

# A Feminist Foreign Policy Approach to Counter-terrorism

Shannon Zimmerman, *Deakin University*

AFFPC ISSUE PAPER SERIES. ISSUE NUMBER 18. DECEMBER 2024

## Executive Summary

A key role of foreign policy is to ensure a state's national security. However, the field of national security in most countries is a deeply gendered space. The very way national security is defined and approached is often informed by "gendered assumptions, gendered labels, and gendered hierarchies".<sup>i</sup> State approaches to addressing terrorism and violent extremism are no exception to this, even though there is clear evidence that gender-sensitive approaches to counter-terrorism (CT) and preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) are more effective.

This brief explores what a feminist foreign policy approach to counter-terrorism might look like. First, it outlines the highly gendered nature of traditional approaches to counter-terrorism. It then highlights the value added by including feminist approaches to counter-terrorism and explores what such an approach might entail. Lastly, it sketches out how Australia might apply a feminist approach to its current counter-terrorism activities to ensure initiatives are more comprehensive, effective, and sustainable.

## The War on Terror as Gendered Terrain

The modern 'War on Terror' that emerged after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 was heavily gendered in both conception and execution. Terrorists were almost exclusively presumed to be men while women were either positioned as passive victims in need of saving or as reluctant terrorists pressed into joining terrorist groups by their male family members.<sup>ii</sup> Counter-terrorism (CT), in contrast, was a heroic activity undertaken by strong states and their masculine security apparatuses. As a result, counter-terrorism initiatives prioritised traditionally masculine security concerns while overlooking approaches viewed as more feminine, such as conflict prevention and sustainable peacebuilding. In some cases, CT and P/CVE activities unintentionally harmed women and minority groups through gender-blind programming.<sup>iii</sup> For example, some programs attempted to counter extremist narratives by promoting moderate or

state-sanctioned religious views, without considering the negative gender impacts this may have.<sup>iv</sup>

As the War on Terror entered its second decade, it had become clear that traditional approaches to CT and P/CVE programming only exacerbated identity-based politics and empowered extremist groups. Research showed that gendered stereotypes were key to terrorist narratives and calls to action, extolling 'real men' to reclaim their lost status and protect 'virtuous women'.<sup>v</sup> The more gender unequal the environment, the more conducive it was to terrorism and terrorist recruitment.<sup>vi</sup> In 2010, the US adopted the so-called 'Hillary Doctrine', which led the way for other key counter-terrorism actors to shift from kinetic responses to terrorism towards a holistic approach focused on human rights.<sup>vii</sup>

International counter-terrorism policy frameworks soon followed suit. The United Nations Security Council had adopted Security Council resolution 1325 in 2000. This landmark resolution noted the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls and called for their greater participation, protection, role in prevention, and support in relief and recovery. The implementation of this resolution in the security sphere, however, was hampered by the reactive militarisation of counter-terrorism efforts post-9/11. It was not until 2013 that a Security Council resolution mentioned in passing the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in relation to "threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts".<sup>viii</sup> It was a further two years before the UN Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED) began to link its work to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and the UN Counter Terrorism Committee (CTC), holding its first open session on Women in counter-terrorism and violent extremism in 2015. That same year, UN Security Council resolution 2242 formally recognised the unique impacts of terrorism and violent extremism on women and girls and called for member states to integrate their gender equality and counter-terrorism efforts.<sup>ix</sup> Security Council resolution 2331 (2016) and 2388 (2017) reinforced concerns about the use of sexual and gender-based violence as a tactic of terrorism. Most recently, Security Council resolution 2467 (2019) identified gender-based violence as

integral to the ideology of most designated terrorist groups. Gender is now widely acknowledged as a core part of effective counter-terrorism approaches and the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth reviews of the UN's Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy have called for gender-sensitive counter-terrorism activities.<sup>x</sup>

## The challenges to a feminist counter-terrorism policy

Despite the clear evidence that gender-sensitive approaches to counter-terrorism are more effective, deeply masculinised security and counter-terrorism apparatuses have been slow to adopt them. In part, this may be because many of the countries most impacted by terrorism are also those with the largest gaps in gender equality.<sup>xi</sup> However, even countries with declared feminist foreign policies have struggled to articulate and implement feminist counter-terrorism policies.<sup>xii</sup> The core of this challenge lies in the fact that feminist policies recentre security from the state to the individual. This requires counter-terrorism actors to walk a fine line between state self-interest and the interests of near and distant individuals

## What would a feminist Counter-Terrorism Policy look like?

A Feminist approach to counter-terrorism would:

*Be People Centred.* Feminist counter-terrorism policies would need to consider the diverse array of factors that lead individuals to engage with extremist ideologies and ultimately commit acts of terrorism. This includes gender, but also encompasses an array of other identity factors such as race, religion, socioeconomic status, location, and profession.

*Be Context Specific.* Feminist counter-terrorism policies would need to understand security through the broader lens of human security such as economic, food, health, personal, environmental, community and political security. While security is understood more broadly, interventions would then need to be grounded in the local context to provide a holistic view of the factors that facilitate violent extremism. To avoid the problematic practice of identifying 'suspect' communities, counter-terrorism policies could focus on activities that increase gender equality and human rights in marginalised areas rather than countering specific extremist narratives or activities.

*Identify and Balance Unequal Power Relationships.* Feelings of deprivation are a major factor in radicalisation. Feminist counter-terrorism policies will need to cultivate environments and systems that respect diversity and empower civil society and social movements so that all groups can engage on equal footing to address issues of concern.<sup>xiii</sup>

*Identify Allies Instead of Enemies.* A feminist approach to counter-terrorism would avoid the trap of narrative dichotomies, where one group is positioned against

another in an "us versus them" dynamic and where one group is identified as "good" and the other "evil". Instead, feminist counter-terrorism policies would need to focus on cultivating allies with shared goals rather than identifying groups or ideologies to combat and care would be taken to ensure that these allies were not instrumentalised, either as proxies or as informants, to pursue CT objectives. This is particularly important when counter-terrorism efforts are taking place abroad and traditional political narratives tend to focus on 'othering' target communities in order to justify international action.

*Prioritise Prevention over Response.* A feminist approach to counter-terrorism would focus on the systematic factors that lead to inequality and form the basis for grievances that make individuals and communities susceptible to extremist narratives. This means that feminist approaches would need to address the structural causes of inequality rather than focusing on the results of that inequality.

Perhaps controversially, this brief argues that a feminist approach to counter-terrorism does not necessarily preclude the use of military force. This is a divisive topic within feminism more broadly and in FFP in particular.<sup>xiv</sup> Militarism reinforces gendered hierarchies and privileges the use of force. Understandably, anti-militarist feminists view military force as anathema to FFP. To avoid perpetuating the patriarchal norms of violence and domination inherent with militarism, some feminist approaches acknowledge that force might be necessary in "very exceptional circumstances so as to ensure the rights and entitlements of women and men in war zones".<sup>xv</sup> Such interventions would need to be designed from the bottom up, focused on listening to and protecting marginalised voices, and pursuing a broader transformative agenda of gender equality.<sup>xvi</sup> This may mean that, before a feminist interventions using the military is possible, the very structures the currently exist would first need to be dismantled. In their place would need to be a system that disconnects war from conceptions of security and instead positions peaceful and more emancipatory approaches as preferable, with responses using the military as a last resort.<sup>xvii</sup>

## Australian approaches to counter-terrorism

Australia's most recent strategy for counter-terrorism was released in 2022 and has a five-pronged approach: prevent, prepare, respond, recover, and partnerships.<sup>xviii</sup> This strategy, in turn, is implemented through a National Counter-Terrorism Plan, most recently released in 2024.<sup>xix</sup> In line with a feminist approach, this strategy already emphasises prevention, in part through meaningful partnerships with locally-based actors. It also acknowledges the importance of individual dignity and the importance of human rights and the rule of law. Where the strategy falls short however, is in acknowledging the gendered nature of extremist ideologies and addressing the structural inequalities that help foster such ideologies.

Australia's counter-terrorism strategy focuses on religiously and ideologically motivated violent extremism – especially nationalist and racist ideologies. This overlooks the fact that all these ideologies have deeply gendered components to their belief systems and engage gender stereotypes in their recruitment. This is a particularly important consideration for Australia as the country has a high level of sexist and misogynistic attitudes. A 2022 report found that Australian men hold some of the most sexist views in the Majority World, with 37% of men interviewed saying the feminism does more harm than good and 30% thinking that gender inequality does not exist.<sup>x</sup> These views make individuals more susceptible to extremist narratives. These sexist attitudes are even more apparent in online behaviour, an increasingly important gateway to extremism. To increase Australia's resilience to extremist ideologies, both domestic and international, active steps need to be taken to address the anti-feminism and toxic masculinities that underpin these ideologies and programming initiated to foster healthy and inclusive gender norms.<sup>xxi</sup>

In addressing structural inequalities, Australia's counter-terrorism strategy does take some proactive approaches to addressing power imbalances. The strategy notes the importance of social cohesion and community support and calls for empowering community groups, though the latter is focused on public awareness of extremism rather than political engagement. While these are steps in the right

direction, their effectiveness can be increased by supporting civil society and social movements more broadly, so that marginalised groups are more fully engaged in Australia's existing political and social life.

Therefore the Australian Government should:

- Integrate gendered analysis into all counter-terrorism activities, including the National Counter
- Terrorism Strategy and Plans
- Take active steps to address anti-feminist and toxic masculinities in Australia by funding programming which fosters healthy and inclusive gender norms
- Fund civil society and social movements in Australia to support the integration of marginalised groups into political and social life

## Conclusion

Engaging feminist approaches to counter-terrorism as part of a feminist foreign policy, while undoubtedly adding complexity, has the distinct advantage of being able to defuse terrorist ideologies before they are able to take hold. Terrorism is a deeply gendered activity and approaches to preventing and countering terrorism need to be gendered as well. The result will be not only a country less troubled by the spectre of terrorism but one increasingly resilient to its threat.

## REFERENCES

<sup>i</sup> Laura Sjoberg, "Feminist Security and Security Studies," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Security*, ed. Alexandra Gheciu and William C. Wohlforth (Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>ii</sup> Miriam Cooke, "Islamic Feminism before and after September 11th," in *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy* (2002). Laura Sjoberg and Caron E Gentry, *Mothers, monsters, whores: women's violence in global politics* (Zed Books, 2007).

<sup>iii</sup> Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, *A Decade Lost: Locating Gender in U.S. Counter-Terrorism*, New York University, School of Law, Center for Human Rights and Global Justice (New York, 2011), [https://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Decadelost\\_locatinggender\\_report.pdf](https://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Decadelost_locatinggender_report.pdf).

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Alison Davidian, "Complementarity and Convergence?: Women, Peace and Security and Counterterrorism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Conflict*, ed. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin et al. (Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>vi</sup> Ann-Kathrin Rothermel and Laura J. Shepherd, "Introduction: gender and the governance of terrorism and violent extremism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 15, no. 3 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2022.2101535>.

<sup>vii</sup> The White House, National Security Strategy, (2010); The White House, National Strategy for Counterterrorism, (2011).

<sup>viii</sup> United Nations Security Council, Security Council resolution 2122, S/RES/2122, (New York: United Nations 2013).

<sup>ix</sup> United Nations Security Council, Security Council resolution 2242, S/RES/2242 (2015), 13 October 2015, (New York: United Nations, 2015).

<sup>x</sup> United Nations General Assembly, The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review, A/RES/72/291 (New York: United Nations, 2016); United Nations General Assembly, The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review, A/RES/72/284, (New York: United Nations, 2018); United Nations General Assembly, The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy: seventh review, A/RES/75/291, (New York: United Nations, 2021); United Nations General Assembly, The United Nations Global Counter-terrorism Strategy: eighth review, A/77/L.78, (New York: United Nations, 2023).

<sup>xi</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2024: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney, February 2024), <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf>. World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap 2024: Insight Report* (June 2024), [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2024.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2024.pdf).

<sup>xii</sup> Shannon Zimmerman, "The Impact of Feminist Foreign Policy and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda on National Counter-Terrorism Policy: Comparative Case Studies of Sweden, Canada, and France.," *Forthcoming* (2024).

<sup>xiii</sup> Jessica Cheung et al., "Practicing feminist foreign policy in the everyday: a toolkit," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung* (2021), <https://eu.boell.org/en/practicing-feminist-foreign-policy-everyday-toolkit>. Karin Aggestam, Annika Bergman-Rosamond, and Annika Kronsell, "Theorising feminist foreign policy," *International Relations* 33, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117818811892>. Melissa Haussman and Birgit Sauer, *Gendering the State in the Age of Globalization: Women's Movements and State Feminism in*

---

*Postindustrial Democracies* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007).

<sup>xiv</sup> Evyn Papworth, "Advancing Feminist Foreign Policy in the Multilateral System: Key Debates and Challenges," *International Peace Institute*. March 2024. [www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2403\\_Advancing-Feminist-Foreign-Policyweb.pdf](http://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2403_Advancing-Feminist-Foreign-Policyweb.pdf)

<sup>xv</sup> Karin Aggestam and Annika Bergman-Rosamond, "Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy in the Making: Ethics, Politics, and Gender," *Ethics & International Affairs* 30, no. 3 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679416000241>.

<sup>xvi</sup> Karin Aggestam and Annika Bergman-Rosamond, "Feminist foreign policy 3.0: Advancing ethics and gender equality in global politics," *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 39, no. 1 (2019).

<sup>xvii</sup> Christine Agius, Annika Bergman Rosamond, Toni Haastrup, and Katharine A.M. Wright, "Challenges for Feminist-Informed Foreign Policy: Militarisation and Australia's engagements via AUKUS and NATO," *Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition*. AFFPC Issue Paper Series. Issue Number 15. December 2023.

[https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/AFFPC-Issue-Paper-December-2023-FFP-and-NATO\\_FINAL.pdf](https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/AFFPC-Issue-Paper-December-2023-FFP-and-NATO_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>xviii</sup> Department of Home Affairs, *Safeguarding Our Community Together: Australia's Counter-Terrorism Strategy 2022*, (Canberra 2022).

<sup>xix</sup> Australia New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee, *National Counter-Terrorism Plan*, (2024).

<sup>xx</sup> IPSOS, *International Women's Day 2022*, The Global Institute for Women's Leadership/King's College London. (March 2022), [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.kcl.ac.uk/giwl/assets/iwd-survey-2022.pdf](https://www.kcl.ac.uk/giwl/assets/iwd-survey-2022.pdf).

<sup>xxi</sup>Christine Agius, Alexandra Edney-Browne, Lucy Nicholas, and Kay Cook, "Anti-Feminism, Gender and the Far-Right Gap in C/PVE Measures," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 15 (3): 681–705 (2021) doi:10.1080/17539153.2021.1967299; Christine Agius, Kay Cook, Lucy Nicholas, Ashir Ahmed, Hamza bin Jehangir, Noori Safa, Taylor Hardwick, and Sal Clark, "Mapping Right-wing Extremism in Victoria: Applying a Gender Lens to Develop Prevention and Deradicalisation Approaches". Swinburne. (2020) doi:10.25916/5f3a26da94911.