

Can P/CVE be salvaged? Lessons and questions from gendered practice

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Abstract: This article argues that the problem-oriented framing of the international agenda for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has limited the conception of gender in P/CVE and constrained the work of women-led civil society organisations. Through a meta-analysis of the cases profiled in *Case Studies on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms*, this article assesses the gendered interventions made by women peacebuilders and pro-peace organisations, noting their role in providing positive alternatives to extremism grounded in the framework of peace, resilience, equal rights and pluralism proposed by Sanam Naraghi Anderlini. The article argues that salvaging P/CVE practice requires recognition of the leadership of women peacebuilders and presents strategies that should inform future P/CVE practice, including the holistic integration of gender and identity, the leveraging of cultural credibility and trust, and the important role of power-building.

Keywords: violent extremism, gender, identity, rights, pluralism, civil society, hate speech, white supremacy

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Introduction

The coincidence of the 20th anniversary of the 11 September attacks – which marked the start of two decades of the global war on terror – with the fall of Kabul to the Taliban sparked a period of reckoning and reflection in relation to the global agenda aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). The chaotic withdrawal of the United States left Afghan women to their own devices, as their rights and ability to participate in public life were taken from them almost overnight. Afghan, women-led civil society organisations – which, for years, had worked as partners implementing P/CVE and women’s rights initiatives alongside both the US and its allies, and the United Nations (UN) and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – now found themselves at immediate risk of retaliation and received little to no protection or evacuation support from their international counterparts. These events in Afghanistan reinforced a dynamic that has long been felt by women-led civil society organisations active in P/CVE: while the elimination of violent extremism has been asserted as a primary objective within international military, political and development policies, higher-level aspirations to secure peace, human rights and gender equality have been sidelined.

The P/CVE policy agenda gained popularity in the late 2000s as a complement to security-oriented counterterrorism approaches. While it was initially conceptualised at the national level through the development of domestic CVE policies, such as the United Kingdom’s ‘Prevent’ strategy, the agenda rapidly globalised with the establishment of the Global Counterterrorism Forum in 2011 and the adoption of then-UN Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (hereafter, the Plan of Action) in 2015 (Kundnani & Hayes 2018; Ucko 2018). By signing up to the P/CVE agenda, the international community aimed to take a united, holistic approach to combating terrorism, one that would combine traditional security policies with preventative development measures (Rothermel 2020). Today, P/CVE is used an umbrella term that covers a broad range of activities implemented by the multi-lateral bodies, governments and non-governmental actors that are seeking to prevent or counter violent extremism through non-coercive measures, united by their focus on addressing the root causes and drivers of violent extremism. Through the national action plans which the Plan of Action calls on UN member states to develop, and through an influx of UN funding to local projects, the P/CVE agenda has been institutionalised in domestic policy worldwide and constitutes an evolving and well-funded field of practice.

During its short span of existence, the P/CVE agenda has faced a myriad of criticisms, many of which have focused on the lack of an agreed working definition for what constitutes ‘violent extremism’. Critics argue that this leaves the agenda ripe

for subversion, misuse and manipulation by states in the name of national security (Striegher 2015), and the adverse human rights implications of leaving the definition of violent extremism open to state interpretation are well documented (OHCHR 2019). The integration of gender perspectives in P/CVE programmes and policies has also become subject to question, with critics pointing to programmes' reliance on problematic gender stereotyping (Gordon & True 2020; Rothermel 2020; Schmidt 2020); the instrumentalisation of women, particularly mothers and wives, as assets for countering radicalisation (Giscard d'Estaing 2017); and the prevalence of P/CVE programmes, plans and national strategies that omit gender entirely (Fransen 2017; Brown 2013). Assessments of the body of P/CVE programmes that do include gender components have found they frequently approach gender simplistically, treating it as a value to be 'added and stirred' to satisfy international commitments to gender equality rather than a consideration that needs to be woven into all aspects of a programme's life cycle (White 2020).

Building on these critiques, this article posits that the dominant discourse of the P/CVE framework – and, specifically, the problem-oriented emphasis its vocabulary places on 'countering' and 'preventing' the threat of violent extremism – constrain measures, approaches and strategies that integrate a gender perspective into efforts to tackle extremism. The limits placed on 'gendered practice' not only adversely impact the work of women-led civil society organisations active in P/CVE but are also fundamentally incompatible with the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda. This study responds to Sanam Naraghi Anderlini's (2018) call for a necessary conceptual shift in P/CVE discourse and practice, one which would situate it in a broader framework of peace, resilience, equal rights and pluralism (PREP) and build on existing international policy commitments to human security and WPS. The article applies Naraghi Anderlini's analysis to the context of the P/CVE agenda after the fall of Kabul and advances her argument by identifying points of tension between the P/CVE, WPS and peacebuilding agendas. It documents the negative impact that the problem-oriented framing she criticises has had on women-led civil society organisations, and it applies the PREP approach to contemporary practice aimed at transforming extremists. It does this by conducting a meta-analysis of a series of five examples drawn from *Case Studies on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremism* (ICAN 2021). The case studies detail gendered interventions made by local, women-led civil society and pro-peace organisations that are implementing positive approaches to transforming violent extremism consistent with the PREP paradigm. The article draws lessons from these interventions and highlights the ways in which they organically incorporate an understanding of gender and identity to strengthen impact, leverage trust and cultural credibility, and embed power-building strategies. By illustrating what a shift from P/CVE to PREP might look like, and by

offering practical examples of holistic approaches to mainstreaming gender, the article seeks to make both a conceptual and a practical contribution to gendered practice in the P/CVE field.

Centring the problem, sidelining the solution

In her paper on ‘Challenging conventional wisdom, transforming current practices’, [Naraghi Anderlini \(2018: 26\)](#) argues that the current discourse and practice of P/CVE impede the effective transformation of violent extremism. She attributes this issue to the problem-oriented framing of the agenda, arguing that ‘the framing of both “countering” and “preventing” violent extremism, while necessary, is not sufficient. These terms state what we are “against”. Even prevention ... is problem-, not solution-oriented’ ([Naraghi Anderlini 2018: 26](#)). Naraghi Anderlini contrasts this framing with the recruitment narratives of violent extremist groups, which promise clear alternatives to people’s grievances, as well as articulating what they stand against. Violent extremist groups, she posits, understand contemporary global trends, such as hyper-connectivity, the uncertainty that comes with rising pluralism and the importance of capturing educational spaces ([Naraghi Anderlini 2018](#)). In response to these trends, they disseminate powerful messaging that taps into people’s gender, religious, economic and ethno-racial identities to foster in-group solidarity and offer them a sense of belonging, purpose and meaning. The messaging of the P/CVE community lags behind that of violent extremist movements in its ability to connect and persuade because it is purely aspirational and does not promise positive change; instead, it offers a return to a problematic status quo.

The problem-oriented conceptual framing of P/CVE that Naraghi Anderlini highlights can, of course, be traced back to the agenda’s roots in counterterrorism policy. In 2005, in the midst of the global war on terror, the Bush administration shifted its approach from using military violence against al-Qaeda leaders towards the broader goal of countering ‘radical Islam’ through a ‘strategy against violent extremism’ that combined a purely military response with the ‘softer’ approach of tackling the ideological and cultural dimensions of radicalisation. Despite this change in tactics, the overt conceptual focus of CVE – and, later, of PVE – remained the prevention, suppression and elimination of a non-state violent extremist threat. A commitment to restore a world order in which violence is the exclusive purview of states was a strong subtext. In the UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy adopted by the Security Council in 2006, ‘addressing the conditions conducive to terrorism’ (including the ‘promotion of a culture of peace’) and ‘ensuring respect for human rights for all and the rule of law’ form two of the four pillars subsumed under the overarching goal,

which is to prevent and combat terrorism in all its forms (UNGA 2006). The strategy's structure implies that the pursuit of peace and human rights is a secondary consideration, worthwhile only insofar as it supports the elimination of international terrorism and violent extremism.

From its inception, this conceptual framing placed P/CVE practice at odds with the well-established field of peacebuilding, which calls not for the elimination of a specific threat but for the broader attainment of positive peace. Abu-Nimer characterises this dissonance as a clash between realism and idealism: P/CVE emerges from a realist power paradigm that serves state interests and regards security, state sovereignty and order as its primary outcomes, while peacebuilding emerges from idealism and prioritises justice, non-violence, human relationships and reconciliation (Abu-Nimer 2018). In line with this premise, Abu-Nimer (2018: 15) argues that when peacebuilding practitioners uncritically deploy P/CVE language and methodology, they 'operate against their own "idealist" paradigm'. Viewed through this lens, the P/CVE agenda is incompatible with a number of international frameworks that are grounded in idealist, positive, peacebuilding approaches, including the human security paradigm; the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and particularly SDG 16, which promotes just, peaceful and inclusive societies; and even the UN founding charter, which affirms the values of human rights, peace, dignity, freedom and social progress (UN 1945).

Central to the focus of this article is the idea that the current discourse and practice of P/CVE is antagonistic to the framework of the WPS agenda. First articulated in 2000 in UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, the WPS agenda advocates for the achievement of lasting and meaningful peace through efforts to strengthen the protection, participation and rights of women and women-led organisations across the conflict cycle.¹ Efforts to align the WPS and P/CVE agendas have been met with considerable resistance. The adoption of UNSCR 2242 in 2015, which calls for the 'participation and leadership of women and women's organisations in developing strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism', was widely criticised for instrumentalising women in service of P/CVE objectives (Ní Aoláin 2016). The message of the resolution was clear: yes, women and women's organisations are invited to participate in the fight against the violent extremist threat, but they have neither the opportunity to define what that threat is nor the chance to decide whether pursuing the fight against it is a worthwhile, feminist goal.

The marrying of these agendas allowed states to interpret WPS solely as a 'way of doing' P/CVE and to deprioritise its higher-level, idealistic, guiding principles – peace, gender equality and equal rights – in favour of the singular, realist objective

¹ It is important to note that the WPS agenda, though not within the scope of this article, has also been subject to criticism by feminist scholars. Several critiques are detailed in Aroussi (2021).

of countering violent extremism (GAPS 2018: 2). The implication of this approach is that gender equality and women's rights will only be respected to the extent that they are useful in countering violent extremism, and, as soon as they are perceived to be a hindrance, they will be sacrificed. A global study on the implementation of UNSCR 1325 further stresses the incompatibility of the two agendas, noting that 'to include [human and women's rights] as counterterrorism efforts is to deeply compromise their value in any given society' (UN Women 2015: 230). The study therefore recommends 'detach[ing] programming on women's rights from counterterrorism and extremism, and all military planning and military processes' (UN Women 2015: 231). The findings of the global study confirm Naraghi Anderlini's view that the P/CVE agenda's problem-oriented framing makes it an ineffective method for transforming violent extremism, but they also go further to suggest that the agenda actively harms gendered and women-led peacebuilding practice.

Conceptual tensions at the grassroots level

The real-world implications of these conceptual tensions and incompatibilities can be most vividly observed through an examination of the impact the P/CVE agenda has had on the work of local, women-led civil society organisations and individuals active in peacebuilding.² Before discussing how the P/CVE agenda's negative framing has adversely impacted the work of these actors, it is important to note that women-led civil society organisations, women peacebuilders and women activists have been among the first to notice and respond to the rise in patriarchal, extremist thinking, the deliberate and strategic targeting of women's rights by extremist groups, and the weaponisation of identity in their communities. Critiques of the P/CVE agenda that position it as a uniquely donor-driven practice, one in which local civil society is by default instrumentalised, obscure a rich history of locally driven and women-led initiatives to resist, counteract and transform violent extremism. To assume that the P/CVE interventions of local, women-led civil society organisations are by nature designed and driven by external forces is to disregard their agency, autonomy and dexterity in navigating politicised spaces to make international agendas work for them.

Since the focus of these organisations is the long-term welfare of their communities rather than the suppression of any single threat, their work on extremism is traditionally broader than P/CVE, aligning closely with the principles of SDG 16, the WPS agenda and peacebuilding practice. For instance, they might advocate for protecting gender equality under the law; provide people with alternatives to extremist activities

² See, for instance, the work of members of the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL).

that integrate social, educational and economic dimensions (Naraghi Anderlini & Koch 2015); and design multi-sectoral approaches to reintegration and rehabilitation (ICAN & UNDP 2019). With the advent of the multilateral P/CVE agenda and the resulting influx of funding for local-level P/CVE work, women-led civil society organisations have experienced a shift in international and national focus from the positive pursuit of peace, justice and rights to the narrower goal of P/CVE. This has undermined and damaged their work in four key ways.

Firstly, donor funding has been directed away from community-level priorities towards the security sector priorities of international donors and governments (Aroussi 2021). Women-led peacebuilding organisations already face financial exclusion and struggle to find resources for WPS-related work, and this additional demand has put pressure on them to develop (or repackage their existing work in the form of) P/CVE programmes and projects in order to access funding (Duke IHRC & WPP 2017). As a result, initiatives that fall outside the scope of P/CVE, such as those that take a holistic, long-term approach to realising sustainable development, peacebuilding, good governance and gender equality, receive less funding and attention (Duke IHRC & WPP 2017; Attree 2017). The donor-driven P/CVE projects that local civil society organisations are asked to submit proposals for and implement tend to be singular in scope, shorter-term and more technocratic than the holistic, transformative programming they design autonomously (Naraghi Anderlini & Rosand 2019).

For women-led civil society organisations, committing to the delivery of projects tied to top-down P/CVE strategies can mean taking on increased risk. As they become visible amplifiers and implementers of international P/CVE priorities and national security policies, they may be perceived as biased and lose trust, credibility and deep relationships with the communities that make their work so valuable (Charbord & Ní Aoláin 2018). Their association with governments and the international community also places them at greater risk of retaliation from violent extremist groups. The P/CVE agenda has not, so far, prioritised building the legal and political safety nets necessary to mitigate the vulnerability of women-led civil society organisations and the risks they undertake (Holmes 2020). Consequently, these organisations have developed their own protection strategies to limit risk and maintain the cultural relevance and transformative nature of their interventions. These strategies include avoidance of the term ‘P/CVE’ and the use of alternative language to refer to their work when engaging with local actors and communities.

Secondly, the focus of problem-oriented P/CVE discourse and practice on suppressing a violent extremist threat has provided a convenient smokescreen for states to shrink the civic space in which women-led civil society organisations operate. In the name of counterterrorism (CT) and P/CVE, states have implemented measures and created legal frameworks that curtail the rights of civil society, human rights defenders

and other actors perceived as dissenters (Wilding 2020; Charbord & Ní Aoláin, 2018). Minority groups, including women-led civil society organisations and women human rights defenders, are particularly vulnerable to state persecution. Efforts to counter the financing of terrorism, including financial institutions' de-risking practices, have had an additional adverse impact on their work, leading to delays in funding transfers, burdensome due diligence and administrative requirements, closure of bank accounts, and security and harassment concerns (Holmes 2020: 14). Counterterrorism finance conditions concerning 'material support', which criminalise engagement with certain stakeholders or parties to a conflict, can make the work of women peacebuilders impossible, as their strength lies in reaching across divides and dialoguing with all conflict parties. As a result, many have had to redesign and limit the scope of their projects (Holmes 2020: 14). Restrictive CT and P/CVE measures compound existing challenges that include the escalation of conservative ideologies and religious fundamentalism, the prevalence of patriarchal cultural norms, and the COVID-19 pandemic and its reinforcement of gender inequalities and discrimination. Women-led civil society organisations and their operating space are being squeezed by all these factors, yet they persist, adjusting and continuing their work even in the face of overwhelming constraints and threats. In some cases, their local networks and relationships built on trust offer them a level of protection, including protection from administrative, legal and physical retaliation from state authorities and state security forces (Holmes 2020: 10–11).

Thirdly, while women-led civil society organisations suffer significant negative consequences from the securitisation of their work under the P/CVE agenda, their ability to participate in high-level decision-making on peace and security is severely limited. The P/CVE agenda remains dominated by political and security actors who have had little exposure to WPS principles and are resistant to expanding the participation of women-led civil society organisations. At the UN, the bodies responsible for CT and P/CVE policy – namely the Counter-Terrorism Committee and the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate – 'remain distinctly masculine spaces' (Ní Aoláin 2016: 286), and women are underrepresented in peace processes, as mediators, as political leaders and in senior military positions (UN Women 2021). In the global P/CVE sphere, the role of women-led civil society organisations is often constrained to that of project-implementing partner, consultant or briefer rather than independent expert partner. Consequently, local women-led civil society organisations shoulder a great deal of the risk in delivering P/CVE interventions while wielding limited decision-making power and influence in international fora.

Finally, problem-oriented P/CVE discourse that centres violence inflicted by non-state groups, rather than transforming violence in all its forms and manifestations, removes states' accountability for their role in perpetuating direct and structural

violence. States can deploy the P/CVE narrative to define the root cause of violence and conflict as ‘other’, thereby divesting themselves of responsibility for injustices, including those perpetuated against women and girls. This also allows states to shift the terms of their accountability so that, instead of taking responsibility for realising peace through good governance and structural change, they gain licence to define and suppress an external violent extremist threat. As a result of the discursive framing of the P/CVE agenda, the ability of local civil society organisations to call out governance failures and advocate for responsive, fair and just governance is stifled. These silos, imposed from the top down, run counter to women-led civil society’s holistic approach to transforming extremism, which recognises that governance issues, such as a lack of service delivery, corruption and poor security practices, create fertile ground for the proliferation of violent extremist movements (Naraghi Anderlini & Rosand 2019).

The dominant discourse and practice of P/CVE inhibits the essential qualities and functions that make women-led civil society organisations so adept at building peace: it detaches them from a long-term peace and gender equality agenda, undermines their capacity to reach across divides and build trust, denies them access to spheres of power and influence, and restricts their ability to speak freely and demand government accountability. Yet, while women-led civil society organisations have significant limitations imposed on their work by the P/CVE agenda, it would be a misrepresentation to characterise them solely as instrumentalised victims of global P/CVE policy. Instead, the limitations that affect these organisations highlight the extent to which they understand the political sensitivities of the agenda and engage with it strategically, deploying P/CVE discourse and language when it serves their work and drawing on other agendas, such as peacebuilding and WPS, in spaces where associating with P/CVE poses a risk, confines them in silos or is counterproductive. This strategic engagement allows them to maintain a practical focus on their positive end goals, which are to build peace, promote gender equality, advocate for justice and rights, and strengthen the impact and longevity of their work.

Lessons from positive gendered practice

The conceptual irreconcilability of current P/CVE discourse and practice with long-term peacebuilding and gender equality objectives is compounded by the agenda’s track record of constraining and damaging the peacebuilding and security work of women-led civil society organisations. Therefore, simple tweaks or adjustments will not suffice to ensure P/CVE is fit for purpose in the coming decade. Instead, a transformative shift is required, which must encompass the value system that underpins the

agenda, its conception of gender, and the types of projects funded and implemented under its remit. Naraghi Anderlini argues for precisely this type of transformative shift towards an idealistic, positive framework, proposing that the international community should ‘articulate and stand by a set of values and principles that promote peace, resilience, equality, and pluralism (PREP), [and that are] are rooted in dignity and offer non-violent practical alternatives’ (Naraghi Anderlini 2018: 34). P/CVE would be one component encompassed in the broader goal of PREP, which prioritises non-violence, resilience to violent extremist messaging, adherence to human rights, and respect for pluralism and a multiplicity of identities.

This section discusses practical examples that demonstrate how – despite the increasingly fraught and constrained environments they operate in – women peacebuilders, women-led civil society organisations and pro-peace organisations are pioneering strategies to transform extremism that embody the values of the PREP paradigm. It draws on a brief meta-analysis of an example set drawn from ‘Case studies on the role of gender and identity in shaping positive alternatives to extremism’, published by the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN 2021), which compiles examples of peacebuilding, deradicalisation, reintegration and counternarrative work in Indonesia, Somalia, Sweden and the United States. A fifth, unpublished case study on Iraq is also included in the analysis.³ The meta-analysis identifies shared themes, lessons and questions across the case studies to illustrate in a practical way what reimagining P/CVE might look like, with an emphasis on gendered practice. The analysis will also reflect on best practices in the P/CVE field and identify positive elements of P/CVE research and practice that might indeed be ‘salvageable’ and support a new era of policy and research-based action.

Positive alternatives

The interventions profiled in the case studies not only ‘counter’ or ‘prevent’ violent extremism but also deliver clear, positive alternatives for communities that constitute a direct counterweight to the way in which extremist groups exploit grievances, societal trends and unmet aspirations in each country context (see Table 1). These include socio-political, cultural and economic alternatives that are rooted in PREP values, authentic to their context, delivered by trusted messengers and cross-sectoral in nature. Crucially, the alternatives are *desirable*. They do not merely promise a return to the status quo but propose a different, peaceful path to attaining a sense of belonging,

³ Due to security concerns for the organisation profiled in the Iraq case study, names and identifying details related to the organisation and its projects have been redacted.

Table 1. Extremist tactics and corresponding positive alternatives

Case study	Extremist tactic	Positive alternative
Indonesia	Dissemination of simplified, patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts by trusted messengers (young conservative women) as the only truth.	Dissemination of peaceful, tolerant interpretations of Islamic texts that centre gender equality and social justice by trusted messengers (women <i>ulama</i>). Creation of spaces for civic discourse, debate and the exchange of multiple narratives.
Iraq	Use of online hate speech to sow societal division and maintain economic and social power over marginalised identity groups.	Use of peaceful and pluralistic speech to unify citizens, encourage community service and enable power-building.
Somalia	Reinforcement and co-option of rigid gender roles to support extremist recruitment, logistics, fundraising and intelligence-gathering.	Expansion of socially accepted roles for all groups, creating spaces for different identity groups to come together.
Sweden	Provision of a predefined masculine identity, ideological superiority, brotherhood and camaraderie.	Development and rebuilding of pro-social identities, including a healthy relationship to masculinity and connection with other men.
United States	Manipulation and infliction of trauma to recruit and retain members, including the offer of a simplistic, binary worldview and the channelling of trauma into violence.	The healing of trauma to disengage members, including by teaching non-violent communication methods and developing the capacity to deal with complexity and experience empathy.

connection and purpose in society. The organisations and peacebuilders delivering the alternatives understand that, as [Naraghi Anderlini \(2018: 34\)](#) states, ‘simply being against [extremist movements] is not enough’.

The case studies demonstrate that, in order to successfully develop and deliver positive alternatives, peacebuilding actors need to draw on a robust understanding and analysis both of the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in their context and of the drivers and conditions necessary for peaceful transformation. In two of the cases assessed here (Sweden and the United States), this understanding results in part from personal experience, with interventions being delivered by former violent extremists who have themselves been active participants in and exited from white extremist movements. In the other cases (Indonesia, Iraq and Somalia), the locally rooted nature of the organisations implementing alternatives gives them real-time insight into the changing dynamics of violent extremism on the ground. The research findings, analytical tools and assessment methodologies of the P/CVE field of practice stand to make an important contribution to the development of positive alternatives by complementing local expertise, strengthening analysis

of violent extremist threats and tactics, and sharing lessons and strategies across contexts.

The notion of positive alternatives is important in work to disengage, reintegrate and rehabilitate violent extremists, as is made clear in the Swedish case study and EXIT Sweden's approach to the disengagement of members of white extremist groups. Rather than challenging former members' ideology, beliefs and political views directly, the programme shows them a new, positive approach to forming relationships and to rebuilding a peaceful social identity. This work includes efforts to help them find alternatives to the resources, relationships and connections they had access to in the movement by, for instance, supporting them to rebuild their social lives. Providing positive alternatives can also mean the development of alternative narratives, as can be seen in the case study from Indonesia, where women religious scholars challenge narrow, extremist interpretations of Islam, not by denouncing them, but by promoting the idea that multiple narratives, perspectives and interpretations can exist, including ones grounded in peace and gender equality. In the Iraqi case study, a local NGO draws on Quranic verses, Shi'a religious heritage, and universal norms of human rights and women's rights to construct pluralistic alternative narratives.

The case studies illustrate that, when interventions are grounded in a strong analysis of local dynamics and delivered by trusted actors, the concept of positive alternatives is broadly applicable to different types of extremism, such as Islamic extremism and white extremism, and to a variety of contexts, spanning the Global North and South.

The centrality of gender and identity

Gender and identity play a central role in the violent extremist movements depicted in the case studies, which provide practical examples of several ways that violent extremist groups manipulate individual identity, including gender identity, to recruit and retain their members and to sow division, fear and hatred. In their recruitment narratives, extremist groups often implicitly promote clearly defined, heteronormative gender identities, both as models of their ideals and as goals for their members. In the Swedish case, white extremist groups propose an untamed, heroic, superior masculine identity as a solution for empowering young men, while in the Indonesian case, conservative Islamic groups popularise notions of piety and wifeness as the key to attaining happiness for young women. In both cases, extremist groups tap into gender identity to promise certainty, simplicity, belonging and meaning to prospective recruits and current members. Group identity also plays an important role. Extremist groups use social networks to recruit members and then strive to retain them by cultivating a sense of brotherhood and community, fusing individual and group identities

to justify violent behaviour and inhibit disengagement by isolating members from outside influences.⁴

Violent extremist groups understand the power of gender identity and co-opt traditional gender roles. In the Somalia case study, Al-Shabaab leverages women's extensive social networks, family connections and place in society to support fundraising, proselytisation, intelligence-gathering and recruitment efforts. Even in spaces where male supremacy is the norm, such as in the white extremist groups described in the case study from the United States, women may derive a sense of expanded social, political and economic power from participating in violent extremism due to their access to in-group support systems, perceived superiority over other identity groups, and the opportunity to have their input both solicited and valued.

The case studies demonstrate that gender identity cannot be considered in isolation from other identities, such as age, class and sexual orientation. The Somali case study finds that young women are particularly vulnerable to recruitment, since they face 'double marginalisation' due to their age and gender. The same is true for older men in the Swedish case study, who, because of their age, are often more isolated and solitary than younger men and can therefore experience a stronger attraction to the community and support offered by white extremist groups and ideologies. In the Iraqi case study, hate speech and extremist narratives target men who either belong, or are perceived to belong, to the LGBTQIA+ community and present themselves in ways that deviate from traditional masculine norms.

In short, violent extremist groups routinely and deliberately target, co-opt and manipulate gender roles and intersectional identities. For responses to violent extremism to be effective, they need to pay equal attention to identity. An 'add women and stir' approach is thus insufficient. Instead, interventions must prioritise a thorough, intersectional understanding of identity factors, including gender, and consider the role individual and group forms of identity play in cultivating belonging and meaning. The case studies demonstrate that taking identity and gender seriously in the design and delivery of interventions strengthens their impact and sustainability. In the Swedish case study, the disengagement and deradicalisation programme actively unpacked clients' constricting ideas of masculinity by encouraging reflection on their experience of being a man in the white extremist movement and modelling positive masculine behaviour. This helped clients open up and organically supported the construction of a pro-social identity. In the Somali case, recognising the power of women's social networks and kinship relations enabled the intervening NGO to leverage them as avenues for peace, bringing together different identity groups – elders, youth,

⁴ The findings from the case studies are in line with recent research on the role of group identity, such as [Ferguson & McAuley \(2021\)](#).

women and religious leaders – to promote positive alternatives, such as expanded roles for women in civic life.

The P/CVE field has generated a growing body of research on identity and on the connection of identity to violent and non-violent behaviour. Deepening examination and recognition of the search for identity and the fundamental human need for belonging, meaning and social connection is an especially positive contribution made by P/CVE, and it should have an ongoing place in policy and practice. Defining participation in violent extremism as an identity-driven rather than an ideology-driven process comes with challenges, however, such as the risk of removing accountability from perpetrators of extremist violence and the normalisation of hateful speech and actions as a developmental stage. Additional research on integrating accountability and restorative justice processes in work on violent extremism, including those pioneered and implemented by women peacebuilders and local civil society organisations, will be essential for informing future practice and for asserting a non-militaristic approach to disengagement and rehabilitation.⁵

Credibility and trust

The case study meta-analysis makes it clear that *who* designs and implements interventions to transform extremism matters as much as, if not more than, the content of those interventions. The draw of violent extremist groups lies in their authenticity, their ability to generate trust and their local roots. In the Somalian case, for instance, Al-Shabaab provided social services to win the trust of communities that had been abandoned by government institutions. Consequently, the actors delivering positive alternatives to extremism needed to possess a similar level of authenticity. The impact of the interventions profiled in these case studies can be attributed to the fact that they have been conceived and implemented by civil society organisations and individuals with track records, trust and expertise in their contexts. In the Indonesian case study, for instance, the women who act as *ulama* – Islamic clerics – are part of a centuries-long tradition of Indonesian religious leadership. Their history and status in the country enable them to disseminate peaceful religious narratives authentically and authoritatively. As mentioned previously, the fact that the implementing organisations and individuals in the case studies from Sweden and the United States are themselves former extremists helps them generate rapport and build relationships founded on trust.

⁵ For a research study that outlines such an approach and details additional gendered practice in relation to rehabilitation and reintegration conducted by women peacebuilders and women-led civil society organisations, see [ICAN & UNDP \(2019\)](#).

Women-led civil society organisations and women peacebuilders are ideally positioned to lead on delivering positive alternatives. In her analysis, Naraghi Anderlini notes that while women peacebuilders mirror some of the qualities of violent extremist groups, unlike these groups they leverage them to deliver on PREP. For instance, they maintain deep local connections and credibility, understand cultural nuances and community grievances, and are often charismatic leaders (Naraghi Anderlini 2018: 31–2). Perceptions and presentation can make or break an intervention, and cultural sensitivity is paramount, particularly in work to deliver alternative narratives. For example, in the Iraqi case study, a woman peacebuilder noted that her presentation as a woman clad in an abaya gave her access that enabled her to engage with male tribal leaders in rural areas, who might not want to speak with younger, less traditional-looking women or with Western outsiders.

Trust is fragile, and its breakdown can damage even the most well-designed intervention. As previously noted, instrumentalisation by governments or the international community, or even the perception that such instrumentalisation is in play, can lead to a loss of access, damage community relationships, and even incur threats or retaliation. The closeness of local civil society and women peacebuilders to their communities and their function as ‘bridge-builders’ also places them at additional risk (Holmes 2020). The international P/CVE community has a critical role to play in building the safety net necessary for local civil society organisations and women peacebuilders to conduct their work safely, including by building mechanisms for the prevention and mitigation of, as well as responses to, threats.

Power-building

The case studies demonstrate that, in addition to offering people a clearly defined, socially sanctioned identity and belonging, participation in extremist groups also gives them a sense of control, power and agency. The power-building quality of extremist movements carries particular weight for women and people belonging to minority groups, who have, historically, been denied power. The US case study, for instance, suggests women may join white extremist groups in part because they are able to derive a sense of agency and self-worth through adjacency to power; by expanding their social, political and economic influence; and by maintaining a sense of dominance over the targets of their hate and violence. Part of the attraction to extremist groups is their promise of emancipation: they invite recruits to become active agents in reshaping their social, economic and political circumstances (UN SRSR 2019).

Conversely, interventions to transform extremism are more impactful when they include elements of pro-social power-building that offer participants a positive, alternative sense of hope, control and agency over their own lives and over the fate of

their society. Disseminating positive, peaceful narratives can lay the groundwork for the reclamation of power and autonomy. In the context of Iraq, where hate speech is used to maintain divisions and prevent different social groups from unifying their demands for rights and resources from the country's leadership, narratives that promote peace, justice and solidarity act as power-building tools. They enable members of marginalised identity groups to come together to organise around shared aims; resist oppressive action by violent extremist groups and the government; and jointly build a peaceful, just and equal Iraqi nation.

Involving women and members of marginalised groups in protests, civic or political activism, volunteerism and community service forms another avenue for building power and self-determination. In the Somalian case, organising groups and networks of people with different identities supported them to reclaim civic space, gave them agency to speak out against violent extremism in their societies, and provided them with the opportunity to become active agents for change and peace. The Iraqi case study also points to artistic expression as a mechanism for power-building, highlighting how it can give a voice to women, youth and people with marginalised identities, enabling them to broadcast their concerns and experiences to society and build a movement of resistance to violent extremism and state violence.

The case studies indicate that the popular P/CVE approach that focuses on building skills – including vocational, psychosocial, educational and critical thinking skills – is more effective when paired with modalities that allow people to feel a sense of control and agency, advocate for transformative change and peacefully channel their grievances. Teaching people positive skills while leaving them in an unjust society that they feel powerless to change will not achieve enough to transform violent extremism (UN SRSG 2019). Positive alternatives to extremism must include opportunities for power-building that enable organisations and individuals to connect and contribute to their societies and effect change over their structural conditions. These opportunities can take forms such as the dissemination of unifying narratives, engagement in civic and political activism, artistic expression and community service. In this regard, the P/CVE field can learn from existing theory and practice on social movements, social and gender justice, and alliance-building, including feminist alliance-building.

Integrating elements of power-building will require P/CVE practice to approach civic space not just as a channel for dialogue and programme implementation, but also as an arena where peaceful resistance and mobilisation can take place. Naturally, states that maintain security through political exclusion and the suppression of dissent are likely to resist giving citizens more autonomy. Engaging with states around power-building will require holding them accountable for human rights and good governance and emphasising the importance of making concessions in terms of political freedom to manage civilian discontent and extremist violence. In contexts

where donors and states view power-building as too high-risk, self-resourcing and income-generating strategies can provide an alternative avenue of support for civil society organisations that are looking to implement power-building initiatives.

Conclusion

Reflecting on 20 years of practice, this article has sought to illustrate the conceptual incompatibility of problem-oriented P/CVE discourse and terminology with the positive, idealistic aspirations of the peacebuilding and WPS agendas. Attempts to consolidate P/CVE with these agendas have led to concessions on their guiding principles of women's rights, gender equality, non-violence and human rights. As a result, the global P/CVE agenda has constrained the work of local, women-led civil society organisations active in peacebuilding, calling for them to narrow the scope of their projects, placing them at greater risk without sufficient protection mechanisms in place, shrinking their operating space, excluding them from decision-making processes and limiting their ability to hold the state accountable for governance failures. These tensions and failures underscore the need for a transformational shift from P/CVE towards a positive set of values and principles – conceptualised using either the PREP framework or a similar model – that better aligns with and supports the work of women-led civil society.

While local, women-led civil organisations and pro-peace organisations have been negatively impacted by the P/CVE agenda, they have been able – thanks to their flexibility, pragmatism and careful navigation of politicised spaces – to maintain a strategic focus on realising the positive end goals of peace, justice, rights and gender equality. It is precisely their work on transforming extremisms that has the most to teach us in reimagining P/CVE practice. Their primary contribution lies in their delivery of positive alternatives to vulnerable communities, alternatives which form a powerful, pro-social counterweight to rising extremism. The authenticity of these organisations and the trust and credibility they have accrued at grassroots level is central to their success. They demonstrate the value of giving primacy to identity, including gender identity, in efforts to transform extremisms, having incorporated an in-depth, intersectional understanding of identity factors to increase the impact of their interventions. Finally, they highlight the importance of creating space for power-building in interventions aimed at transforming extremisms. Their work demonstrates that engaging people in unifying narratives, activism, artistic expression and community service can help to strengthen their agency and connection to society and reduce their vulnerability to recruitment by extremist groups.

To answer the question this article posed about whether or not P/CVE can be salvaged, the elements of current P/CVE practice that can be repurposed are those that

work in solidarity with the efforts of local civil society and complement their leadership on developing positive alternatives to extremism. Research studies, assessment methodologies and analytical tools that enable in-depth analysis of violent extremist dynamics and radicalisation strategies, especially those that consider gender and identity dimensions, have an important place in ongoing practice too. P/CVE has directed attention to the importance of identity and to the human drive for social connection, meaning and belonging, and this focus should be maintained and amplified. Furthermore, the international P/CVE community has an essential role to play in ensuring the protection of local civil society organisations, their work and their rights.

This article has focused on the role of local interventions by women-led and pro-peace organisations in delivering positive alternatives and realising PREP's goals of peace, resilience, equal rights and pluralism. However, it is important to note that their work – even when fully supported, heard, funded and protected – will not suffice to transform violent extremism. As [Naraghi Anderlini \(2018: 35\)](#) notes, a 'whole of society' approach is needed, with governments internalising and practicing PREP values. Such an approach will require states to address the ways in which they perpetuate direct and structural violence and extremist thinking, and they must take steps to face and dismantle legacies of colonialism, reform imbalanced economic systems and discriminatory social structures, and/or redress violence at the hands of state law enforcement and security apparatuses. The most significant disincentive for states in moving towards a PREP approach may be that they can no longer take the moral high ground over violent extremist groups by presenting a façade of tolerance or justice. To effectively work with states on transforming extremism, the international community will need to encourage not only the implementation of positive alternatives and interventions aligned with PREP but also honest self-reflection.

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To cite the article: Fransen, R. (2023), 'Can P/CVE be salvaged? Lessons and questions from gendered practice', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s1): 157–176. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s1.157>