



Helpdesk Research Report

Women and violent extremism

Becky Carter

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Question

Review the available literature on women and violent extremism: What role have women played in preventing, promoting and participating in violent extremist groups and violent extremist acts over the last 15 years? What is the relationship between violent extremism and violence against women and girls?

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1. Overview

This report synthesises a rapid review of the literature on women and violent extremism,¹ looking at women's roles in violent extremist groups and acts over the last 15 years, and at the relationship between violent extremism and violence against women and girls.

While gender has tended to be ignored in the literature on terrorism and political violence, a gender perspective of violent extremism has started to receive media and academic attention recently, driven by an increasing awareness of the roles of women in preventing, promoting and participating in violent extremism. The literature is coming from the separate fields of terrorism and counter-terrorism studies

¹ One of the experts consulted for the research raises the important point that the terms 'violent extremism' is problematic: who defines what is extremism and what is violence? Other terms used in the literature, such as terrorism and counter-terrorism, are also contested. Given the limitations of the scope of this rapid review, this point is noted but terms are used as found in the literature without attempting to define them.

and feminist and gender studies.² Experts identify the need for more systematic research on gender implications in terrorism and counter-terrorism studies (Jackson et al., 2011).

The key findings from the literature are the following:

Women's role in preventing violent extremism

- Counter-terrorism interventions have tended to ignore gender perspectives
- Women's roles – as 'policy shapers, educators, community members and activists' (OSCE, 2013, p. 2) – in countering violent extremism have started to be recognised
- The capacity of women to react to extremism varies greatly
- Various initiatives funded by international government and non-governmental organisations aim to support women's role in preventing violent extremism, including by working with local grassroots women's organisations
- There are mixed messages on the desirability of using stereotypes (such as emphasising women's maternal role) in counter-terrorism narratives.

Women's promotion of violent extremism

- Women's potential for terrorist radicalisation and involvement has tended to be underestimated
- There is growing recognition that women's complex roles may involve supporting or encouraging violent extremism.

Women's participation in violent extremism

- There has been a rise in women's direct engagement in violent extremist acts, notably as suicide bombers, in the last thirty years for secular and (more recently) religious violent extremist groups
- A large body of literature explores the drivers for women to become suicide bombers, with mixed findings on their motivations
- While typically represented as 'deviants, monsters or victims' by the media and academia, some experts find that the women tend to join violent extremist groups for much the same, complex reasons as men
- Experts identify a need for further research into terrorist radicalisation of women.

The relationship between violent extremism and violence against women and girls

- There appears to be a lack of systematic research exploring this relationship. There are some insights into different facets of this relationship in the literature:
 - Cultures of gender-based violence can be exacerbated during conflict, and violent extremist groups tend to be operating in environments characterised by conflict
 - Violent extremists with conservative or reactionary gender agendas are likely to victimise women, and there are multiple examples of violent extremist groups targeting women and girls for acts of violence
 - Sexual violence and rape are a form of terrorism and used as a tool by violent extremists, notably towards women and girls (but men have also been victims and women have also been perpetrators)

² There is related literature on women and peace-building and women and war, and from security and policing studies which has not been included in this review.

- Counter-terrorism measures may lead governments to fail to prevent or punish gender-based abuses
- There are mixed findings on whether personal trauma, most notably rape, is one of the fundamental motivations for women's involvement in violent extremism
- Some experts raise issues in seeing all women as victims of violent extremism, arguing that this essentialist view does not reflect the more complex reality.

2. Gender perspective in research on violent extremism

While much has been written on the subject of terrorism, particularly since September 2001, gaps remain in the understanding of violent extremism, insurgency, and the role of gender³ (USAID, 2011, p. 4).

Gender has tended to be ignored in the literature on terrorism and political violence (Jackson et al, 2011, p.146-147). CHRJ (2011, p. 13) finds the gender dimensions and impacts of US counter-terrorism measures are also 'largely undocumented and significantly under-theorized'.

Practical difficulties for researchers affect the state of knowledge on violent extremism in general and including the role of women. Governments are wary of disclosing sensitive information. Policymakers and officials do not always have the time required for detailed research when they are confronting a rapidly evolving terrorist threat and the responsibility to protect citizens from future attacks. (Fink and El-Said, 2011, p. 28-29)

Recently there has been growing awareness of the need for a better understanding of the role of gender as both a brake and driver of violent extremism (USAID, 2011, p. 4). A **gender perspective of violent extremism has 'gained ground in academic and media discourse'** (Hearne, 2009, p. 2).

There are **growing bodies of literature** on 1) female suicide terrorism, linked to the rise of the female suicide bomber (Jackson et al., 2011, p 143-144) and 2) the gendered nature of the war on terror (Pratt, 2012). The literature comes from separate academic disciplines: terrorism and counter-terrorism studies and feminist and gender studies.

There have been **new landmark initiatives** such as the first global study into how the U.S. government's counter-terrorism efforts profoundly implicate and impact women and sexual minorities (Center for Human Rights and Global Justice (CHRJ), 2011) and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) two expert roundtables (2011-2012) and report of recommendations on women and terrorist radicalisation (OSCE, 2013).

Nonetheless, Jackson et al.'s (2011) assessment of political terror and its study concludes there is a **need for more systematic research in the terrorism studies field, and in particular a need to take gender much more seriously in terrorism research** (p. 95-96). They call for exploration of a number of important topics including examining:

- 'the gendered nature of the terrorism studies field itself, the kinds of masculinised forms of knowledge it produces and the silences it contains about women, gender and gendered identities;
- the role of masculinity in terrorist and counter-terrorist violence;
- the various perspectives, motivations, ambitions, goals and political agency of female participants in terrorism, counter-terrorism and political violence more broadly;

³ Noting that the literature highlights that 'gender is not synonymous with 'sex' or women' (CHRJ, 2011, p. 26): gender is 'relevant to men as well as women, given that gender (and feminism) is as much about men and masculinity as it is about women and femininity' (Jackson et al, 2011, p. 144-145).

- a gender-sensitive perspective towards militant groups and movements, and how women join, mediate, subvert and resist such movements;
- comparative research on women in different societies who join terrorist and counter-terrorist groups; and
- the impact of counter-terrorist measures on women and children’.

3. Women’s role in preventing violent extremism

Increasing recognition of women’s roles

CHRGJ (2011, p. 13) reports **the failure over the last decade of the United States’ ‘War on Terror’ to consider either the differential impacts of counter-terrorism on women, men, and sexual minorities or the ways in which such measures use and affect gender stereotypes**. This is part of a wider problem: Fink (2010, p. 1) finds that ‘international initiatives to counter terrorism and militancy have more often than not been directed at the military aspects of such threats, with insufficient attention paid to the specific context—the social, political, and regional dynamics—in which they evolve’.

In recent years the special **potential of women in countering violent extremism has started to be recognised**. This is linked to what Aldritch (2012, abstract) reports to be the adoption of a more holistic approach to understanding terrorism and counter-terrorism which aims to push military responses ‘downstream’, focusing on the re-integration of marginalised communities and locally-based counter-narratives.

The OSCE finds that the **involvement of women as ‘policy shapers, educators, community members and activists’** is essential to prevent terrorism (OSCE, 2013, p. 2). It emphasises that women can ‘provide crucial feedback on the counter-terrorism efforts of the international community, pointing out when preventive policies and practices are having counterproductive impacts on their communities’, and they are ‘effective undertakers of initiatives and shapers of narratives to counter violent extremist and terrorist propaganda and may carry special weight with women audiences’ (OSCE, 2013, p. 2).

Participants of a EU workshop on *Effective Programming for Countering Violent Extremism* found that women can **de-mystify the life of a terrorist** by speaking about the hardships involved such as those of separation, insecurity, loss of income, and anxiety about a covert life. In addition, women who are victims or survivors of terrorism **compel media attention and public sympathy**, making them ‘a powerful voice for use against terrorism and violent extremism’ (Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation (CGCC), 2012, p. 8).

Participants in the Women Without Borders/Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) 2010 workshop in Yemen make the point that the **capacity of women to spot and react to extremism in their families ranges greatly** based on levels of education, local awareness, and geographic remoteness. They report that mothers, especially those with less formal education, struggle to recognize the warning signs, as they may perceive their children as merely becoming more religious and often consider the change to be positive. (SAVE, 2010)

Recent research initiatives may improve understanding of the role of women in preventing violent extremism. For example, case studies such as Van Lierde’s (2013) publication covers the stories of six devout Indonesian Muslim women, looking at how they contribute to combating violence in their communities and communicating values to young people (Van Lierde, 2013). Another initiative is reported by Aldritch (2012, p. 49) who reports that the USAID, the Department of State, and the

Department of Defence have started to undertake randomised field experiments to understand the impact of their counter-terrorism programmes.

Interventions

Various initiatives aim to support women's role in the prevention of violent extremism. Examples include:

- The world's first female counter-terrorism platform Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) platform was launched by Women without Borders in 2008 and is currently operating in Yemen, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Israel, Palestine, and Northern Ireland.⁴ SAVE runs a *Mothers for Change!* campaign which encourages and empowers mothers, strategically placed at the centre of the family unit, to take a stand against ideologies of violent extremism in their homes and communities (Women without Borders/Save, 2010).
- The Institute for Inclusive Security and the US Institute of Peace programme support Pakistani women to (1) advocate for policies at the national and international level to address the drivers and consequences of extremism, and (2) conduct peace-building activities at the local level with outreach to youth groups, civil society organizations, the media, religious leaders and educators (Chatellier, 2012).

OSCE (2013, p. 11-12) makes **multiple recommendations for OSCE member states on how to improve their counter-terrorism interventions to take into account women's potential role** in preventing violent extremism. The recommendations focus on the importance of supporting women's small grassroots organisations; providing safe spaces and platforms to share resources, experiences and tools for facing violent radicalization; and engaging women in all stages of counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation strategies, policies and measures, with impacts monitored through specific gender benchmarks.

Stereotypes

Recent literature identifies that terrorism and counter-terrorism narratives have both **mobilised and reinforced stereotypes around men, women, and sexual minorities**. Looking at statements by the US government, CHRGI (2011, p. 26) reports that while there is some recognition that women are both agents and drivers of change in their communities, sometimes 'the United States government relies on the stereotype that women are inherently more peaceful and moderate influences in a community as the basis for seeking their inclusion in national security efforts'. CHRGI (2012) finds that such stereotypes can either side-line women in efforts to combat violent extremism or lead to their inclusion in ways that may perpetuate these stereotypes.

4. Women's role in promoting violent extremism

OSCE (2013) finds that the **understanding of women terrorist radicalisation is characterised by misconceptions and tends to be underestimated**. Terrorist organisations have targeted women for recruitment for decades, but violent extremism and terrorist radicalisation is persistently misconceived to be a male issue.

CGCC (2012, p. 3) finds that women can be **ideologues and supporters of violent extremism**. Fink's (2011) study of terrorism, political violence and governance in Bangladesh finds a **worrying trend emerging of Bangladeshi women supporting or encouraging jihad**, with women targeted in recruitment

⁴ <http://www.women-without-borders.org/save/>

drives, as they arouse less suspicion and can engage in community outreach efforts with greater access to families (p. 13). Von Knop (2007) looks at the multifaceted **roles of the women in the movement of Al Qaeda** and finds that female involvement is at a formative stage but it is on the rise, with women following a gender-specific interpretation of the radical ideology, the female Jihad, by acting as facilitators, supporters, and educators for the movement.

The 2011 USAID policy on the *Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency* has highlighted the **need for local research and assessment to understand the drivers of violent extremism and insurgency**. The policy specifies that in their assessments, missions should consider the role of women vis-à-vis drivers and development responses (USAID, 2011, p. 9).

5. Women's role in participating in violent extremism

Rising participation

According to OSCE (2013, p. 1-2) the threat of women's terrorist radicalisation is now being taken seriously because of the **recent violent extremist attacks perpetrated by women and intelligence gathered on terrorist efforts to recruit women**. While noting that women had been involved in separatist struggles before the cold war (Ness, 2007), experts report that female participation in suicide attacks has expanded 'ideologically, logistically and regionally' during the last thirty years, in conflict regions such as the Middle East, the North Caucasus, and South Asia (Dearing, 2010, p. 1081, quoting Cunningham, 2003). Women's participation has evolved from auxiliary roles supporting their male counterparts, to gathering intelligence, providing healthcare, and maintaining safe houses, to direct engagement in violent acts, including suicide bombings (Hearne, 2009, p. 1).

The literature provides **statistical estimates of women's participation in suicide bombings**. Bloom (2011, p.2) reports that between 1985 and 2010, female bombers committed over 257 suicide attacks (representing about a quarter of the total) on behalf of many different terrorist organisations, and that the percentage of women since 2002 in some countries exceeds as much as 50 percent of the operatives. Ness (2007) estimates that girls and women now make up 30 to 40 percent of the combatants in numerous ethnic separatist/guerrilla struggles.

The literature notes the **recent development of religious terrorist groups, previously deterred by specific ideology from encouraging female participation, to use violence by women and girls** (Ness, 2007). Dearing (2010, p. 1079) lists suicide attacks involving women by groups such as Hamas and Fatah in Israel, Chechen separatists in Russia, Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka, Islamic militants in Uzbekistan, Kurdish separatists in Turkey, Syrian nationalists in Lebanon, and recently, militant groups in Pakistan. He also notes that the global *Salafi-jihadist* movement has also influenced many of the most recent female suicide missions by groups in Iraq, Somalia, and Chechnya (Ibid.).

Jackson et al. (2011, p. 157-158) highlight that there have also been a **number of all-women armed organisations** (e.g. an all-women right-wing Norwegian organisation) and **women's wings of armed organisations** (e.g. *Vituthalai Pulikal Makalir Muani* – Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers).

Afghanistan is identified as an exception: ninety-nine percent of suicide attacks in Afghanistan have been carried out by men (Dearing, 2010, p. 1081). Dearing (2010, abstract) explains the low propensity for female suicide bombers in Afghanistan as arising from the insurgents' freedom of mobility and resistance capacity that reduces the need for female suicide bombers, a fiercely conservative culture that

restricts female participation in both Afghan society and within insurgent organizations and the absence of a female culture of martyrdom.

Drivers

There is a **large body of literature exploring the drivers for women's participation in violent extremism**, with some mixed findings. Experts come to varied conclusions on whether and to what extent the women involved are 'pawns, victims or agents' (Jackson et al., 2011). Jackson et al. (2011) provides a useful review and synthesis of this literature.

Women who are involved in violent acts are often depicted as the exception that proves the rule that women are inherently peaceful and less prone to violence by their nature than men (Jackson et al, 2011, p. 144-145). Those that participate in violent extremism are typically represented in the media and academia as '**deviant women, monsters or victims to be rescued**' (Sjoberg and Gantry, 2007, quoted in Jackson et al 2011, p. 144-145).

In a 2010 review of mainstream and feminist thinking on women as agents of violence, Gentry argues that these are **stereotypes linked to public-private gendered conceptualisations and a power structure** which create values of what is expected from a man and a woman: 'men are the (public sphere) actors that are gendered toward the possibility of violent action ...; 'proper' women within the private sphere are gendered to be non-violent or peaceful actors' (Gentry, 2010, p. 7446). Women who operate outside the prescribed roles for their gender are denied agency or rationality (Gentry, 2010; expert comment, e-mail communication, 12.03.13). Gentry concludes that the portrayals and understandings of political violence in the global context continue to subordinate women with the construction of gender deflecting away from the realities of various power dynamics (Gentry, 2010, p. 7459).

Zia (2011) warns against aims to 'rescue the subaltern Islamist woman' **tending to over-emphasise their agency**. She examines the rise of female suicide bombings in Pakistan and concludes that given the overall patriarchal discourse, and violence against and marginalisation of women by tribal communities, it is difficult to read the trend of women suicide-bombers as a sign of self-realisation and autonomy.

A number of experts find that the **situation and the motives of women undertaking suicide missions are complex**, arguing that women who commit this type of violence 'are driven by the organisation of their social world, which is predicated on a host of structural arrangements and deeply felt moral beliefs' (Hearne, 2009, p. 87). Jackson et al (2011, p. 165) highlight that studies have shown that overall women made the decision to join armed organisations for much the same reasons as men (citing Alison's 2009 study of women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's and armed organisations in Northern Ireland). Women's motivations can include: 'adherence to a particular political ideology, such as nationalism; grievance and concern with injustice; avenging personal bereavement; a desire to improve one's social status; and a desire to change society for the better' (Jackson et al, 2011, p. 165).

From the side of the violent extremist groups, Bloom (2007, p. 99) finds that **recruiting female suicide bombers can be a tactical response** to the need for more manpower and can be used to shame men into participating. Jackson et al (2011, p. 161-162) report that terrorist organisations also take advantage of the extra media attention attracted by female bombers, the 'invisibility' of women, presumptions of their non-violence and, in some societies, a reluctance to subject women to intimate searches. Bloom (2007, p. 101) finds that female converts married to Muslim men (increasingly among female bombers in Iraq) are a particularly dangerous group, not only because they can evade most profiles, but also because they carry European passports and garner a lot of media attention.

The literature also explores the **'certain mystique'** that sometimes surrounds female terrorists (Jackson et al, 2011, p. 160) with some commentators finding that women terrorists can be more ruthless and more efficient than their male counterparts (p. 160-161).

Recommendations

The OSCE (2013, p. 11) makes a number of **recommendations for understanding and preventing women's involvement in violent extremism:**

- 'Increase awareness of women terrorist radicalisation and women involvement in terrorism, encouraging the sensitisation of parents, teachers, social workers, frontline police officers, journalists and judges to dispel stereotypes and misconceptions.
- Allow and support research into women terrorist radicalisation, especially factors conducive to it, and women's logistical and ideological roles in terrorist groups.
- Increase interaction and exchange of information with researchers on women terrorist radicalization to facilitate the information of policy-making through research findings'.

6. Violent extremism and violence against women and girls

There appears to be limited systematic research exploring the relationship between violent extremism and violence against women and girls. Nonetheless the literature offers insights into: 1) the violence against women in conflict environments, 2) women as targets for violent extremists, 3) sexual violence and rape as a form of terrorism, 4) the impact of some counter-terrorism measures, 5) the relationship between women who have experienced violence and their involvement in violent extremism, and 6) deconstructing the view of women as victims in the war on terror.

Violence against women in conflict environments

Contexts where violent extremist groups are operating tend to be environments characterised by conflict. Where cultures of gender-based violence and gender discrimination exist prior to conflict and transition, they will be exacerbated during conflict (Sigsworth, 2008, 2007). Sigsworth (2008, p. 7) reports that during and in the aftermath of conflict women are targeted with forms of sexual violence (including: mass rape, forced pregnancy, forced prostitution, forced marriage, and sexual slavery) and also face domestic violence, extreme economic vulnerability, and secondary victimisation through institutions such as the criminal justice system.

On the one hand the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Fourth World Conference on Women) states that 'while entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict, [political instability] and terrorism, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex' (Sigsworth, 2008, p. 4). On the other, Jackson et al (2011) explain that under humanitarian law, women are not deemed to be especially vulnerable by virtue of simply being women, (men as the majority of combatants are more likely to be harmed), though their vulnerability in certain circumstances (e.g. pregnancy, responsibility for young children) is recognised.

Women as targets for violence

Violent extremists are seen as being most likely to victimise women because of their often conservative or reactionary gender agendas (expert comment, e-mail communication, 12.03.13). CGCC (2012, p. 8)

identifies that the effects of violent extremism on women can be seen in efforts to limit girls' access to education, curtailing access to healthcare and services and perpetrating acts of violence. CHRJG (2011 p. 23) reports that there are countless incidents of terrorists undermining the rights of women and sexual minorities. Examples include:

- the attack on Malala Yousafzai in Pakistan by the Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Swat, Pakistan (CGCC, 2012);
- the subjection of women to rape, forced marriage and beheading by the Al-Shabaab in Somalia (CHRJG, 2011, p. 23); and
- the brutality to women in north of Mali by the Al-Qaeda jihadists, through rape and forced marriage and prostitution (Masters, 2013).

Hardy (2001) highlights that violent extremist groups may also target female victims for their violent acts, because of the emotional impact of female casualties. She cites the example that the American Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, was specifically targeted in 1998 by Al-Qaeda operatives because the Ambassador was a woman.

Sexual violence and rape as a form of terrorism

Jackson et al (2011) provide a review of how **sexual violence and rape are a form of terrorism**, and a prominent feature of on-going fighting by violent groups. Examples include:

- Rebel groups and militias in the Democratic Republic of Congo often mark their victories by systematically raping women, children and men in the dominated territory. The use of rape in the DRC has been described by aid agencies as sexual terrorism (Jackson et al, 2011, p. 169-170, citing Pratt and Werchick, 2004).
- Dershowitz's assertion that in 2007 a group of Palestinian terrorists claiming to act in retaliation against Israel had been raping young teenage Israeli girls (Jackson et al 2011, p. 171, citing Dershowitz, 2007).

Jackson et al (2011) also note that while men are the most frequent perpetrators of gender-based terror, women have also participated and men have been victims (p. 173-174).

Impact of some counter-terrorism measures

The U.N. Special Rapporteur states that 'those subject to gender-based abuses are often caught between targeting by terrorist groups and the **State's counter-terrorism measures that may fail to prevent, investigate, prosecute or punish these acts and may also perpetrate new human rights violations with impunity**' (CHRJG, 2011, p. 60) and that 'some Governments have used gender inequality to counter terrorism, employing the rights of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex individuals as a bartering tool to appease terrorist or extremist groups in ways that have furthered unequal gender relations and subjected such persons to increased violence' (CHRJG, 2011, p. 24).

Women who have experienced violence

Some experts argue that **personal trauma, most notably rape, is one of the fundamental motivations behind a woman's involvement in violent extremism**. Looking at experiences in Palestine and Iraq, Bloom (2010, p. 449) argues that 'occupation forces must become aware that the imprisonment, harassment, and torture of women will likely be used as cannon fodder for terrorist organizations to recruit more fighters and will increase the likelihood of women joining the resistance movements'. In Bloom (2007), she states that the women who participate in suicide bombings are usually among the

most socially vulnerable: widows and rape victims. She goes on to report that in some instances **women are raped or sexually abused by the insurgents** themselves as a recruitment tactic, as this stigmatises the women and making them easier to exploit (Bloom, 2007).

De Knop (2007) reports that a contributing factor driving the Chechen women to terrorism was their desire to regain their personal or family honour following their routine rape by Russian soldiers. However other experts have profiled the women involved in the Chechen cases and found no evidence of routine rape (Speckhard and Akhmedova, no date). De Knop (2007) also reports that in Sri Lanka, terrorism is often seen as a viable option for Tamil women who are survivors of sexual violence, as their social disgrace prevents them from getting married or bearing children.

As explored in the previous section, other experts (Gentry, 2010) argue that identifying personal trauma, and notably rape, as one of the fundamental motivations behind a woman's involvement in violent extremism, is to **perpetuate gendered notions and deny women's agency**.

Deconstructing the view of women as victims

Jackson et al (2011, p.1 168-169) point out that **women's roles as victims in wars are used as propaganda** and 'the war on terrorism has been constructed and portrayed in ways that uphold the view of women as victims of violence in need of protection by men' (Jackson et al, 2011, 168-169).

One expert contacted (expert comment, e-mail communication, 12.03.13) explains some issues with an approach that assumes all women are victims of violent extremism in that:

- 'it may marginalise the other targets of violent extremists (gay men, religious minorities);
- it marginalises those women who may, for different reasons, accept conservative gender agendas; and
- it can reduce 'violent extremism' to the ideologies of particular groups without considering other contingent factors, such as, intra-group rivalry for political authority'.

Salime (2007) argues that understanding the gender dynamics of the war on terrorism entails shifting the lens away from its impact on women and gender policies, and focusing instead on **women's contributions in reshaping the discourse of the war on terror and using it for political gains**. Her sociological analysis explores the way Moroccan women's groups strategically positioned themselves vis-à-vis the war on terrorism agenda. This approach allows her to identify the ways women have co-opted the agendas and narratives of the war on terrorism in order to pursue their long-standing demands for reforming women's status in law, society, and religion.

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Key websites

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- SAVE - Sisters Against Violent Extremism <http://www.women-without-borders.org/save/people/>

Expert contributors

- Jenny Birchall, IDS
- Mavic Cabrera-Balleza, Global Network of Women Peacebuilders
- Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Center of Global Counterterrorism Cooperation
- Caron Gentry, University of St. Andrews
- Jessica Horn, IDS
- Jayne Huckerby, NYU School of Law Center for Human Rights and Global Justice
- Nicola Pratt, University of Warwick
- Kirsten Wall, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies
- Gabriella Vogelaar, Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict

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