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From Policy to Practice: A Comparative Analysis of Gender-Sensitive Counterterrorism in the United Kingdom, Spain and Germany

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Contents

1. Introduction

The persistence of terrorism as a global security challenge sits uneasily alongside the growing sophistication of counterterrorism frameworks. Recent Global Terrorism Index reports reveal a dual pattern: partial global improvement alongside increasing geographical dispersion and structural complexity (GTI, 2024, 2025). In 2024, terrorism reached its widest geographical spread since 2018, with 66 countries affected by at least one incident and, for the first time in seven years, more countries experiencing a worsening terrorism impact than improvement, with 7,555 deaths attributed to terrorist violence. Although subsequent trends indicate progress at the global level, with deaths reducing by 28 per cent and attacks by 22 per cent across 81 countries, this overall decline masks critical regional divergences. Deterioration was concentrated in seven Western states,[1] where terrorism-related deaths rose sharply by 280 per cent, reaching 57 fatalities driven by high-profile attacks in New Orleans, Bondi Beach and Washington D.C. Militant Islamist organisations persist as the principal drivers of global terrorist violence in the post-9/11 era, notably the Islamic State (ISIS), Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and al-Shabaab, they collectively account for around 70 per cent of global terrorism deaths, while more than 30 per cent of attacks remain unclaimed, reflecting the increasingly fragmented and decentralised nature of contemporary terrorism (GTI, 2025).

In Europe, 2024 marked a sharp resurgence in terrorist activity, with recorded attacks doubling from 34 in 2023 to 67 in 2024, particularly antisemitic attacks and hate crimes in the wake of the Gaza war perpetrated by both Islamist and politically motivated extremist actors (GTI, 2025). Germany ranked as the most affected European country, placed 27th worldwide, and ideologically motivated violence intensified across the whole continent. The European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (EU TE-SAT) data indicates that arson was consistently the most common attack method across Member States, followed by bombing, stabbing, shooting and property damage; bladed weapons were predominantly used in jihadist attacks and fire accelerants by left-wing and anarchist actors (Europol, 2024; 2025). In the United Kingdom, completed attacks were rare, only two were classified as terrorism in 2023, both stabbings, yet the broader threat picture includes 248 terrorism-related arrests in 2024 and a dominant pattern of lone actors employing low-sophistication methods such as bladed weapons, vehicles or fire (Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, 2025; Home Office, 2024; Pool Re, 2024; 2025). Critically, these evolving threat profiles are increasingly diverse in ideology, method and perpetrator demographics, exposing a structural limitation that aggregate statistics tend to obscure: counterterrorism has historically been designed around a predominantly male perpetrator model,

[1] This includes Sweden, Australia, Finland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland and Germany (GTI, 2025).

but the actors driving radicalisation, recruitment and violence are neither uniformly male nor ideologically uniform. Gender-disaggregated data on terrorism perpetrators although scarce (Lützinger et al., 2020; UNODC, 2019), available evidence reveal that women, while a numerical minority, accounted for 43 of 449 arrestees across EU Member States in 2024 and roughly 10 per cent of terrorism-related arrests in the UK in recent years, women constitute a consistent presence across most ideological milieus, fulfilling a wide range of roles with significant implications for both perpetration and prevention (Europol, 2025; Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, 2025; Bigio & Vogelstein, 2019).

In spite of the information, counterterrorism frameworks have been slow to register this reality. For decades, terrorism and counterterrorism have been treated as gender-neutral domains, obscuring the differentiated roles women play and producing incomplete threat assessments, entrenched stereotypes and reduced operational effectiveness (Council of Europe, n.d.; UNODC, 2019; UN Women, 2017). This blind spot reflects long-standing critiques within feminist security scholarship, which has argued since the late 1980s that traditional security studies, shaped by state-centric and militarised approaches, have systematically marginalised gender as an analytical category, constructing security around implicitly male actors and rendering women's contributions to both violence and prevention invisible (Enloe, 1989; Tickner, 1992). The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000, establishing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, marked a defining normative shift, formally recognising that armed conflict and insecurity affect women and men differently and affirming women's meaningful participation as essential to conflict prevention, peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction (UN Security Council, 2000). Resolution 2242 in 2015 extended this framework explicitly to counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism for the first time, framing women not only as vulnerable populations but as key actors in preventing radicalisation and supporting disengagement and deradicalisation processes (UN Security Council, 2015; UN Women, 2017; GCTF, 2015). Over time, international frameworks and policy discourse have increasingly emphasised gender-sensitive approaches (Bou Serhal, 2025), however the extent to which these normative commitments have been translated into operational practice seem deeply uneven, creating a persistent gap between international obligations and domestic reality (International Crisis Group, 2020). This gap is the subject of the present study, with the central research question being: *how are gender-sensitive approaches integrated into counterterrorism policies in the United Kingdom, Spain and Germany?*

The three cases were selected to maximise variation in the formal degree of gender integration within counterterrorism policy at the same time as maintaining comparability across political systems, legal frameworks and exposure to terrorist threats. The focus lies not on formal policy architecture alone, but on how gender perspectives are understood, operationalised and

experienced by the practitioners and institutions responsible for implementation and evaluation. Two analytical expectations structure the inquiry: first, that a policy-implementation gap exists, whereby gender-sensitive approaches are more prominently reflected in official discourse than in operational practice; second, that cross-national variation follows a discernible pattern, with the United Kingdom exhibiting the most developed formal integration of gender perspectives, Spain an intermediate and partial incorporation, and Germany a decentralised approach in which gender is less explicitly articulated in national strategy. As the analysis will expose, the relationship between formal commitment and operational reality does not move uniformly in the same direction across cases and it is precisely in tracing where policy and practice converge or diverge that this study makes its contribution.

2. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design, appropriate given the complexity of counterterrorism environments, where outcomes are shaped by interconnected factors, including geopolitical developments, intelligence capabilities, socio-economic conditions and international cooperation, that resist isolation through quantitative measurement (Crelinsten, 2014; Sobol et al., 2023). Quantitative approaches are further constrained by a fundamental data limitation as the most widely used open-source terrorism datasets, including the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) [2], do not disaggregate data by gender. Europol's TE-SAT does include gender-disaggregated arrest figures, but it remains geographically bounded to EU Member States. This structural data gap is itself a finding of this study, the inability to answer basic empirical questions about gendered participation in terrorism is not incidental but reflects the same gender-blind assumptions that this thesis examines at the policy level, making qualitative methods not merely preferable but necessary for understanding how gender perspectives are framed and operationalised in practice rather than inferred from aggregate statistics.

The research integrates three complementary strands. The first is a historical and theoretical review tracing the evolution of gender within security studies, from Cold War state-centric paradigms to the emergence of feminist security scholarship in the 1990s and the institutionalisation of gender perspectives through the WPS agenda, providing the conceptual foundation for the empirical analysis. The second is a systematic policy analysis of national counterterrorism strategies, related legislative frameworks and implementation mechanisms in

[2] The Global Terrorism Database and the Global Terrorism Index, encompass hundreds of indicators, for example, attacks, fatalities, arrests and convictions, across several decades and geographies, but contain no gender-disaggregated variables, fundamentally constraining their capacity to assess women's active roles in either terrorism.

each country, assessing the extent to which gender perspectives are incorporated into policy design, stated objectives and practice. The third strand complements the findings of the second, it consists of semi-structured interviews with experts and practitioners, selected to capture how gender-sensitive approaches are understood, implemented and evaluated beyond what formal documents can reveal. The interview guide, which can be found in the annex, was structured around a pre-established set of questions but designed to allow interviewees to elaborate freely, combining analytical rigour with the flexibility necessary to surface practitioner knowledge that does not appear in open-source material. All interviews were conducted online in June 2026, lasted approximately thirty minutes each and were recorded with participants' consent. Anonymity is preserved throughout, participants are referred to exclusively as P1, P2 and P3[3].

The three cases of the UK, Spain and Germany were selected through a most-different-within-similarity logic as they are all consolidated European democracies embedded in EU and UN counterterrorism frameworks and formally committed to the WPS agenda, yet they diverge meaningfully in how gender is applied within their respective security architectures. This design maximises analytical variation, allowing for comparability and cross-national conclusions, which would not be possible through a single-case study. The findings remain geographically and institutionally constrained, also because they share a counterterrorism tradition shaped primarily by the jihadist threat, a context in which women have historically been framed as passive victims or peripheral actors (De Leede, 2018), which limits the transferability of conclusions to other ideological threat environments, political systems or non-Western institutional contexts.

The most significant methodological limitation concerns the interview sample. Thirty individuals were contacted across the three national contexts, and three ultimately agreed to participate within the time and resource constraints of the study. This restricts both the depth and the cross-national balance of the qualitative evidence, a larger interview pool would have strengthened the validity and comparability of the findings, which is an acknowledged avenue for future research. The constraint was partially offset by the profile of the three participants: a Spanish academic with over a decade of experience researching radicalisation and prevention policy at a leading security think tank (P1); a researcher and consultant with over eight years of experience in violence prevention across the UK, Germany and Canada (P2); and an American academic with over forty

[3] I strictly adhered to the standards outlined in the Belmont Report. Prior to each interview, I obtained informed verbal consent after explaining the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of the information provided, participants' right to decline to answer any question, and their ability to withdraw from the interview at any time without consequence. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded solely for transcription and analysis purposes. The recordings will be securely stored, accessed only by the researcher and permanently deleted upon completion of the thesis in accordance with academic ethical standards.

years of experience in terrorism and gender research, who has worked directly with the UN, the UK government and EU member states on counterterrorism strategy (P3).

A further limitation concerns the relationship between policy language and operational practice. Document-based analysis carries an inherent assumption that the absence of explicit gender language in official strategies indicates the absence of gender-sensitive approaches in practice. As the German case illustrates most clearly, the silence of formal policy documents does not necessarily reflect operational reality because gender perspectives may be embedded in practitioner cultures, civil society programmes and institutional routines without ever being codified in national strategy. This gap between what is written and what is done runs in both directions, formal commitment does not guarantee operational depth, as the UK case shows, but the absence of formal language does not preclude meaningful practice, as Germany demonstrates. Reliance on publicly available documents alone would have obscured this dynamic entirely, the interview evidence was therefore essential not only to supplement the documentary record but to correct for the systematic bias that document analysis introduces when applied to a field where much operational knowledge remains informal, classified or simply unwritten.

The study pursues three analytical objectives: to trace the historical incorporation of gender into international security and counterterrorism frameworks, to analyse how gender-sensitive approaches are integrated into policy design and implementation in the UK, Spain and Germany, and to examine how these approaches are perceived and experienced by practitioners, identifying where formal commitment and operational reality converge or diverge.

3. Literature Review and Historical Evolution of Gender in Security Studies

3.1. Key Concepts and Definitions

Before proceeding to the substantive literature review, it is necessary to clarify the key concepts that structure this thesis, as they carry specific legal, theoretical and operational meanings that inform the analysis throughout.

Terrorist offences are defined in accordance with Article 3 of Directive (EU) 2017/541, which provides that they are intentional acts that, given their nature or context, may seriously damage a country or an international organisation, committed with at least one of three specific aims: seriously intimidating a population, unduly compelling a government or international organisation to act or refrain from acting, or seriously destabilising or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a state or international body (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2017). The acts covered are broad and include

attacks on a person's life or physical integrity, destruction of public infrastructure and the manufacture or use of weapons, among others. This definition does not require a transnational element, rendering it suitable for comparing national counterterrorism policies across the three cases examined here.

Counterterrorism is understood broadly, following the UN's Women's Engagement (2020a) inclusive framing, as encompassing military operations as well as the adoption of legislative and policing frameworks to control, repress and track terrorist activities, the training, equipping and reorganisation of national security forces and intelligence services, and the enhancement of border surveillance and checkpoints.

Gender, as used throughout this thesis, refers to a socially constructed set of roles, identities and expectations associated with masculinity and femininity, distinct from biological sex (Enloe, 1989). It structures power relations and social hierarchies, shaping who is perceived as threatening, vulnerable or legitimate within political and security contexts. This understanding, developed at length in the feminist security scholarship reviewed below, is foundational to the argument that counterterrorism frameworks are not gender-neutral instruments but are themselves shaped by, and reproductive of, particular gendered assumptions.

Gender-sensitive counterterrorism refers to those national and international policies and practices that systematically integrate gender perspectives into the prevention, detection and response to terrorism, it recognises that women and men engage with, and are affected by, terrorism in different ways, and that women can be both perpetrators and key actors in prevention and deradicalisation (Enloe, 1989; UN Security Council, 2000). They rely on gender-disaggregated data and operational protocols designed to enhance the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts (Sjoberg, 2009), moving beyond a binary understanding of women as victims and men as perpetrators toward a more analytically complete account of the actors involved (Herschinger, 2014b).

3.2. Feminist Perspectives on Security and Gender

Security studies, particularly during the Cold War, were dominated by state-centric and militarised approaches focused on interstate conflict, territorial integrity and the use of force. Within this framework, gender was largely absent as an analytical category, security was implicitly constructed around male actors, both as decision-makers and as perpetrators of violence, while women's experiences, roles and labour were systematically excluded from the field's central questions (Herschinger, 2014a). Since the late 1980s, scholars such as Enloe (1989) and Tickner (1992) fundamentally challenged this assumption, arguing that security is shaped by socially constructed gender hierarchies embedded within state institutions, military structures and international politics. Gender, in this scholarship, is understood not simply as an individual

identity category but as a relational and political construct that structures power relations, distributes roles and determines who is perceived as a threat, who is protected and whose insecurity is rendered visible or invisible (Sjoberg, 2009).

Dominant security narratives have been built around gendered dichotomies that associate masculinity with rationality, autonomy, militarism and legitimate violence, while femininity is linked to emotion, dependency and victimhood. These dichotomies, feminist scholars argue, are not natural or incidental but actively produced and sustained through security discourse and practice, shaping how terrorism is understood and counterterrorism is designed. Jean Bethke Elshtain's (1997) depiction of men as "just warriors" and women as "beautiful souls" illustrates how these binaries have historically shaped dominant understandings of conflict and security, reinforcing the idea that security is produced by men and for men while naturalising male roles as both necessary and protective.

Feminist scholarship has sought to broaden the concept of security beyond state-centric approaches, incorporating social, economic and structural forms of violence. Cynthia Enloe's enduring question — "Where are the women?" — reveals that women have always been present in conflict and politics, but their roles and labour are routinely depoliticised or excluded from mainstream analysis (Enloe, 1989). At the heart of this shift is the recognition that the personal is political, that everyday experiences of insecurity are integral to understanding security dynamics, and women and girls disproportionately bear the structural costs of political violence through displacement, gender-based violence and long-term economic and social insecurity (UN Security Council, 2000). These insights have been increasingly institutionalised through international policy frameworks, most notably the Women, Peace and Security agenda, examined in the following section.

3.3. The International Policy Framework: From Resolution 1325 to Resolution 2242

The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000 marked a defining normative moment for the integration of gender into international security discourse. The resolution formally recognised that armed conflict affects women and men differently and emphasised the importance of women's full and meaningful participation in peace and security processes (UN Security Council, 2000), thereby initiating the Women, Peace and Security agenda, structured around four pillars: prevention, protection, participation, and relief and recovery. The UNSC has since adopted nine further resolutions reinforcing and expanding the WPS framework[4], the most significant for the purposes of this study being Resolution 2242 (2015).

[4] The nine subsequent WPS resolutions address distinct, but interconnected dimensions of the agenda: Resolution 1820 (2008) recognised sexual violence as a tactic of war; Resolution 1888 (2009) strengthened mechanisms to address conflict-related sexual violence; Resolution 1889 (2009) focused on

Resolution 2242 marked the first explicit institutional linkage between the WPS agenda and counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism, accelerating the integration of gender into security frameworks at the operational level. The resolution called on member states and the UN system to further integrate their WPS, counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism agendas, required key counterterrorism bodies, including the Counter-Terrorism Committee and its Executive Directorate, to treat gender as a cross-cutting issue rather than a peripheral concern, and tasked UN Women with researching the drivers of women's radicalisation and the impact of counterterrorism measures on women's rights (UN Security Council, 2015; UN Women, 2017). Together, these developments signalled a growing recognition that gender-blind counterterrorism is not only analytically incomplete but operationally counterproductive.

Despite this normative progress, implementation has remained deeply uneven across contexts. UN Women's research (2017) across Europe and Central Asia finds that women continue to be viewed primarily as secondary or passive actors within extremist networks, and prevention initiatives seldom apply a structured gender analysis. Consequently, understanding of the distinct pathways driving women's radicalisation remains limited, as does awareness of how counterterrorism measures affect women's rights and experiences differently from men's, a blind spot with direct impact on prevention and response, since policies designed without this knowledge are more likely to miss female-specific vulnerability indicators, underestimate women's roles as recruiters and facilitators, and produce the “positive security bias” that terrorist organisations can exploit (European Commission, 2022). It is precisely this implementation gap between what international frameworks require and what national security architectures deliver that the comparative analysis of the United Kingdom, Spain and Germany in Section 4 sets out to examine.

3.4. Women's Roles in Terrorism

Women's agency in terrorism and political violence must be understood in its full complexity, as women are neither inherently peaceful nor a homogeneous group with uniform interests. Contrary to common assumptions, large-scale cross-national research shows that women are active participants in well over half of the world's armed rebel groups, serve as combatants in nearly one-third of all cases and hold leadership positions in over a quarter of the movements examined, importantly, most of these movements rely primarily on voluntary rather than coerced

women's participation in post-conflict peacebuilding; Resolution 1960 (2010) established monitoring and accountability mechanisms for conflict-related sexual violence; Resolution 2106 (2013) addressed the prosecution of perpetrators of sexual violence; Resolution 2122 (2013) reinforced women's participation across all stages of peace processes; Resolution 2242 (2015) explicitly linked the WPS agenda to counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism for the first time; Resolution 2467 (2019) adopted a survivor-centred approach to conflict-related sexual violence; and Resolution 2493 (2019) called for full implementation of all previous WPS resolutions (UN Women, 2020b).

participation, challenging narratives that automatically portray women as victims and suggesting that joining political violence is often a deliberate choice (Henshaw, 2015). Regardless of this, feminist scholars point to a persistent silencing of women's roles in armed conflict, including their erasure from archives, official histories and post-conflict transition programmes, which has reinforced the false impression that women's participation is marginal or exceptional (Enloe, 1989; Henshaw, 2015).

Women have participated as combatants, supporters, recruiters, propagandists and perpetrators in a wide range of major organisations, including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Boko Haram, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), ISIS and the Shining Path (OSCE, 2012; Europol, 2025). Despite this, and despite Henshaw's (2015) finding that women have taken active roles in 60 percent of armed rebel groups[5], terrorism is still inaccurately perceived as a man's world, where women appear primarily as victims (Bourekba, 2020). Bigio and Vogelstein (2019) offer a more accurate framing, arguing that women's roles in terrorism are best understood across three overlapping and non-exclusive categories: perpetrators, mitigators and targets.

The case of the Islamic State offers the most extensively documented illustration of women's involvement in contemporary jihadist terrorism and is directly relevant to the three national cases examined in this thesis. Since 2012, women made up a notable share of the foreign fighters and supporters joining ISIS, estimated at 15 to 20 per cent globally (UN Women, 2017). Cook and Vale's (2018) landmark dataset, covering 80 countries and roughly 41,490 ISIS-affiliated foreign citizens, found that 13 per cent were women and 12 per cent were minors, meaning women and minors together accounted for one in four recorded foreign affiliates. In Europe, around 5,000 people joined Sunni militant groups in Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2016, predominantly from France, Germany, the UK and Belgium, with women making up approximately 17 per cent of European foreign fighters (Bourekba, 2020) and around 20 per cent across the wider Europe and Central Asia region (UN Women, 2017). Women in ISIS were far from passive, their roles were of wives and mothers, but they served as police and religious enforcers within the Al-Khansaa Brigade, as teachers, state-building agents and, most strategically, as recruiters. The share of European women among ISIS foreign fighters rose from one in seven in 2014 to one in three in 2016 (Cook & Vale, 2018; Bourekba, 2020), and by 2018 women accounted for approximately 20 per cent of EU arrests on terrorism-related offences (Bourekba, 2020). Although Europol already warned in 2017 that terrorist groups might exploit women, young adults and even children to carry out attacks in the EU, policy responses remained slow to adapt.

[5] Henshaw's study is based on a cross-national dataset of armed rebel groups active since 1990, examining women's participation across insurgent and terrorist organisations (Henshaw, 2015).

The implications for counterterrorism practice are considerable. When women engaged in terrorist activity are portrayed as coerced, manipulated or brainwashed, it produces what the European Commission (2022) describes as a "positive security bias," meaning that female offenders are less likely to be arrested, prosecuted or sentenced harshly compared to men, enabling, on the one hand, terrorist organisations to exploit gender stereotypes to evade detection, and on the other hand, women to strategically deploy victim narratives to reduce legal consequences, limiting opportunities for rehabilitation and increasing the risk of re-engagement. The conventional distinction between "victim" and "perpetrator" frequently fails to reflect reality, as clearly seen in the case of women who travelled to ISIS-held territory who may have experienced coercion or gender-based violence while simultaneously contributing to the organisation's ideological and governance structures, leading to inconsistent data collection, unreliable threat assessments and distortions in prosecution and sentencing outcomes (Bigio & Vogelstein, 2019). Feminist scholars further highlight how counterterrorism efforts have prioritised disrupting violent and combat roles, predominantly associated with men, while neglecting strategically essential functions such as fundraising, logistics, recruitment and community-based radicalisation which are roles more commonly adopted by women, a blind spot that undermines both prevention and disengagement efforts (Bigio & Vogelstein, 2019).

3.5. Institutionalising Gender in Counterterrorism

The progressive recognition of gender as a relevant dimension of counterterrorism has translated into concrete institutional changes at the international and regional levels, though the depth and consistency of that translation varies across bodies and mandates. At the UN, Resolution 2242 (2015) marked the first explicit mandate for key counterterrorism bodies, including the Counter-Terrorism Committee and its Executive Directorate (CTED), to integrate gender as a cross-cutting issue across their work, moving it from a peripheral concern to a stated institutional priority (UN Security Council, 2015). The CTED has since developed dedicated analytical outputs on gendered dimensions of terrorism, including trend reports on female foreign fighters, the repatriation of ISIS-associated women and the prosecution of women for terrorism-related offences (UN Security Council, 2015; UN Women, 2017). The UN Office of Counter-Terrorism has worked in parallel to mainstream gender into counterterrorism programming, adopting a human rights-based approach that recognises women simultaneously as victims, perpetrators, facilitators and agents of prevention, a framing that explicitly resists the reductive victim narrative that has historically dominated policy design (UN Women, 2017; UN Women, 2020a). The 2015 Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism reinforced this direction, calling on member states to involve women substantively in prevention strategy design and implementation rather than instrumentalising them as community assets or maternal influencers, yet this distinction would prove difficult to enforce in national practice (Bourekba, 2020).

The Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), has played a significant complementary role in adopting a good practices document on women and countering violent extremism, developed with input from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), governments, civil society and practitioners and later publishing a 2019 Addendum that explicitly mainstreams gender perspectives across all CVE policies (GCTF, 2019). These documents represent the first multilateral attempt to translate gender-sensitive norms into operational guidance for counterterrorism practitioners.

At the European level, the EU has progressively incorporated gender perspectives into its counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism frameworks. Europol's annual TE-SAT reports now include gender-disaggregated arrest data, currently the most comprehensive such reporting available in the European context, and the European Commission has funded research on radicalised women and promoted gender-sensitive approaches in its counter-radicalisation network (European Commission, 2020; 2022; Europol, 2025). The Council of Europe has similarly emphasised the need to move beyond stereotypical portrayals of men as perpetrators and women as passive victims, recognising that gender-sensitive counterterrorism improves both threat assessment and prevention outcomes (Council of Europe, n.d.).

In conclusion, the literature reviewed in this section traces a meaningful, but incomplete shift. Feminist scholarship has fundamentally challenged the male-centric framing of security, arguing that gender shapes not only who participates in political violence but how threats are perceived, how responses are designed and whose experiences are prioritised within policy frameworks. The empirical record on women's roles in terrorism as combatants, recruiters, ideologues and state-builders complicates dominant narratives that have long positioned women primarily as victims, with direct consequences for threat assessment and prevention practice. At the institutional level, the progressive adoption of gender-sensitive norms from Resolution 1325 through Resolution 2242 and the operational guidance of the GCTF and the EU shows a growing recognition that gender-blind counterterrorism is analytically incomplete and operationally costly. Yet, normative development at the international level does not automatically produce policy change at the national level and it is precisely this gap between institutional commitment and domestic practice that the following section examines through the comparative cases of the United Kingdom, Spain and Germany.

4. National Trajectories: The United Kingdom, Spain and Germany

The post-9/11 era reshaped counterterrorism strategies in all three countries, and jihadism has since emerged as the primary driver of strategic reorientation, following landmark attacks such as

7/7 in London, 11M in Madrid and the 2016 Berlin Christmas market attack. The contemporary threat landscape has become more plural, as one of "fluid extremism," (P2) where individuals increasingly adopt ideologies that respond to personal needs rather than adhering to fixed political programmes:

> Extremism appears to be 'meeting a need' rather than reflecting stable ideological commitments, resulting in increasingly fluid combinations of Islamist, far-right, nihilistic and misogynistic beliefs. (P2, 12/06/2026)

This ideological hybridisation has direct implications for gender analysis as extremist actors draw simultaneously from jihadist, far-right, incel and misogynistic currents, gender-blind threat categorisation becomes analytically inadequate across all ideological domains, not only in jihadist contexts where women's roles have been most studied. Against this backdrop, the following subsections examine how each country has incorporated gender into its counterterrorism framework, moving from formal policy to operational practice, and drawing primarily on interview evidence to identify where the two converge or diverge.

4.1. United Kingdom

The UK's counterterrorism strategy has been shaped by two defining historical experiences. The first is the ethno-nationalist violence of the Northern Ireland Troubles, accounting for the 84 per cent of the total 5,513 fatalities related to terrorist events recorded in the GTD (2020), where the Irish Republican Army and associated paramilitary groups carried out bombings, assassinations and infrastructure attacks for nearly three decades before the 1998 Good Friday Agreement resolved it through political negotiation rather than military defeat (GTD, 2022; House of Commons Library, 2021; Walker, 2015). The second is the jihadist threat that reshaped national priorities after the 7 July 2005 bombings, when four British-born citizens trained at Al-Qaeda camps killed 52 people on the London transport network, what Walker (2015) terms "neighbour terrorism," an attack whose perpetrator profile rendered obsolete the assumption that terrorism was an externally imported threat. In 2017, three further attacks at Westminster Bridge, Manchester Arena and London Bridge killed a combined total of 40 people and underscored the persistence of the jihadist threat (House of Commons Library, 2021). In the current landscape, Islamist extremism accounts for 60 per cent of those imprisoned for terrorism-related offences, extreme right-wing terrorism has risen sharply to 30 per cent, more than double the figure recorded in 2018, and the national threat level stands at SEVERE as of May 2026 (Counter Terrorism Policing, 2025; MI5, 2026).

The legal backbone of UK counterterrorism is the Terrorism Act 2000, it replaced a series of temporary and Northern Ireland-specific statutes[6], with a unified, permanent legal code applicable to all forms of domestic and international terrorism, which has progressively expanded[7] (Ramraj, 2006; Walker, 2015). The national strategic architecture is organised through CONTEST, first developed in 2003 and most recently updated in 2023, and it is structured around four pillars: Prevent (stopping radicalisation), Pursue (disrupting and prosecuting attacks), Protect (strengthening security of targets) and Prepare (building resilience), (Home Office, 2023); and, it is internationally recognised as one of the most comprehensive national counterterrorism frameworks (Bandon & Vidino, 2012). Counterterrorism responsibility is distributed across a network of interconnected agencies, where the MI5 leads the identification, investigation and disruption of terrorist threats domestically and overseas, working alongside the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), MI6 and the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre, which sets the national threat level. Operationally, Counter Terrorism Policing (CTP) delivers the law enforcement elements of CONTEST across all forty-three police forces of England and Wales, with Scottish and Northern Irish services alongside, that at the same time coordinate with MI5 at all stages, from investigation through to arrest and prosecution (Home Office, 2023).

On paper, the UK's current integration of gender approaches record is considerable. The fifth WPS National Action Plan (2023–2027) marked the first inclusion of formal Home Office and Ministry of Justice input, domesticating the WPS agenda beyond its traditional foreign policy remit and explicitly acknowledging women's roles as perpetrators, facilitators, recruiters and agents of prevention (UK Government, 2023). CONTEST 2023 includes Equality, Diversity and Inclusion provisions recognising the importance of gender-sensitive community engagement, and overseas counterterrorism programmes undergo Gender, Equality and Social Inclusion assessments. The Channel Programme, which is the UK's primary early intervention mechanism for individuals at risk of radicalisation, remains the principal site of gender-sensitive prevention practice, supported by UN Women (2019) research identifying distinct gendered pathways for women and girls, including the role of personal relationships, identity-seeking and experiences of gender-based violence. Yet, the interview evidence reveals a significant and underappreciated gap between this normative infrastructure and operational reality. P3, who has worked with MI5 since the early 2000s, provided the most direct insider account of this gap: she had raised gender considerations

[6] The Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provision) Act and the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act, that allowed extended detention without charge, exclusion orders, special courts, and enhanced police and military powers to investigate and prevent terrorist activity (Ramraj, 2006).

[7] The Terrorism Act 2000 has been expanded through the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 introduced administrative detention powers (later struck down by the House of Lords in the Belmarsh ruling of 2004); the Terrorism Act 2006 created new offences including preparation of terrorism acts and incitement; and the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 introduced Temporary Exclusion Orders to manage the return of individuals who had travelled to join terrorist organisations abroad.

early in her career within the institution, but those concerns were not taken seriously until the surge in female foreign fighters joining ISIS from 2012 onward and the high-profile gendered attacks of 2017. The pattern is not incidental but diagnostic, revealing that gender mainstreaming in UK counterterrorism has been fundamentally reactive, driven by operational shocks rather than sustained analytical commitment. As P3 observed, the institutional culture itself remains an obstacle:

> Counterterrorism is still very slow to incorporate my recommendations with regard to women because there's still this sort of “macho”, misogynistic culture within counterterrorism. (P3, 12/06/2026)

P2 reinforced this from a different angle, noting that gender-conscious measures to address the online threat environment, namely the Ofcom and the Online Safety Act (2023), were only adopted after women began to be systematically targeted by extremist propaganda and AI-generated content, again, a reactive rather than anticipatory response. The consequence is that gender in UK counterterrorism functions primarily as an equality and inclusion consideration rather than as a substantive analytical category within core threat assessment, because domestic Prevent operations lack explicit gendered referral criteria and frontline practitioners are not systematically trained to recognise female-specific vulnerability indicators (Pearson, 2023). This perpetuates precisely the “positive security bias” whereby women's roles as recruiters, enablers and propagandists remain analytically underestimated and operationally exploitable.

4.2. Spain

Spain's terrorism history spans four decades of Basque separatist violence by Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, responsible for approximately 853 deaths between its founding in 1959 and its formal dissolution in 2018, followed by the jihadist turn that culminated in the 11 March 2004 Madrid train bombings linked to Al-Qaeda in response to Spain's military participation in the Iraq War, 193 people were killed and it fundamentally reoriented national counterterrorism priorities (Nesser, 2006; Domínguez, 2017; Olmeda, 2022). A subsequent attack on Las Ramblas in Barcelona and Cambrils in August 2017 confirmed the persistence of jihadist terrorism with sixteen deaths and over 130 injured, and Spain's Anti-Terrorist Alert Level remains at four out of five in June 2026 (Ministerio del Interior, 2026).

National counterterrorism architecture was built first around ETA and progressively adapted to jihadism. During the 1970s, Royal Decree-Law 1/1977 established the Audiencia Nacional as a specialised terrorism court, later consolidated through Organic Law 9/1984 into a police-judicial model directed primarily against ETA. The 11M bombings exposed critical coordination failures and triggered a structural reorganisation: the Centro de Inteligencia contra el Terrorismo y el Crimen Organizado (CITCO) was created to integrate intelligence from the National Police, Civil

Guard, National Intelligence Centre and prison services, over a thousand additional officers were recruited and a legislative reform followed through the 2010 Criminal Code and Organic Law 2/2015 (Reinares, 2009; Jordán, 2009). ENCOT-2023 is Spain's current National Counterterrorism Strategy, and is structured around prevention, protection, prosecution and preparedness, and aligned with EU and UN frameworks through a human-rights-based approach. The Plan Estratégico Nacional de Prevención y Lucha contra la Radicalización Violenta (PENCRAV) since 2020, provides the prevention-specific framework targeting the ideological drivers of radicalisation, marking a shift from the coercive ETA-era enforcement paradigm (Ministerio del Interior, 2019; Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, 2024).

Spain was designated the intermediate case in this study because its normative gender equality framework is comparatively advanced, for example, Organic Law 3/2007 mandates gender mainstreaming across all areas of public policy, including security, but this commitment has not translated visibly into domestic counterterrorism strategy (EIGE, 2025). ENCOT-2023 and the PENCRAV both treat terrorism as a formally gender-neutral phenomenon, lacking gender analysis, gender-disaggregated data collection mechanisms and explicit recognition of women's diverse roles. The II National Action Plan on WPS (2017–2023) included a dedicated section on gender and P/CVE explicitly recognising women's active roles in terrorist organisations, particularly in radicalisation and recruitment (P1), and stressing that prevention measures should be adapted to gender-specific dynamics (Government of Spain, 2017), but the subsequent III National Action Plan (2025–2030) dropped all references to terrorism and counterterrorism entirely and shifted focus toward human rights and gender equality generally, a tendency seen in UN and EU policy frameworks (P3), representing not stagnation but regression in the formal linkage between Spain's WPS commitments and its security architecture (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, 2025). The disconnect is sharpest when Spain's domestic architecture is compared with its international posture, here Spain integrates gender considerably more consistently through its Feminist Foreign Policy, active participation in EU and OSCE gender-focused security initiatives, and by hosting the latest session of the UN Crime Commission, which focused specifically on gender-sensitive responses to terrorism and organised crime (OSCE, 2026). Overall, national experts agree that there is growing awareness of gender perspectives in violent extremism analysis, but this has to translate into substantive policy reform (Real Instituto Elcano, 2023; P1).

The interview with P1 revealed, however, that this public-facing picture significantly understates what is happening operationally, P1 identified 2012-2013 as the decisive turning point, not because of any institutional initiative, but because jihadist propaganda began specifically targeting women for the first time:

> Before Islamic State, women were hardly involved. The decisive change came around 2012-2013, when jihadist propaganda started specifically targeting women. In response, prevention policies had to adapt. (P1, 08/06/2026)

This adaptation was externally triggered and reactive, driven by a visible operational development and concurrent EU normative pressure rather than by endogenous institutional evolution. Its consequences are most visible in rehabilitation and prison management, where P1 confirmed that gender-sensitive practices have gradually developed in response to the growing number of female detainees with terrorism-related profiles, but these practices remain largely undocumented in public-facing sources, creating a visibility gap that constrains both external evaluation and policy learning. Critically, P1 also disclosed that sex-disaggregated data does exist within Spanish institutions, but is confined to internal sources. This finding has significant implications beyond Spain, confirming that the absence of public gender-disaggregated data in counterterrorism is not always a data collection failure but a transparency and publication failure, a policy choice, whether deliberate or by default, with consequences for democratic oversight and evidence-based reform.

4.3. Germany

Germany's encounter with terrorism has unfolded across three distinct waves: the left-wing extremism of the Red Army Faction (RAF), which conducted nearly thirty years of political violence before dissolving in 1998; the right-wing Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund (NSU), whose decade-long series of racially motivated murders, primarily targeting Germany's Turkish and Greek communities went undetected due to systematic investigative failures that assumed organised crime rather than far-right motives; and, the current jihadist wave, during which over 1,000 Salafi-jihadists from Germany joined armed groups in Syria and Iraq, and produced the December 2016 Berlin Christmas market attack, the country's single most lethal jihadist incident with twelve deaths and over fifty people injured (German Historical Museum, 2014; Guhl, 2024; Soufan Center, 2024; Counter Extremism Project, 2025). The current landscape reflects P2's characterisation of fluid extremism, with a rise of right-wing terrorism, as seen with the May 2025 ban on the Reichsbürger-affiliated group "Königreich Deutschland" for promoting far-right extremist ideology (Counter Extremism Project, 2025), but also incel and misogynistic currents increasingly intersecting with jihadist propaganda in ways that complicate ideologically siloed threat responses.

Germany's counterterrorism architecture has two structural features with direct implications for gender integration. The first, is federalism, each of the sixteen Länder maintains its own criminal office and domestic intelligence service, with the autonomy to develop their own prevention programmes, creating a decentralised P/CVE ecosystem that is both diverse and difficult to

evaluate systematically (Hellmuth, 2013). The second, is the constitutionally mandated separation between police and intelligence functions, the Trennungsgebot, which reflects a deliberate post-authoritarian safeguard and prevents the kind of centralised strategic architecture found in the UK or Spain (BfV, n.d.). Germany has no single national counterterrorism strategy equivalent to CONTEST or ENCOT, its framework operates through the combined mandates of the Federal Criminal Police Office (Bundeskriminalamt, BKA), which investigates major terrorism cases and coordinating with state criminal offices, the Federal Police (Bundespolizei, BPol), which manages border security and federal territory, the Federal Domestic Intelligence Service (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, BfV), which monitors extremist and terrorist threats domestically, and the Federal Intelligence Service (Bundesnachrichtendienst, BND), responsible for foreign intelligence (Koch, 2022). They are coordinated through the Gemeinsames Terrorismusabwehrzentrum (GTAZ), which is a joint information-exchange platform established post-11M, and supplemented by one of the most diverse civil society P/CVE ecosystems in Europe (BAMF, 2022; Koehler, 2021).

Germany was initially treated as the least gender-sensitive case on the basis of documentary analysis as it has no national WPS action plan, the BfV's public monitoring does not disaggregate data by gender, there are no statutory gender-specific referral obligations within the GTAZ process, and Lützinger et al. (2020) found that only two per cent of German P/CVE programmes have an explicit gender perspective for women and girls. The government-funded Interventionspunkte project, designed to generate systematic understanding of women's radicalisation and exit processes in Salafi-jihadist contexts, represents a research-led exception, but remains limited in scale and disconnected from federal security strategy (Dzhekova & Wolf, 2022). The interview with P2 fundamentally reframes this assessment, P2, who works with the Violence Prevention Network in Germany and was careful to frame her remarks as those of an external practitioner rather than as authoritative on national policy, observed that gender perspectives are substantially more embedded in operational practice than formal documents suggest, and that the absence of written policy is itself, paradoxically, part of the explanation:

> I think there's a certain sense in Germany where it's just taken for granted... so we don't need to write it down... our practitioners take a very holistic viewpoint... they are taking into account the gender elements... it's just integrated into the approach. (P2, 12/06/2026)

This is the thesis's most counterintuitive finding and its most significant methodological implication: in Germany, gender-sensitivity is not absent but assumed, they are embedded in practitioner culture and the professional norms of the civil society organisations that do much of the actual prevention and deradicalisation work, without being codified in national strategy. P2 noted substantial improvements in gender awareness over the last five years, driven by the rise in

female foreign fighters and high-profile gendered attacks, as well as by the growing recognition that AI-generated right-wing propaganda increasingly targets women specifically, with “warrior” narratives, a dynamic that has itself necessitated gender-sensitive countermeasures within what P2 described as a genuinely cross-ideological threat environment. She emphasised that gender-sensitive, holistic disengagement and rehabilitation work improves outcomes by addressing emotions, caregiving responsibilities and life-course changes such as motherhood, and that the earlier gender is recognised in a case, the easier subsequent intervention becomes.

This inverts the pattern found in the UK, where the UK leads on formal policy but lags on operational depth, Germany writes less but does more. The key shortcoming, which P2 and Koehler (2021) both identify, is not the absence of practice but the absence of documentation, without systematic monitoring and evaluation, effective gender-sensitive approaches cannot be validated, scaled or transferred, leaving Germany's considerable practitioner knowledge both invisible to external scrutiny and vulnerable to loss when individual practitioners move on.

4.4. Comparative Assessment

The three cases reveal distinct but structurally related configurations of a common problem revealed through the interviews. The UK presents the strongest formal gender integration, reflected in its WPS National Action Plan, CONTEST's provisions and overseas gender assessments, but P3's insider account confirms that this integration has been crisis-driven rather than analytically proactive, and that gender functions as an equality add-on rather than a core threat assessment category. Spain presents an apparent paradox with a sophisticated gender equality architecture coexisting with a counterterrorism strategy that has evolved to a gender-neutral approach, where P1's evidence reveals that operational practice is more advanced than public documents suggest, creating a transparency deficit with consequences for accountability and reform. Germany appears at first sight the least gender-integrated case, just before P2's evidence discloses that this appearance is produced partly by a methodological artefact, the assumption that absence of policy language signals absence of practice, Germany's practitioner-embedded approach, concentrated in its civil society P/CVE ecosystem, represents a form of gender integration that document analysis systematically misses.

Across all three cases, four common patterns emerge. First, gender mainstreaming has been reactive rather than proactive in all three contexts, triggered by the ISIS foreign fighter surge from 2012 onward and specific high-profile gendered attacks, rather than by sustained analytical commitment or feminist policy advocacy. Second, gender integration is deepest where it is embedded in long-term prevention and deradicalisation infrastructure, for example Channel in the UK, prison-based rehabilitation in Spain, civil society programmes in Germany, and shallowest in core threat assessment and intelligence functions, where gender-blind assumptions remain most

entrenched. Third, gender stereotypes continue to shape operational practice across all three countries with women still frequently framed as victims or caregivers even where evidence points to their involvement as operational actors, the "positive security bias" that all three interviewees identified as a live and exploitable vulnerability. Fourth, limited public gender-disaggregated data constrains evidence-based policy across all cases, though for different reasons: in Germany because it is not systematically collected at the federal level, in Spain because it exists internally but is not published, and in the UK because it is published for arrests but not for prevention referrals or programme outcomes.

Drawing on these findings, the three interviewees converge on four concrete priorities for improving gender integration in counterterrorism practice. First, existing gender-responsive practices must be documented and made explicit, P2 identified this as the most urgent need in Germany, where effective practitioner knowledge remains informal and invisible to evaluation. Second, gender-disaggregated data must be systematically collected and publicly reported across all counterterrorism and prevention pillars, not only in arrest statistics, P1's revelation that Spain holds this data internally but does not publish it points to a transparency failure that policy reform could address directly. Third, specialised gender training must be extended to frontline practitioners as a professional requirement rather than an optional add-on, P3's account of a "macho, misogynistic culture" within counterterrorism institutions confirms that no amount of policy language produces operational change without the practitioner capacity to apply it. Fourth, the strategic deployment of female security and prevention personnel from local communities should be increased, both to reduce gendered analytical blind spots and to minimise the community grievances that counterterrorism operations can generate, particularly in Muslim communities subject to racialised surveillance.

5. Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how gender-sensitive approaches are integrated into counterterrorism policies in the United Kingdom, Spain and Germany, moving beyond formal strategies to explore how such approaches are understood and implemented in practice through a combination of historical and theoretical review, policy analysis and semi-structured interviews, it has produced findings that clarify the hypotheses with which it began.

The analysis confirmed that traditional, ostensibly gender-neutral security paradigms have systematically marginalised women's experiences and obscured the gendered assumptions underpinning counterterrorism, a blind spot challenged by feminist scholarship since the 1980s and progressively institutionalised through UNSCR 1325, UNSCR 2242 and the operational

guidance developed by the UN, EU and the GCTF. The empirical literature on women's roles in terrorism further demonstrated that women occupy diverse positions as perpetrators, facilitators, mitigators and targets across ideological contexts, confirming that gender-blind counterterrorism is not only analytically incomplete but operationally counterproductive.

The first hypothesis — that a policy-implementation gap exists, whereby gender-sensitive approaches are more prominently reflected in official discourse than in operational practice — is confirmed across all three cases. Gender is consistently more visible in national strategies, international forums and policy documents than in everyday threat assessment tools, referral criteria and operational protocols. What the analysis reveals, however, is that this gap is not uniform in character: in the UK it reflects the dominance of an institutional culture that has absorbed gender language without transforming the analytical assumptions underpinning core security work, in Spain it reflects a structural disconnect between an advanced feminist foreign policy framework and a domestically gender-neutral counterterrorism architecture and in Germany it is partially an artefact of document-based analysis itself, since gender perspectives exist operationally in ways that formal frameworks neither capture nor require.

The second hypothesis — that cross-national variation would follow a pattern with the UK most advanced, Spain intermediate and Germany least explicit — is partially overturned by the evidence, and the inversion between the UK and Germany constitutes the study's most significant and counterintuitive finding. The UK leads on formal policy with its fifth WPS National Action Plan, CONTEST's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion provisions and gender assessments in overseas programming representing the most developed normative architecture among the three cases. However, P3's insider account confirms that this policy leadership has not produced operational depth, gender integration in UK counterterrorism has been fundamentally reactive, triggered by the ISIS foreign fighter surge from 2012 onward and specific high-profile gendered incidents, and gender continues to function as an equality consideration rather than a core analytical category in threat assessment and referral practice. Germany, by contrast, writes the least about gender in its federal security frameworks, as it has no unified national counterterrorism strategy, no WPS national action plan and no statutory gender-specific referral obligations, but the evidence exposed by P2's reveals that gender perspectives are substantially embedded in practitioner culture and the civil society P/CVE ecosystem, it is “just taken for granted” embedded in holistic practitioner approaches that document analysis would systematically miss. Spain occupies a intermediate position, but not in the way initially anticipated, rather than reflecting moderate integration at both the formal and operational levels, Spain presents a sharp internal divergence, where formal regression, with the III WPS National Action Plan (2025–2030) dropping all counterterrorism references entirely, coexists with emerging operational practice in rehabilitation and prison management that P1 confirmed is considerably more gender-sensitive

than public documents suggest. Spain's most consequential gap is not between intention and implementation, but between internal practice and public visibility, because sex-disaggregated data exists within ministerial and judicial sources though is not published, a transparency failure with consequences for democratic accountability and evidence-based reform.

The findings carry implications that extend beyond the three cases examined. At the empirical level, the UK-Germany inversion challenges the common assumption in comparative policy analysis that formal policy commitment is a reliable proxy for operational practice, and that the absence of gender language in official frameworks indicates the absence of gender-sensitive approaches in reality. Both assumptions are demonstrably incorrect in this sample and likely undermine the validity of document-based assessments of gender mainstreaming more broadly. At the theoretical level, the study reinforces the feminist security scholarship argument that security institutions are not simply gender-blind but actively gendered, the "positive security bias" is not a technical oversight but a structural product of institutional cultures that have constructed terrorism around a predominantly male perpetrator model and continue to reproduce that construction through training and data collection. Enloe's (1989) question — "Where are the women?" — remains as analytically productive in the counterterrorism context as it was in her original formulation, not because women are absent from the terrorism landscape, but because security institutions need to place them where the evidence demands.

Taking into account the policy analysis and practical introspection, three policy recommendations are advanced to further integrate gender-sensitivity approaches into counterterrorism. First, gender must be established as a core analytical category in threat assessment rather than an equality add-on, national counterterrorism strategies should integrate gender analysis into threat assessment methodologies, referral criteria and operational protocols as a cross-cutting dimension of all threat categories, not a separate section. Second, mandatory substantive gender training, not one-off awareness sessions, should be introduced as a requirement, so that professionals are equipped to recognise and correct for the positive security bias in casework. Third, the systematic publication of gender-disaggregated data and more specific policies on a national basis should be obligatory, the release of non-sensitive operational guidance, evaluation reports, and best practice examples would enable independent assessment of policy effectiveness, support evidence-based reform, and facilitate cross-national learning. In this context, transparency is not only a democratic requirement but also a precondition for institutional learning, as it makes informal and tacit practices visible and scalable.

This study is subject to limitations that qualify its conclusions and point toward productive avenues for future research. The selection of three Western liberal democracies exposed primarily to jihadist terrorism and the three interviewees constrains generalisability, so a further study

would benefit from a case selection with different counterterrorism traditions and threat profiles, P2 specifically identified Canada, Australia and New Zealand as exhibiting comparatively strong gender integration, also a larger pool of interviewees, particularly including frontline practitioners, these would substantially strengthen the validity and cross-national comparability of the findings. Greater attention to intersectionality is also warranted, this study has focused on gender as an analytical category, but the feminist scholarship of Kimberlé Crenshaw and others suggests that gender intersects with race, class, age, migration status and religion in ways that shape both radicalisation pathways and counterterrorism responses in ways this study has not been able to examine systematically. Finally, the online environment represents one of the most pressing challenges for future research, the increasing use of AI-generated extremist content and algorithm-driven propaganda is reshaping recruitment and radicalisation through distinctly gendered narratives, including appeals based on domestic violence, identity, belonging and warrior ideals, so a valuable avenue for future research would therefore be the analysis of how gendered online propaganda influences radicalisation processes and how counterterrorism policies can include gender perspectives to respond more effectively to these emerging digital threats.

The answer to the central research question — how are gender-sensitive approaches integrated into counterterrorism policies in the UK, Spain and Germany? — is neither simple nor uniform. What this study demonstrates is that meaningful gender integration cannot be assessed through policy documents alone, and that when operational reality is examined alongside formal strategy, the expected hierarchy of cases collapses. Progress and persistent gaps coexist in all three contexts, the most gender-sensitive formal commitments do not produce the most gender-sensitive practice, and the most operationally embedded practice exists precisely where it is least formally visible. The overarching conclusion is that although genuine efforts to incorporate a gender perspective into counterterrorism are underway across all three countries, they remain at an early stage of development, lack cross-national consistency and are insufficiently embedded in the operational core of security institutions to constitute a systematic approach, this fragmentation limits both the effectiveness of individual national frameworks and the possibilities for the cross-national cooperation and policy learning that a shared threat landscape demands. Integrating gender into counterterrorism therefore requires not the addition of gender language to existing frameworks, but the transformation of the institutional assumptions, about who is a threat, who is a victim and whose insecurity counts, on which those frameworks rest. As long as counterterrorism institutions continue to construct terrorism as a predominantly male domain filled with stereotypes, they will continue to produce blind spots that are analytically costly and operationally exploitable. The three cases examined here illustrate different pathways through

that challenge, but share the same underlying obstacle: a security culture that has yet to take gender seriously as a tool of analysis rather than a marker of equality.

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Annex

1. Interview questions

For all participants:

1. Could you briefly describe your professional background and how your work relates to counterterrorism policy or practice in [UK/Spain/Germany]?
2. In your assessment, how has the terrorism threat landscape in [UK/Spain/Germany] evolved and what are currently the most significant challenges facing counterterrorism efforts?
3. Is gender part of mainstream debates on terrorism and counterterrorism? If so, in what ways?
4. When do you think gender began to receive more attention in terrorism and counterterrorism discussions? Was there a specific turning point or event?
5. How is a gender perspective incorporated into counterterrorism policies in practice? Which mechanisms, instruments and institutions are responsible for its implementation and oversight?
6. Do you observe a gap between policy commitments (e.g., under the national policies, the WPS agenda) and operational realities? Where is this most visible?
7. What are the main institutional, financial or political barriers to more meaningful gender integration in counterterrorism policy and practice in your country?
8. In your view, do gender-sensitive approaches make counterterrorism more effective in practice? Where do you see the clearest evidence of added value (in early detection, community trust, prosecution, deradicalisation) and where is the evidence weakest or absent?
9. Do you think gender stereotypes (e.g., women as victims, men as perpetrators) still influence how terrorism is understood and addressed?
10. How does the limited availability of gender-disaggregated data, particularly in major international datasets such as the Global Terrorism Database, affect counterterrorism analysis and the design of policies in practice?
11. How should the effectiveness of counterterrorism policies be evaluated, given the limitations of traditional indicators like attack numbers?
12. Are you aware of approaches in other countries (within Europe or beyond) that you consider good practice in integrating gender into counterterrorism? What, if anything, could [UK/Spain/Germany] learn from them?

13. Looking ahead, what do you think is the single most important change, at the policy, institutional or operational level, that would most improve the gender-sensitivity of counterterrorism in your country? What changes would you recommend to better integrate gender into counterterrorism policy and practice?

United Kingdom specific:

14. Do you think the UK's alignment with the WPS agenda has had a tangible impact on counterterrorism policies?

15. The UK's CONTEST strategy includes Equality, Diversity and Inclusion considerations. How effectively are these translated into operational practice, particularly within the Prevent pillar?

16. Are gender considerations meaningfully integrated into community engagement and prevention programmes, or are they more discursive?

Spain specific:

17. ENCOT 2023 and PENCRAV are structured around preventing radicalisation, detecting threats, protecting infrastructure and preparing responses, but neither framework explicitly integrates gender as an analytical category. In your view, why has gender remained peripheral in Spain's domestic counterterrorism strategy despite its strong normative commitments through the Feminist Foreign Policy and the WPS National Action Plans?

18. Are gender perspectives applied in practice even if they are not explicitly included in policy (ENCOT 2023)?

19. Do you see movement toward greater gender integration in Spanish counterterrorism, or does it remain largely gender-neutral?

Germany specific:

20. Do you think Germany's alignment with the WPS agenda has had a tangible impact on counterterrorism policies?

21. Germany does not have a single national counterterrorism strategy. Instead, extremism prevention is embedded within broader democratic resilience frameworks like the Federal Strategy to Prevent Extremism and Promote Democracy and programmes such as "Demokratie leben!". Does this decentralised approach make it easier or harder to integrate gender perspectives systematically?

22. To what extent do prevention programmes (e.g., civic education, community-based initiatives) incorporate gender considerations?

23. The BfV's threat assessments do not systematically incorporate gender analysis, and most prevention programmes remain gender-neutral. Is there any institutional discussion about changing this, and if so, what are the main obstacles?

2. Declaration of Use of Generative AI Tools

Academic Year: 2025-2026

Master's Programme: Master in International Security Management (MISM)

Student Name: Noemí González Cañas

I declare that generative artificial intelligence tools have been used as support tools in the preparation of this Master's Final Thesis.

X YES ☐ NO

1. Ethical and Academic Use

Have you included sensitive or personal data when using AI tools? If yes, specify:
No.

Have you used AI tools to replace your own work without critically reviewing the generated content? If yes, specify:

No.

Have you followed the academic recommendations and guidelines regarding the use of AI tools?

Yes.

2. Technical Use of AI Tools

Please indicate the AI tools used (e.g., ChatGPT, Copilot, Claude, Gemini):

ChatGPT, Claude, Grammarly and ReadAI.

Please mark the applicable uses:

- ☐ Text generation
- X Reformulation / editing
- X Translation / proofreading

X Structure suggestions

☐ Methodological support

X Bibliographic search or citation support

☐ Audiovisual content generation

X Other uses (please specify): to transcribe and summarize online interviews, to check for grammar and punctuation errors, and to identify gaps in my thinking and blind spots in my logic.

I confirm that the final content of this thesis has been fully reviewed, corrected, and validated by me as the author. The use of AI has not replaced my own critical analysis, personal reflection, or intellectual work.

Signature: