



RAN ISSUE PAPER

The Role of Gender in Violent Extremism

Introduction

Understanding the role of women in extremism is in many ways challenging. There is a tendency to think about women as more passive and inactive in extremism rather than just as active as their male counterparts. But first-line practitioners have often noted that women and girls play an important role in every type of violent extremism. Conversely, there is also the view that women have a unique role to play as a powerful, countervailing and positive force against violent extremism. Women can be unique agents of change within society, exercising considerable power over radicalised individuals in their roles as mothers and as wives. Nowhere is this challenge and opportunity more evident than with ISIL's recruitment of women.

This brief issue paper was based on contributions from Magnus Ranstorp, Jerry Galesloot, Amy-Jane Gielen, Kelly Simcock, Edit Schlaffer, Harald Weinböck, Michaela Köttig, Silke Baer and Elizabeth Pearson.



Gender and ISIL recruitment

Among the estimated 5 000 individuals within the EU who have left for Syria and Iraq to join ISIL, there are at least 550 women. The underlying motivations for women in the West to leave their countries to join ISIL in Syria and Iraq are multi-varied and complex. Often it involves a combination of religious, ideological, political and personal reasons.

Calling themselves *muhajirat*, in reference to the women who protected the Prophet during battles in the seventh century, ISIL's women recruits are often strongly motivated by calls for religious mandatory duty of hijra (migration), and for assistance in building a Muslim Caliphate. ISIL have also framed this nation-building process within an unfolding, imminent apocalypse – one which will soon pit the Caliphate against all non-Muslims, with final battles occurring in Dabiq. A strong religious and ideological framework provides an overwhelming sense of urgency and a sense that history is in the making. More women have travelled to join ISIL since its leader, al-Baghdadi, announced the creation of the Islamic State in June 2014. The trend is also due to the fact that there is an active ISIL drive to recruit women to take care of their male fighters.

The attractiveness of joining ISIL involves a complex interplay of pull and push factors on the individual level. While many of these factors are similar to those encouraging men to join ISIL, the religious factors seem a stronger pull for women. Often ISIL is very skillful in exploiting the personal identity struggles of some women grappling with the challenge of standing between cultures – between traditionalism imposed by parents and the liberal, secular values of their friends, schoolmates and others. Often these women

have problematic backgrounds or have had difficult experiences during their youth.

Pull factors

ISIL is very adept at exploiting identity conflicts, stressing the differences between Islam and European nation states – and the perceived impossibility of practicing Islam properly within them. As such, ISIL presents itself as a place of pure Islam, undiluted by pressures where women can practice their faith unrestricted and without discrimination. It stresses the religious duty of hijra and projects positive personal experiences of a religious utopia. Self-sacrifice (or martyrdom) becomes the ultimate incentive, where marrying a *mujahid* provides eternal rewards in the afterlife.

A strong sense of belonging and sisterhood is projected; women are seen as being part of a wider community that is under siege. This sisterhood is also about enforcing gender norms – for both men and women. Multiple social media platforms play a major role in the direct grooming and recruitment of women. For women, ISIL's narrative offers a romanticised perspective, simultaneously offering them the opportunity to become wives of potential martyrs and mothers of a new generation. Other glorified stories of women's journeys into ISIL provide powerful motivation. A profound sense of solidarity and a strong personal identification with Muslims – who are perceived to be systematically oppressed – provide a common and powerful focal point for action. Many women are motivated by humanitarian issues to help those suffering and in great need. Some buy into the jihadist narrative that the West is directly responsible for these conditions.



Women also see it as their role to radicalise others to reinforce the Caliphate. The role is strengthened by gender-specific recruitment activities i.e. charismatic, cultish, romantic and/or mentor-like dependencies.

Push Factors

Powerful push factors are also exploited by ISIL in the recruitment of women, such as feelings of alienation and inequality, a lack of religious freedom, racism, xenophobia or negative attitudes toward Muslim immigrants in the West. Combined, these factors reinforce their personal experience of not being tolerated and a sense of being unable to practise their faiths without discrimination. This experience or perception of intolerance can reinforce social exclusion or withdrawal from society.

It is also important to stress that ordinary personal issues can serve as motivational factors. These include boredom, dissatisfaction with life, adolescent rebellions and other forms of discontent.

Many similarities exist between the motivations for women and men to join ISIL. There are, however, important reasons for pursuing a more targeted gender approach during individual interventions: there are also several positive practices that focus specifically on women (see appendix).

Prevention and Gender

First-line practitioners in areas of radicalisation awareness have often noted the key relevance – at all levels of practical intervention – of pronounced gender identity issues for both women and men (around topics of masculinity and femininity). Women can be empowered to come forward and help in the design of

countering violent extremism (CVE) interventions by empowering other women to share their experiences, and by providing training for women and in the community itself, via civil organisations and personal networks.

Prevent efforts could be more effectively targeted towards girls and women vulnerable to being radicalised and recruited in a number of different ways:

- Prevention activities should target the push and pull factors that make girls and women vulnerable to being radicalised and recruited. In terms of push factors for example, troubled family situations need to be dealt with at an early stage. This means an early warning system and support should be available regardless of radicalisation.
- The online element is a very important pull factor that needs to be dealt with. At an early stage this can be done via education, by safeguarding on the internet to prevent online grooming. At a later stage, the ideal picture of the so-called Caliphate, in which women are treated as princesses, food and housing are abundant and the notion of sisterhood prevails, needs to be countered. An alternative narrative needs to be provided, preferably one-on-one – one-to-many counter-narratives are not effective at this stage, because they are considered as 'state-propaganda'.
- The prevent activities should also comprise a religious element, to deal with the notion of 'hijra' (the Islamic duty of Muslim to migrate to an Islamic country, the so-called Caliphate). Religious leaders and communities should be empowered to provide alternative narratives.



Useful practices exist, showing what kind of support women/girls need if they are to re-integrate into society upon their return:

- To re-integrate women and girls back into society, the general de-radicalisation lessons apply. In other words, the approach should be tailor-made, meeting the requirements of the specific individual. In general such an approach will consist of individual coaching, family support, practical support (school, work, housing), family support and psychological and religious counselling. However, additional interventions, tailored towards the gender dimension,

are sometimes necessary. Quite often, these women/girls have troubled family relationships and histories (experience with domestic violence, sexual abuse and honour related violence). A risk assessment should be made to establish whether it is safe – on both a psychological and physical level – to return home. Upon return, issues, including those relating to honour/shame, need to be addressed. Additionally, trauma therapy by a psychotherapist is often necessary. Although women and girls haven't entered into combat, they are quite often traumatised from their experiences.

Appendix

An important prerequisite to working with women to counter radicalisation is to recognise women and women's organisations as equal actors in this work, rather than simply as labels. Women are often drawn into this work or the arena of CVE because their role is portrayed as that of 'mothers' or 'wives'. These roles and their involvement as such are important. Many women working at community level are doing so in their own right and their involvement, as part of a social network, is in itself of value. Empower women and grassroots to take up countering violent extremism themselves. The challenge often is lack of resources and of impetus to continue. Like many other community-based initiatives or NGOs, the lack of sustainable and substantial financial support form a barrier to do more in this area. Financial support to those organisations who are already doing CVE work and have proven to be a credible and effective partner, will empower these organisations to carry out additional activities. The provision of resources, but also platforms, networks and outlets through which their involvement could be meaningful and relevant is important to maintain momentum on such issues.

Below are a number of useful examples of prevention practices and practitioner organisations that adopt a gender approach to intervention.

- **Berlin – Neukölln (DE)**

In the Berlin district of Neukölln, the following NGOs have begun to cooperate more closely and implement a solid gender perspective in their work.

- Together with Ufuq e.V. (NGO), Cultures Interactive e.V. (NGO) works in targeted schools in the district as an independent provider, servicing schools considered to be hotspots of extremism related phenomena. Ufuq provides civic and political education as well as media-based interventions in reference to issues of Islam. Cultures Interactive applies a youth-cultural approach which also offers "Girl Power" workshops for young Muslim women. Both approaches have begun to highlight gender-specific and gender-sensitive aspects of radicalisation and inter-group aggression. Ufuq focuses more on civic education and discussion, while Cultures Interactive offers settings for youth-cultural self-expression and self-experience group work.
- Dialog macht Schule (Dialogue in Schools) (NGO) trains young dialogue moderators from a democracy and human rights pedagogy perspective who go on to moderate group discussions. Gender-oriented groups have been formed, especially for younger students.
- In a youth-work setting, Dissens e.V. (NGO) has developed special competences in gender-focused educational work. The NGO offers training courses and workshops designed for youth clubs. Here, alternative concepts of masculinity and femininity are developed together with the young people.
- The HEROES approach (by Strohalm e.V.; NGO) offers peer-to-peer training and workshops for young men in street work settings in order to redefine the young men's sense of male heroism. An alternative concept of 'honour' is offered, which strengthens the focus on gender equality and understanding of groups which they would normally have perceived as 'other', 'different', or 'inferior'.

- Aufbruch Neukölln e.V. (NGO) provides different sorts of family counselling and group work moderated by psychotherapists/counsellors, especially for families which witness domestic violence and radicalisation. Groups for fathers, mothers, parents of schoolchildren, ex-offenders on probation, are offered and focus on gender-sensitive topics around masculinity/femininity, violence, delinquency and radicalisation.
- The Kiezmütter approach (urban community mothers) (corp.) works with women and mothers from different cultural backgrounds who work as “integration mediators” and family counsellors in their own communities, furthering non-violent education and radicalisation awareness (strohalm-ev.de/heroes/kinder/87/, aufbruch-neukoelln.de, stadtteilmuetter.de).

These and various similar organisations are active in one district – Berlin Neukölln – and are interconnected with each other (partly in the context of German federal programs of CVE) and with the local authorities in many ways. Cooperation with law enforcement, especially prosecution, needs to be developed more in the future.

- **Aarhus (DK)**

Aarhus has become an internationally renowned example of an inter-agency approach which works in gender-specific ways and cooperates intensely and confidentially with law enforcement and intelligence. The comprehensive community approach includes respectful-assertive dialogue with mosques, cultural societies and other major actors in local communities, awareness-raising measures, targeting first-line practitioners and the public. The approach also offers self-help and facilitated group work with mothers, fathers and parents from families affected by radicalisation

phenomena, flanked by individualised – and gender sensitive – mentoring and mental health care support for young people.

- **Women building peace, The Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Peace Centre (UK)**

‘Women Building Peace’ is a radicalisation-aware and conflict-sensitive training programme. It supports marginalised women to become more active citizens who lead the way in preventing and resolving violent conflict through intercultural dialogue and challenging extremist narratives. It consists of a highly flexible and tailored programme of interactive, accessible, audio-visual, non-formal learning delivered to women of any age in cohorts of 12-15, usually via a 4-6 month programme of 12-14 workshops undertaken at highly accessible local sites, with an added intensive residential element. Units cover: identity and belonging – the compatibility of multiple identities; prejudice and discrimination; conflict resolution and peacebuilding – how to identify and manage conflicts, including those driven by early signs of radicalisation; active citizenship and leadership – volunteer placements and support packages to allow local women to take initiative in preventing and resolving conflicts; intercultural dialogue sessions with members of little-encountered communities that are the subject of violent extremist narratives; intercultural dialogue platforms, allowing feedback of under-represented voices into the policymaking process.

- **SIPI (Foundation for Intercultural Participation and Integration) (NL)**

SIPI provides gender-specific Diamant training for young people at risk of becoming radicalised, delinquent, and/or drop-outs from school. The training module most in demand is that for girls and young women who have attempted to or intend to go to Syria, and who were stopped. The



approach focuses on the whole family. The methodology is based on the Diamant FP7 research project and on the SIPI methodology on raising Turkish and Moroccan children/parental support.

- **PEARLS (UK)**

PEARLS (Positively Empowering And Reaching Limitless Strengths), is a multipronged initiative that aims to engage vulnerable women in the community who are at risk of being groomed by those wanting to peddle their own extremist ideologies, or women affected by extremism. Female identity, low self-esteem, bullying, domestic violence and confidence issues are explored within these sessions. PEARLS is available to women of all ages (13+), ethnicities, backgrounds and religions who suffer from low self esteem, have confidence issues and want to feel more empowered at home and in their community. Most of the women who take part are from a Muslim background, given the unique issues they face. The Active Change Foundation is committed to helping women affected by extremism and violent crime, and believes that they can overcome these challenges when they are mobilised together in an environment where communication is open and accessible. PEARLS provides a support network for women, both young and old, who need somewhere to go, feel detached or even have an issue they feel they cannot discuss with anyone else.

- **MAXIME Berlin Intercultural and Interreligious Prevention (DE)**

The intention of the project MAXIME Berlin Intercultural and Interreligious Prevention is to prevent (further) disintegration and radicalisation of vulnerable youths, to help multipliers to recognise radicalised attitudes and deal with them, to establish a framework for interreligious and intercultural dialogue and to reduce prejudices and fears in the majority society.

Within schools and in the youth welfare service, the frequency of interreligious and intercultural conflicts is increasing. The preventive community programme offers workshops – conducted by intercultural interreligious tandem teams – who cover topics such as the theological base of Islam, religious everyday practice, Islam and human rights and the Middle East conflict. Other topics are:

- traditionalism and concepts of honour as well as gender roles in Islam;
- opportunities for participation in German society;
- different currents of Islam and their cultural and historical backgrounds;
- religious fanaticism and Salafism.

Organised field trips to the Jewish Museum, the Genezareth Church and the Sehitlik Mosque in Berlin are also offered. And the programme includes training for multipliers and individual training sessions for youths at risk.

- **Muslimah Matters (UK)**

A series of facilitated workshops focusing on 'factors for vulnerability' as developed by Dr Jon Cole of Liverpool University in 2007. The purpose of the workshops is to increase knowledge levels around the issues of vulnerability, foster a positive notion of personal identity, promote community involvement and good citizenship and establish self-sustaining women's networks. The principles of the model involve the identification of a 'matriarch' figure that promotes involvement and encourages the creation of women's networks. A methodology to engage women's groups connected with Faith Institutions utilising the subjects that involve the 'factors for vulnerability' for people that may be attracted to extremism and violent radicalisation. The target audience is women networked through their connection with Mosques and other faith institutions that may have informal roles in the institution or wider community



- **Mothers' School, Women without Borders (AT)**

Based on the findings of the innovative 2011 study 'Can Mothers Challenge Extremism?', Women without Borders developed the Mothers' School Model, the first-ever family-centered counter-radicalisation platform. This initiative empowers and equips mothers to safeguard their adolescent and young adult children from the threat of radicalisation and recruitment.

Women without Borders trains local trainers, drawing social workers, teachers, psychologists and other grassroots professionals and leaders. These trainers implement the Mothers' School curriculum with groups of concerned and affected mothers over 10 weekly meetings. The Mothers' School curriculum uses developmental psychology, self-confidence training, interactive exercises, and theoretical sessions to define radicalisation and prevention. It provides a formalised space where mothers gain support, key tools and knowledge to build resilience in their children, their families, and their communities.

Mothers' Schools have been implemented in Tajikistan, Pakistan, India/Kashmir, Nigeria, Indonesia and Zanzibar, successfully strengthening community vigilance and security from the bottom-up. The model travels to Europe in 2015, starting in Belgium and Austria, to address the ongoing recruitment of young foreign fighters to ISIL. Mothers' Schools are expected to spread to Sweden, England, France and the Netherlands in 2016.

- **Steunpunt Sabr (NL)**

Steunpunt Sabr (the Arabic word for 'patience') is a women's organisation that is situated in the Schilderswijk neighbourhood (The Hague), and is active both in the Municipality of The Hague and nationally. Sabr is an independent and

autonomous NGO that works bottom-up. It supports and empowers vulnerable women.

Sabr organises activities for woman in a confidential and safe environment, it is a place where women meet each other and interact around the kitchen table or living room. Sabr supports these women – who have questions and needs – and empowers them to take care of their problems themselves. If the problems are too complex, Sabr will refer these women to other professional support and care organisations.

Reacting to the growing challenge of youngsters from this area leaving for Syria, Sabr has organised a support group for parents affected. The group brings together parents from different cultural backgrounds and is growing fast. Parents joined the group voluntarily and usually found out about the support group through their networks. Sabr also has close connections with community police officers, who have referred parents, including from other geographical areas, to the support group. The needs of the parents were the starting point of conversations. When questions for the government and municipality about the Syria issue were raised, Sabr arranged for government and municipality officials to join the group and respond. Key factors in this approach are the low entry levels (very local, short communication lines), closed meetings in a safe space (trust between participants and the organisation) and the independent nature of Sabr.