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**United Nations Association in Canada**  
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**Extremism: A Women, Peace and Security Approach**

*This brief has been submitted as background to a roundtable discussion on the integration of gender perspectives into the development of a new defence policy, with input from the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations*

United Nations Security Council resolutions on Women Peace and Security anchored the dialogue related to sustainable peace to the role of women in conflict and post-conflict settings. The resolutions situate the experiences of women in conflict within the centre of peace-making and peacebuilding. While heralding in a much-welcomed and often overlooked perspective on peace and security; the collective resolutions have generally focused more on the role of women as peace builders and less on their role as active agents in conflict.

The historical role of women as peacebuilders among communities is well acknowledged. Evidence of this can be seen in community-dialogue and inter-communal peace processes, from Somalia to South Sudan. Women have also been active in identifying threats to community and have developed early-warning networks, like that in Darfur supported by the African Union – United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID).

However, less attention has been given to the emerging threat of women’s radicalisation and support of violent extremism. Policy-makers have gravitated towards recognising the role of women as actors in the prevention of extremism, through the essentialist lens of motherhood.

The recent adoption of Security Council Resolution 2242 on Women, Peace and Security highlights the emergence of violent extremism as a threat to global security and calls on Member States to ensure that the participation and leadership of women is central to the development of all strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism.

The traditional roles ascribed to women in many societies as wives and mothers often uniquely position them to act as powerful agents of prevention. Yet, while mothers are their children’s first teachers, what is taught is not always peaceful and tolerant. When considering how to engage and empower women for countering violent extremism, it is important to understand the varied roles of women in this area including the motives that move women towards violent extremism. Women have been both supporters and active agents in violence.

The role of women as agents of terror is not new; having been recognised as suicide bombers, from Algeria's war of independence from France in the 1950s to the Chechen “black widow” suicide bombers in the 1990s. In states far removed from conflict, girls and young women have been actively recruited to engagement in support of extremism. It is this female activism towards violence that is disturbing and thus excluded from current debate on peace and security.

## **Recommendations:**

In light of the above, the following are recommendations to the Department of National Defence as it develops new policies.

**Recognizing the increasing role of women not just as victims, but also as key actors and perpetrators of terrorism and violent extremism.** Women play various roles in violent extremism, including victims, actors and peacemakers. The role of women as key actors in terror attacks in the region has been identified, and needs to be further researched and interrogated in a way that adds value to the design of responses.

1. **More effort needs to be placed on the efforts of women within local communities and identifying how these can be incorporated into CVE responses at the national and regional levels.**
2. **Development of early warning** and subsequent action is necessary for a multi-layered approach to security, from the local to the national, regional and international levels. Early warning indicators should be developed to recognise the signs of early radicalisation.
3. **Allocation of resources to women's efforts to counter violent extremism** as opposed to high military spending that excludes their perspectives and contributions must be prioritized.
4. **Community dialogue is necessary** within various Canadian cultural settings through social interaction and education. Women can and must have a safe space to engage in these types of dialogues, as they are often the first to reach across divides and build bridges.
5. **Culturally relevant solutions** are an important step towards increasing the efficiency of countering violent extremism and this requires local knowledge.

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