

Women & Preventing Violent Extremism at the Grassroots Level

Photo credit: [UK Department for International Development](#)

By Kristen Cordell – April 8, 2016

Here in Pakistan, [Mossarat Qadeem](#), founder of [Paiman Trust](#), is working at the grassroots level with [women, such as mothers, and Madrassa teachers](#), empowering them to take a stand against violent extremism in their communities. She is advocating for a preventative approach to the type of violent tragedy that recently unfolded in [Lahore](#), where the majority of the 70 victims were women and children.

During this year's [Commission on the Status of Women](#) in March, the role of women as “victims” of violent extremist was a contested subject. Many international civil society activists — long active in the women, peace, and security space — are divided on new policy frameworks to counter and prevent violent extremism. Those who do not support efforts to link gender and preventing violence often argue that efforts to engender countering violent extremism (CVE) result in [instrumentalizing](#) or [securitizing](#) women — making the “women as victims” narrative stronger.

This debate thunders on, making the discussion on gender equality and CVE uniquely contentious and polarizing. International civil society and academics have gone so far as to suggest that policymakers should abandon their efforts to address gender within CVE.

Yet, here in Pakistan, there is no time for esoteric debate, as the fight against violent extremism continues with women like Qadeem in the lead. She and others like her know that women are far more than victims. In Pakistan, women are active in the [security sector protecting their communities; leading peaceful movements against violence](#); and of course, as violent extremists (as illustrated in San Bernardino)

This plurality of roles, this need to understand and integrate the needs of women, was represented by Under Secretary Sarah Sewall during her [remarks at a European Union-hosted panel on Policy Practices to Counter Extremism during the Commission on the Status of Women last month](#). Sewall stated that advocates for gender equality must embrace multilateral efforts to address violent extremism.

“Seize the moment,” Sewall advocated. “Take an active role in shaping the emerging PVE architecture.” Her reference to PVE (*preventing* violent extremism) and not CVE was a nod to the United Nations secretary general's [Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism](#), debated in the UN General Assembly in February and again up for [debate at the Human Rights Council in Geneva on April 7–8](#).

Prevention prioritizes resilience-building measures to empower communities. Prevention offers a common ground which engages women early and often in determining need and creating solutions to their communities' most entrenched challenges (including violent extremism). Prevention offers a space to empower women to speak out against violent extremist narratives and “[with independence and authenticity](#),” according to Sewall.

Improving efforts in prevention means understanding communities. Here's where the academic community becomes critical. To prevent violence, policymakers must truly *understand* community dynamics, which are deeply contextual. Inherent to this understanding is a thorough conception of the diverse needs of men, women, boys and girls — again, in a deeply context-specific way. As articulated by a recent report by the [Women's Alliance for Security Leadership](#), this includes the “[hopes and aspirations of the moderate majority](#),” as opposed to polarity and stereotypes (women as fighters, women as victims).

Prevention embraces the gray area, and seeks to understand be guided by it. According to Qadeem, a focus on prevention means teaching women the warning signs of radicalization and violence, and how to respond. When “women are engaged in the earliest signs, they are empowered to ask hard questions [of their sons, brothers and husbands].”

There are many that remain unconvinced. Two weeks ago, for example, at the London School of Economics launch of the program on Women, Peace, and Security these critiques took center stage. A [keynote speech by Dr. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin](#) cited the “real risks” and “dangers” of addressing gender within the P/CVE space and called on policymakers to “be wary” of any engagement.

This language is a direct impediment to our collective and inclusive efforts to prevent violence. It is not supportive of women like Qadeem, doing the work on the ground — fully *living* the nuances that academics tend to gloss over. Policymakers must empower these activists.

To continue to ensure women have the resources to do this critical work, we must cooperate to document its relevance and output. On a practical level, this means continuing to invest in research that looks at the critical link between the goals of the international community for gender equality and overarching state stability. [Valerie Hudson's watershed work](#) in this space is a great example of the positive role of academic research in mobilizing quality policy. Not as detractors, but instead as advocates.

Research must engage both the academy as well as policymakers, to ensure strong gender analysis of context. A [recent journal article](#) by Sarah Davies provides a strong roadmap. Davies calls for improved contextual gender analysis where sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is prevalent. She suggests that in the rush to address SGBV in conflict contexts, we have forgotten the importance of broad gender analysis. As a solution, she advocates for an improved understanding of the structural conditions (gender and social roles) of the family and state.

The problem set (defined by the research) must drive the solutions. In bringing longstanding gender inequalities to light, we learn more about the ways to prevent violent extremism. An excellent [new publication from the Global Center](#) rightly points out that without more information on the various roles women play, there is an inadvertent potential to reinforce stereotypes.

Improved information will also help avoid a propensity towards protection — programming focused solely on women as vulnerable. Moving beyond protection is a core recommendation of the [2015 Global Counterterrorism Forum's Good Practices on Women and Countering Violent Extremism](#). The document recommends focusing instead on empowering activities such as livelihood promotion and improved education,

based on local needs. For example, Qadeem pointed out to me that over 50 percent of Pakistan's teachers are women, and that by simply connecting them to civil society advocates, she is building a strong network to stand up against radicalization.

On the policy side, we must find ways to empower local researchers and activists to establish prevention systems and strengthen community resilience. One good example is the [Researching Solutions to Violent Extremism \(RESOLVE\) Network](#) at the [United States Institute of Peace \(USIP\)](#). We must also build staff capacity in this space. USIP's new [CVE training resource](#) encourages trainees to examine the "gender motivations" for men and women to support or join violent extremist groups. The training creates a space for participants to understand their own motivations and presuppositions as well. Active listening, cited by the USIP training toolkit and reinforced here by [Tara Sonenshine](#), is also a practice we could all benefit from. Mossarat tells me the story of one mother who started listening, hearing the earliest signs of radicalized behavior in her son. She intervened. "If he had gone down that path, it may have been too late," said Mossarat. This is what prevention is really about.

Advocates and academicians must not reject the P/CVE space for fear of its instrumentalization of women. Policymakers need the context that academics can provide, now more than ever. They should advocate for and participate in high-quality and contextual research. This will aid diverse prevention efforts to increase equitable resilience to violent extremism.