Beyond Jihadi Brides: Female Migrants to ISIS
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The rhetoric around radicalisation and extremism is dominated by talk of adolescent males. There is a perception that only young Western men are travelling to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS and that they should be the focus of anti-radicalisation efforts. When those who do not fit the profile are found, they are treated as a special case.

Three women from Bradford became the centre of media attention when it emerged that they had travelled to Syria to join ISIS, bringing the issue of female radicalisation to the fore. These women did not fit the ‘standard profile’ for Western jihadis migrating to join ISIS, suggesting that the standard policies and procedures for preventing radicalisation must be broadened. A fixation on Western male jihadis detracts from the required attention that must be paid to young females who also become radicalised. Efforts to engage and educate radicalised young people are almost entirely geared towards men.

A report released by the think tank ISD, Till Martyrdom Do Us Part (http://www.strategicdialogue.org/Till_Martyrdom_Do_Us_Part_Gender_and_the_ISIS_Phenomenon.pdf), emphasises the pressing need to turn our attention to the growing trend of female radicalisation and migration to join ISIS. By using case studies of Western women who have joined ISIS, the report sheds light on the phenomenon and how it can be effectively countered. The report found that the widely held impression of Western females who join ISIS as ‘jihadi brides’ is fundamentally wrong. The female jihadi is not always confined to passivity, but rather, is being enthusiastically engaged by the upper echelons of the group and invited to take up an active role in forming the utopian Islamist society that ISIS aspires to create.
Questions of identity and the absence of a sense of belonging are portrayed as major push factors among many young Western women who choose to join ISIS. Many women feel a disconnect with the society around them, in which they have spent the majority, if not all, of their lives. The report notes that Muslim women in general, and specifically those who choose to wear the hijab or niqab, are particularly likely to have encountered some type of verbal or physical abuse.

The identity crisis faced by these young Western women, and a sense of ‘otherness,’ motivates their aspirations to find a society in which they can feel a sense of belonging. The report also observes that social groups within ISIS seem to be formed along lines of language commonality. Those from English-speaking backgrounds, such as Australia and the UK, tend to stick together, further demonstrating that it is a sense of belonging that is being sought. According to the report, female migrants to ISIS territory are commonly very expressive and emotional about the plight of Muslims around the world, believing that they are the victims of systematic and widespread persecution. This narrative is reinforced by the circulation of graphic portrayals of violence, often against women and children.
The complexities of the conflict are simplified with the use of binary language. While the conflict has drawn a number of participants, each with their own objectives and issues, the process of radicalisation involves instilling the idea that the good believers are heroes fighting against the evil unbelievers. Reducing the conflict to an 'us versus them' situation not only consolidates and broadens the scope of what the enemy is, but also helps dehumanise those they are fighting. The report found that a highly influential push factor was the feeling of empathy expressed by female recruits for the Muslim victims of violence.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue also suggests that there is a growing sense of anger and frustration among some young Muslims that international entities are not perceived to be making any efforts to defend the Muslim community. This leads to and develops a sense of duty among Western youth that this conflict is something that they are obliged to engage in.
PULL FACTORS

Women have been called to join ISIS by the ‘caliph’, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, himself, and have been told that they have an important and active role to play in society, a role that is based on carrying out their religious duty. For those women being drawn into ISIS controlled territory there is the understanding that rather than migrating to a war-torn conflict zone, they are in fact entering what they believe is a safe haven for those who truly wish to embrace and protect Islam. Due to strict gender segregation laws, women have been actively encouraged to come and take on societal roles in society such as teachers and nurses. These efforts not only convey the sense of a utopian Islamic society coming into fruition, but also give women the opportunity to take up active roles in the formation of this society rather than being consigned to passive roles.

The report mentions that the present trend in young Western women migrating to ISIS territory represents a significant shift from previous conflicts of a similar nature. Unlike previous conflicts in Somalia, Iraq, the Balkans, and Afghanistan, the conflict in Iraq and Syria has seen the unprecedented movement of women to the territory. This may be seen as a result of the direct invitation to women to come and join ISIS and to contribute towards the establishment of a utopian Islamic society. Although the ages vary for those profiled in the report, the majority of those females who have travelled to Syria and Iraq are in their late teens to early twenties. The youngest known female migrant is believed to have been just 13 years old.

The report analyses the types of imagery specifically targeted at attracting women that was being shared on social media, and discovered that the marriage between a female migrant and a jihadi is highly glorified. The draw of migrating to ISIS territory conveyed in propaganda appeals to the religious, social and personal aspirations held by these young Western women. By joining the vanguard they believe they are securing their place in paradise, playing an active role in shaping this utopian Islamic society, and are able to meet like-minded individuals.
CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

• There is a considerable amount of diversity in the profiles of women radicalised by ISIS and migrating to its territory. Different backgrounds, ethnicities, languages are present, but all united in their support for ISIS and its objectives.

• The notion that all Western women who join ISIS are migrating with the intention of becoming ‘jihadi brides’ is inaccurate. The invitation from Baghdadi himself presents women with the opportunity to take part and contribute to the development of ISIS’ state.

• However, this premise fails to reflect the realities many of the women who have travelled to live under ISIS have complained about, particularly about domestic isolation, living in a conflict zone, and severe living conditions. Women who join ISIS are expected to be the wives of jihadi fighters and the mothers of the next generation of jihadis.

• Western education programmes need to be broadened in order to include material on developing awareness of radicalisation amongst children and young adults. There must be a gender-conscious approach when developing counter-narratives, the measures must acknowledge the gender nuances and adequately address them in any solutions put forward.

• Deradicalisation programmes must have a greater capacity and a more robust infrastructure in order to adequately meet the needs for handling those returning from Iraq and Syria. Deradicalisation and prevention programmes must provide a greater number of female mentors in order to successfully connect with the subjects of these programmes.

• The important role of women in fighting radicalisation must also be understood and applied in measures to counter violent extremism. Counter-extremism programmes will greatly benefit from women becoming active and empowered agents effecting change, rather than being labelled with the age-old stereotype of being purely victims of extremism.

The report may be read in full here (http://www.strategicdialogue.org/)
ISD observes that there are gender specific reasons for Western women joining ISIS and that counter-narratives must be mindful of gender nuances when tackling the issue.