



Global Network  
on Extremism & Technology

# Bringing Women, Peace and Security Online: Mainstreaming Gender in Responses to Online Extremism

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*GNET is a special project delivered by the International Centre  
for the Study of Radicalisation, King's College London.*

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The Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) is an academic research initiative backed by the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), an independent but industry-funded initiative for better understanding, and counteracting, terrorist use of technology. GNET is convened and led by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), an academic research centre based within the Department of War Studies at King's College London. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as representing those, either expressed or implied, of GIFCT, GNET or ICSR.

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# Executive summary

**T**he relevance of gender to discussions about extremism and technology has been acknowledged, but not fully capitalised upon. The current report seeks to understand how gendered frameworks—particularly, the global agenda on Women, Peace, and Security—may be better engaged to understand these issues.

Key to this analysis is an incorporation of principles from research in Feminist Security Studies. As a subfield that links international relations, security studies, and gender studies, work in this area lays out principles relevant to both academics and practitioners. Among these are: the need to understand “violence” broadly, the need to envision how gender is linked with other social hierarchies, skepticism regarding the roles of state actors and advocacy for civil society engagement, and an understanding of the intertwined nature of discussions about security and development issues.

Taking these principles as guidelines, the report explores three trends in extremist uses of technology that explicitly speak to gender. First, it looks at how technology is used by extremists to directly facilitate physical and sexual violence against women and other marginalised groups. Second, it looks at gender-based patterns of online recruitment by extremist organisations. Finally, it explores the emerging challenge of semiotic violence online, examining the various ways that extremist groups engage with online platforms with the intent to silence or discredit women. Overall, the report concludes there is much to be gained from further dialogue about extremism and technology from a gender perspective, though developing such an approach requires both political will and responsible engagement.



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# 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, gender mainstreaming efforts have sought to highlight the links between gender and international security. The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, launched in 2000 by UN Security Council resolution 1325 and encompassing nine additional resolutions, has taken a special interest in addressing the status of women along four dimensions, referred to as the pillars of WPS. These include: protection; prevention; relief and recovery; and the participation of women in related processes.

The relevance of gender within the digital space, especially with relation to extremism and technology, has been acknowledged but not capitalised upon fully. For example, documents including UN Security Council resolution 2354 (2017) and the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee's "comprehensive international framework to counter terrorist narratives" (S/2017/375) have called for attention to be paid to gender, while efforts by UN Women have examined violence against women occurring either online or facilitated by information and communication technology (ICT). However, none of the current UN Security Council resolutions on WPS directly address the agenda's application in the digital space. Additionally, analysis of national action plans on WPS drafted by UN member states suggests that while attention to the gender aspects of extremism and radicalisation has been on the rise since 2015, few states engage directly with technology or cybersecurity issues in their implementation strategies.<sup>1</sup>

Efforts to bring WPS into the digital space may be impacted by a number of factors. First, there is a tendency to view relevant issues like the digital gender divide narrowly, framing them as development issues and siloing them accordingly.<sup>2</sup> Second, the failure to envision the full spectrum of violence against women arguably results in WPS initiatives focused on certain forms of harm, like violence in fragile and conflict-affected states. Third, attempts to extend global governance may run up against geopolitical efforts to extend national sovereignty over cyberspace.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the under-representation of women in the technology sector should be taken into account as a factor resulting in outcomes that fail to account fully for how women engage with technology.<sup>4</sup>

1 Caitlin Hamilton and Laura J. Shepherd (2020), WPS National Action Plans: Content Analysis and Data Visualisation, v2. Online, at <https://www.wpsnaps.org/>.

2 See, for example, the discussion of gender inequality in digital access in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals EQUALS/UNU, "Taking Stock: Data and Evidence on Gender Equality in Digital Access, Skills, and Leadership" (New York, NY: United Nations, 2019), p. 9.

3 Milton L. Mueller (26 November 2020), "Against Sovereignty in Cyberspace", *International Studies Review* vol. 22, no. 4: pp. 779–801, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viz044>.

4 Soraya Chemaly (2016), "The Problem with a Technology Revolution Designed Primarily for Men", Quartz, <https://qz.com/640302/why-is-so-much-of-our-new-technology-designed-primarily-for-men/>.

The report proceeds as follows: first, I engage with feminist scholarship to discuss principles that can be deployed to view the study of extremism and technology through a gender lens. Next, I offer insight into the applications of this approach by discussing recent cases of gender-based violence and gender-based recruitment by extremists. Finally, I comment on ways to approach gender mainstreaming in this area. Throughout, I argue that the issues discussed in this report intersect with every pillar of the WPS agenda, providing the basis for future dialogue.

## 2. Applications for Feminist Scholarship in the Digital Space

Feminist security studies (FSS) provides a useful framework for engaging with questions about gender and extremism in the online space. Emerging in the early 2000s, FSS falls at the intersection of international relations, security studies and gender studies.<sup>5</sup> Researchers in FSS generally see research and practice as interrelated, with academic enquiry both informed by and informing the lived experience of security.<sup>6</sup>

FSS outlines several principles that can inform the gendered analysis of extremism and technology. Among these are the following:

1. *The need to define “violence” broadly.* Feminist work draws on the notion of a continuum of violence, seeing violence beyond physical acts and outside the realm of conflict.<sup>7</sup> Krook, for example, categorises violence against women in politics along five dimensions: physical; psychological; economic; semiotic; and sexual. Applying this typology, WPS resolutions have brought significant focus to physical and sexual violence against women as well as the resulting psychological harms. They have also sought to address economic issues via relief and recovery efforts. However, semiotic violence – which deploys words, gestures and images with the purpose of silencing women or rendering them incompetent – represents a distinct form of harm that flourishes in the online space.<sup>8</sup> Semiotic violence in the online environment fosters new and digitally native forms of violence against women, such as revenge porn, “upskirting” and the creation of synthetic or “deepfake” pornography.<sup>9</sup>
2. *The need to envision how gender is intertwined with other social hierarchies.* FSS scholarship cautions against universalism, that is, making the assumption that all women experience oppression the same way and can find remedies through the same solutions.<sup>10</sup>

5 Laura Sjoberg (2016), “What, and Where, Is Feminist Security Studies?”, *Journal of Regional Security* vol. 11, no. 2: pp. 143–16; Maria Stern and Annick Wibben (2014), “A Decade of Feminist Security Studies Revisited”, *Security Dialogue*, no. Special Virtual Issue: pp. 1–6; Christine Sylvester (2010), “Tensions in Feminist Security Studies”, *Security Dialogue* vol. 41, no. 6: pp. 607–14; Annick T. R. Wibben (2 October 2014), “Researching Feminist Security Studies”, *Australian Journal of Political Science* vol. 49, no. 4: pp. 743–55.

6 Bina D’Costa and Katrina Lee-Koo (2013), “The Politics of Voice: Feminist Security Studies and the Asia-Pacific”, *International Studies Perspectives* vol. 14, no. 4: pp. 451–4; S. Laurel Weldon, “Inclusion and Understanding: A Collective Methodology for Feminist International Relations”, in *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern and Jacqui True (eds.), 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2006); Wibben, “Researching Feminist Security Studies”.

7 Cynthia Cockburn, “A Continuum of Violence: Gender, War and Peace”, in *The Criminology of War*, Ruth Jamieson (ed.) (Routledge, 2017), ch. 18; Feminism and Nonviolence Study Group, “Piecing It Together: Feminism and Nonviolence” (Feminism and Nonviolence Study Group, 1983), <https://wri-irg.org/en/story/2010/piecing-it-together-feminism-and-nonviolence>.

8 Mona Lena Krook, *Violence against Women in Politics*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

9 Krook; Clare McGlynn, Erika Rackley and Ruth Houghton (2017), “Beyond ‘Revenge Porn’: The Continuum of Image-Based Sexual Abuse”, *Feminist Legal Studies* vol. 25, no. 1: pp. 25–46; UN Women, “Online and ICT\* Facilitated Violence against Women and Girls during COVID-19” (New York: UN Women, 2020), <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/brief-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19-en.pdf?la=en&vs=2519>.

10 Anne Sisson Runyan and V. Spike Peterson, *Global Gender Issues in the New Millennium*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013).

Research has shown that women from marginalised groups are more likely to experience online abuse and threats than their peers.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, findings suggest that online and ICT violence against women takes culturally distinct forms.<sup>12</sup> Transgender or nonbinary individuals similarly experience online abuse more frequently and in distinct ways.<sup>13</sup> Taken together, these findings suggest the need for an intersectional approach that understands how gender interacts with other social hierarchies.

3. *Scepticism regarding the role of the state and calls for greater civil society engagement.* While examples discussed in this report highlight problems caused by extremist groups, FSS does not envision state action as the best solution. FSS scholarship has emphasised the potential for state actors to misuse technology. Online surveillance and censorship has been used to target women and LGBTQ activists in several countries.<sup>14</sup> Some states are also alleged to have backed campaigns of gender-based online harassment against female journalists.<sup>15</sup> Civil society engagement is regarded as an important safeguard against abuse, and UN Security Council resolutions consistently encourage the engagement of civil society actors as partners in WPS.<sup>16</sup> Though recent analysis of national action plans finds that states often fall short of creating robust frameworks for engagement,<sup>17</sup> established frameworks on WPS should encourage the active engagement of civil society groups engaged in digital rights as well as the investigation of online and ICT-facilitated violence against women.
4. *The mutually constituted nature of security and development.* FSS work has called upon analysts to view security and development as part of a holistic process, with violence supported and enabled by economic forces.<sup>18</sup> Such a view issues a call to academics, analysts and a variety of stakeholders to establish a broader dialogue. As noted above, initiatives related to online and ICT violence are handled in a diffuse manner by an array of institutions. The role of private actors, including technology companies, can also be scrutinised, especially where they have supported or failed to take timely action on abuses of their platforms.

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11 Amnesty International (2018), "Toxic Twitter – A Toxic Place for Women" (London: Amnesty International), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/>; Nina Jankowicz et al. (2021), "Malign Creativity: How Gender, Sex, and Lies Are Weaponized Against Women Online" (Washington D.C.: The Wilson Center), [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/malign-creativity-how-gender-sex-and-lies-are-weaponized-against-women-online?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_campaign=wilson](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/malign-creativity-how-gender-sex-and-lies-are-weaponized-against-women-online?utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=wilson); Dubravka Šimonović (2018), "Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences on Online Violence against Women and Girls from a Human Rights Perspective" (New York: United Nations).

12 Nithya Sambasivan et al. (2019), "They Don't Leave Us Alone Anywhere We Go: Gender and Digital Abuse in South Asia" (CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems Proceedings, Glasgow, Scotland, UK), <https://www.classes.cs.uchicago.edu/archive/2020/winter/20370-1/readings/GenderSouthAsia.pdf>.

13 Amnesty International, "Toxic Twitter"; Women's Media Center (n.d.), "Online Abuse 101", <https://womensmediacenter.com/speech-project/online-abuse-101>.

14 Leta Hong Fincher, *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* (Verso, 2018); Human Rights Watch (8 October 2019), "Russia Censors LGBT Online Groups", Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/08/russia-censors-lgbt-online-groups>; Joy Onyesoh, Madeleine Rees and Catia C. Confortini, "Feminist Challenges to the Co-Optation of WPS: A Conversation with Joy Onyesoh and Madeleine Rees", in *New Directions in Women, Peace and Security*, Soumita Basu, Paul Kirby and Laura J. Shepherd (eds.), 1st ed. (Policy Press, 2020), pp. 233–45; Madeleine Rees and Christine Chinkin (21 March 2019), "How New Technologies Are Violating Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia", *LSE Women, Peace and Security Blog* (blog), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2019/03/21/how-new-technologies-are-violating-womens-rights-in-saudi-arabia/>.

15 Jankowicz et al., "Malign Creativity".

16 Hamilton, Naam, and Shepherd, "Twenty Years of Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans"; Mirsad Miki Jacevic, "WPS, States, and the National Action Plans", in *The Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace, and Security*, Jacqui True and Sara E. Davies (eds.) (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 274–89, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190638276.013.32>.

17 Hamilton, Naam, and Shepherd, "Twenty Years of Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans".

18 Juanita Elias and Shirin Rai (June 2015), "The Everyday Gendered Political Economy of Violence", *Politics & Gender* vol. 11, no. 2: 424–29, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X15000148>; Maria Stern (2017), "Feminist Global Political Economy and Feminist Security Studies? The Politics of Delineating Subfields", *Politics and Gender* vol. 13, no. 4: pp. 727–33; Jacqui True (2010), "The Political Economy of Violence Against Women: A Feminist International Relations Perspective," *The Australian Feminist Law Journal* vol.32 no.1: pp. 32–59.

### 3. Gendered Uses of Technology by Extremist Groups

This section explores how extremist groups have leveraged technology to engage women as well as facilitate gender-based violence in recent years. While this overview is not comprehensive, it calls for reflection upon the diversity of organisations and platforms involved in enacting extremist violence against women and other members of marginalised communities. It also shows the varied and complex ways that technology may interact with distinct pillars of WPS.

#### Facilitation of physical and sexual violence

Islamic State (IS) has become closely associated with discussions about extremist violence against women. Technology played an essential part in both its transnational recruiting efforts (discussed in the following section) and in its campaign of violence against marginalised groups. ICT including social media directly facilitated slavery and sexual violence against Yazidi women and girls and as well as other “enemy” populations of IS. Estimates suggest that up to 9,000 slaves were trafficked within IS.<sup>19</sup> Although physical slave auctions were usually held at a few specific sites, slaves were also trafficked through online auctions and groups. Platforms including Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram and Signal were among those used to sell slaves.<sup>20</sup>

At least one report suggests that the use of these platforms enabled the expansion of slave markets beyond IS territory, pointing to the alleged sale of slaves to buyers elsewhere in the Middle East.<sup>21</sup> Technology may likewise be extending the life of the slave trade beyond the territorial defeat of IS. As of 2020, an estimated 3,000 Yazidi women and children were still missing.<sup>22</sup> Yazidi families have alleged that, in the rush by foreign fighters to abandon IS strongholds, some women held as slaves were sold to criminal gangs and subsequently trafficked out of Syria.<sup>23</sup> Based on available

19 Nadia Al-Dayel, Andrew Mumford and Kevin Bales (4 February 2020), “Not Yet Dead: The Establishment and Regulation of Slavery by the Islamic State”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* vol. 0, no. 0: pp. 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1711590>.

20 Al-Dayel, Mumford, and Bales; FIDH/Kinyat (2018), “Iraq: Sexual and Gender-Based Crimes against the Yazidi Community: The Role of ISIL Foreign Fighters”; Lori Hinnant, Maya Alleruzzo and Balint Szlancko (2016), “Islamic State Tightens Grip on Captives Held as Sex Slaves”, IS: A savage legacy | AP Explore, <http://www.ap.org/explore/a-savage-legacy/islamic-state-tightens-grip-on-captives-held-as-sex-slaves.html>.

21 Al-Dayel, Mumford and Bales, “Not Yet Dead”.

22 Ban Barkawi (4 August 2020), “Six Years on: Yazidi Survivors See ‘only Empty Promises’ in Aftermath of Massacre”, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/iraq-war-yazidis-idINL8N2DW0XI>; Susan Hutchinson (2020), “Financing Da’esh with Sexual Slavery: A Case Study in Not Gendering Conflict Analysis and Intervention”, *Journal of Global Security Studies* vol. 5, no. 2: pp. 379–86.

23 Chloe Cornish (14 March 2019), “Yazidi Hostages Traded to Criminals as Isis Loses Ground”, <https://www.ft.com/content/cabb2f68-4570-11e9-a965-23d669740bfb>.

data, research estimates that IS-related interests could stand to gain millions of dollars in additional funding through the sale or ransom of those still held captive.<sup>24</sup>

Elsewhere, extremists have used technology to promote ideologies advocating violence against women. Most notable is the emerging terror threat posed by incels and far-right groups engaged in the discourse of violent misogyny. Incel is an abbreviation of “involuntary celibates”. While the term originated as a way to refer to Internet users who were single and seeking a community, it has evolved to refer to male extremists, including those who advocate violence against women. Hoffman and Ware estimate that approximately 50 people have been killed in incel-motivated attacks in the United States and Canada, with additional plots disrupted elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> This and other assessments of incel-motivated violence cite highly public incidents, such as mass killings in Isla Vista in California in 2014, Toronto in 2018 and Tallahassee in Florida in 2018. Yet they plausibly underestimate the true scale of violence, as they cannot reliably ascertain the role played by these ideologies in perpetuating rape, sexual assault, domestic violence and so on. Incel beliefs about the “natural” supremacy of men and the right to sexual access form a natural point of dialogue with other far-right extremist views like Identitarian discourse, which praises masculinity and urges a return to traditional family roles (such as men being leaders and breadwinners). This has led some to describe extreme misogyny as a potential gateway to other extremist communities.<sup>26</sup>

Misogynist groups are highly reliant on semiotic forms of violence and online communications. Of significant concern is violent discourse within the so-called “manosphere”, the online networks in which men engage in dialogue about their perceived oppression. This digital space encompasses a diversity of subgroupings, ranging from extremist incel groups to communities focused on legal advocacy to change laws on divorce, child custody and so on.<sup>27</sup> Attempts to map the manosphere suggest that, despite efforts by social media platforms to ban communities advocating violence against women, extremist content remains easy to access – even via popular social media platforms like YouTube, Discord and Reddit.<sup>28</sup> One factor facilitating the ease of movement between more and less extreme groups has been the diffusion of violent misogyny to purpose-built sites and less-regulated locations (including 4chan and 8kun, formerly known as 8chan). Researchers attribute this diffusion to actions by social media providers against incels (in particular, bans on incel communities by Reddit).<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, the continued existence of communities advocating misogyny and advancing anti-feminist conspiracies on mainstream social media

24 Hutchinson, “Financing Da’esh with Sexual Slavery”.

25 Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware (12 January 2020), “Incels: America’s Newest Domestic Terrorism Threat”, Lawfare, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/incels-americas-newest-domestic-terrorism-threat>.

26 Alex DiBranco (10 February 2020), “Male Supremacist Terrorism as a Rising Threat”, <https://icct.nl/publication/male-supremacist-terrorism-as-a-rising-threat/>; Ashley Mattheis and Charlie Winter (2019), “The Greatness of Her Positionion/male-supremacist-terrorism-ihadi Discourses” (London, UK: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation), <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ICSR-Report-%E2%80%98The-Greatness-of-Her-Positionion%E2%80%99-Comparing-Identitarian-and-Jihadi-Discourses-on-Women.pdf>.

27 Manoel Horta Ribeiro et al. (2021), “The Evolution of the Manosphere Across the Web”, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2001.07600.pdf>; Jie Liang Lin, “Antifeminism Online: MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way)”, in *Digital Environments: Ethnographic Perspectives Across Global Online and Offline Spaces*, Urte Undine Frömming et al. (eds.) (Transcript Verlag, 2017).

28 Horta Ribeiro et al., “The Evolution of the Manosphere Across the Web”; Kostantinos Papadamou et al. (2020), “Understanding the Incel Community on YouTube”, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2001.08293.pdf>; Matthew Sharpe (5 November 2020), “The Hate Matrix of Online Gaming”, *GNET* (blog), <https://gnet-research.org/2020/11/05/the-hate-matrix-of-online-gaming/>.

29 Horta Ribeiro et al., “The Evolution of the Manosphere Across the Web”.

platforms creates a loophole through which users are funnelled to other locations hosting more extreme discourse. These findings raise important questions about balancing free speech concerns online with limiting the potential for violent extremism.

## The recruitment of women by extremist groups

Although the WPS agenda tends to present women as potential peacemakers and/or subjects in need of special protection, the reality of women's engagement in conflict is more complex. Women and girls can serve as perpetrators in armed conflict, and gender-based recruitment can serve strategic goals for some extremist groups, as discussed below.

The use of technology to appeal to or recruit women is nothing new. Organisations as diverse as al-Qaeda and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia have used electronic media including blogs, digital magazines and videos to cultivate support among women.<sup>30</sup> Islamic State took this practice of recruitment to a new level. Women and girls from at least fifty countries joined IS, with Cook and Vale estimating that over 4,000 women travelled to Syria intent on supporting IS, making up 10–13% of total recruits.<sup>31</sup> Historically, narratives about the recruitment of women and girls to extremist organisations have minimised their commitment. Especially in the media, accounts of extremist women often seek to rationalise their actions using gendered stereotypes, emphasising emotional decision-making, affective connections to male fighters or perceived mental illness.<sup>32</sup> However, the visible presence of female IS affiliates online counters this narrative. An assessment of social media posts from Western women who joined IS indicated that the recruitment of women was driven both by grievance, especially the sense that they could not practice their religion freely in their country of origin, and by genuine commitment to the IS project.<sup>33</sup>

The transnational nature of recruitment by Islamic State meant that the Internet and ICT were essential to recruiting women from abroad and promoting a common understanding of women's roles. Online recruitment tactics were arguably more important for the recruitment of women than the recruitment of men, as young women were less likely to have access to sites where men were recruited in person.<sup>34</sup> Within IS, transnational recruitment led to a hierarchy among women. Those who have fled IS territory contend that women recruited from abroad – as opposed to those living in territories conquered by the group – received special access to privileges,

30 Alexis Henshaw (2020), "Peace with a Woman's Face": Women, Social Media, and the Colombian Peace Process", *Contexto Internacional* vol. 42, no. 3: pp. 515–38; Seran de Leede (September 2018), "Women in Jihad: A Historical Perspective", ICCT Policy Brief (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague), <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2018/09/ICCT-deLeede-Women-in-Jihad-Sept2018.pdf>; Vicente Llorent-Bedmar, Verónica Cobano-Delgado Palma and María Navarro-Granados (16 February 2020), "The Education of Muslim Women in Daesh's and Al Qaeda's Online Magazines", *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* vol. 0, no. 0: pp. 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2019.1709157>.

31 Joana Cook and Gina Vale (2018), "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State" (London, UK: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2018), <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>.

32 Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*, 1st ed. (Zed Books, 2007).

33 Meredith Loken and Anna Zelenz (February 2018), "Explaining Extremism: Western Women in Daesh", *European Journal of International Security* vol. 3, no. 1: pp. 45–68, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2017.13>.

34 Elizabeth Pearson (2 November 2018), "Online as the New Frontline: Affect, Gender, and ISIS-Take-Down on Social Media", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* vol. 41, no. 11: pp. 850–874.

including use of the Internet, to further their roles as propagandists.<sup>35</sup> As demonstrated in a recent GNET insight, detained IS-affiliated women have continued to use social media to solicit financial assistance and foster the idea of collective grievance. In particular, these posts have highlighted poor conditions within al-Hol detention camp.<sup>36</sup> Such incidents further highlight the need to resolve the status of these women and their children, many of whom remain in legal limbo.

More recently, scholars have attempted to draw attention to gender trends in recruitment by QAnon and various far-right groups. GNET's knowledge base defines QAnon as "a decentralised violent ideology rooted in an unfounded conspiracy theory that a globally active 'Deep State' cabal of satanic pedophile elites is responsible for all the evil in the world."<sup>37</sup> QAnon has been closely linked to conspiracies about elections in the United States and the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>38</sup> Scholars further discuss the movement's re-packaging of older, anti-government, anti-Semitic and religious conspiracy theories.<sup>39</sup> QAnon supporters, including women, were among those who stormed the US Capitol building in January 2021.<sup>40</sup>

While QAnon lacks a formal leadership structure – its nominal leaders being the anonymous Q (whose posts on social media launched the conspiracy) and an indeterminate number of online influencers who perpetuate its messaging – it has developed a substantial online footprint that enables devotees to coordinate real-world actions. A 2020 survey by CBS News found that 11% of social media users surveyed find QAnon theories "very accurate".<sup>41</sup> GNET further estimates that the movement has developed a robust international following, with adherents in as many as 75 countries.<sup>42</sup>

The movement's strong appeal among women has been evident. QAnon has served as the motivation for women-led demonstrations in the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>43</sup> Women have been responsible for a number of criminal acts in the name of QAnon, including murder, weapons trafficking, assassination threats and assault.<sup>44</sup> Women serve as some of the movement's key figures

35 Azadeh Moaveni (21 November 2015), "ISIS Women and Enforcers in Syria Recount Collaboration, Anguish and Escape (Published 2015)", *The New York Times*, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/world/middleeast/isis-wives-and-enforcers-in-syria-recount-collaboration-anguish-and-escape.html>.

36 Bruna Descamps (22 September 2020), "Diaries of Female Jihadists Imprisoned in Al-Hol Camp: An Analysis", *GNET* (blog), <https://gnet-research.org/2020/09/22/diaries-of-female-jihadists-imprisoned-in-al-hol-camp-an-analysis/>.

37 GNET Team (15 October 2020), "What is QAnon?", *GNET* (blog), <https://gnet-research.org/2020/10/15/what-is-qanon/>.

38 GNET Team; Marianna Spring and Mike Wendling (2 September 2020), "How Covid-19 Myths Are Merging with the QAnon Conspiracy Theory", *BBC News*, sec. BBC Trending, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-53997203>.

39 GNET Team, "What is QAnon?"; Gregory Stanton (9 September 2020), "QAnon Is a Nazi Cult, Rebranded," *Just Security*, <https://www.justsecurity.org/72339/qanon-is-a-nazi-cult-rebranded/>.

40 Sabrina Tavernise and Matthew Rosenberg (8 January 2021), "These Are the Rioters Who Stormed the Nation's Capitol", *The New York Times*, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/07/us/rioters-capitol.html>; Casey Tolan, Rob Kuznia and Bob Ortega (7 January 2021), "Insurrection a Stunning Show of Force for Conspiracy Groups, Extremists and Fringe Movements - CNN", *CNN*, [https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/07/us/insurrection-capitol-extremist-groups-invs/index.html?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=tw&utm\\_term=link&utm\\_content=2021-01-07T07%3A50%3A54](https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/07/us/insurrection-capitol-extremist-groups-invs/index.html?utm_medium=social&utm_source=tw&utm_term=link&utm_content=2021-01-07T07%3A50%3A54).

41 Ines Novacic, *Reverb | The QAnon Effect* (CBS News, 2020), <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/cbsn-originals-presents-reverb-the-qanon-effect/>.

42 GNET Team, "What is QAnon?".

43 Annie Kelly (10 September 2020), "Mothers for QAnon", *The New York Times*, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/10/opinion/qanon-women-conspiracy.html>; Novacic, *Reverb | The QAnon Effect*.

44 Amarnath Amarasingham and Marc-André Argentinio (31 July 2020), "The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making?", *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-qanon-conspiracy-theory-a-security-threat-in-the-making/>; Travis M. Andrews (11 November 2020), "She Fell into QAnon and Went Viral for Destroying a Target Mask Display. Now She's Rebuilding Her Life.", *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/11/11/masks-qanon-target-melissa-rein-lively/>; Kelly, "Mothers for QAnon".

and influencers, including politicians and a collection of “mommy bloggers”, wellness coaches and lifestyle gurus who have been collectively referred to as “Pastel QAnon”.<sup>45</sup> Argentino has argued that Pastel QAnon has been particularly important to the spread of QAnon beliefs among women, framing the movement as a community aimed at wellbeing and ending child trafficking while downplaying its connections to violence and racism.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, many documented instances of women acting on behalf of QAnon involve adult women, many of whom are mothers or grandmothers.<sup>47</sup> This represents an important challenge to stereotypes about women who engage in extremism, in particular the presentation of recruits as young and naïve.<sup>48</sup>

Women’s contributions to developing and spreading QAnon beliefs are hardly surprising from a comparative perspective. Research on women and political violence shows a long history of women serving as ideological or spiritual leaders in extremist movements.<sup>49</sup> The moral authority of women as wives and mothers has likewise been invoked to bolster the legitimacy of violent movements, to frame grievances surrounding threats to family and culture, and to shame men into joining armed struggle.<sup>50</sup> In particular, both QAnon and Islamic State have used women’s voices to spread their messaging and express beliefs about appropriate social roles. In doing so, they rely on methods also employed by other extremist groups. Analysts point out that female influencers in far-right groups like the Identitarian movement were influential in spreading extremist messages while also softening or mainstreaming them.<sup>51</sup> In particular, women were involved in nativist and anti-immigrant campaigns conducted via social media, as addressed in the following section.<sup>52</sup>

## Semiotic gender-based violence

As discussed above, the notion of semiotic violence as a distinct form of harm that seeks to target, silence and discredit marginalised groups in the online space poses unique challenges – both to the WPS agenda and to common understandings of “security”. First, there is a challenge in recognising this as “violence” in the sense that it does not coincide with a narrow understanding of violence as a physical act. Second, there is the challenge of seeing it as a violation

45 Marc-André Argentino (15 October 2020), “Facebook, YouTube Moves against QAnon Are Only a First Step in the Battle against Dangerous Conspiracy Theories”, *The Conversation*, <http://theconversation.com/facebook-youtube-moves-against-qanon-are-only-a-first-step-in-the-battle-against-dangerous-conspiracy-theories-147883>; Eden Gillespie (2020), “Pastel QAnon: The Female Lifestyle Bloggers and Influencers Spreading Conspiracy Theories through Instagram”, *The Feed*, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/pastel-qanon-the-female-lifestyle-bloggers-and-influencers-spreading-conspiracy-theories-through-instagram>.

46 Argentino, “Facebook, YouTube Moves against QAnon Are Only a First Step”.

47 See, for example, demonstrations depicted in Kelly, “Mothers for QAnon”; Novacic, *Reverb | The QAnon Effect*.

48 Laura Sjoberg (1 May 2018), “Jihadi Brides and Female Volunteers: Reading the Islamic State’s War to See Gender and Agency in Conflict Dynamics”, *Conflict Management and Peace Science* vol. 35, no. 3: pp. 296–311, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894217695050>.

49 Kim Cragin and Sara A. Daly, *Women as Terrorists: Mothers, Recruiters, and Martyrs* (ABC-CLIO, 2009); Alexis Henshaw et al. (10 November 2019), “Understanding Women at War: A Mixed-Methods Exploration of Leadership in Non-State Armed Groups”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* vol. 30, no. 6–7: pp. 1089–1116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2019.1649829>.

50 Cragin and Daly, *Women as Terrorists*; Joshua Goldstein, *War and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Sjoberg and Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*; Alexis Henshaw, *Why Women Rebel: Understanding Women’s Participation in Armed Rebel Groups* (Routledge, 2017); Jessica Trisko Darden, Alexis Henshaw and Ora Szekely, *Insurgent Women: Female Combatants in Civil Wars*, 1st ed. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

51 Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner, “The Fringe Insurgency – Connectivity, Convergence and Mainstreaming of the Extreme Right” (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2017), [https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/The-Fringe-Insurgency-221017\\_2.pdf](https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/The-Fringe-Insurgency-221017_2.pdf); Julia Ebner and Jacob Davey, “How Women Advance the Internationalization of the Far-Right” (Washington D.C.: GWU Program on Extremism, 2019), <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/How%20Women%20Advance%20the%20Internationalization%20of%20the%20Far-Right.pdf>.

52 Davey and Ebner, “The Fringe Insurgency – Connectivity, Convergence and Mainstreaming of the Extreme Right”.

of accepted norms and behaviours. Finally, there is the challenge of determining where and under what circumstances semiotic acts represent an organised effort by extremist actors.

The first of these points is somewhat self-evident. As distinguished from some of the acts previously discussed in this section, semiotic acts often do not entail physical violence. This puts them outside what scholars have called the minimalist conception of violence.<sup>53</sup> Embracing the concept demands a more comprehensive understanding of harm. Work on online and ICT-facilitated violence highlights the need for context in recognising material that may lead to violent outcomes. In South Asia, for example, experts say that lack of cultural context complicates responses. What may be permissible under a provider's terms of service, such as photos of a woman in revealing clothing, can be a source of humiliation, threats or blackmail.<sup>54</sup> Jankowicz et al. similarly note that content moderators can be unfamiliar with some forms of harassment, such as language targeting the disabled.<sup>55</sup> More broadly, extremists have become adept at challenging the boundaries of social media. Extremist groups have used Discord channels and sites like 4Chan and 8kun to generate memes and videos for use on more mainstream platforms.<sup>56</sup> Strategies, including the use of coded language, the hijacking of hashtags created by others and fake accounts, have all been used to broadcast extremist messages without necessarily violating terms of service.<sup>57</sup> The fact that such campaigns are coordinated offsite or via private channels further complicates effective responses, as it becomes difficult to prove that acts are both coordinated and tied to extremist groups.<sup>58</sup>

Questions of how to respond to semiotic violence are relevant for social media as a whole but especially insofar as they relate to the targeting of women and other marginalised groups. Over the past several years, multiple organised campaigns have been mounted with the intent to silence women. These include efforts by far-right extremists to co-opt the #MeToo hashtag and to derail feminist conversations by spamming hashtags like #TakeBacktheTech with offensive messages and images.<sup>59</sup> A 2018 report by Amnesty International found that threats and harassment on Twitter target female journalists, politicians and activists; among these, women of ethnic or religious minorities, the disabled and members of the LGBTQ community receive the most abuse.<sup>60</sup> Distinct from abuse targeting prominent men, attacks on women are often specifically gendered, making use of gendered (and, at times, racist or homophobic) slurs and offensive images. This includes "deepfake" and "cheapfake" pornography, intended to humiliate women.<sup>61</sup>

53 Vittorio Bufacchi (1 April 2005), "Two Concepts of Violence", *Political Studies Review* vol. 3, no. 2: pp. 193–204, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-9299.2005.00023.x>; Krook, *Violence against Women in Politics*.

54 Sambasivan et al., "They Don't Leave Us Alone Anywhere We Go".

55 Jankowicz et al., "Malign Creativity".

56 Davey and Ebner, "The Fringe Insurgency – Connectivity, Convergence and Mainstreaming of the Extreme Right"; P. W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (Boston: Eamon Dolan/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

57 Davey and Ebner, "The Fringe Insurgency"; Ebner and Davey, "How Women Advance the Internationalization of the Far-Right".

58 Davey and Ebner, "The Fringe Insurgency".

59 Amnesty International, "Toxic Twitter"; Ebner and Davey, "How Women Advance the Internationalization of the Far-Right".

60 Amnesty International, "Toxic Twitter".

61 Amnesty International; Jankowicz et al., "Malign Creativity"; Krook, *Violence against Women in Politics*.

Though such attacks appear to the average Internet user as disorganised “mob violence”, some have been deliberately coordinated by extremists. For example, a “Troll Army” mobilised by the neo-Nazi website *The Daily Stormer* took part in coordinated harassment campaigns against several women in politics and journalism.<sup>62</sup> One Black student leader who won a lawsuit against the site’s founder in 2019 said a campaign the site coordinated against her caused her to fear for her life.<sup>63</sup> Such outcomes are common among women experiencing targeted abuse, with subjects interviewed by Amnesty International reporting anxiety, trouble sleeping and feelings of disempowerment or demoralisation. In many cases, online abuse leads women to self-censor, limit their interactions online or leave social media altogether.<sup>64</sup> Krook has argued that recognising semiotic violence, broadly defined, is crucial for understanding the full spectrum of gender-based violence in politics.<sup>65</sup> The present study argues it is also important to understanding the full spectrum of gender-based extremist violence in the online space.

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62 Chris Baraniuk (2017), “How to Tackle Internet Mob Rule”, *Wired UK*, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/mob-rule-internet>; Marcus Dysch (30 October 2014), “Neo-Nazi Gave out Internet Abuse Tips in Campaign against MP”, *The Jewish Chronicle*, <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/neo-nazi-gave-out-internet-abuse-tips-in-campaign-against-luciana-berger-1.60174>; Lauren Gambino (29 April 2016), “Journalist Who Profiled Melania Trump Hit with Barrage of Antisemitic Abuse”, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/28/julia-ioffe-journalist-melania-trump-antisemitic-abuse>; Times of Israel (5 June 2016), “Fire up the Oven: Neo-Nazis Target Jewish Candidate in California”, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/fire-up-the-oven-neo-nazis-target-jewish-candidate-in-california/>.

63 Samantha Schmidt (10 August 2019), “Federal Judge Awards over \$700,000 to Former American University Student Targeted in Neo-Nazi ‘Troll Storm’”, *Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/federal-judge-awards-700000-to-former-american-university-student-targeted-in-neo-nazi-troll-storm/2019/08/10/f73dca84-bb7f-11e9-bad6-609f75bfd97f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/federal-judge-awards-700000-to-former-american-university-student-targeted-in-neo-nazi-troll-storm/2019/08/10/f73dca84-bb7f-11e9-bad6-609f75bfd97f_story.html).

64 Amnesty International, “Toxic Twitter”; Jankowicz et al., “Malign Creativity”.

65 Krook, *Violence against Women in Politics*.



## 4. Mainstreaming Gender in Responses to Online Extremism

The preceding analysis discussed the importance of applying a gender lens to the study of extremism and technology. In doing so, it puts principles of feminist security studies into dialogue with work on technology and violence. The analysis of selected cases shows that gender is leveraged in a variety of ways by extremist groups with an online presence. It additionally shows an intersection with all pillars of the WPS agenda. Insofar as the examples illustrate targeted violence based on gender (as well as intersectional effects based on gender and ethnic/religious identity, disability or sexuality), they address a need to incorporate gender perspectives into discussions of the prevention of online abuse and the protection of women and girls. To the extent that women are among the perpetrators, this further speaks to the need to prevent online radicalisation while mainstreaming gender into relief and recovery efforts. Overarching the entire study is the need for participation, including civil society engagement and the incorporation of gender perspectives into relevant institutions or processes.

With the WPS agenda entering its third decade, feminist scholarship has seen a mixed record of achievement in gender mainstreaming. Feminist work highlights how efforts at preventing or countering violent extremism have replicated simplistic notions of gender, ignored the potential for women to become radicalised and placed unrealistic burdens on women, especially in their capacity as mothers.<sup>66</sup> Recent work on post-conflict demobilisation and justice programmes further critiques ongoing trends of gender-based exclusion.<sup>67</sup> All of this has sparked philosophical debates about the instrumentalisation of WPS to serve strategic ends – like the attainment of peace or economic growth – rather than to improve the lives of women.

Incorporating technology into the WPS agenda presents new challenges and potential pitfalls. The role of the state in regulating cyberspace, for example, is problematic, as some states have used technology to harass and surveil feminist and LGBTQ

66 Jayne Huckerby and Fionnuala Ní Aoláin (3 May 2018), "Gendering Counterterrorism: How to, and How Not to – Part II", Just Security, <https://www.justsecurity.org/55670/gendering-counterterrorism-to-part-ii/>; Emily Winterbotham (2018), "Do Mothers Know Best? How Assumptions Harm CVE", Institute for Global Change, <https://institute.global/policy/do-mothers-know-best-how-assumptions-harm-cve/>; Elizabeth Pearson and Emily Winterbotham (4 May 2017), "Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation", *The RUSI Journal* vol. 162, no. 3: pp. 60–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2017.1353251>; Rachel Schmidt (2018), "Duped: Why Gender Stereotypes Are Leading to Inadequate Deradicalization and Disengagement Strategies", Working Paper Series (Waterloo, ON, Canada: Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security, and Society), [https://www.tsas.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/WP18-07\\_Schmidt.pdf](https://www.tsas.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/WP18-07_Schmidt.pdf).

67 Evelyn Pauls et al. (2020), "I Have to Speak: Voices of Female Ex-Combatants from Aceh, Burundi, Mindanao, and Nepal" (Berlin, Germany: Berghof Foundation); Alexis Henshaw (1 January 2020), "Female Combatants in Postconflict Processes: Understanding the Roots of Exclusion", *Journal of Global Security Studies* vol. 5, no. 1: pp. 63–79, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz050>; International Crisis Group (2020), "A Course Correction for the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda", Crisis Group Special Briefing No. 5 (London and Brussels: International Crisis Group).

activists.<sup>68</sup> To date, states have also under-utilised their strongest tools – national action plans – to address online and ICT-facilitated violence. Addressing these concerns further demands engagement with multinational corporations involved in technology development. Multi-stakeholder initiatives are one tool currently being leveraged to establish accountability and prevent cross-platform abuse, but evidence suggests they could be further strengthened through a more robust approach to gender mainstreaming that addresses cross-cultural and intersectional contexts.

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68 Hong Fincher, *Betraying Big Brother*; Onyesoh, Rees and Confortini, "Feminist Challenges to the Co-Optation of WPS: A Conversation with Joy Onyesoh and Madeleine Rees"; Rees and Chinkin, "How New Technologies Are Violating Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia"; Human Rights Watch, "Russia Censors LGBT Online Groups"; Jankowicz et al., "Malign Creativity".

# Policy Landscape

*This section is authored by Armida van Rij, Lucy Thomas, and Dr. Alexi Drew. Armida and Lucy are Research Associates at the Policy Institute, and Alexi is a Research Associate at the Centre for Science and Security Studies, all based at King's College London. This section provides an overview of the relevant policy landscape for this report.*

## Introduction

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda was launched by resolution 1325 of the UN Security Council in 2000.<sup>69</sup> Since then, there have been several further resolutions, which broadly fall into two groups: the first deals with the need for women's participation in peacebuilding and the second focuses on conflict-related sexual violence. Governments and organisations alike have committed to taking the commitments from the agenda onboard. The resolution consists of four pillars: 1) the role of women in conflict prevention; 2) their participation in peacebuilding; 3) the protection of their rights during and after conflict; and 4) their specific needs during repatriation and resettlement, as well as for rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction.

This report discusses the policy landscape in a series of jurisdictions, and how the WPS agenda has been taken on board by these countries.

## Bringing 'Women, Peace and Security' (WPS) online: addressing the challenges and assessing new developments

### *Canada*

Canada's second national action plan (NAP) enshrines the government's commitment to the WPS agenda between 2017 and 2022. There is no specific budgetary commitment from the Canadian government, unlike in its 2010 NAP where organisations receiving federal funding were obliged to draw up local codes of conduct for sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>70</sup> The NAP exists alongside the Canadian Feminist International Assistance Policy (its response to Sweden, Mexico, Luxembourg and France launching their 'feminist foreign policies').<sup>71</sup> It affirms a specific interpretation of a 'whole-of-government' approach to the WPS agenda: the lead agencies for the NAP are Global Affairs Canada, the Department

<sup>69</sup> <http://undocs.org/en/S/RES/1325%282000%29>.

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/Canada-NAP-1-2010-2016.pdf> pp. 5–6.

<sup>71</sup> [https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues\\_developpement-enjeux\\_developpement/priorities-priorites/policy-politique.aspx?lang=eng](https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_developpement-enjeux_developpement/priorities-priorites/policy-politique.aspx?lang=eng) and <https://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/issues/womens-human-rights/feminist-foreign-policy>.

of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. In other words, the Canadian WPS approach engages a wide range of foreign affairs-focused security agencies. This approach covers “early warning tools; to natural disaster responses; to defence and security capacity building; to peace operations; and to post-conflict stabilization”.<sup>72</sup> This suggests that the main thrust of the Canadian NAP for the WPS agenda is directed towards its overseas military and humanitarian engagements.

Canada’s NAP suggests a commitment to an expanded agenda beyond traditional security concerns. As well as a concern with female participation in security organisations and gender-based violence in “fragile, conflict, and post-conflict settings”, Canada also commits itself to upholding “sexual rights and access to sexual and reproductive health services” for women and girls in humanitarian settings.<sup>73</sup> The NAP also pledges to “prevent, respond to and end impunity for” sexual violence and exploitation against women and girls by international personnel.<sup>74</sup> The document should be lauded for its mention of race- and gender-oriented violence based on the historical harms from colonisation against its female Indigenous population, noting that “While Indigenous women make up 4% of Canada’s total number of women, 16% of all women murdered in Canada between 1980 and 2012 were Indigenous.”<sup>75</sup> That being said, the Canadian NAP does not mention violence against women within its own borders beyond this. This means various elements are not included, such as: domestic violence, rape and murder;<sup>76</sup> violence, rape and murder against sex workers;<sup>77</sup> and violence, rape and murder of trans people.<sup>78</sup> The NAP does not make reference to online or Internet-based harms, including cyberbullying, hate speech, the proliferation of extremist misogynist groups and attempts by extremist groups to recruit women.

### *European Commission*

In 2008, the EU first introduced a comprehensive approach in response to UN Security Council resolution 1325. This offered a “tool for regions to articulate priorities and coordinate the implementation of UNSCR1325 at the regional level” within Europe.<sup>79</sup> It was meant to be a guiding document to allow for the involvement of all stakeholders in the defence, gender, security and foreign policy spheres. It set out a common approach to the implementation of resolution 1325, drawing on lessons learned and past experiences.<sup>80</sup> The comprehensive approach set out a “three-pronged approach” to “protect, support and empower women in conflict-related situations and in long-term development cooperation, with the aim of achieving gender equality”.<sup>81</sup> The first element was to integrate WPS issues into

72 <http://peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/cnap-eng.pdf> pp. 8–9.

73 <http://peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/cnap-eng.pdf> p. 10.

74 <http://peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/cnap-eng.pdf> p. 10.

75 <http://peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/cnap-eng.pdf> p. 4.

76 <https://cfc-swc.gc.ca/violence/knowledge-connaissance/ipv-vpi-en.html>.

77 <https://toronto.citynews.ca/2020/02/16/murder-of-sex-worker-exposes-canadas-hypocrisy-on-prostitution-advocate/>.

78 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/julie-berman-death-canada-trans-activist-killed-toronto-a9262711.html>.

79 <http://www.peacewomen.org/content/eu-rap>.

80 <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15671-2008-REV-1/en/pdf> p. 4.

81 <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15671-2008-REV-1/en/pdf> p. 11.

political and policy dialogue with partner governments. The second was to mainstream gender equality in EU policy. The third was to support “strategic actions targeted at protecting, supporting and empowering women”.<sup>82</sup>

The EU then introduced indicators to monitor the comprehensive approach’s progress in 2010, which were updated in 2016. These indicators included looking at actions at the country and regional level of EU-partner countries (that is, action outside the EU). This included, for example, the number of partner countries the EU was working with on furthering the WPS agenda, any EU tools that were used to support WPS in partner countries. On top of that, there was a focus on women’s participation, such as the number of women negotiators involved in peace processes supported by the EU.<sup>83</sup>

The EU subsequently developed the EU strategic approach to WPS in 2018, and the corresponding action plan in 2019. This called for the systematic integration of gender perspectives into all areas related to peace and security. In EU external action, it emphasised the need for the EU to engage, empower, protect and support women and girls to help countries achieve sustainable development.<sup>84</sup>

The most recent EU policy development on WPS has been the EU Gender Action Plan (GAP) III of 2020. This is an action plan that spans 2021–2025, and sets out the “EU’s political and operational roadmap towards a gender-equal world”.<sup>85</sup> It aims to take a transformative approach by challenging the structural causes of gender inequality. The GAP III has five pillars<sup>86</sup>:

1. Making EU engagement on gender equality more effective as a cross-cutting priority of EU external action in its policy and programming work.
2. Promoting strategic EU engagement at multilateral, regional and country level, and stepping up the implementation of GAP III in partner countries and regions.
3. Focusing on key areas of engagement.
4. Leading by example by establishing gender-sensitive and gender-balanced leadership at top EU political and management levels.
5. Reporting on results and establishing quantitative, qualitative and inclusive monitoring systems.

The GAP III goes hand in hand with the EU gender equality strategy of 2020–2025, which aims to achieve sustainable development goal 5: gender equality.<sup>87</sup>

82 <https://theconversation.com/jamal-khashoggi-why-the-us-is-unlikely-to-deliver-justice-for-the-murdered-journalist-156165> p. 11.

83 <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11948-2010-INIT/en/pdf>.

84 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/12/10/women-peace-and-security-council-adopts-conclusions/>.

85 [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/topics/empowering-women-and-girls\\_en#header-5139](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/topics/empowering-women-and-girls_en#header-5139).

86 [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/join-2020-17-final\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/join-2020-17-final_en.pdf) p. 3.

87 [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/topics/empowering-women-and-girls\\_en#header-5139](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/topics/empowering-women-and-girls_en#header-5139).

## France

France launched its first NAP for WPS in 2010 for the period 2010–2013. The NAP had four overarching goals:

1. To protect women against violence and work to ensure respect for women's fundamental rights.
2. To ensure the participation of women in managing conflict and post-conflict situations.
3. To raise awareness of respect for women's rights in training programmes.
4. To develop political and diplomatic action.<sup>88</sup>

Criticism of this first NAP was that it did not include a monitoring and evaluation framework.<sup>89</sup>

The most recent NAP was published in 2015, for the period 2015–2018. This NAP consisted of five pillars:

1. Participation of women in managing conflict and post-conflict situations.
2. Protecting women against violence and protecting women's rights during conflict and post-conflict periods.
3. Fighting impunity.
4. Prevention by raising awareness of the issues linked to the fight against gender violence, women's rights and gender rights.
5. Promoting the WPS agenda regionally and internationally.<sup>90</sup>

Both NAPs lacked a detailed monitoring and evaluation framework, nor did they have an allocated budget.<sup>91</sup>

France is currently developing its third NAP, which will focus on raising awareness of the WPS agenda and its mainstreaming in national and international action on the rights of women in conflict.<sup>92</sup>

## Ghana

The Republic of Ghana's second National Action Plan (GHANAP 2) was renewed in 2020, covering a five-year period up until 2024. Ghana notes that a key reason for its previous NAP falling short of its objectives was a "lack of dedicated budget".<sup>93</sup> GHANAP 2 will be financed "using a multi-stakeholder approach including domestic and external sources", including governmental ministries and departments, private and corporate sources, UN entities, ODAs and regional bodies.<sup>94</sup>

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88 <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/index.php/france/>.

89 <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/index.php/france/>.

90 [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/women\\_peace\\_security\\_final\\_cle439e93.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/women_peace_security_final_cle439e93.pdf) p. 7.

91 <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/index.php/france/>.

92 <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/index.php/france/>.

93 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2021/01/Ghana-NAP-2-2020-2025.pdf> p. 6.

94 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2021/01/Ghana-NAP-2-2020-2025.pdf> p. 23.

GHANAP 2 is refreshingly forthright. Rather than containing self-congratulation or obfuscation, the plan is honest about its previous shortcomings and the lack of political interest in the WPS agenda. It explicitly names the problem with which it is grappling. Although recognised as a “relatively peaceful country”, Ghana has suffered with “pockets of recurrent conflicts” revolving around ethnic, chieftaincy, land and party conflicts. For instance, the plan contends that the “activities of nomadic headsmen continue to pose a security threat for women in certain districts in Ashanti, Eastern and Northern regions in Ghana”, since women have been raped, forced to flee in the wake of raids or been widowed.<sup>95</sup>

Trafficking is also a chronic issue in Ghana. As the NAP notes, “women between the ages of 18 and 35 years continue to be lured by the traffickers and are promised a better future in the Gulf countries, where they work as housekeepers but end up as sex slaves largely.”<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, Ghana identifies child marriage, female genital mutilation and sexual abuse (which covers “rape and defilement”, including the high-profile case of a four-year-old girl) as target issues for the plan.<sup>97</sup>

These named issues suggest that Ghana is less concerned with the WPS’s traditional international security and peacebuilding agenda, and more focused on gender-based violence. This is plausibly a product of its deep engagement with civil society, including, for example, the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, since it reflects a primary preoccupation with the issues ‘on the ground’.<sup>98</sup>

GHANAP 2 includes a 7-page “Comprehensive Implementation Plan” which breaks its activities down across the four pillars – participation; protection and promotion of rights; prevention; and relief and recovery. Under each, the plan names its objectives, strategies, output, expected outcome, indicators and specific activities.<sup>99</sup> The NAP involves a robust monitoring and evaluation framework.<sup>100</sup>

In terms of online harms, the proposed government and public agency stakeholders for the NAP<sup>101</sup> do not include traditional security and intelligence bodies. This suggests that countering violent extremism (CVE) and the WPS agenda remain distinct at the moment. That being said, as noted in previous GNET reports, Ghana does not yet have a specific CVE strategy, though this may change with the rise of online hate speech and the spread of dangerous conspiracy theories.

95 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2021/01/Ghana-NAP-2-2020-2025.pdf> p. 8.

96 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2021/01/Ghana-NAP-2-2020-2025.pdf> p. 7.

97 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2021/01/Ghana-NAP-2-2020-2025.pdf> pp. 7–8.

98 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2021/01/Ghana-NAP-2-2020-2025.pdf> pp. 4–5 (Foreword and Acknowledgements).

99 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2021/01/Ghana-NAP-2-2020-2025.pdf> pp. 14–21.

100 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2021/01/Ghana-NAP-2-2020-2025.pdf> pp. 22–23.

101 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2021/01/Ghana-NAP-2-2020-2025.pdf> p. 9.

## Japan

The Japanese NAP was published in 2015 and has no specific expiry date. Its monitoring and evaluation framework commits it to reviewing the NAP approximately every three years,<sup>102</sup> but it is not clear that there has been any review or that plans have been updated based on reviews. Japan has given a light-touch commitment by way of budget for the NAP, stating only that “the government endeavours to appropriately secure financial resources for implementation”.<sup>103</sup>

The NAP names the 1999 Basic Act for a Gender Equal Society as a guiding principle for its commitment to “the achievement of a gender equal society as a top priority in deciding the future course of Japan in the 21st century”.<sup>104</sup> In terms of its international engagements, Japan has “set peacebuilding as one of the priorities” in its Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) and launched its Women in Development Initiative in 1995 and Gender and Development Initiative in 2005.<sup>105</sup> In an expansion of the traditional WPS agenda, Japan brings attention to large-scale natural disasters as a discrete area in which the agenda can be implemented; the country has “been strengthening its efforts to incorporate a gender equal perspective in all stages of disaster risk reduction and reconstruction”. More explicitly, Japan’s NAP states that “If women area left vulnerable [by disaster], they are apt to be subject to human rights infringement. In that sense, the issues are similar to those concerning women in conflict.”<sup>106</sup>

Stakeholders in Japan’s NAP span the range of governmental agencies and bodies, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Cabinet Office, the Ministry of Defence, the National Police Agency and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. Nevertheless, the main agencies responsible for the implementation of the NAP are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Japan International Cooperation Agency.

The four main identified streams of activity in the Japanese NAP are participation (“equal participation of women in all stages in the field of peace and security”), conflict prevention (“promote women’s participation and leadership in all processes of prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts”), protection (“protect various aid recipients including women and girls from violence and other human rights infringement during or after conflict”) and humanitarian and reconstruction assistance (“reflecting circumstances and needs unique to women and girls”).<sup>107</sup> These suggest a fairly standard interpretation and national implementation of the WPS agenda.<sup>108</sup> With the exception of humanitarian and reconstruction assistance, which includes national efforts after disasters in Japan, the NAP is geared towards the traditional WPS concerns of international security and peacebuilding. For this reason, it seems unlikely that future iterations of the NAP

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102 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/Japan-NAP-2015.pdf> p. 30.

103 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/Japan-NAP-2015.pdf> p. 6.

104 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/Japan-NAP-2015.pdf> pp. 1–2.

105 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/Japan-NAP-2015.pdf> pp. 3–4.

106 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/Japan-NAP-2015.pdf> p. 5.

107 Like many other NAPs, ‘monitoring, evaluation, and review’ constitute another stream of activity.

108 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/Japan-NAP-2015.pdf> pp. 8–28.

in Japan will explicitly expand the agenda to include online harms against women or make reference to the ways in which the Internet can be a conduit for gender-based violence.

### *New Zealand*

The New Zealand NAP was published in 2015 and covers the years up until 2019. However, no review or new iteration of the NAP has been published at the time of writing. There is no provision for budgeting within the NAP, meaning that any additional activity under the WPS agenda or within the NAP would need to be funded by the relevant department.

Female participation in New Zealand security and peacebuilding activities is a core concern in the NAP. Four pages of the document are devoted to demonstrating the appointment of women in the New Zealand Police, the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) and to high-ranking official appointments.<sup>109</sup> A further six pages highlight New Zealand's international development activities, particularly its aid programme. For instance, in the late 1990s, the programme "supported the New Zealand Police to establish a network of community part-time auxiliary police officers to live and serve in the more remote villages and communities of Bougainville" in Papua New Guinea.<sup>110</sup> There are several other examples of bilateral policing assistance engagements. For this reason, the NAP has a heavy emphasis on police activities abroad. This is reflected in the lead agencies: NZDF, New Zealand Police and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. No other government agency, civil society organisation, or NGO is mentioned in the document or has any substantive responsibility to implementing the NAP.

The specific actions set out in the NAP are vague. Under each pillar (prevention; participation; protection; and peacebuilding, relief and recovery), the actions and indeed the wording is brief and largely repetitive. The actions revolve around advocacy, reviewing codes of conduct, strengthening recruitment and promotion of military women, and ensuring that "women, peace and security issues are on the agenda".<sup>111</sup> There are indicators of each action's progress, but no specific aims or measurable outcomes.

As the NAP itself notes, "New Zealand has a long history of international leadership in promoting the rights of women".<sup>112</sup> The narrowness of the NAP's scope, focusing so strongly on female participation in the police and defence force, along with the lack of budget or engagement with civil society, bucks the trend and challenges New Zealand's progressive reputation. Hopefully a future NAP will re-establish New Zealand as a leader in civil-society-led initiatives.

109 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/New-Zealand-NAP-2015-2019.pdf> pp. 13–16.

110 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/New-Zealand-NAP-2015-2019.pdf> p. 17.

111 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/New-Zealand-NAP-2015-2019.pdf> p. 31.

112 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/New-Zealand-NAP-2015-2019.pdf> p. 10.

## *United Kingdom*

The UK was one of the first countries to adapt an NAP on WPS in 2006. The UK's focus throughout its subsequent NAPs has been predominantly international, rather than in streamlining the UK's own policies with regards to women, peace and security. The UK's current NAP for the years 2018 to 2022 is based on the principle that WPS is needed to achieve gender equality and fulfil women's human rights.<sup>113</sup> Its main premise is that "people experience violent conflict differently according to their gender, with women and girls being particularly affected".<sup>114</sup> The NAP does not set out specific objectives for the UK government. Instead, it focuses on outcomes and priority countries selected to allow the UK to make a "significant contribution".<sup>115</sup> The areas of focus, called strategic outcomes, for the NAP are wide-ranging: decision-making; peacekeeping; gender-based violence; humanitarian response; security and justice; preventing and countering violent extremism; UK capabilities. These outcomes are intended to contribute to the pillars of WPS (prevention; protection; participation; relief and recovery), established by UN Security Council resolution 1325.

## *United States*

The second NAP launched by the USA was published on June 2016, in the final months of the Obama presidency. Its predecessor was released in December 2011 and the second iteration is a product of "a comprehensive review of policy, programming, challenges, and lessons learned during the first three years".<sup>116</sup> The NAP had no specific budgetary provisions, but since it operates through the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, which "coordinates the development and implementation of DOD [Department of Defence]'s efforts on Women, Peace and Security",<sup>117</sup> it is reasonable that the DOD financed additional activity. It illustrates the USA's legacy of providing services to women and girl survivors of gender-based violence, including "case management, referral services, health care, legal assistance, counseling, emotional healing and learning activities and child and women's safe spaces". These services, via the USAID's Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance, reached at least 2.2 million people in 2014 and were valued at \$21 million.<sup>118</sup> The Department of State (DOS) also supported initiatives to promote the integration of women into its counter-terrorism and CVE efforts.<sup>119</sup> The NAP also acted as a specific stream of activity that brings together other 'softer' institutional positions and initiatives, for example the Department of State's Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues and USAID's Senior Coordinator for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment.

The US NAP championed an expanded WPS agenda beyond traditional security and peacebuilding activities. Investment in access to technology, for example mobile and Internet access, was supported by USAID's digital development programme. Healthcare, such as prenatal

113 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2018/01/16/uk-government-launches-new-national-action-plan-on-women-peace-and-security/>.

114 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/677586/FCO1215-NAP-Women-Peace-Security-ONLINE\\_V2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/677586/FCO1215-NAP-Women-Peace-Security-ONLINE_V2.pdf) p. 3.

115 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/677586/FCO1215-NAP-Women-Peace-Security-ONLINE\\_V2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/677586/FCO1215-NAP-Women-Peace-Security-ONLINE_V2.pdf) p. 5.

116 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/United-States-NAP-2-2016.pdf> p. 1.

117 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/United-States-NAP-2-2016.pdf> p. 5.

118 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/United-States-NAP-2-2016.pdf> pp. 8–9.

119 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/United-States-NAP-2-2016.pdf> pp. 10–11.

care and services, HIV testing, nutritional support, and sanitation and hygiene interventions, were part of the USA's global health initiative. According to the NAP, “the United States is also working collaboratively with conflict-affected countries to ensure that women are beneficiaries of priority global development efforts”.<sup>120</sup> Climate change was also identified as a core issue for the WPS agenda.<sup>121</sup>

The US' response to the WPS agenda has shifted with its domestic political climate. The 2016 NAP reflected the Obama administration's liberal approach to international relations, but the advent of the Trump administration saw a rollback of many positive aspects of the NAP. The Women, Peace, and Security Act, passed in 2017, as well as the US' Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security, published in 2019 have seen a narrowing of the WPS agenda to focus on traditional security architectures. In contradistinction to the Obama-era expansive agenda, the US enclosed its WPS activities into only four agencies—the DOD, the DOS, USAID, and the Department for Homeland Security (DHS)<sup>122</sup>—and removed activities relating to global health, climate change, and access to technology.

Each of the agencies involved in the delivery of the strategy have their own implementation plans that set out their approach and intended activities.<sup>123</sup> Common to each of the plans are four fairly narrow ‘lines of effort’: supporting women's participation, promoting women's safety and rights, adjusting US international programmes to improve outcomes for women, and encouraging partner nations to support WPS.<sup>124</sup> The State and Defense departments' implementation plans are the most robust of the four, and include reference to monitoring and evaluation. However, the metrics have no benchmark or performance indicator to evaluate their progress over time. For example, participation by women in decision-making processes will be measured by “number of engagements by key USG [US Government] leaders,” but does not commit the US to increasing the number of engagements, or define what counts as ‘key USG leader.’<sup>125</sup>

The US' involvement in the WPS agenda is a complex one. The Obama administration invested millions of dollars of funding for an expansive WPS agenda that was seen as a bridge toward “embracing the more powerful aims of WPS.”<sup>126</sup> The “return to masculine militarism” characterised by the Trump administration's 2017 Act and 2019 Strategy, seen to “undercut advances” made by the Obama administration, is still a narrow lens from which to evaluate the US and WPS. The broader issue, present in both an expansive and a limited agenda, is that US does not confront the reality of its role in creating much of the conflict that so often acts as an accelerant for gender-based violence. If the root cause of the issue is not addressed, then the US NAP or a US WPS agenda can only be so effective – why are peacekeepers and humanitarian workers needed in the first place?

120 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/United-States-NAP-2-2016.pdf> p. 13.

121 <https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2019/09/United-States-NAP-2-2016.pdf> p. 16.

122 See: <https://www.state.gov/women-peace-and-security/>

123 See: [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/20-01943-SGWI\\_v11\\_forWeb\\_Bookmarks508.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/20-01943-SGWI_v11_forWeb_Bookmarks508.pdf), <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/wps-dhs-implementation-plan.pdf>, [https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jun/11/2002314428/-1/-1/1/WOMEN\\_PEACE\\_SECURITY\\_STRATEGIC\\_FRAMEWORK\\_IMPLEMENTATION\\_PLAN.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jun/11/2002314428/-1/-1/1/WOMEN_PEACE_SECURITY_STRATEGIC_FRAMEWORK_IMPLEMENTATION_PLAN.PDF), <https://www.usaid.gov/women-peace-and-security>

124 Ibid.

125 [https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jun/11/2002314428/-1/-1/1/WOMEN\\_PEACE\\_SECURITY\\_STRATEGIC\\_FRAMEWORK\\_IMPLEMENTATION\\_PLAN.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jun/11/2002314428/-1/-1/1/WOMEN_PEACE_SECURITY_STRATEGIC_FRAMEWORK_IMPLEMENTATION_PLAN.PDF) p.19

126 <https://genderpolicyreport.umn.edu/the-women-peace-and-security-agenda-under-the-trump-administration-undercutting-advances-with-a-return-to-masculine-militarism/>

## Conclusion

To counter the misuse of ICT platforms by extremist groups targeting women stakeholders, the full range of actors invested in these platforms, concerned with gender-based violence or contributing to analysis or policy on any of these issues must act in concert. Without a holistic approach to understanding both the topics raised in this paper and the way they can be addressed, efforts will remain fragmented across regions, platforms and forms of gendered violence enabled or enacted on these platforms. Historically, efforts towards these goals have been separate and uncoordinated, conducted by several stakeholder groups unintentionally working at cross-purposes. In so doing, such groups have made achieving a long term, fully encompassing solution more difficult. To effectively counteract the systemic issues contributing to gender-based violence and extremism identified in this report, we propose four central areas for improvement:

1. The broadening of stakeholder engagement properly to reflect breadth of engagement.
2. The expansion of international gender mainstreaming efforts to specifically encompass the digital space.
3. The recognition of base standards of protection and prevention capacity for private technology companies.
4. The unbiased and comprehensive enforcement of content moderation policies and terms of service by platforms across all regions.

### *Broadening Stakeholder Engagement*

Without a cohesive strategy informed by a comprehensive array of stakeholders, approaches to ensure a safe digital environment will continue to fall short of the mark. While private companies are on the front line of efforts to police specific instances of violence and are best placed to understand the technical limitations and capacities that can be turned towards this goal, they do not necessarily deploy these capacities with an understanding of the wider implications and second-order effects that may be generated.<sup>127</sup> Nor should private companies be given sole responsibility for classifying what is and is not appropriate content.<sup>128</sup>

The most obvious response to this is to seek to expand the range of stakeholders engaged in the crafting of a holistic approach to dealing with the issue of gender-based violence and online extremism. A broader array of stakeholders represents a more diverse range of communities and identities that experience this type of harm. Different types of stakeholder contribute different capacities to the whole effort. Technology companies can provide technical knowledge as well as accurate data with regard to how their platforms are being

127 T. Gillespie, P. Aufderheide, E. Carmi, Y. Gerrard, R. Gorwa, A. Matamoros-Fernández, S. T. Roberts, A. Sinnreich and S. Myers West (2020), "Expanding the debate about content moderation: scholarly research agendas for the coming policy debates", *Internet Policy Review* vol. 9, no. 4. Available at: <https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/expanding-debate-about-content-moderation-scholarly-research-agendas-coming-policy>.

128 Jillian York and Corynne McSherry (2019), "Content Moderation is Broken. Let us Count the Ways.", Electronic Frontier Foundation. Available at: <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2019/04/content-moderation-broken-let-us-count-ways>.

used to cause harm.<sup>129</sup> Civil society groups can provide an important depth of understanding on how these types of harm interact with the communities that they represent. Government stakeholders provide legal and institutional governance that can ensure that decisions and policies that are produced are more likely to be taken up and become best practice.

This community of stakeholders operating towards a shared, communal goal also provides an effective means of counteracting instances where the motivations of any one stakeholder or group of stakeholders might negatively interact with the goal and direction of the group effort. This mechanism for self-correction of potentially conflicting motivators also serves as a means of building public trust in the stakeholder group and its outputs.

### *Expanding Gender Mainstreaming into Digital Spaces*

At an international, institutional level we recommend that efforts to mainstream a gendered approach to issues of security be expanded specifically to include online spaces and platforms. The absence of these issues from specific efforts by the United Nations fails to amplify them in a manner that would likely invigorate the discourse around them and increase the chances of definitive efforts towards these goals.

The WPS agenda and the NAPs drafted by UN member states as part of this programme demonstrate how effective an international, institutional platform can be with regard to gathering attention and stimulating dialogue. While each nation has taken slightly different approaches to acting upon the agenda, awareness has increased and in many cases actual progress towards an inclusive, multi-stakeholder approach to the issues has begun to take shape.

It follows that this currently under-represented issue, the WPS agenda, would be given greater attention and prioritisation, should it be used as a medium for collecting the currently scattered efforts to engage with gender-based violence and extremism. UN member states who have already signalled a willingness to engage with the historical components of the agenda and to do so through a framework that encourages broad stakeholder engagement and an understanding of intersecting hierarchies with gendered violence would do the same for the added online component.

### *Base Standards of Protection and Prevention*

Private technology companies have long espoused the slogan “move fast and break things”. This accurately epitomises the motivations of an industry that has not only grown in user base, but also in profit margins through break-neck innovation where mistakes are fixed after the fact, if at all. While some of these companies have come publicly to eschew the values that this slogan represents, others, newly

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<sup>129</sup> European Commission (2020), “The Digital Services Act: ensuring a safe and accountable online environment”. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act-ensuring-safe-and-accountable-online-environment\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act-ensuring-safe-and-accountable-online-environment_en).

emerging into the market, have held true to old ways in a manner that has effectively reinvented online-violence-related problems which their more established peers have already faced.

This dynamic effectively sees progress made towards technical and policy-based efforts enacted by technology companies being eroded by progress of a different type. Innovations that have allowed companies to increase their market share of social media users or to gain a user base from scratch (in the case of new companies) do not necessarily mean innovation in terms of preventing violence upon the platform. Profit-driven innovation leads to the invention of new methods of interaction and forms of online violence where the lessons often arduously learned from previous iterations are forgotten or set aside.<sup>130</sup>

A cultural change needs to be encouraged, one that identifies the motivations that lead established companies and newcomers to embody the type of innovation that lauds pace over the need to consider what problems the process might cause later. We should seek to replace incentives that drive a type of innovation that views technical and policy capacities for the prevention of gender-based violence as an inessential feature that can be traded in exchange for competitive advantage.

### *Comprehensive Enforcement of Harm-Prevention and Protection Policies*

As technology companies have grappled with the means by which their platforms have been used to enact violence against women and minority groups, they have almost all adopted and adapted terms of service or community guidelines designed to protect their users from this kind of harm. While these rules are universally applicable across national boundaries and regions irrespective of whether there are domestic incentives or legal requirements, their application has not always been as demonstrably complete.

Due to the vast amount of user-generated content produced on any one online platform the possibility of ensuring perfect adherence to these rules is very low. However, efforts at developing effective content moderation processes and tools designed to enforce these standards as effectively as possible are still far from universal. Companies based in the USA, which hosts the majority of platforms facing these kinds of issue, have a tendency to focus on harm-mitigation strategies of all types. Innovation by these companies around the methods by which they enforce their rules and community guidelines notably takes place within regions or states where they have a significant user base. This dynamic places at risk those regions or areas where there is not a significant enough user base; companies struggle to see the investment in resource-intensive moderation tools or personnel as cost effective, which means such regions are left with an entirely unequal range of protections from digital violence.

Content moderation capacities and capabilities should not be decided on the basis of cost-effectiveness or the size of the regional user base. Such an approach results in the continuation and calcification

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<sup>130</sup> Biz Carson (2020), "Moderation can't wait: The challenges startups like Clubhouse face trying to build community", Protocol. Available at: <https://www.protocol.com/moderation-clubhouse-building-community>.

of existing inequalities and systemic sources of violence, online and offline. The universality of a platform's terms of service or its community guidelines prohibiting uses of the platform that constitute violence should be reflected in practice as well as on paper.

### *Feminist Security Studies: An Effective Framework*

The fundamental goal of the above recommendations is effectively to mainstream gendered responses to online extremism in a manner that simultaneously allows for the crafting of effective policies while also engendering greater trust in these efforts through the inclusion of a broad church of stakeholders. In this instance, the inclusivity of this approach serves several purposes. It provides diversity of experience with regard to the types of behaviour extremists engage in online and it ensures that the common goals of the group counterbalance the individual motivations of any one stakeholder or type of stakeholder.

The principles of feminist security studies (FSS) serve to inform the basis of these recommendations. A broader definition of violence is critical when seeking to encompass types of harm that often occur predominantly in a digital rather than physical space.<sup>131</sup> FSS offers a broader framework for violence that more effectively encompasses the types of non-physical harm that take place in today's online environments. As a framework, FSS also provides a means to grapple with the global reach of online spaces alongside the need for flexibility of understanding in the face of how gender interacts with different social hierarchies and social constructs to result in a huge array of experiences of severity and types of gender-based harm online.

Finally, at its core, FSS is a framework of understanding that centres the requirement for the building of trust between different types of stakeholders in order to prevent future abuses of power and to ensure that actions taken towards the reduction and ultimate prevention of gender-based violence do not unintentionally prolong them or shift them onto another community. The approach encouraged by these principles is one that is ideally suited to the forms of violence and abuses conducted by extremist actors on online platforms. As our digital lives become increasingly inseparable from our physical ones it would take limited effort to build upon the progress already made to prevent gender-based violence in a manner that could extend these reflections into the online realm. Doing so would not only serve as a means to negate harm already being done against minority groups but could also do so in a manner that sets a lasting precedent for how these technologies and the spaces they create develop in the future.

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<sup>131</sup> Semiotic violence, for example, is one which can be seen to have flourished in online spaces where women are the subject of language, images or communications intended to silence or restrict their agency.







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