Women, Gender and Terrorism: Gendered Aspects of Radicalization and Recruitment

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The rise of groups like ISIS has galvanized the expansion of the global terrorism problem. While ISIS is hardly the first extremist organization to attract women and to use gendered tactics for recruitment, its formation and growth has paralleled the explosion of social media, bringing unprecedented attention to the problem. As scholars and policymakers attempt to develop coherent responses to the threats that groups like ISIS pose, three critical issues need to be addressed.

(1) What drives individuals to join extremist groups, and are these drivers different for men or women?

(2) What are common methods of recruitment, and do they differ by gender?

(3) Have states and international institutions integrated gender perspectives in their responses to radicalization and extremist violence? Do these approaches empower women to resist recruitment?

Without an integrated dialogue between the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and counterterrorism communities, the answers to these questions will remain incomplete and policy responses may fall short.

Drivers of Radicalization: Gender Dimensions

The drivers of radicalization, those "push" factors that attract men and women to join extremist groups, have been studied in relation to terrorism for decades, yet little attention has been given to the gendered dimensions of the radicalization process. Recent academic research suggests that men and women generally have similar grievances that make them susceptible to radicalization. Among these grievances are feelings of oppression, powerlessness, frustration and marginalization. In addition, a perceived lack of options, including the political space to exercise rights, can push individuals toward radicalization.

However, the ways that women and men experience these grievances and how they deal with their frustrations can be very different and are often highly gendered. For example, during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, a lack of employment options due to centuries of institutionalized discrimination affected men and women in different ways. The patriarchal, divided society of Northern Ireland and its rigid, conservative gender roles meant that men and women felt these grievances and acted on them in widely varied ways. Men tended to act out their frustrations through gendered responses including violence and alcohol use. This led many men to join republican paramilitaries such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and fueled the waves of violence that swept the state during the Troubles. Women, on the other hand, in a similarly gendered manner, had family members to care for and domestic responsibilities, so they turned to their communities and to each other for assistance. In the example of Northern Ireland, the frustration of the

mostly-male republican organizations like the PIRA and IRA offshoots created obstacles to the peace process, but the local community organizations founded and run by women were able to cross sectarian boundaries and move the peace dialogue along. The relationships and hardships that these women had built and shared over the decades became the lines of communication that paved the way for more inclusive compromises during the final talks that ultimately resulted in the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

Of course, not all men or women will react along these lines. Some men will become peacemakers, as evidenced by the former paramilitary leaders who work with vulnerable youth today in Northern Ireland to prevent radicalization. Conversely, some women will turn to violence, such as Mairead Farrell, who, as a higher-ranking officer in the IRA bombed a hotel and served time in prison before being killed during an IRA attack on the British.

That said, many experts and policymakers are uncomfortable with the idea of women as rational actors who choose extremism as a way of expressing their agency. These experts struggle to imagine women as violent except when coerced or in self-defense. As such, they turn women into one-dimensional actors that are apolitical and infantilized, overlooking the full range of choices women make.

Existing counterterrorism policies and programs that seek to remedy the underlying conditions leading to radicalization must take into account the different ways in which these conditions and the resultant grievances impact women and men. Most U.S. deradicalization programs primarily target men, and only a few programs have been developed specifically for women. While this is starting to change, and some policymakers have stressed the importance of targeting both men and women, many policymakers continue to assume that women are confined to stereotypical roles and lack agency in such an environment, thereby placing women in victim roles even when they are the primary targets of reintegration programs.

For example, to help the reintegration of former female militants of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Sri Lankan government wanted to encourage economic independence. They decided to give returning militant women livestock, assuming that women would merely return to a domestic environment, and that livestock would be best suited to help them reintegrate and resume – or improve upon – their former situations. However, this ensured that all

community members could identify them as former LTTE, thus further isolating instead of integrating them. This policy also failed to account for the many other ways in which women belong to and integrate into society; livestock did not actually fit into the lives of all women. This policy eventually led some of them to return to the LTTE by isolating them from their communities and convincing them that LTTE was the only community that could help them and where they belonged.

Successful counterterrorism and violent extremism programming needs to integrate a gender perspective when examining grievances and underlying conditions that may lead to radicalization. Areas that deserve further attention and research include the role of violence toward women in patriarchal cultures and the hyper-masculine ideals often pushed by extremist groups in recruiting individuals. While research by scholars like Valerie Hudson and Mary Caprioli has identified a link between gendered violence and state violence, these observations have not trickled down to the counterterrorism community nor significantly impacted counterterrorism policy. In addition, we need more research on what drives women towards extremist groups.

Future programs should also be designed to encourage normative changes that alter gender norms and relations to make them less violent and more equal. This can potentially decrease the attractiveness of radicalization as a response to grievances and increase the range of options that individuals will consider when faced with marginalization.

Recruitment: Gendered Approaches

The gendered nature of "pull" factors—that is, the means that extremist groups employ to recruit individuals to their cause—has been even more neglected than the gendered nature of drivers of radicalization.

One major recruitment tactic used by extremist groups such as the Islamic State is to make individuals believe that they have the power to change things. Extremist group leaders – displaying a disturbing awareness of the drivers of radicalization – recognize that oppressed and frustrated individuals are significantly affected by a perceived lack of power. They also understand that men and women experience this lack of power differently. Men often feel slighted publicly and hence are offered public displays of power, such as political power, economic power, and power

over women. As such extremist organizations glorify rigid, traditional gender roles and hyper-masculine ideals in the process—whereby men rule over women.

Their overtures toward women glorify stereotypical notions of power yielded by women. That is, the power to play a role in building communities and in supporting their men. Extremist groups like ISIS portray domestic and maternal roles as glorious and honorable above all else. This may provide some women more power and dignity than they feel they have in their current situations.

Policymakers should be aware, however, that pull factors and recruitment tactics are not universally effective or appealing, and policy prescriptions should reflect this awareness. Research suggests that the personal frustrations and past experiences of each individual can make recruitment more or less effective. Personal experience with discrimination, biases, or societal estrangement renders some individuals more vulnerable to recruitment by extremist organizations by creating an opening for messages to make an impact. If an individual already feels isolated or marginalized by discrimination or estrangement, he or she could be more willing to entertain alternative ideas.

This even holds true for some individuals who were coerced into joining organizations. For example, LTTE often forcibly abducted individuals, so one might expect those individuals to have lower levels of commitment to the overarching cause. Yet some who were abducted participated at the highest levels of the LTTE hierarchy, displaying a surprising commitment and a high degree of socialization. How these individuals joined LTTE was less critical than their life histories: socialization only worked if their life experiences matched the extremist group's recruitment message.

Counterterrorism policies may have little impact on the means of recruitment that organizations use, but policymakers must realize that individual life experiences and frustrations can result in very different outcomes. One way to make recruitment tactics less effective is to pay greater attention to gender norms and relations—making these norms and relations more equal may well provide alternative channels to address local and individual grievances.

Policy Responses

The unique individual nature of the radicalization process makes preventive programming extremely difficult and complex. That said, combating radicalization and recruitment, and engaging individuals who have been radicalized requires multi-faceted responses which address questions of identity, culture, and political freedoms.

First, individuals need to be able to communicate their frustrations, interact within their communities, and have a voice in the design of solutions. Creating a political space to freely discuss grievances allows individuals and communities to gain a measure of control over their problems and develop local solutions. This kind of counter-intervention – positively enabling the development of such political spaces – can drive vulnerable individuals toward constructive non-violent solutions instead of radicalization

Second, counter-narratives must emphasize that norms that support violence, hyper-masculine ideals, and the subordination of women are unacceptable. Cultural norms are often assumed to be static and untouchable but they are not. Policy responses and counter-narratives must address issues related to gender norms and traditions and seek how to change them.

Third, the way the security community views gender in foreign policy and programming must also change. Changes in gender roles are often indicative of broader changes in societies. For example, ISIS adopted strict stereotypical and unequal gender roles. It was a sign of an extreme violent society they sought to create. The embrace of traditional, conservative gender roles by the loyalist and republican paramilitaries in Northern Ireland is another example of how rigid, oppressive gender roles are embraced by extremist groups. We must look for these signs and work to directly address them. Instead of relegating gender considerations to the end of the list when addressing state security, the treatment of and inclusion of women should be the top priority of any security program. State and regional security depends on the fair and equitable treatment of women.

Fourth, states and international organizations should be more attentive to the gendered nature and unintended consequences of reintegration programs. Radicalized men and women, whether recruited forcibly or by choice, are often structurally alienated both before and after returning from radicalized groups. Communities frequently continue to marginalize these individuals after they return, risking their successful reintegration. For example, women returning from Boko Haram and LTTE are often poorly treated by their communities, making it more likely they will return.

In closing, both the counterterrorism community and the WPS community need to work together to develop innovative solutions that are relevant to both men and women. The counterterrorism community must understand that the gendered characteristics of a society – gender roles, hyper-masculinization, and violence toward women – are critical factors in the fight against extremism and terrorism. Also, the WPS community must engage with traditional security experts to ensure that if and when militarized solutions are explored, a gender perspective is included from day one.

Until we fully grasp these concepts, policy responses will continue to be inadequate, for they will simply be treating the symptom instead of the source of the problem.

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