

# UN Women Review of Gender Integration in UN Counter-Terrorism Mechanisms: A Summary of the Findings

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## 1. Introduction and objectives

The primary aim of this review is to assess the overall understanding and integration of gender within the main UN counter-terrorism (CT) coordination framework – the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact – and across inter-agency collaboration.

Commissioned by UN Women, this review will inform the organization's revised engagement framework on UN Counter-Terrorism and Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE)<sup>1</sup> to update its strategic priorities in supporting the acceleration of the implementation of women, peace and security (WPS) commitments as part of the UN Counter-Terrorism agenda. The findings are based on secondary research and 58 interviews with UN staff, academics, civil society and UN Special Rapporteurs.

## 2. Context: Definitional challenges and legal frameworks

Terrorism remains a persistent global threat, with designated groups operating across regions where local and regional dynamics intersect in complex ways. The lack of precise legal definitions for core concepts such as 'terrorism' and 'violent extremism' has created a permissive environment for the weaponization of these terms. In numerous jurisdictions, this terminological fluidity is utilized to target non-violent dissent, restrict civic space, and criminalize the legitimate activities of women human rights defenders and civil society organizations (CSOs).

These broad and vague policy frameworks often undermine international human rights and humanitarian law. States frequently employ reactive, militarized, and criminal justice approaches that violate human rights, rather than human rights-based responses. Consequently, the erasure of women in the national security space is becoming state policy in various contexts, and terms such as 'gender' and 'women' are being removed from documents produced by Member States and multilateral institutions.

Compounding this challenge is the increasing reliance on 'soft law' – the guidelines, standards and best practices generated by multilateral bodies and technical entities within the CT architecture. While these instruments are technically non-binding, they are frequently adopted by Member States to circumvent the more rigorous, treaty-based obligations of international human rights law. A systemic trend has emerged wherein these 'soft' norms harden into practice, effectively becoming the primary regulatory framework for national security operations. This process is often accelerated by UN technical assistance and capacity-building initiatives that, in the pursuit of operational efficacy, may inadvertently entrench human rights-deficient practices. Consequently, the distinction between binding legal obligations and voluntary standards becomes blurred, often to the detriment of human rights protections and the rule of law.

<sup>1</sup> See current engagement framework (to be revised in 2026): <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/05/un-womens-engagement-in-support-of-counter-terrorism-and-prevention-of-violent-extremism>.

### 3. Gender dimensions and intersectionality

Constrained and inconsistent interpretations of gender within the UN system have created normative gaps that enable Member States to appropriate gender discourse to legitimize securitized and militarized approaches, thus undermining the intended objectives of gender equality, protection and women's agency. The former Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism has recommended that the UN CT entities – including the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) and the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) – adopt a clear and precise definition of gender mainstreaming in their work that is in line with the definition used by UN Women. The adoption of this recommendation is critical to ensure that gender mainstreaming is consistent with Member State obligations, including those related to human rights.<sup>2</sup>

Despite high-level policy commitments to gender mainstreaming, the operational reality within the counter-terrorism architecture reveals a persistent tendency to view gender through a binary and instrumental lens. Currently, there is a global backlash against non-heteronormative gender identities, and misconstruing gender as only applicable to women undermines rights protections.

Furthermore, while the whole-of-society approach to PVE is intended to promote inclusive and preventive engagement, its application must be carefully circumscribed to avoid unintended harm. Without clear purpose, defined objectives and robust safeguards, there is a risk that non-security sectors such as education, health, and social welfare become implicitly securitized. This blurring of roles can inadvertently position care providers as extensions of state security functions, thereby undermining professional ethics and eroding the social trust that underpins community cohesion and effective prevention.

#### Masculinities and intersectionality

There is a critical gap in addressing the role of masculinities in CT and PVE. Hyper-militarized security responses often reinforce toxic masculine norms, yet few programmes critically engage with how these norms drive recruitment and violence. Blindness to the gendered dynamics of men and boys, coupled with a lack of intersectional analysis, results in programming that is often one-dimensional. Such programming fails to account for how overlapping identities – including race, ethnicity, religion and class – intersect with gender to shape individual experiences of both terrorism and state responses to it. Moreover, the global backlash against gender equality has manifested in concerted efforts by some actors to erase gender terminology from official discourse, threatening to unravel decades of progress in integrating gender perspectives into international security frameworks.

#### Instrumentalization vs. agency

The role of women in CT initiatives is complex and paradoxical. Women are often instrumentalized with the responsibility of preventing terrorism placed upon them, thus increasing their sociopolitical burdens. Programmes often view women's equality merely as a tool to prevent the radicalization of men. Paradoxically, while the 'good mother' who partners with the security state is promoted, these programmes may stigmatize and make her a frontline target. Conversely, some women participate in these initiatives to express agency, resisting and subverting securitized approaches in practice.

### 4. Institutional obstacles within the UN System

The UN counter-terrorism architecture presents significant structural challenges for the meaningful integration of human rights and gender equality. A prevailing culture within parts of the system continues to prioritize 'hard' security imperatives over 'soft' human rights obligations, creating an artificial dichotomy that hinders holistic programming. The structural and systemic obstacles to the integration of gender in UN CT mechanisms include:

<sup>2</sup> A/HRC/46/36: Human rights impact of counter-terrorism and countering (violent) extremism policies and practices on the rights of women, girls and the family. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc4636-human-rights-impact-counter-terrorism-and-countering-violent>.

- **Prioritization of security over human rights:** There is a perception that ensuring gender equality is distinct from preventing human rights harms. UN entities sometimes prioritize maintaining presence in a country over human rights, giving Member States carte blanche to disregard rights, effectively signalling that compliance with international law is secondary to security cooperation.
- **Information silos:** There is a lack of proactive information-sharing among members of the UN Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact, with some members unaware of critical processes like the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy reviews.
- **Funding disparities:** The fourth pillar of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (human rights and rule of law) is severely underfunded compared to other parts of the architecture. Proposed budget cuts threaten to further reduce resources for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and UN Women. The scarcity of resources for rights-based programming, contrasted with the availability of security-focused funding, often distorts programmatic priorities, incentivizing organizations to frame their work through a security lens to access resources, even when they lack the requisite thematic expertise.
- **Lack of oversight:** There is a lack of UN system-wide standard indicators and benchmarks on how to integrate human rights and gender into CT action. Furthermore, there is a dearth of evaluators who possess both counter-terrorism knowledge and gender expertise.

## 5. Civil society and the impact on rights holders

Civil society engagement, while ostensibly a priority, remains inconsistent and frequently transactional. Grassroots women's organizations report significant barriers to accessing the UN CT architecture, particularly in New York, which they found to be opaque and elite-driven compared to the more accessible human rights mechanisms in Geneva. In national contexts, the UN was said to partner typically with 'safe' or elite-aligned organizations, a practice that effectively limits the diverse, often critical voices of women directly impacted by conflict

and security measures. Furthermore, a troubling 'gendered cooling effect' on advocacy was identified; women's organizations retreat from the security space due to fears of reprisals, surveillance or administrative burdens, such as bank de-risking, that disproportionately impact their access to financial services – and ultimately the sustainability of their organizations.

## 6. The comparative advantage of UN Women

In this complex landscape, UN Women can play a catalytic role. As the standard-bearer for gender equality within the UN system, it is uniquely positioned to safeguard the integrity of the WPS agenda against the risks of excessive securitization. Hence, UN Women must engage with the security sector in a principled manner, affirming that WPS is a distinct normative framework essential for sustainable peace, not merely a subset or instrument of counter-terrorism. By leveraging its triple mandate of normative support, system-wide coordination, and operational activities, UN Women can bridge the divide between the security and development pillars, promoting evidence-based, human rights-centric approaches that address the root causes of violence.

UN Women's established relationships with diverse women's networks allow it to facilitate genuine, rather than tokenistic, dialogue between civil society and security actors. This convening power is critical for ensuring that grassroots perspectives inform high-level policy formulation, transforming the engagement model from one of transaction to one of strategic partnership. UN Women's role is therefore not just to participate in the CT architecture, but to actively reshape it, ensuring that gender is understood not as an operational add-on but as a fundamental analytical lens required for effective and sustainable security outcomes. UN Women's principles of engagement include a feminist approach, intersectionality, platforming civil society, ethical partnerships, and adherence to the principle of 'do no harm'.

UN Women has previously added value by providing gender analysis to the review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and by facilitating civil society participation in it.

## 7. Recommendations

### A. Legal and human rights concerns

- **Terminology:** UN Women should prepare a fact sheet on terminology based on existing frameworks and the Special Rapporteur's model definition to clarify acts that do not constitute terrorism.
- **Risk assessments:** Ensure risk assessments of programmes include a thorough review of possible misinterpretation or misuse of terminology and flag adverse human rights/gendered impacts.
- **Documentation:** Document definitions used by UN Women at all levels, including key terms used in PVE-related programmes and projects, and analyse the potential impacts of these terms in local contexts where the programmes and projects are implemented. Such documentation and analysis should be used to formulate a working agency definition for key terms that are compliant with the rule-of-law and human rights.
- **Research:** Undertake research on gendered aspects of CT, such as sentencing disparities between men and women and the gendered impact of new technologies.

### B. Gender dimensions of UN strategies and practices

- **Oversight:** Advocate for an independent oversight mechanism for the UN CT architecture, potentially a strengthened Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS).
- **Annual reporting:** Advocate for UN CT entities to prepare annual reports on human rights integration.
- **Review of products:** Advocate for the assessment, by mandate holders on human rights and gender, of all

human rights documents from CT entities to ensure adherence to international law, thereby reinstating the supremacy of treaty-based law over soft law.

- **Civil society engagement:** Formulate a strategy to encourage CSOs to enter the CT space and provide clarity on the architecture.

### C. Human rights and gender dimensions of UN assistance

- **Mitigate instrumentalization:** Risk assessments of programmes must include assessment of the risk of the instrumentalization of women and the undermining of their agency.
- **Contextual understanding:** Build deep context analyses to ensure whole-of-society approaches do not weaponize familial relations or alienate social groups.
- **Protection measures:** Work towards setting in place protection measures for civil society engaging with UN CT mechanisms, potentially as a Compact initiative.

### D. UN Women's role in upholding WPS commitments

- **Coordination:** Strive for stronger coordination with OHCHR to adopt joint strategies, avoiding duplication and enhancing coherence.
- **Advocacy:** Advocate for an entity that establishes common norms on critical issues for the UN system to be used by Country Teams.
- **Field engagement:** Strengthen the humanitarian-development-peace nexus (HDP) and effectively include field officers in Compact discussions.

UN Women exists to advance women's rights, gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. As the lead United Nations entity on gender equality, we shift laws, institutions, social norms and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. We keep the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.