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A Milieu Approach

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In this article, Elizabeth Pearson and Emily Winterbotham explore the role of gender in radicalisation to Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS). They discuss possible factors in female radicalisation, and how radicalisation differs between men and women. They find that the gender of the recruit affects the enabling factors, mechanisms and locations relating to radicalisation. The article challenges assertions that the recruitment of young men and women to Daesh follows identical patterns, as well as the narrative of women as innately peaceful, or as actors coerced into joining Daesh, revealing the importance of female empowerment in the group's appeal.

Women have long participated in 'terrorist' organisations, whether as fighters for movements such as the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – some of whom are now fighting Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS) – or as 'Black Widow' suicide attackers and hostage takers in Chechnya.[1] Female terrorists, such as Leila Khaled, have been active in Palestinian organisations, with many other less well-known figures involved in bombing, recruiting and vigorously supporting the cause.[2] Women were an important resource to Al-Qa'ida, even if they were not involved in active violent jihad.[3] Despite this, research on terrorism still tends to neglect the participation of women in violent groups.[4]

There are three major reasons for this. First, such research has often focused on perpetrators of physical violence, which have predominantly been men.[5] Women have historically been involved mainly in non-violent, supportive roles, as spies, sympathisers and, sometimes, 'dominant forces', which is to say they provide leadership, ideology, strategy or motivation.[6] Some governments have not prioritised addressing such non-violent action in counterterrorism policy, and, where women have not been arrested, their roles are not represented in official data. Second, the minority status of women in the formal structures and organisational roles of terrorist groups means there are fewer of them, making them less accessible as a research group.[7] Third, an insufficient gender focus in security institutions has often resulted in bias against considering women, even when they are embedded in the roots of terrorist organisations and their supporting movements.[8]

However, an intense debate has begun on the role of young women in terrorism, due to the focus on the migration, or *hijra*, of thousands of them to Daesh. While the majority have travelled from North Africa and elsewhere in the Middle East, with 700 from Tunisia alone by 2015,[9] the West has focused on those hundreds who have joined Daesh from Europe, the US, Australia and Canada.[10] Daesh is the latest incarnation of a decades-long history of 'Salafi–jihadi' groups which aim to establish Islamic states through violence.[11] However, it distinguishes itself by its territorial ambition, and the desire to build a functioning Islamic state of global fighters in Syria and Iraq as the first steps towards a global 'caliphate'.[12] Families have been central to this project, with a focus on creating physical and social infrastructure under strict sharia. This includes drawing women to the Islamic state to marry fighters, mother children and propagandise.[13] This contrasts with the important but primarily supportive role envisaged by Al-Qa'ida for its female members. For some in the West, this migration of mainly teenage girls (but also older women) to Daesh has been hard to comprehend, on the assumption that women would not want to live in

Khadijah Dare, from the UK, travelled to Syria in order to marry Swedish Daesh fighter, Abu Bakr. Image originally posted to Facebook and now available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-29507410>

openly violent societies where their roles are perceived to be highly constrained by sharia. One dominant media narrative in their recruitment has therefore suggested these 'naive' 'jihadi brides' have been 'groomed' by men.[14]

The reasons for Western female radicalisation to Daesh are complex. This article uses the concept of gender to frame findings, 'gender' describing contextually dependent beliefs determining expectations of male and female behaviour.[15] Therefore, it also reappraises the gender dynamics of male Daesh engagement. It uses an innovative milieu-based qualitative methodology, with research conducted in communities that have experienced cases of radicalisation, including those with direct experience of family members travelling to Syria or Iraq to join Daesh. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in five countries: the UK; Canada; France; Germany; and the Netherlands. The UK, France and Germany are among the highest European contributors of recruits to Daesh.[16]

The analysis shows that narratives of Daesh 'luring' young women are more complex, as Daesh can provide an important source of empowerment for them. Furthermore, culturally determined gender expectations lead to key differences in the practical mechanisms through which males and females are recruited. Research shows that such expectations were shared to a surprisingly high degree across countries, despite the different demographics and heritage of Muslim communities in the countries studied.

Gender, Women and Radicalisation: The Theoretical Basis

This article contributes to the understanding of both male and female 'radicalisation', a highly problematic term.[17] It is politicised, and frequently associated with the broad-brush targeting of counterterror intervention of Western Muslim communities.[18] It has also failed to offer a clear understanding of how and why one person joins a terrorist group while another does not. It is understood by some as the pathway to violence (behavioural), and by others as the pathway to extreme thought (cognitive).[19] Theoretical radicalisation models developed over the years suggest the necessity of multilevel analysis. This incorporates a range of factors: from personal questions of agency and individual reward, to issues of identity and belonging, to structural pressures, such as an inability to find employment, to organisational factors, such as the chance to fight in a high-status group.[20] There are also push and pull factors. Pull factors might include well-framed ideological messages by terror organisations aimed at the target group.[21] Push factors include societal pressures, such as discrimination and poverty.[22] Radicalisation is regarded as a collective enterprise, facilitated by kinship and friendship groups, with only a minority favouring lone action.[23] Enabling factors include the 'how', 'who' and 'where': the charismatic preachers, radical mosques, prisons, the internet or other recruitment grounds.[24] Understandings, however, tend to focus on male radicalisation and recruitment.

Recently, Daesh has had a great impact on the recruitment of females, which it has explicitly targeted. Women have been a significant demographic in those travelling to Syria and Iraq in support of the caliphate announced by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the leader of Daesh, in 2014. A 2014 report estimated that 18 per cent of EU-origin Daesh jihadis – about 350 – were women.[25] The total number is now thought to be in excess of 550.[26] Although Daesh formulates women's roles primarily as mothers, wives and propagandists, women who have joined it strongly support violence, and declared their willingness to carry out attacks.[27] There is, however, little

61

indication yet that Daesh is ordering female violence in Syria or Iraq.[28] As with online recruiters for Al-Qa'ida, such as Malika El Aroud,[29] Daesh women are also active online. In her study of Daesh Twitter support, Jytte Klausen describes their collective influence as 'The *Umm* Factor', a reference to the Islamic honorific *Umm* (mother), frequently adopted by female extremists.[30] Studies of online material posted by Western females suggest they joined Daesh for reasons including: a rejection of Western feminism; online contact with recruiters who offer marriage and adventure; peer or family influence; adherence to the ideology and politics of Daesh; naivety and romantic optimism; and the chance to be part of something new, exciting and illicit.[31]

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Studies of female and male radicalisation have often considered them in isolation from one another. Women have often been considered on the margins. A number of authors have framed female radicalisation to terrorism in personal terms.[32] Mia Bloom, for example, highlights the 'four Rs' – revenge, redemption, relationship and respect – along with the incidence of rape among violent extremist women.[33] Many feminist authors on female terrorism meanwhile criticise any emphasis on the personal as playing to stereotypes, which depoliticises female violence.[34] In fact women, like men, join violent extremist groups for many reasons, both personal and political.[35] These reasons, however, can be read as 'gendered'. Mark Sageman notes, for example, that jihadi groups offer young men a particular high-status brand of masculinity – fighters are the 'rock stars' of militant Islam.[36] Organisational factors also strongly influence both male and female recruitment. Militant organisations need male fighters and leaders recognise this. Women may, however, be recruited to violence, and due to assumptions that

violence is usually carried out by males, women are often able to carry out surprise attacks or transport weapons undetected.[37]

The conceptual basis for this article is an understanding of gender roles within society and communities as central to radicalisation for both men and women. The approach lies in the pyramid model of radicalisation, which understands that violent political actors emerge from broader communities of support. The logic is that at the bottom are the broad potential support bases, which may be targeted by violent groups. From this wide community emerges the sympathetic support base, and immediate social environment of extremist actors, which Peter Waldmann terms the 'radical milieu'. Together, these communities comprise the physical or social setting in which radicalisation occurs.[38] At the top of the pyramid are a tiny number of individuals actually willing to commit violence. Salafi–jihadi groups have explicitly – but not exclusively – focused messaging on young people from a Muslim heritage background, exploiting arguments about popular shared concerns, such as unjust foreign policy, discrimination or injustice.[39] This has had implications for corresponding countering violent extremism (CVE) approaches.

The five countries covered in the research have all experienced female as well as male radicalisation to Daesh, enabling a holistic appraisal of radicalisation gender dynamics. A small number of Canadian women and girls have travelled to Daesh, and others have been prevented from doing so.[40] France, which has contributed more fighters to Daesh than any other Western country – around 1,200 – estimates that some 30 per cent of all French jihadists are women and girls; and 25 per cent of these are converts to Islam. The figure is 20 per cent for men.[41] Women were involved in both 2016 Paris attacks and in a number of recently disrupted plots.[42] Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, women have long supported Islamist extremism.[43] Since 2013, more than 50 Dutch women have travelled to Iraq and Syria, and an estimated 20 children have been born there to them.[44] In the UK, the Metropolitan Police suggests that more than 56 women and girls have travelled

to Iraq and Syria, just below 10 per cent of the total of 600; and of almost 700 Germans in Iraq and Syria, 21 per cent are women.[45] Since the call for European jihadis to join the caliphate, as many as 38 per cent of Germans travelling there are women.[46]

Methodology

The research engaged with questions of why and how women are radicalised; how this compares to male radicalisation; and the gender dynamics involved. In other words, it looks at the impact of gender norms on the radicalisation process, and deals only with radicalisation to Daesh, due to the participant-led nature of the research, and focus on this topic. The research drew on the knowledge of professionals, family members of those radicalised, and the communities in which radicalisation has occurred – the radical milieu.

Qualitative research took place in the five countries mentioned, within Muslim communities in cities where there had been known instances of people supporting or joining Daesh. The countries were selected due to key differences in CVE approaches addressing the same primary threats, and cases of male and female radicalisation. Semi-structured interviews were used to talk to family groups or individuals with direct radicalisation experience, individuals themselves, and professionals working with such individuals and their families. These interviews involved the least researcher intervention as possible, to enable a participant-led approach. Gatekeepers such as mosques, community groups and women's groups were approached to assist in participant recruitment.

Twenty expert interviews were carried out with professionals in the field, including NGO officials, leaders of youth groups, the heads of community centres, police officers, local authority coordinators and mosque leaders. The family members of five young individuals who had been radicalised also provided interviews. Additionally, the responses of 157 men, women and young people (aged over sixteen due to reasons of consent) were collected in 27 focus groups, which elicited information in group discussions

through interaction and consensus-forming.[47] Participants were identified according to stratified sampling, aimed at homogeneity based on agreed criteria of age and gender. This saw participants engage in women-only, men-only or youth discussions, where appropriate.

Focus groups brought together community members to provide cultural and contextual understanding of the broader milieu in which radicalisation occurs. Although research locations were selected based on prior cases of radicalisation to Daesh, participants were not selected on the basis of any direct experience. Despite this, in almost half of the focus groups (thirteen), most participants had personal experience of radicalisation taking place in their family, friends or community. The authors thus draw a distinction between those with little knowledge or experience of radicalisation (non-expert participants) and others with first-hand understanding of losing individuals to Daesh (expert participants). This was an unanticipated but highly useful aspect of the community research. The perceptions of community members are fundamental to understanding the context in which radicalisation takes place: the norms, narratives and indeed preconceptions of the milieu. They also provide factual information and therefore add to the academic research about radicalisation. Care has been taken throughout to demonstrate where community perceptions are simply that; where they differ from the findings of the research to date; and where they provide new information, for example where radicalisation happens.

Fieldwork was undertaken from October 2015 to January 2016. Each participant response was then coded and analysed using ATLAS.ti software. This research provides original data that develops current understandings, through professionals, the families of those radicalised and communities.

Why and How Are Men and Women Radicalised?

The research highlighted the different factors involved in radicalisation. For instance, focus group participants had experienced: being approached online by Daesh recruiters; knowing people in the community who had joined the group or had left for Syria or Iraq; and street radicalisation. Direct experience of radicalisation was highest in the Netherlands (in four out of five groups), with four groups in Canada, two in Germany, two in France and one in the UK.

Radicalisation, Gender and the Milieu: Received Wisdom

All community focus groups across countries began with the question, 'What do you understand by the terms "extremism" and "radicalisation"?', which participants uniformly connected with Islamism, and particularly Daesh. The aggregate findings of the focus groups as a whole (without distinguishing between expert and non-expert participants) suggested five shared factors as most important in radicalisation for both genders: issues of belonging and identity; the internet; youth; status; and the wrong interpretation of Islam. These are all consistent with the academic literature.[48]

Five shared factors are most important in radicalisation for both genders

Considering all focus group responses, a gender bias was evident in the beliefs about the factors for male and female radicalisation. Female radicalisation was perceived to be driven by factors related to grooming and/or exploitation, the lure of marriage and the desire to achieve social status through association with a male jihadi. Male radicalisation was linked most frequently with a misinterpretation of Islam, radical mosques or preachers, emotion (anger and hot-headedness explicitly) and a backlash against Western foreign policy. These were not identified as factors in female radicalisation. Research suggests political motivations are actually common to both men and women.[49] The community responses, however, demonstrate the ways in which community norms frame male and female behaviour in gendered ways. These gender narratives constitute an important context to the later findings, and in particular the ways in which community, family and friends are likely to respond to initial signs of radicalisation in young women and men.

Grievances, Resilience and the Gender Impact of Discrimination

The research found frequent reference at the community level to grievances such as socioeconomic disadvantage, a perceived lack of belonging and failed integration as factors in radicalisation. Structural factors – in particular economic, social and political marginalisation, or perceptions of this, when coinciding with perceived discrimination along religious or ethnic lines – are widely believed to facilitate an environment conducive to radicalisation.[50] These findings indicate the pressures on communities at the milieu level and are the basis for the following, gendered, findings.

Participants with first-hand experience of radicalisation (expert participants) believed grievances became 'active' in catalysing radicalisation when combined with both personal discrimination and inadequate coping mechanisms. The types of discrimination described differed for young males and females. In the Netherlands, the family of a boy radicalised and later killed in Syria believed that his failure to win an internship, while friends from non-Muslim backgrounds had succeeded, had been a key factor driving him to Daesh. The mother of a Muslim convert in Germany who had tried to leave for Iraq/Syria described how her son had been attacked due to being mixed race and that he was 'treated differently by police' and blamed for the offences of his friends. Communities described the ways in which expectations of young men and young women differed. They also discussed their view that when young men failed to meet expectations, because of (perceived) societal injustice, they may be more susceptible to Daesh messaging, which offered status.

Muslim female participants also described perceived injustice as a factor in the radicalisation of young women. Community members described their

experiences of public Islamophobia, linked to female dress and appearance. Most female Muslim participants chose to wear the hijab, and Islamic dress was important to them. A lack of societal acceptance of clothing choices, including the hijab, niqab or traditional long black robes, was strongly associated with feelings of exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination, and as possible push factors to Daesh. A mother in the Netherlands whose daughter had left to join Daesh described how the refusal of a place at college due to her preference to wear the niqab was a key factor in her radicalisation process. 'That really felt like rejection', she said. Participants described a milieu in which Daesh messaging about these issues had a chance of resonating.

This finding was particularly marked in the Netherlands, Germany and France, where there have been bans on the wearing of the headscarf in certain public positions and locations, arguably constraining women's ability to exercise full citizenship. It was also in these countries that generational division emerged, with some older Muslim women, including those who wear the headscarf, suggesting that the burqa and the niqab were potential indicators of female radicalisation. In Germany, one woman who wears the hijab stated, '[I]t's mostly people who wear the niqab [who are radicalised]'. Other older Muslim women believed clothing such as the burqa was an indicator not of piety, but something more sinister, given it is not demanded in Islam. As one French woman said, '[A] person whose body is covered from top to bottom. This is extreme Islam … a radical interpretation'. Such views may reflect a simple generation gap, but they may also reflect the dominant narratives of the countries in which they live, where the burqa is frequently discussed as a sign of extremism. This was of note, as the academic literature frequently notes a rejection of the norms of parents and other older members of Muslim communities as a factor in radicalisation.

Women in the UK and Canada, which do not have clothing bans, were, however, also affected by such issues. They too suggested Islamophobia meant it was hard to fulfil a societal role, and linked this

with susceptibility to Daesh messaging. As an older Muslim woman in Canada described it, 'Our girls are educated, but also religious. They learn to be doctors, nurses, everything – then people say "no job" because of their appearance and wearing the hijab. So what have they left? They say, "I worship my Allah"'. Some women, even though they oppose Daesh, described empathy for women drawn to the group by feelings of exclusion in the West, which they believed was in large part due to discrimination over appearance. Male participants also described feelings of estrangement from societies where females who wore the hijab or niqab faced discrimination, because they had empathy with their female relatives. These perceptions again suggest the gendered ways in which Daesh messaging may resonate in communities on this issue.

Individual Factors

Gendered Identity Crisis, the Hijab and the Pull of Daesh

Research of both those with direct experience of radicalisation, and within broader milieus, supported the importance to radicalisation of the search for identity among young people who did not feel that they belonged in their society or country. The mother of a convert deterred from travelling to join Daesh from Germany reflected on the role of identity in her son's radicalisation, saying, 'he tried lots of things – like Buddhism. He was just looking for something … a path of some kind'. Other family members offered similar reflections, consistent with the substantial research showing many join terrorist groups as part of a search for meaning in their lives.[52] 'Identity crisis' can be a significant source of 'vulnerability'.[53] In a study of more than 2,000 foreign fighters in Al-Qa'ida-linked movements, Colonel John M Venhaus of the US Army concluded, 'they all were looking for something … [T]hey want to understand who they are, why they matter, and what their role in the world should be'.[54]

Participants reflected on the ways the search for an identity incorporated gender, with Daesh's caliphate representing a space in which a minority of young

women might feel accepted – a significant pull factor when considered against a background of societal discrimination. However, discrimination could also come from within communities, as suggested by the 'generation gap'. One German woman, a non-expert participant in her mid-20s, described her own struggle with her family's rejection of her decision to cover and wear long black clothing. She felt that other young women facing similar pressure might look to Daesh for confirmation of their beliefs:

> I've been wearing the headscarf for almost three years now. And I had months where I had no contact with my family because they didn't accept it. And … many people, particularly young people, just aren't capable of taking on this struggle. That's why they just give up and cut contact with their families, because they just don't try to understand you … so the girls separate themselves and find someone on the internet who motivates them … and then one night they just disappear, in the middle of the night, and then two weeks later you find out that they're in Syria.

This view offers an important insight into a scenario familiar to professionals working with young recruits to Daesh. One German deradicalisation professional described how she had heard many stories from radicalised young women identifying family rejection of pious clothing as a factor in the radicalisation process. In one case, she provided anecdotal evidence of a girl from a Muslim family whose father referred to her friends who wore the burqa as 'your terrorist girlfriends'. This had caused a rift between parent and child that contributed to her gradual radicalisation.

A lack of acceptance of female Muslim attire was strongly associated with a sense that the territory occupied by Daesh might represent (and indeed frames itself as) a location where pious women could belong. These attitudes affirmed the likelihood of Daesh messaging on this issue to be met with positive reception. One German Muslim student in her 20s said:

> There are girls who say, well, I'll go and find somewhere where everyone looks

like me. Where they are accepted with the headscarf. And ISIS, that's how they advertise themselves to people, and I think that's how all this starts really.

Indeed, other research into the social media accounts of women who had left for Syria and Iraq has revealed that women were not only rejecting the culture and foreign policy of the West, but actively embracing a new vision for society. These women felt they were migrating to an area where they could live honourably 'under the law of Shariah'.[55]

These insights reveal contradictions in community responses. As a whole, communities associated ideological motives with young male radicalisation. However, when involved in detailed discussion, female religious conviction and its expression was emphasised by both expert and non-expert participants as a key female rationale for joining Daesh.

Agency, Marriage and Grooming

Marriage was, on aggregate, the second-highest cited factor driving radicalisation for females. Many participants across countries identified 'naivety' as the key factor in drawing young females into Daesh, through a promise of marriage. This view is hardly surprising, given the much-publicised media reporting on 'jihadi brides'. Many of the research participants – both expert and non-expert – felt the 'grooming' narrative best described this situation. These responses appeared to reflect inherent gender biases in Muslim communities, the media and wider society. The majority of research participants therefore accepted the link between the radical Islamism of Daesh and the submission of women to men, and expressed doubts about women's agency or political commitment to the group as an important factor in their radicalisation. They felt that joining Daesh was not a choice women would make if they had total freedom and access to, as they suggested, 'the facts'. In the UK, the term often used, particularly by middle-aged and older Muslim men and women, was 'brainwashing'.

There is a perception that women and girls have less agency in their radicalisation

The perception that young females had less agency than young males in the radicalisation 'process' was associated with a belief that they are less 'streetwise', potentially less educated on the issues surrounding radicalisation and therefore less able to critically engage with Daesh narratives. This reflected the perception expressed across the focus groups that cultural norms affect young men and women in different ways. Many described the impact of rigidly patriarchal values sometimes experienced in parts of Muslim communities on lowering both female esteem and resilience to recruitment by Daesh. As one British Muslim woman in her 30s said:

> Well, if someone is oppressed? Or looked down on, or a housewife, and somebody comes online and talks nicely, respects you, compliments you – women are more likely to respond to that. Young ladies going to Syria to be wives – they're all being played.

One woman in France described the experience of an acquaintance:

> She fell in love with a convert Frenchman and wanted to marry him, but her parents said no. So she ran away … and they got married. The man went to Syria and she followed him. She was a very pretty girl, but she did not see it herself … she never looked you in the eye. Very insecure. So she fell for it.

This account provides factual information about cases of radicalisation, in addition to gender bias, which the participants employ to rationalise the event, and understand it according to expectations of female behaviour. This image of being 'played' or 'falling for it' was frequently repeated, and therefore reveals an implicit assumption of women's passivity in radicalisation. Although there are undoubtedly cases where the grooming narrative does fit, particularly online,

this is not exclusively the case. The views of focus group participants of women radicals as 'vulnerable', 'naive' or 'groomed' contradict evidence that women who join Daesh do actively support its principles, including violence. It also suggests communities may find female radicalisation less easy to spot, where it contradicts community norms about how women should behave.[56]

Thus, men and boys were ascribed agency in their radicalisation process and criticised for making the wrong choices, while more allowances were made for women and girls. Male radicalisation was more frequently linked with discrimination in the workplace or by authorities. It was not perceived as grooming, and was seen as more 'political', even when research participants associated the support of men and boys radicalised to Daesh with Islamophobia and emotional responses, such as anger and frustration. This again suggests that community understandings of male and female roles differ and need to be engaged in order to counter radicalisation.

Status and the Pull Factor of Daesh

While women joining Daesh were generally perceived as 'naive', participants also emphasised the rationality of their decision to travel to Syria and Iraq. Research participants emphasised that women might agree with the principles of Daesh and reject Western values, such as feminism, gender equality and consumerism. This led at times to contradictory views in focus groups regarding female agency itself. Perhaps surprisingly, gaining status was more strongly associated with female than male radicalisation, in focus groups, and by interviewees and professionals working in the field. Attaining status through Daesh was seen to have a dual function: it could constitute a rejection of traditional family gender norms (which serve to constrain girls) and a bid for independence and a new identity; alternatively, it could act as a rejection of Western norms and a family perceived as not religious enough.

The subject came up most frequently in France and the Netherlands, where research participants reflected

most frequently on the restriction of movement and behaviour of women and girls at home. Women in France suggested power could be gained by association with the violent Jihad itself, which gave women a perceived position of influence, or with male actors in that struggle, who are regarded as 'heroes'. A Dutch Muslim woman offered a similar reflection, 'Girls are extra protected', she said. 'This subordinated position … contributes to their radicalisation. Because they don't mean much at home they want to be somewhere else where they play an important part, they think'. This perception fed into the stories of expert participants. Another Dutch Muslim woman again used a similar understanding of the highly gendered nature of community roles to rationalise the actions of young women she knew who had joined Daesh:

> Within radical groups women have a different role. They get – according to them – more recognition and are seen as important for the group. So that also plays a part in radicalisation … the motive for those who want to participate is the longing for recognition and a more important position.

This offers a valuable insight again into ways with which Daesh female recruitment narratives of status might resonate.

In contrast, expert participants believed financial incentives were an important factor in male radicalisation. Several focus groups of both men and women in France and the Netherlands specifically cited cases in which money was offered by recruiters to males. Although it is not known whether money was also offered to women who had been radicalised, the implicit link between men and money reflects the expectation of the male as breadwinner. Alongside Islamophobia and discrimination, participants believed this Daesh tactic had great success with those struggling to find work. A Dutch male expert participant provided anecdotal knowledge of local male radicalisation:

> There were two youngsters from this neighbourhood. One gets to work, the other doesn't. The reason is appearance. Pakistani clothing with a beard. As soon as you walk around like that you don't have a job. One boy left because that happened, I have money for you in Syria, he was told.

Again, the participant provided data – evidence of payment to young men – filtered through his own bias, and the gendered norms within the milieu.

Gender Difference in Mechanisms and Spaces of Recruitment

Consistently across countries, participants described highly gendered norms regulating both public and private life in ways that shaped the possibilities for male and female action, and the spaces in which this might occur, according to the different expectations associated with men and women.

This was relevant to the discussion of enabling factors, such as radical preachers, mosques or networks with extremist associations. Norms were consistent between expert and non-expert participants, and across countries. One of the most frequently asserted views was that radical recruitment of young people was predominantly face-to-face for men and boys, and online for women and girls. Expert participants gave accounts of the online radicalisation of young women and offline radicalisation of young men from their milieu, while those speculating on the possibilities for radicalisation concurred, describing a lack of female access to public space.

Public Space

First-hand information received from focus groups in the Netherlands, France and Germany revealed that differences between male and female radicalisation were particularly apparent in public spaces, such as on city streets, where men appeared more vulnerable. This was not a feature of responses from the UK or Canada. A young Dutch Muslim woman explained:

> What I noticed on the street was that youngsters were radicalising right under my nose. Most of them … are basic Muslims, they know little about Islam. But when you encounter the wrong people who try and make you believe all kinds of things, you [just] believe it.

A German Muslim mother described her alarm when her teenage son was approached in the street by a stranger:

> He asked my son if he was a Muslim and he said yes, if he knew a *surah* [Qur'anic chapter], and he didn't. So he said, 'come with me … you're Muslim, you need to know'. And got him to go with him. Fifteen years old. Last year that was, and his friends went along too … And my other son who's ten has also been approached on the street in the same way!

This was a familiar situation to German experts working in CVE, who also described frequent occurrences of city street radicalisation of young men. In another German-Muslim focus group, participants described how their local mosque had been targeted by radical preachers who approached men and boys on the street outside. Although women and girls also attend this mosque, cultural expectations restricted their movements, and young women were never unaccompanied outside, so they had been left alone. There was therefore consensus between expert and non-expert participants about the role of traditional cultural gender roles. Non-expert participants speculated that this could protect women from radicalisation, as young girls were less likely to be permitted the freedoms, frequently perceived as dangers, which young men enjoyed. One mother of Egyptian descent in the Netherlands said:

> Because [females] are not as active in the mosque and one expects a different sort of lifestyle and behaviour, they are at home more. Boys are allowed more. Also from Islam and culture the boys have more rights … That has now protected the women against radicalisation because they cannot move easily.

Indeed, in France a non-expert participant living in a *banlieue* described what she

perceived as public gender segregation outside working hours: 'The *banlieues* are completely male-dominated after six pm, there are no girls outside. So it is really hard to radicalise them'. The milieu thus offers an insight into the different enabling factors of radicalisation, given the local function of gender norms.

Private Space

Focus group participants and professional experts described how cultural restrictions that protected young women in public served to put them at risk in private. Their spaces of vulnerability were simply relocated from the street to the home and the internet, which was emphasised as a particular site of female radicalisation. A German professional working with families to stop both young men and women joining Daesh noted the role of the internet, accessed in the home, in the radicalisation of young women with whom she had had contact. She explained that once recruited, women and girls were then more able to successfully recruit other women online, as they knew what had worked for them. She suggested that the consequence was a highly gendered 'snowball' impact, as young women tended to have large social networks, and spent a lot of time messaging online. The impact of Daesh in explicitly fostering online relationships with young women meant, she said, that 'grooming' narratives might actually apply to women more than men. This finding is consistent with a number of emerging online studies.[57] The finding contextualises community beliefs about the dominant role of the internet in radicalisation. While the internet was emphasised by the milieu as relevant to both male and female radicalisation, there appeared to be important gender differences, due to both cultural norms and differences in male and female internet use.

Indeed, a number of expert participants reported direct knowledge of cases of radicalisation both online and offline, through men proposing marriage. In France, a woman explained how there had been attempts to recruit her on Facebook, which she had resisted. A young female in Canada described how she had been drawn into extremism via the internet. Now deradicalised, she explained the ease of online radicalisation:

> The internet is like a drug, or alcohol. It has good aspects, but the harmful side is too big ... There are ... some websites, where, for example, I can write anything I want and it will be spread.

These accounts, of course, do not serve to deny the targeting of young men online, which has also been widespread. However, the research suggested female offline radicalisation was more of a challenge for Daesh; additionally, there were no first-hand focus-group accounts of male online radicalisation. This warrants further exploration.

Social Network: Kinship and Friendship Groups

Social networks and groups, whether online or offline, were highlighted as pivotal to radicalisation by all participants. Significantly, expert participants felt that Daesh provided young people with a social network or group that had previously been missing. A man in Germany suggested that this was entwined with theological arguments: '[T]hen, of course, the other thing that's promised ... is paradise. This makes them feel they are part of this brotherhood around them, this society'. A Dutch expert participant, meanwhile, rejected the link with Islam, but did associate radicalisation with friendship, saying, 'mixing with the wrong friend is often the inducement. It is just like with the Mafia. The [radicalised] boys that I know were first in the coffee shop [together] ... This has nothing to do with Islam'.

Dutch focus groups had more expert participants than any other country. The role of friendship circles was strongly emphasised, and participants described how groups of friends became interested in Daesh together and encouraged one another. In one case, a local group of male youngsters had disappeared to join Daesh as a group. This is consistent with Sageman's 'Bunch of Guys' theory of radicalisation to Al-Qa'ida,[58] which theorises the adoption of ideology after

the creation of groups of like-minds, rather than vice versa.

The importance of male kinship was also emphasised by a German expert working with mothers of sons radicalised to Daesh. He linked the appeal of this 'brotherhood' of fighters with the absence of fathers, and issues of masculinity. Daesh propagates hyper-masculine norms, with strict division between male and female roles, and limited freedoms for women. Men are promoted as 'warrior' prototypes, women's protectors and the head of the household, while the ideal woman is elevated as an ideologically committed wife and mother, reliant on her husband.[59] The expert suggested that the impact of stress on single-mother families, combined with issues of status and masculinity, had led to an interest in Daesh among young men he saw:

> [T]he most important thing is that we very often see that fathers are not there ... This means the mother is overburdened – and there's more conflict than if two parents are there. The father becomes this ideal figure ... And that fits in really well with this idea of the *Ummah* [community] ... the authority figure of God, the beloved brethren, the fact that there is no mother figure in this system. Mostly, the father is there, somewhere, and that's what we try to do – make contact with him. This is very much to do with masculinity – violence, brotherhood, power.

In the case of young women, as mentioned before, online social networks appeared to be the primary location of female radicalisation identified by expert participants and professionals. However, where women had access to public spaces, and were not subject to cultural restrictions, they could be recruited offline via the same mechanisms as young men. This was relevant to the case of a young Dutch revert (a non-Muslim who has converted to Islam), who had travelled to Syria. Unrestricted by the cultural gender norms governing Muslim women, she was introduced to Islam at work, via another female revert. The young woman's mother described how this progressed to attendance at a radical mosque. However, the actual recruitment

to Daesh took place online, via a young male contact. In another Dutch case, a Muslim focus group discussed their concerns over the ongoing radicalisation of a young girl known to several of them. They identified three relevant factors: offline contacts at a radical mosque; Facebook; and a group of radical friends abroad, contacted online.

Warning Signs of Radicalisation: Shared Indicators

Interviews with professionals across countries and with five families of young people who had gone – or had attempted – to join Daesh described similar indicators of routine change in both young men and women. They had noted changes in clothing, relationships, politics and hobbies, which included: a new interest in political events and foreign affairs; conversation justifying Daesh activity; attempts to 'convert' family members; attempts to censor the 'un-Islamic' behaviour of family members; voluntary isolation; changes to clothing and appearance, including the wearing of gloves or the niqab, or growing a beard; changes to friendship circles accompanied by new radical friends or a boyfriend or girlfriend; posting political and religious material on social media; ceasing hobbies and habits seen as un-Islamic, such as listening to modern music; disengaging from contact with the opposite sex; expressions of homophobia and antisemitism; and attending radical mosques.

In the Netherlands, the mother of a teenage convert woman who travelled to Syria noted a number of the above indicators:

> [H]er clothing changed. First, a headscarf, then long dresses and suddenly the niqab … She withdrew to her room, took down her rapper posters, threw out the hip-hop CDs.

Similar observations were made by the mothers of two young radicalised men in Germany, both of whom were prevented from travelling to Syria. One noted:

> He was evangelising the whole time … You could see that he was extreme. He always wore jogging bottoms, then he began wearing 'Islamic' clothes. He liked Islamic State … I also had other people telling me what was happening. The neighbours … had been complaining about [his] music, this really loud rap. Now, it was *nasheeds* [Islamic musical chants, used by Daesh as propaganda]. Also … he was posting things on Facebook, WhatsApp … Many people unfriended or blocked him – they just didn't want to see it.

These indicators, repeated by others in the research data, largely coincide with those documented in the academic literature. Parents found it difficult to assess the point at which these changes became a cause for concern. Several of the young people radicalising to Daesh had had difficulties at school with drugs or peer groups, and at first Islam appeared to provide a positive change. The difficulty was in distinguishing between normal teenage experimentation and when changes warranted intervention. This was particularly problematic for the families of those who had converted to Islam. Additionally, there was little time for a parent to assess the risk, as both professionals and families of radicals highlighted how quickly young people went from 'normality' to *hijra*. The family of the Dutch young man killed in Syria suggested two to three months; the mothers of the two young German men also suggested the process took only months.

It was pointed out that such a short timeframe may result from both young men and women keeping their real views secret. One young male expert participant in Canada emphasised that indicators might not always therefore be obvious. He described how an acquaintance supported Daesh, but kept it secret from his parents:

> [Y]ou could never guess he supports ISIS, he jokes around, speaks to his parents, he goes outside, plays football, everything that normal people do. He is a human being like others, but he supports ISIS and has decided that ISIS is right.

Conclusion

Daesh has Muslim heritage communities in its sights, and focus group responses suggest ways in which particular recruitment messages may resonate – or not. The findings from the research clearly show the significance of gender in radicalisation, and the dangers in arguing that everything is equal between men and women with regard to radicalisation to Daesh. The norms, expectations and structural pressures differ for men and women.

Structural issues affect both men and women, but the specific impacts were highly gendered

While structural issues – including discrimination, alienation and socioeconomic concerns, or individual factors, such as belonging and identity – affect both men and women, the specific impacts were highly gendered. This creates significant differences in radicalisation mechanisms and therefore 'risk'. Communities also suggested ways in which male and female resilience might differ, and offered insights into the assumptions that guide their own responses to the signs of radicalisation: a perception of young men as 'hot-headed' led groups to blame them, while expectations of the relative innocence, naivety or innate goodness of young Muslim women resulted in the blame for their radicalisation being placed on others. It is also possible that counterterrorism narratives have additionally reinforced gender stereotypes, such as the notion of the groomed and naive 'jihadi bride'. Further research is needed.

There was also a complex understanding of agency. Women were at times ascribed less agency and blame, while young female research participants emphasised the significance of young Muslim women deliberately seeking to challenge both traditional and Western-imposed gender norms, by seeking a new identity for themselves. Women's identity was often deeply pious, and exclusion by wider society because of this was clearly an important factor in radicalisation, particularly in legislation banning the veil or

headscarf. Meanwhile, a lack of acceptance from within Muslim communities was also significant. Participants felt both kinds of exclusion might enable women to find a sense of belonging and empowerment with Daesh. These insights suggest ways in which Daesh messaging may be likely to resonate within milieux, and the importance of state action. It was in those countries where full or partial hijab, burqa and veil bans have been enforced that this pushback was particularly emphasised by young pious women.

The contradictions and ambiguities expressed by research participants reflect the need to avoid generalisations or oversimplified explanations. Political commitment and an emotional pull to Daesh are not mutually exclusive for either young men or women. Nor should emotional factors, such as love or marriage, imply that women's actions are not rational, or feed 'brainwashing' explanations. This complex engagement of women (and men) with hybrid identities, and the different expectations of women in different domains, does not lend itself to simple conclusions about the reasons for female or male radicalisation. However, the layers of family, community and societal responses to increased religiosity clearly impact on feelings of belonging, civic inclusion and, in some cases, alienation. Issues of women's access to full citizenship – that is the ability to wear what they wanted – were connected with travel to Syria and Iraq.

Daesh has proved able to exploit these issues through varying recruitment mechanisms. As violent Salafi-jihadi doctrine does not allow for a public role for women, or for contact between the sexes, radicalisation may take place more frequently online for women rather than men, although peer groups are vital for both genders. These differences also reflect the daily realities for young Muslim men and women. Expert participants reported that recruiters are frequently from the same backgrounds as those they are targeting, and understand the arguments that are most likely to appeal. Thus, CVE programmes must take account of the physical, cultural and practical factors affecting Muslim men and women. This also means that online grooming narratives apply more often to young women, although this does not negate their agency. Gender restrictions do not prevent the radicalisation for women, but instead relocate their spaces of vulnerability.

The need to build the resilience of young people is crucial, and it needs to be taken into account that it is likely to be highly gendered. Working with young men and women to increase self-esteem should be an important area of future focus for CVE. This is a long-term project, although worryingly, research shows radicalisation to Daesh may sometimes take only weeks.

Radicalisation has an impact on individuals, families and wider communities. Given the relatively small scale of the research for this article, further, longer-term studies are needed, particularly with radicalised women and those who have returned from Iraq and Syria. It will be important to investigate the ways in which radicalisation to Daesh may adapt, particularly given the increasing lack of emphasis on *hijra* as Daesh loses territory, in favour of a growing commitment to terror attacks in the West, and to observe how this may influence and impact on both men and women.

The information provided by the participants in this research can inform a gendered approach to CVE, not only for female radicalisation, but also for men; and the community insights should inform state responses, not only to extremism, but also in regard to Islam and protection of Muslim rights, while also safeguarding against extremism. ∎

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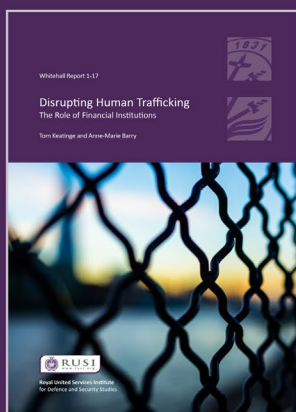
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