and have a range of experiences, including as perpetrators, victims, agents of prevention, and peacebuilders. However, this broad range of agency is often not sufficiently accounted for in P/CVE policy and programming, leading to additional gendered harms. While violence deemed "terrorism" or "violent extremism" remains overwhelmingly perpetrated by men, women are increasingly participating as direct perpetrators and combatants, sympathizers, and mobilizers of non-state armed violence. Given that women's participation in non-state armed groups is largely understood to be aberrant, security approaches overwhelmingly lack an understanding of the gender dynamics of non-state armed groups.

In addition to women's recruitment to and participation in non-state armed groups, women also experience a wide range of harm as returnees from such groups. While there is increasing attention to the gendered dimensions of women's return — and in particular the issue of sexual slavery and the trafficking of women and girls by non-state armed groups — the challenges facing women returnees remain largely unaccounted for in P/CVE policy and programming. The failure to account for gendered differences among returnees poses serious risks to women and girls including economic consequences, lack of adequate reproductive and mental health care, increased stigmatization from communities, lack of opportunities, and re-recruitment. The gaps and challenges related to the disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration of women and girls returned from non-state armed groups must be addressed to prevent further harm. The knowledge and experiences of women's civil society organizations already working with such individuals is crucial in this context.

### Swiss Civil Society Advocacy on WPS and Violence Prevention: The Importance of Political Dialogue at all Levels

In Switzerland, civil society has been instrumental in the implementation of the Swiss National Action Plan (NAP) 1325. Monitoring of the previous three NAPs resulted in the publication of the independent alternative report *Women, Peace and Security: Reloaded*. This report offered a critical and comprehensive reflection of Switzerland's implementation of the WPS agenda and identified thematic areas which require civil society's sustained attention, including the integration of the WPS and P/CVE agendas. Therefore, in the context of the fourth Swiss NAP 1325, three civil society organizations — PeaceWomen Across the Globe (PWAG), the Swiss Platform for Peacebuilding KOFF at swisspeace, and cfd: The Feminist Peace Organization — jointly lead a project to capitalize on the already existing knowledge and expertise within civil society regarding women, gender, violence prevention, and the P/CVE agenda. In order to do this, an in-depth research study was designed in Kenya; these findings were then reflected in other contexts, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Kyrgyzstan, Mali, Palestine, Philippines, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Together, these findings, along with desk-based research, comprised the basis for policy dialogue with Swiss parliamentarians and Swiss state institutions in the realm of peace and security in order to raise awareness of WPS and to communicate concerns regarding the P/CVE agenda.

On September 18, 2019, an international conference was held in Bern, Switzerland, to provide a space for state and civil society actors to come together to discuss issues related to the P/CVE agenda and the militarization and securitization of the WPS agenda. This forum enabled the experiences of civil society actors working directly on the topic to reach policymakers and security actors. Importantly, this conference facilitated constructive dialogue among a range of actors who are rarely in conversation, including military officers, peacebuilding, women's rights, and human rights organizations, high-ranking representatives of the Swiss government, and members of Parliament.

Fostering continuous and constructive dialogue between civil society and state actors is essential to establishing policies which best reflect the needs of communities and which have the greatest chance of preventing violence and contributing to sustainable peace. Furthermore, it is also important to establish the relevance of WPS at the domestic level. Since 2018, advocacy by Swiss civil society has resulted in four Swiss Parliamentarians becoming "1325 Ambassadors," and making interpellations to the Parliament on issues related to Switzerland's exportation of arms and the gendered impacts of the weapons trade; the need to promote women's rights and gender equality in violence prevention; and the importance of promoting women's meaningful political participation. Such advocacy is essential to the success of the WPS agenda and the effective prevention of violence.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on desk-based research, a field study in Kenya, and dialogue with civil society actors in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Kyrgyzstan, Mali, Palestine, Philippines, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, the following policy recommendations were formulated. Switzerland, as an implementer of the Swiss NAP 1325, as a donor agency in international cooperation and funder of strategic partners, and as an influencer of like-minded countries, should:

1. **Increase funding and promotion of the WPS agenda** and invest in flexible, long-term funding of programs to address underlying drivers of violent conflict, including gender inequality. If funding violence prevention programming within WPS funding streams, Switzerland should ensure that such programming is holistic, grounded in principles of peacebuilding and human rights, and which promotes community-led definitions of security.

2. **Promote and require gender analysis** prior to the design and implementation of any programming related to violence prevention in order to understand the specific gendered dynamics of violent conflict, including the role of masculinities in both the prevention and perpetration of violence. Switzerland should be cautious to not promote violence prevention programming which reinforces gender stereotypes or unduly burdens women or mothers with the sole responsibility of preventing their children from engaging in violence.

3. **Enhance responsible donor behavior** by ensuring that funding for violence prevention programming is flexible and long-term and that the program design is based on comprehensive and holistic country-needs assessments community-needs assessments. Switzerland should ensure that any P/CVE programs it funds have carefully designed exit strategies and plans for sustainability, and allow for language organic to the context.

4. **Promote community-led definitions of security**, particularly as defined by women and other discriminated against or marginalized groups. Switzerland should not fund programming which prioritizes state security or the protection of transnational industries at the expense of community security, and should promote the importance of community-led definitions of security at the international level.

5. **Address negative connotations and impacts of the P/CVE agenda**, including the issue of shrinking civil society space and human rights violations caused by CT and P/CVE legislation and practice by funding and supporting civil society organizations working on violence prevention that reflects the needs of communities and that is grounded in the principles of peacebuilding and human rights. Switzerland should remain mindful about the promotion of Islamophobia and avoid using the vague and incoherent language of "terrorism" and "violence extremism" and instead promote language which contributes to violence prevention and conflict transformation.

6. **Invest in research on returnees** to better understand the process of disengagement, rehabilitation, and rehabilitation for returnees, with particular attention to the gendered harms that women face in the process of returning from or being associated with non-state armed groups. Switzerland should support civil society organizations, and in particular women's organizations, working with returnees in developing effective measures to reintegrate returnees and assist their families.

7. **Critically assess participation in the arms industry** and acknowledge that the P/CVE agenda risks contributing to the growth of the security industry, including the small arms and light weapons industry. Switzerland should not engage in the sale of any weapons which are used, at any point after the purchase, to perpetrate human rights violations or which contribute to instability and violent conflict.

## About

In cooperation with the:

Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

**Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA**