BUFFER ZONES AND CONTESTED TERRAIN: SHIFTING ROLES FOR WOMEN IN COUNTERTERRORISM

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3 May 2016

Recent U.S. counterterrorism policies highlight the strength of local women and ask local women to be active partners in countering terrorism. However, the previous decade of counterterrorism policy almost exclusively treated local women as passive *victims* of terror and justifications for intervention. The dominant scholarly narrative explains this shift as a process of moral awakening or as the result of pressure from women's groups for counterterrorism policies to recognize women’s agency; However, others worry that the shift represents counterterrorism agendas co-opting women or the women’s empowerment field as tools. In order to better understand the agendas that shape these policies, it is essential to understand the historical or institutional factors that shape them. By examining primary sources in the years immediately before, during, and after the emergence of these policies in 2011, I challenge the dominant narrative of gender mainstreaming and explore the role of counterterrorism in co-opting non-military spaces. Specifically, I argue that the desire to engage women reflects the emergence of a new form of proxy warfare, which seeks to engage local actors in place of U.S. soldiers as a way to save costs and reduce the visibility of U.S. imperialism. By analyzing alternate explanations for the shift in policy, this research will shed light on which agendas influence women's engagement and add to the debate over the relative influence of civil society and the military in foreign policymaking.

*Introduction*

As U.S. counterterrorism strategy shifted from wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to a policy of “countering violent extremism,” the government has increasingly invested in “soft” areas of counterterrorism, such as diplomacy and development. In particular, policymakers have emphasized broader community engagement and suggested using women’s empowerment projects to carry out counterterrorism.[[1]](#footnote-1) For example, events at the United States Institute of Peace, the Center for Strategic International Studies, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe suggested that the U.S. should work directly with empowered women who will stand up to violent extremism.[[2]](#footnote-2) In particular, these strategies suggest that women are powerful agents in the domestic sphere; law enforcement mechanisms then should use women as buffers and early warning systems by encouraging them to confront and report on their husbands, brothers, and sons.3

However, this sudden rush to include women as *agents*, as opposed to helpless victims, sharply contrasts with a history of exclusion, erasure, and victimization of local women within post-9/11 counterterrorism. Scholars like Judith Butler and Lila Abu-Lughod point out that the beginning of the“War on Terror” was characterized by rhetoric on Muslim women, particularly Afghan women, that framed them as agentless victims. Their presumed weakness was used to bolster the justification for a “rescue mission,” and the veil and other cultural symbols were continually highlighted as emblematic of Afghan women’s inability to speak for themselves.[[3]](#footnote-3) Given this previous history of framing women as helpless victims in the context of terrorism, what accounts for the shift toward framing women as strong, empowered partners?

This question holds immediate significance for the debate within the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) community over the potential opportunities and dangers of these policies. During the Afghanistan and Iraq War, Critical Feminists challenged the reductive victim-status that counterterrorism assigned to local women. NGOs also called for policymakers to recognize the agency and unique talents of women in counterterrorism and conflict resolution.[[4]](#footnote-4) At first glance, the shift toward recognizing local women’s agency might then elicit a round of applause for advocates and a gold star for counterterrorism policymakers. Several NGOs and advocates have, in fact, expressed their gratitude and support for these shifts.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, after a decade of singular representation and the co-option of the WPS field, some advocates and Critical scholars remain wary of the potential misuse of women’s engagement for military purposes.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The agendas that underlie this shift may also hold significance for the broader debate over the intent and efficacy of CVE as an alternative to previous counterterrorism policies that privileged the use of military force. During the Afghanistan and Iraq War, human rights and human security scholars criticized what they saw as an overreliance on military force for countering terrorism. NGOs encouraged policymakers to employ a broader range of tactics such as development, diplomacy, or human rights-promotion to address the grievances that motivate current or future extremist groups.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, while CVE policies increasingly use these “soft” areas to combat extremism, some observers now question the extent to which CVE policies truly address the grievances of “violent exclusion” and to what extent they represent the securitization of previously civilian areas of foreign policy.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Finally, the possibility of engaging women in combat zones who are neither officially soldiers nor contractors and are often more vulnerable members of their communities brings up important ethical questions: Who is responsible for their actions or the harm that may come to them? In the past year, government officials and advocates have widely noted a lack of research on the effects of CVE, and these particular questions over responsibility and ethics have attracted even less attention.[[9]](#footnote-9)

By examining the origins and influences that underlie the policy shift, I move toward explaining the contradiction and provide relevant information in the debate over the potential opportunities and limitations of the new partnership framework. Unpacking the root causes may clarify the relative influence of agendas underlying the foundations and progression of women’s roles in CVE. A clearer outline of the causes may also be predictive of the influence and relative power of groups in shaping the past and future of women’s roles in CVE policy. By dissecting the roots of this shift, this research aims to test the dominant assumption of gender mainstreaming as the single cause of the shift and to critically examine historical and military factors that may have shaped the shift as well.

In the literature review that follows, I outline three possible shift factors and examine the potential of each to explain part of the shift from one discourse to another in post-2011 counterterrorism policy: gender-mainstreaming, influenced by pressure from the WPS community, the securitization and co-option of the WPS field, and a post-Iraq War desire for counterterrorism strategies to avoid direct, visible American military involvement abroad. The methodology section explains my choice of an Interpretivist process-tracing methodology, based on historical, policy, and consultation analysis. This allows me to pursue a highly contextualized examination of policy discourses on engaging women in counterterrorism through official government and NGO texts and individual perspectives.

*Literature Review*

Given CVE’s relatively short and recent history, there is a very narrow body of literature on it and even less on women’s inclusion in CVE. Therefore, I draw from relevant literature on women’s empowerment and gender-mainstreaming as a whole since 9/11 to contextualize the policy framework. Since I approach this research with the goal of critically investigating the assertion of gender-mainstreaming, I next look to two more critical bodies of literature. These focus on the effects of institutional militarization and literature on the transition to surrogate warfare. In doing so, I examine the ways that each effect may have contributed to the final outcome and the relative influence each could have had on this particular policy shift.

*Dominant Policy Narrative: Gender-Mainstreaming*

The first body of literature places women’s roles in CVE within the context of the history of gender-mainstreaming in U.S. foreign policy. Specifically, in 2000, just before 9/11, the U.S. signed United Nations Resolution 1325, a foundational document that outlined the importance of including women in the fields of conflict resolution, peace, and security.[[10]](#footnote-10) While it did not anticipate counterterrorism, it has since begun to incorporate women’s involvement in counterterrorism.[[11]](#footnote-11) 1325 also helped to shape the already present but consequently more defined WPS community.[[12]](#footnote-12) Drawing on this framework, WPS advocates have championed women’s talents, agency, and unique contributions and pushed for incremental gender-mainstreaming in U.S. security policy.[[13]](#footnote-13) Particularly, they have focused on empowering women by increasing women’s inclusion and ability to shape their own and their community’s safety.[[14]](#footnote-14) Within this context, it would be natural to assume that a policy framed as empowering women is a reference to the process of empowering local women and gender-mainstreaming in U.S. security policy.

However, critical advocates point out that although the WPS community has been calling for empowerment, empowerment is just one of the goals they call for, including women’s safety and protection, multidimensional gender analysis, and listening to women’s perspectives.[[15]](#footnote-15) They point out that policymakers often selectively highlight a singular aspect of local women based on how it suits a policy framework.[[16]](#footnote-16) If the policy calls for an intervention, women can play the victims. If they want a resilient community, women become the steadfast entrepreneurs. If they want to transition responsibility, women become “strong” and “confident.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The focus on empowerment, they point out, is equally selective and, thus, potentially motivated by an underlying policy incentive.[[18]](#footnote-18) While the discussion of women’s empowerment superficially matches some aspects of the context of gender-mainstreaming, the tokenist approach to women’s empowerment suggests that it’s an unlikely explanation for the *full* policy shift.

*First Critical Framework: Institutional Militarization*

Institutional scholars note another important trend in post 9/11 national security: the rapid expansion of national security agendas into other areas of American foreign policy.[[19]](#footnote-19) This “mission creep” as Shoon Murray and Gordon Adams label it, represents a seismic shift in the distribution of responsibilities, resources, and platforms through which national security can operate.[[20]](#footnote-20) For example, post 9/11, the military has not only expanded into “soft power” areas but has also been actively involved in projects such as drilling wells, building roads, constructing schools and clinics, advising national and local governments, and supplying mobile services of optometrists, doctors, and dentists overseas.[[21]](#footnote-21) This creeping militarization has allowed the Department of Defense to not only accrue a larger set of resources, but also to reshape the priorities and agendas of diplomacy, development, foreign aid, and policy to reflect a military perspective and national security agenda.[[22]](#footnote-22) It additionally allows military operations to take

on a new humanitarian face.[[23]](#footnote-23)

In terms of women’s participation in countering extremism, Katherine Brown has examined how the engagement of Muslim women in the United Kingdom reflects a securitized agenda.[[24]](#footnote-24) The agenda is wrapped in women’s rights language, but it reflects limited perspectives of gender that idealize motherhood and “liberal” and “integrated” Muslim women who are supposed to preach against extremism in alliance with the U.K. government.[[25]](#footnote-25) The government can therefore “check the women’s rights box” while continuing to prioritize institutional securitization.[[26]](#footnote-26) This area of scholarship explains the representation of local women as extensions of the securitization of the women’s empowerment field. Building on Brown’s research in the United Kingdom, I investigate to the role of securitization, which explains changes in representations as reflections of increased defense prioritization in previously civilian areas. However, the instrumentalization of women as victims again might just as easily serve the purpose of military intervention, leaving the question of why it is so important that women’s abilities and agency be stressed. Additionally, Murray and Adams describe securitization as a trend that has gradually intensified since 9/11. In order to explain a shift that is specific to the past five years, an additional factor needs to be examined.

*Second Critical Framework: Surrogate Warfare*

The first two groups of scholars offer important explanations for the Strategic use of

gender and the increasing instrumentalism of non-military fields. However, these bodies of scholarship do not fully explain the shift from depicting women as victims to enlisting women as actors. What would make women who seemed uniquely oppressed before, now appear to be empowered agents who would not only make excellent humanitarian justifications, but also talented actors for national security and law enforcement?

A third group of scholars focuses on explaining a parallel discourse and set of policies, the empowerment of foreigns security sector “partners” in the context of 21st century warfare. Scholars like Nick Turse and Steve Niva have traced a post-Iraq military strategy that focuses on a “military-lite” approach that extends additional responsibilities to human proxies. These proxies include private security contractors and foreign soldiers and a mix of technological proxies like drones, autonomous weapons, and cyberwarfare.[[27]](#footnote-27) This shift has been framed as “leading from behind” and empowering U.S. partners to tackle their own security problems, which focuses on risk minimization.[[28]](#footnote-28) Andreas Krieg labels this as “surrogate warfare,” a combination of compound warfare and proxy warfare that prioritizes cost-effectiveness, legal and ethical deniability, and invisibility.[[29]](#footnote-29) Krieg argues that by the end of the Iraq War, austerity measures and a “war-fatigued American public” necessitated shifting to surrogate warfare. In doing this, surrogate warfare externalizes the burden of war from taxpayers, policy-makers, and military to foreigners.[[30]](#footnote-30) Niva and Turse illustrate that, by relying on special forces, covert operations, and military missions framed as development or humanitarianism, these policies create the effect of “disappearing violence” and “further US imperial interests on the cheap.”[[31]](#footnote-31) The engagement of these actors has been framed as empowering partnerships, and by prioritizing the humanitarian aspect of the partnership, military action and perceived imperialism is de-emphasized.[[32]](#footnote-32) Rather than representing a shift toward egalitarian partnerships and shared security, these scholars argue that the shift toward partnership language reflects a transition that allows counterterrorism operations to continue in a period of heightened global and domestic resistance towards the U.S. military interventions.

Turse and Niva also discuss the role of securitization of U.S. foreign policy, but identify this new warfare as a particular form of securitization emerging around the end of the Iraq War, where civilian agencies are securitized to justify the instrumentalization of nontraditional actors or provide nontraditional actors.[[33]](#footnote-33) While this group of scholarship does not address women, gender, or non-armed actors, I extend this analysis to examine the potential influences of surrogate warfare on women’s roles in CVE. Because this particular brand of securitization requires agency and “empowerment” for nontraditional actors, it presents strategic advantages to to highlight women’s agency and empowerment, rather than their weakness or victimhood. This body of literature, unlike the previous two, matches more specifically with the timeline and would serve to explain a more sudden shift. This scholarship offers potential explanations to the sudden faith in women’s abilities and willingness to engage them, not as equal partners in creating and shaping counterterrorism policies, but as surrogates for American soldiers and law enforcement.

*Conclusion*

By examining the roots of this shift, this paper aims to test the dominant narrative of the gender role shift in countering violent extremism as a purely moral awakening or gradual recognition of women’s rights and to critically examine historical factors that may have shaped the shift in discourse. I compare the extent to which these factors explain the current policies and build on Brown’s analysis of U.K. policy through an examination of U.S. policy. Additionally, I extend the analysis of surrogate warfare to the engagement of women to examine the potential effects of surrogate warfare on local women. This brings a gender analysis to the literature on surrogate warfare and test the boundaries of who can be categorized as a proxy.

*Methodology*

Since I am focusing on the process that shaped and influenced a set of policies in a specific setting, I employ an Interpretivist research design and a process-tracing methodology. This methodology allows me to pursue a highly contextualized examination of the origins of a new discourse on engaging women in counterterrorism. I use this to unpack and compare the relative influence of different agendas in the policymaking process. I created a timeline of relevant events and bring together historical and policy analyses. Using this as a guide, I trace the policies back to their origins, examine the previous policies or ideas that inspired them, and locate them in the broader policy frameworks they belong to. In doing so, I aim to trace the policy back to the most influential agenda.

*Process-Tracing*

Process-tracing has been developed over several decades of political science research, but articulated particularly well by Andrew Bennett and Alexander George.[[34]](#footnote-34) They define the methodology as an approach that is concerned with testing theories in a way that focuses on “the causal processes at work in political life.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Peter Hall also adds that process-tracing is a methodology well-suited to testing theories in a world marked by “multiple interaction” effects, where it is difficult to explain outcomes in terms of two or three independent variables.[[36]](#footnote-36) Primarily, process-tracing allow me to focus on the causal mechanisms or influencing factors. However, its unique advantage is that process-tracing allows me to exam multiple interaction effects, such as the *interaction* of gender-mainstreaming and military strategy.[[37]](#footnote-37) Therefore I can examine not just these two factors independently, but also analyzing how they interact with one another. This adds an additional level of nuance to the research in understanding how the two factors may complement one another to create the policy outcome. By adding this level of nuance, process-tracing allows me to focus on the degree to which these factors influenced the policies, relative to one another and also to understand particular forms of each factor more specifically. For example, I am able to analyze a specific form of militarization that makes rhetorical use of gender-mainstreaming.

While most process-tracing is within a Positivist approach, I employ an Interpretivist approach that has been gaining more traction with Constructivist researchers.[[38]](#footnote-38) The primary reason is that this research is intended to be highly contextualized and particular to this specific period of U.S. foreign and military policy. Vincent Pouliot points out that in some cases, “it is the meaningful contexts that give practices their social effectiveness and generative power in and on the world.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Therefore, I do not outline a specific hypothesis at the beginning of my research, but draw on theory from the literature to inform my approach to selecting documents, the time periods, and broad theoretical explanations. By not confining myself to specific limitations at the outset, this approach allowed me the flexibility to examine how different influencing factors interact, use a “snowball” approach to tracing historical documents, incorporate a broad range of perspectives on the topic.

*Material Selection*

From the outset, I focused the origin of the policies around 2011. The relevance of December 2011 is the official end of the Iraq War and the release of the most significant original policy on CVE, the “Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States.”[[40]](#footnote-40) These two events mark a significant shift in counterterrorism policy from direct military intervention and occupation to the broader tactics and goals of countering violent extremism.[[41]](#footnote-41) A report from the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, *A Decade Lost: Locating Gender in Counter-terrorism*, provides a comprehensive examination of women’s roles in U.S. counterterrorism post-9/11. It notes a shift around this time toward discussing the use of local women to counter terrorism.[[42]](#footnote-42) In order to get a comprehensive timeline of events, I primarily examine documents from several years before the shift to the present, specifically 2009-2015, but included a few key pieces from previous years, such as the U.K. PREVENT strategy. While this creates a large span of time, it is important to have enough information prior to the shift and enough information about how the shift plays out to be able to trace the influences of different agendas over time. Given that this research focuses on the interagency process of creating and implementing policy, it is even more important to examine several years in order to account for the gradual process of creating and implementing policy in different sections of the government.

I examine a range of different materials to create a timeline of relevant events, trace the policies back to their origins, examine the previous policies or ideas that inspired them, and locate them in the broader policy frameworks. I focus on three main sources: material from policymakers and government officials, material from WPS advocates, and research from consultations with women’s groups who are countering violent extremism. The material from government officials and policymakers, includes policy outlines, statements at events on women and CVE, and speeches on counterterrorism policy. I select the pieces based on their relevance to the 2011 transition and focus on speeches from government officials and key figures in the Obama administration, such as Obama’s 2015 commencement speech at West Point. These pieces allow me to examine the framework for broader justifications for counterterrorism and women’s engagement. Secondly, I examine blogs and reports from Women, Peace, and Security advocates on women’s roles in CVE. For example, “Women and Preventing Violent Extremism: The U.S. and U.K. Experiences” provides a comprehensive look at what the WPS community expected from the United States government prior to the rollout of this policy. I look at documents like this prior to and during the release of the policies to compare the WPS community’s goals and reactions to the policies. I also look to see concerns about militarization or the instrumentalization of women. Finally, I analyze research from consultations conducted by the Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership with nearly seventy women’s groups engaged in countering violent extremism. I compare the reactions and goals of the women in these groups with the policies to investigate their effect.

*Reflexivity*

While this research focuses on causal mechanisms in policymaking, it is still be important to maintain reflexivity in my approach to the subject. Most importantly, I consider my role as a white, Western woman with comparatively significant wealth, access to education, and access to politicians and policymakers. I have the privilege to make the women described in these policies as my subjects, while they have historically had limited influence over how their identities are shaped in U.S. and international discourses. Sally L. Kitch points out that the role of Western women investigating the lives of women in contested terrains, represents a “figuratively contested terrain,” where researchers and subjects carefully negotiate geopolitical, cultural, and power differentials.[[43]](#footnote-43) Given the focus on U.S. counterterrorism, I also consider my identity as an American citizen. A history of colonialism and neocolonialism and recent American military interventions have at least in part been responsible for the insecurity of the women who represent the objects of the discourse and some of the NGO workers.[[44]](#footnote-44) Fulfilling my responsibilities to the subject requires recognizing how my own security has been elevated at the expense of the security of the women in question, but also how my identity grants me perceived legitimacy as an American and resident in Washington, D.C. [[45]](#footnote-45) Parin Dossa and Geyla Frank add that because the identities of the researcher and subjects are intertwined, reflexivity must go beyond an initial recognition of identity to an active and consistent analysis of oneself as an actor in the research.[[46]](#footnote-46) Since my own identity and security is interdependent with the identity and security of the women in question, I reflected on my own identity and positionality throughout each step of the research process.

*Analysis*

In this analysis, I first discuss the historical and policy context of the policies on women and CVE. Second, I analyze the effects of the policies from the perspectives of local women. I build to a discussion the primary influence of the policy shift, a transition to surrogate warfare. Finally, I consider alternative explanations, primarily the dominant narrative of gender mainstreaming, and discuss the element of reflexivity.

*Historical and Policy Context*

Rather than a strictly gendered version of empowerment, the rhetoric of “empowerment” programs, “empowered women,” and “women as partners" stems from a much broader counterterrorism framework of “partner empowerment” that has become dominant under the Obama administration.[[47]](#footnote-47) President Obama has explained that his national security approach aims for “American leadership” that constitutes a middle ground to avoid both negligent isolationism and reckless interventionist, a stark contrast from Bush’s “preventive war” approach.[[48]](#footnote-48) While America’s strategic interests remain just as important before, not every problem, he argues, can be solved through military intervention, and, thus, in order to achieve U.S. goals, America must partner with and empower others.[[49]](#footnote-49) Through the strategic partnership of empowered countries, communities, and individuals, the U.S. can counter terrorism “without us firing a shot."[[50]](#footnote-50) The rhetoric of empowerment in the field of women countering violent extremism then has less to do with a radical shift in the views of women, but a broader language shift in counterterrorism as a whole.

Specifically, the idea of empowering partners features heavily in the original two outlines of CVE policy, whose titles both center around the term “Empowering Local Partners.”[[51]](#footnote-51) The documents include consistent references to “empowerment" as a very broad range of activities, and “partners" as anyone on the receiving end of government empowerment, such as individuals, communities, families, “stakeholders,” and even local politicians.[[52]](#footnote-52) The original reports do not include women, although later CVE policy begins to include women, along the same lines of empowering partners.[[53]](#footnote-53) The empowered partners framework even extends beyond CVE to active military engagement. For example, AFRICOM, the U.S. command in Africa, frames their work as "empowering African state partners” through trainings and information sharing.[[54]](#footnote-54) In 2014, a new defense initiative dedicated five billion dollars to this effort in the “Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund” to empower partners through "training, building capacity, and facilitating partner countries on the front lines."[[55]](#footnote-55)

*The Effects of “Empowering Partners” for Local Women*

Beneath the empowering rhetoric, consultations with women activists on the ground and remarks from advocates also reflect a deep divide between the language of the policies and realities and needs of women on the ground. In consultations for a report for UN Women and a report from the Women’s Alliance in Security Leadership, based on seventy consultation with women involved in countering violent extremism in fifteen countries, researchers described that women were “very firm in their belief” that although women’s empowerment reduces violent extremism, the securitization of women’s empowerment and instrumentalization of themselves as actors posed direct threats to their safety and genuine empowerment.[[56]](#footnote-56) When women’s engagement was perceived as the instrumentalization of outside actors, it created "a risk of backlash against women’s right defenders...in an already volatile environment.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

Others noted that the problem is compounded by high rhetoric that doesn’t match commitments, short-term engagement that leaves women vulnerable when the geopolitics shifts, and the way that other U.S. counterterrorism finance laws negatively affect them when that fits U.S. interests.[[58]](#footnote-58) In 2014-2015, numerous experts wrote blogs, policy papers, and spoke at events to address the dangers present when CT policy engages women without concern for their safety and their long-term stability and rights.[[59]](#footnote-59) Specifically, despite the continued rhetoric of women as strong and empowered in the domestic sphere to justify their engagement in direct confrontation, Chantal de Jourat, President of Women in International Security criticized this, saying that “Actually, what these women tell us is that they have no power whatsoever in these families. And that their survival strategies is denial, of what's happening with extremism.”[[60]](#footnote-60) While the policies reflect two goals of WPS, the inclusion of women and emphasis on women’s agency, they reflect a much more limited framework than desired by WPS, one that women activists see as often instrumentalist and securitized.

*Surrogate Warfare as an Explanation for Women’s Instrumentalization*

U.S. counterterrorism policy makers within the Obama administration inherited significant incentive to develop unusual surrogates on the frontline, due to pressure to bring U.S. soldiers home and cut defense costs while simultaneously aggressively protecting strategic U.S. interests around the world.[[61]](#footnote-61) Non-state actors as surrogates also bring benefits like deniability and surface-level international legal compliance in an environment where the Obama administration perceived violations of international law and norms to be damaging to U.S. interests.[[62]](#footnote-62) Indeed, the engagement of women, as securitized instruments, can be traced to the primary goals of the Obama administration’s CT goals: drawing down the military, cutting costs, and returning to international legitimacy. As CT expert Andreas Krieg describes it, US "leadership from behind” means "that surrogates are empowered to secure strategic and operational objectives in the region”[[63]](#footnote-63) Rhetorically, shifting the burden of war to foreign actors has been "justified by the maxim of letting local partners solve local problems.”[[64]](#footnote-64) By engaging nontraditional actors like women as proxies under the framework of “empowerment,” the Obama administration can achieve its goals of withdrawing troops, cutting costs, and returning to international legitimacy. The policy shift matches each of these criteria, framing previously “weak” actors as suddenly strong, “empowering” them to take more direct action, and describing the relationship as a partnership and a transition of responsibility.

A policy from a dominant world power that instrumentalizes foreign Muslim women would not, in fact, be a first. In the 1920s, Soviet attempts to spark Communist revolution in South Asia were stymied by the lack of a clear “proletariat” in a society without industrial class divisions.[[65]](#footnote-65) With the assistance of the Soviet Women’s Bureau, Soviet agents created surrogates, “artificial proletariats,” by training women to "stand up" to their societies gender restrictions.[[66]](#footnote-66) Perceived by their communities as agents of foreign infiltration, women activists suffered immediate backlash, alienation and severe violence.[[67]](#footnote-67) When the effort failed to produce Communist progress, the Soviets decided to abandon the investment.[[68]](#footnote-68) While there is likely little connection between these two policies, it demonstrates that instrumentalizing South Asian Muslim women as proxies may not be nearly as historically original nor far-fetched as the theory of surrogate warfare may seem.

*Considering Alternatives: The Result of WPS Advocacy?*

A viable alternative idea might be that this is the result of the best intentions of the WPS community or the best intentions of the policy makers to listen to the WPS recommendations. However, the origins and inspiration for U.S. CVE policy also reflect an agenda that is far from a response to the goals and voices of the WPS community. The foundation for the White House’s CVE policy derives from the United Kingdom’s previous domestic counter-radicalization policy, PREVENT.[[69]](#footnote-69) Throughout the policy’s implementation in the U.K., starting in 2007, Feminist scholars and the WPS community continually condemned the policy and its implementation for a hypocritical and dangerous engagement of women.[[70]](#footnote-70) In particular, common critiques highlighted the way that a gendered approach to securitizing Muslim communities instrumentalized women for counter terrorism and co-opted their activism, delegitimizing their goals and trapping them between extremists and the state.[[71]](#footnote-71) Additionally, despite the language of “empowerment” in PREVENT, policymakers often described women in singular, essentialist terms as exclusively mothers and other female relatives.[[72]](#footnote-72) Implementation too often assumed willingness to participate, based on the assumption that women were more moderate and liberal and just needed the tools to save themselves from an extreme religion.[[73]](#footnote-73) Given the numerous allegations against the policy for harming women, if the WPS community *had* brought about the “empowerment” framework, it’s unlikely that they would have used the PREVENT strategy as the foundational framework.

*The Role of the WPS Community*

What then is the role of the WPS community? While the origins of an empowerment discourse in CVE and support on the frontlines do not stem primarily from pressure from the WPS community, the WPS community does have strategic agency within these limits. Since the release of CVE policy in 2011, WPS organizations have hosted numerous events, published several extensive reports for policymakers, initiated dialogues with counterterrorism policymakers, and continued to build a larger community dedicated to women’s roles in security.[[74]](#footnote-74) Significantly, their activism ensured that there was always an incentive to include women, albeit in an often essentialist fashion.[[75]](#footnote-75) Particularly in the past year, WPS community members have been vocal about the dangers that instrumentalizing women present, in Washington and around the world, in print, in consultations, and at events.[[76]](#footnote-76) As CVE policy continues to evolve, the relative influence of the WPS community will be further clarified by the degree to which they are able to curtail these current dangers for women in CVE policy.

Some might argue that the emphasis on women’s instrumentalization continues to underestimate their agency. After all, women are already on the frontlines. Language that complains about “weaponized” women is problematic as well, in its objectifying language and assumption that women are not naturally agents in war. Additionally, the idea of a frontline where women face increased danger may be too heavily emphasized, since many of the extremists groups who represent the focus of these policies threaten women in community homes and within families, in and among their community, meaning that there often are no safe spaces and no need for an outside actor to move them toward the violence. However, while women are already on the “front lines,” sometimes by active choice and sometimes due to the diffuse nature or extremism, it is essential to delineate the additional dangers presented when their existence in this “front line” is perceived as being instrumentalized by outside influencers, creating additional dangers.

*Reflexivity*

Throughout this research process, I continually reflected on my role as the researcher in my motivations, inclusion of material and description, and my role at events on women and CVE. My motivation for this research topic stemmed from working with advocates who felt that they were making decisions on whether to engage in CVE without fully informed knowledge of the extents of militarization. My perspective undoubtedly influenced my intent to examine the role of militarization and the complex concerns of NGOs and advocates. At the same time, in my effort to describe the role of a military agenda, it could have been easy to downplay the role of local NGOs and WPS organizations, whose hard work, creativity, and agency could be underemphasized by too heavy a focus on the more powerful agenda at play. Distant from the challenges and threats of extremism and the day-to-day struggles of women on the “front lines” of countering extremism, research that overlooked the defiant work of these women would do them a disservice. I strove to maintain an understanding of the limitations placed on civil society, while observing their remarkable ability to push for their goals in and among these limitations.

Finally, I considered my role as a educationally, financially, and geographically privileged white woman with access to elite NGOs and policymakers in Washington, D.C. In the past two decades, American feminists who have advocated on behalf of female victims of extremist violence have at times used this advocacy to gain a seat at the policy table.[[77]](#footnote-77) This phenomenon was particularly pronounced during the first few years in Afghanistan when organizations like the Feminist Majority Foundation gained greater national importance through their collaboration with the intervention in Afghanistan. However, this effect remained present to a degree at the events I attended on women and CVE where primarily white women spoke on behalf of local, Muslim women. This advocacy work not only gives women with these particular privileges a seat at the table with CT policymakers and experts, but essentialist views of women also grant us the presumed ability to speak on behalf of women whose race, religion, and geography we do not share.

*Conclusion*

After examining the historical and policy context, the origins and foundation of the PREVENT policy, and the consultations with women, gender-mainstreaming proves to be a poor explanation for the shift from one counterterrorism framework to another. Gender-mainstreaming provides the incentive in both frameworks to reference women’s issues in counterterrorism, but not to fully address the complexities of women as both victims and agents of change. Gradual, institutional militarization provides an impetus to militarize the WPS field over the past decade, but it is a specific form of militarization that plays the largest role in the shift around 2011. The transition to surrogate warfare, drawing on elements of gender-mainstreaming and broader militarization, highlights women’s strength and agency to justify shifting responsibility for U.S. counterterrorism to women as local partners.

As Jayne Huckerby, UN expert on women and CVE states, “Instrumentalization and militarization are not just buzzwords, but profound human rights and ethical implications.”[[78]](#footnote-78) While the discussion of empowered women might sound like progress for women’s inclusion, the use of WPS terminology creates a “Trojan horse” effect where WPS rhetoric disguises military encroachment into local women’s lives. While many WPS and human rights advocates are currently wary of the influence of institutional militarization, this research points to a more sinister form of militarization, surrogate warfare that directly instrumentalizes local women. In an effort to cut costs, withdraw soldiers, and return to perceived international legitimacy, the Obama administration has ostensibly transitioned responsibility to partners like local women. However, without the intention of relinquishing of U.S. interests, these policies have securitized civilian areas like women’s empowerment and dumped the burden of war onto local actors.

This research initially set out to examine a small puzzle and potential hypocrisy within the WPS field. However, it hit on just one branch of new form of 21st century warfare and a much larger root of militarization that extends to a significant portion of U.S. CVE and counterterrorism operations. Scholarly literature on surrogate warfare has previously discussed the engagement of private contractors, foreign armies, technology, and unusual state forces such as Iranian agents.[[79]](#footnote-79) However, the theory must be extended to include the strategic engagement of local community members as well, whose engagement lies in the grey area of surrogacy. Additionally, scholarly literature on the emerging trend toward surrogate warfare has focused exclusively on the military and strategic implications of this shift. New research must address the human rights and ethical consequences as well. In particular, future research should examine the effect of externalizing the burdens of war on different affected surrogates and their communities, as well as the way that it may shift American and foreign perceptions of US counterterrorism.

Additionally, this brings up a challenge for advocates against militarization. While previous advocacy against post-9/11 militarization has focused on turning the government away from too easily using military solutions to problems, Obama’s explicit shift away from using traditional military solutions has also brought militarization into previously civilian areas of foreign policy, making demilitarization far more complex, and political, than simply reducing the military and use of direct force. Future research could illuminate the boundaries between securitized engagement of women and engagement that reflects a more civilian role to trace the specific effects of securitized policy and to determine the methods by which different actors grapple with, resist, or encourage securitization in the foreign policy process.

Timeline

2000: Women, Peace, and Security: Security Resolution 1325 signed

2001: 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

2003: United Kingdom releases CONTEST, which includes a branch called PREVENT

2005: Iraq War begins

2007: Full PREVENT strategy released in U.K.

2007: US founds AFRICOM and AFRICOM partnerships

2007-2008: Barack Obama campaigns on drawing down the War on Terror

2007-2008: National Security community discusses future of counterterrorism, the effect of a change in presidential leadership, and the expense of the WOT

2008: Barack Obama elected as President

2009-2010: National Security community discusses hybrid warfare, preparation for post-Iraq War CT

2010-2011: CT policy focus shifts to homegrown terrorism

2011: Official withdrawal from the Iraq War

2011: White House releases *Empowering Local Partners to Counter Violent Extremism* and *Srategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States*

2011-14: Women, Peace, and Security community criticizes lack of gender analysis in CVE policy

2012-2013: Policy focus on women and CVE highlights the women’s roles as mothers and their role in intelligence-gathering

2012-2013: WPS community criticizes narrow role for women, call for more agency for women

2014: National Security community discusses downsizing military and preparing for hybrid and irregular warfare

2014: Obama addresses West Point and outlines new CT strategy

2014: Presidential statements refers to women as “buffers” to violent extremism

2014-2015: State Department creates programs to engage individual women to stand up to extremism

2015: August 20, 2015 the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) holds its first open session briefing member states on the role of women in countering terrorism and violent extremism. It highlights the role that women, particularly mothers, might play in preventing radicalization of their children.

2015: Several blogs occur in *Just Security* warning of dangers of CVE instrumentalization

2015: At an event at USIP, several NGO leaders warn of dangers of instrumentalization in CVE for women

2016: Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership releases a report based on seventy consultations with women countering extremism

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