THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN SUPPORTING AND OPPOSING VIOLENT EXTREMISM:

UNDERSTANDING GENDER AND TERRORISM IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA
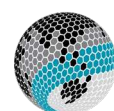
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A NOTE ON READING THE TEXT: GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

In this report, 'Countering violent extremism (CVE)' and 'Preventing violent extremism (PVE)' are used in accordance with sources cited. Williams et al. (2015: 45) note that both 'essentially refer to a preventative approach to counterterrorism'.

GLOSSARY OF ARABIC LANGUAGE TERMS

Baqiyah (literally, 'everlasting') Used in IS slogans and also as part of the IS Twitter lexicon.

Dabiq The title of Islamic State's (IS) English-language online propaganda magazine published July 2014 – July 2016 for a total of 15 issues. The title refers to a town in Northern Syria which *hadith* stipulate is where Muslim and non-Muslim forces will engage in battle before the apocalypse (Ryan 2014). Replaced by *Rumiyah* in September 2016 (see below).

Dua Supplication prayer

Hadith Tradition; sayings of the prophet Muhammad

Haram Forbidden

Hijab Headscarf worn by some Muslim women

Hijrah Migration, particularly for a religious cause or to live free from religious persecution. Often used to mean 'migration for the cause or sake of Allah'. *Hijrah* has a strong meaning in Islamic history, as the first '*hijrahs*' were when the prophet Muhammad and his companions left Mecca, where they were being persecuted, for Medina (and other places) where they could not only practice their religion freely, but also, in the case of Medina, implement *shariah*. *Hijrah* was so significant that later Muslim scholars used this to designate the 'Year 0' when creating the Islamic calendar. *Hijrah* is also spoken about repeatedly (about 15 times) in the Qur'an as a noble undertaking for Muslims.

Jannah (literally, 'garden') The Islamic concept of Paradise

Muhajirat (singular, *muhajirah*) Female migrant. Self-descriptor offten used by females interested in joining Islamic State (or those who already have joined). See also *hijrah* above.

Niqab Face veil worn by some Muslim women

Rumiyah English-language propaganda magazine published online by Islamic State's media centre, Al-Hayat. Replaces *Dabiq* magazine (July 2014-July 2016). First issue published September 2016, with 4 issues published as of December 2016. Translates as 'Rome' in Arabic, possibly referencing both the historical spread and power of the Roman Empire, and also Rome as a metonym for the Vatican's institutional seat of power as part of the 'crusader' narrative.

Shariah The religious law governing Islam; a body of moral and religious law derived from the Qur'an and *hadiths*.

Ummah Global Muslim community

ABBREVIATIONS

AQ	Al-Qaeda
ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
PIRA	Provisional Irish Republican Army
PVE	Preventing Violent Extremism
IS	Islamic State (also known as ISIS and ISIL)
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/al-Sham (also known as IS and ISIL)
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (also known as IS and ISIS)

INTRODUCTION

This project set out to explore the issue of what roles are being played by Australian women who radicalise to violence or who oppose violent extremism. Internationally, there is strong evidence of increasing women's involvement in radicalised violent social movements, spurred in particular by the rise of Islamic State (IS) in 2014 and its specific agenda of creating a caliphate in territory straddling Iraq and Syria. Islamic State's appeal for women rested in large part in recruiting women to join a movement that sought explicitly to involve women in a state-building enterprise with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and which offered the promise – however problematic, illusory or unachievable in reality – of new opportunities for women to participate meaningfully through social influence and social action as part of this effort. This had a galvanising effect on young women in particular who in many (though not all) cases are looking to empower themselves, achieve solidarity with people and causes to which they feel meaningfully connected, create transformational identities, drive social change, and resolve long-standing identity, cultural and sometimes religious conflicts and tensions in their lives.

Australian women have by and large been slower to become active in violent extremism than Australian men, and this number reduces even further when we consider the distinction between 'direct actors' (which can include social influencers, facilitators, enablers and supporters) versus 'violent actors', or those who directly participate in conducting terrorist violence on an individual or group basis. However, more women than previously are becoming involved in violent extremism compared to previous mobilisations of radicalised violence, and it is this trend that the current study has sought to capture and better understand.

We have done so in four stages: first, by conducting a literature review of international academic analysis and media sources on the dynamics of women and violent extremism; second, by interviewing 48 purposively sampled community members and government stakeholders in the key capital cities of Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Canberra, with a sampling bias towards female project participants; third, by analysing a small sample size (under 10) of case study data relating to Australian women known to have currently or recently radicalised to violence; and fourth, by conducting in-depth analysis of how three Australian women currently believed to be in former Islamic State territory have used Twitter to generate and extend their social influence as

'active radicalisers' of others to the IS cause. The outcome of these four research phases has enabled us to produce a preliminary analytical model to help better understand the drivers, attractors, pathways and roles that characterise women's involvement in violent extremism to date, while recognising that these trends are volatile and can quickly transform depending on a wide range of contextual and environmental factors.

We have also sought to better understand the roles and experience of women who not only do not support violent extremism, but instead work actively and sometimes tirelessly to oppose it. The efforts of women in countering violent extremism (CVE) contexts are largely under-recognised and even less well researched. Very little systematic investigation has been conducted of women who are active in CVE efforts, which in turn has provided only a weak and largely anecdotal evidence base on which to consider issues related to support, funding, resourcing, barriers, challenges and opportunities for women who engage in this work, whether in Australia or elsewhere. The picture is complicated further by the number of women who are reluctant, for reasons explored in more depth below, to generate or sustain a public profile in the course of their community-level work in this area. However, the generosity and insights of many women we interviewed in speaking frankly about their roles, experiences and their

needs in CVE work has opened up new opportunities for assessing and enhancing the landscape in which such work occurs based on robust evidence relating to the women's gendered experience in this space.

In approaching these issues, we have been very mindful of the critical importance of social media, which continues to rewrite the rules of engagement for how we analyse, disrupt, divert and re- channel efforts to reduce terrorism and improve the effectiveness of both prevention and intervention measures for those radicalising to violence. Social media offers specific gender-based social affordances to women that are essential if we are to understand and work with the contemporary contexts in which violent extremism – and in particular the social influence that conditions receptiveness to violent extremism – both thrives and can be mitigated. Social media also has a crucial, if not yet optimised, role to play in supporting women who work to counter violent extremism, and many strong and good ideas about how to improve this capacity were canvassed as part of the study.

In the chapters that follow, we hope we have done justice both to the complexity of the issues examined here and especially to the many project participants, female and male, who so generously and candidly shared their knowledge and insights with us. Their contributions in a number of instances challenged orthodox thinking on these issues and in particular helped to dispel further the many popular myths and misconceptions that currently prevail about the thinking, roles and experience of women who are active in both supporting and opposing violent extremism. These project participants have not only helped us to identify with more precision the ways in which women may contribute to the problems posed by terrorism, but have also given us greater knowledge and optimism about the key roles played by women working to reduce or eliminate radicalisation to violence in Australian communities. We are enduringly grateful to them as a result.

METHODOLOGY

This was a four-phase qualitative research study.

Phase 1 involved a comprehensive international review of the literature on women and violent extremism, with a wide range of open-source academic, grey literature and media articles and reports included in the search terms, which drew on a range of academic and media databases including Academic Search Premier, EBSCOHost, BONUS+, Google Scholar, Google, Australia and New Zealand Newsstream and Media Scan. Boolean logic was used to search for word and phrase combinations including 'women', 'violent extremism' and variants, 'violent action', 'terrorism/ist', 'countering violent extremism', 'preventing violent extremism', 'online', 'offline', 'internet', 'social media' and variants (e.g. SM), 'Islamic State' and variants (e.g. 'IS', 'Daesh', 'D'aesh'), 'social influence', 'radicalisation' and variants, and 'counter-terrorism' and variants, including acronyms. The literature was reviewed and synthesised for both theoretical and empirical themes, findings and points of convergence or contrast in relation to the study of or reporting on women's involvement in violent extremism, with a specific focus on more recent cases of female radicalisation to extremist violence or support for extremist violence in various contexts and countries.

Phase 2 involved the conduct of Victoria University ethics-approved semi-structured qualitative individual or focus group interviews of approximately 1.5 hours duration each with 48 participants in four field sites: Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Canberra (see Participants by Location table below). These four capital cities were chosen based on purposive sampling logic (Patton, 2007) which, using serial sampling approaches (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) drawing on the research team's earlier Australian studies relating to community and government stakeholder knowledge and expertise on violent extremism (Tahiri and Grossman, 2013; Grossman, Tahiri and Stephenson, 2014; Grossman 2015), suggested these locations as the richest potential field for participant recruitment.

Two cohorts of participants were recruited for individual interviews or focus groups: 1. Community members (n=35) and 2. Government stakeholders at both Commonwealth and State/Territory levels (n=13). Individual interviews (n=24) were conducted with female and male participants across both cohorts (see Participants by Gender table below). In addition, three focus groups (one each in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane) with all-female groups of community-based participants (n=24). All interviews were conducted in 2016.

Participant recruitment was conducted through a combination of drawing on researchers' existing community and government networks, snowballing referrals from participants, and purposive sampling based on knowledge and expertise in relation to the research topic. Community members participating in the study represented a strong range of experience and knowledge, including female and male community leaders, community workers, male imams, mothers, professionals, female counsellors and female religious teachers from both Australian Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds.

The cohort of government stakeholders were purposively sampled with a specific focus on both policy makers and practitioners in law enforcement and both state and federal government agencies based on their familiarity with counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism policy, programming and practice.

Based on our specific interest in examining the role of gendered experience in women's radicalisation and opposition to political violence, the project deliberately oversampled based on gender, with women recruited on a ratio of roughly 4:1 compared to male participants (see Participants by Gender table below).

The breakdown of participants who contributed to **Phase 2** is as follows:

PARTICIPANTS BY LOCATION

CITY	NUMBER
Sydney	15
Melbourne	18
Brisbane	9
Canberra	6

PARTICIPANTS BY GENDER

Female	34
Male	14

PARTICIPANTS BY COHORT

Community members	35
Government stakeholders	13

The interview data reached saturation when approximately two-thirds of the community-based interviews had been analysed and approximately half-way through analysis of government stakeholder data, reflecting a hypothesised greater concordance for government stakeholders exposed to shared training and knowledge bases. However, saturation tends to be reached more quickly in smaller studies (Fusch and Ness 2015) and the findings generated by analyses of these data could be modified by engagement of a larger sample across both cohorts. The interview data were coded on an iterative thematic basis by the research team, and coding reliability was established through systematically comparing and refining codes during the analysis to maximise dependability of the findings.

Phases 3 and 4 involved the analysis of two empirical datasets for triangulation with the interview data collected in **Phase 2** and the discussion of the literature developed in **Phase 1**. In **Phase 3**, the team analysed a small sample of fewer than 10 women known to government authorities on the basis of their radicalisation to violence. The data were rigorously de-identified by the law enforcement agency providing the case studies prior to their release to the research team. These case studies are discussed in detail in Chapter 3 below. The **Phase 4** dataset comprised an in-depth analysis of three (3) sets of Twitter accounts by Australian women who overtly supported violent extremism. These tweets were collected on an open-source basis using a method known as Twitter-scraping (see Chapter 4 below) for one or more periods comprising several weeks or months in 2014 and 2015. The analysis generated new information about frequency, typology, intensity and both thematic and rhetorical dimensions of how a major social media platform can be used to generate and disseminate social influence towards violent extremism in specific gendered contexts. A detailed account of the methodology used in collecting, authenticating and analysing the Twitter dataset appears in Chapter 4 below.

As with all qualitative research, the findings detailed below are not generalisable and this should be a recognised limitation of the study.

CHAPTER ONE

WOMEN AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM:
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

BACKGROUND

Violent extremism is a growing problem for Australia. ASIO director Duncan Lewis recently stated that approximately '110 Australians fighting or engaged with terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq (SBS, 2016), with around 190 people in Australia who actively support IS; other national estimates put this figure even higher at around 400 Australians of active interest. This sits within a global context of about 30,000 current foreign fighters from 104 countries who have joined Islamic State (IS) forces in Iraq and Syria (Ginkel & Entenmann 2016). Most significantly, the average age of Australians actively supporting IS continues to drop dramatically, from those in their 20s and 30s a few years ago to those still in their early teens today. An estimated 45-49 Australians have been killed in the conflict in Syria and Iraq (SBS 2016). On a global scale, the problem similarly persists. There are 4000 estimated Westerners living in Syria as foreign citizens, including 550 Western women (CPRLV 2016). There are 689 French citizens in Syria, including 275 French women (Reuters, 2016), and France has classed an additional 15,000 people as a potential risk to national security (SkyNews 2016). While many of these citizens have joined IS, some have also joined groups like the formerly AQ-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra (CPRLV 2016) (and now calling itself Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham after dissociating from Al-Qaeda in 2016).

Social media plays a crucial role in the migration to, and support of, terrorist groups, particularly IS. Monitoring suggests there are currently around 40,000 Twitter accounts that actively support IS, with around 2000 accounts tweeting primarily in English (Berger, 2015), but issuing statements in almost two dozen languages (Schmid 2015)[1]. During its peak, IS was reported to produce up to 90,000 tweets and other social media responses per day (Schmid 2015), with significant implications for the global reach of recruitment and radicalisation: 'In almost every American case, social media played some part in recruitment and/or radicalisation' (Berger 2015).

[1]Due to a rapidly changing online landscape, further accelerated by Twitter and other social media companies' recent initiatives to remove IS accounts, this figure is very hard to finalise and will inevitably change again in the near future.

GENDER AND TERRORISM: BIASES AND BLINDSPOTS

Women (and girls) are active contemporary participators in online recruitment and propaganda, particularly in relation to foreign travel for the purpose of joining the so-called caliphate established by Islamic State in parts of Syria and Iraq. Huckerby (2015) notes that 'roughly 10 percent of [IS's] Western recruits are female, often lured by their peers through social media and instant messaging. The percentage is much higher in France: An estimated 63 of the 350 French nationals believed to be with the group are women, or just below 20 percent.'[2]

Women and girls are also migrants themselves, both with families and on their own; there are currently an estimated 550 Western female migrants living within Islamic State's self-declared borders (Hoyle, Bradford & Frenett 2015). Reports suggest around 60 of these are women from the UK (*Guardian* 2015), 70 from France, 40 from Germany, 20 from Belgium, and 35 from the Netherlands Dutch women (Stoter 2014). Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has said up to 40 Australian women 'have taken part in terror attacks or are supporting militant groups' (BBC 2015). This is in no small part due to their active recruitment by IS. Unlike other neo-jihadi groups (Lentini 2013) such as Al-Qaeda, 'women of the IS have been visibly active as network members and as both creators and distributors of pro-IS propaganda' (Huey 2015: 2). They are particularly targeted on social media for *hijrah* – both to undertake it and to encourage others to do it. As one Belgian jihadist wrote on her account, 'We need more women to take care of the women and children. It doesn't matter if you are young or old, with or without children, divorced or widowed. Women who are interested can contact me in private, (Stoter 2014).

The roles that women have played and continue to play in terrorist organisations are varied. In some groups, women have actively engaged in mass killings, including suicide missions, whereas in more recent manifestations, such as IS, women have played a more supportive role. Women not being allowed to engage in active combat with groups such as IS, however, should not be interpreted as them having unimportant positions (Huey & Witmer 2016). Their engagement as facilitators, propagandists, and supporters (particularly as mothers and wives) is vital in the success and continuation of pro-jihadist terror groups.

However, it is important to remember that 'while social media is an important source of insight – and should be treated as such – our understanding of the organisation's appeal to women must not be based exclusively on the public ruminations of English-speaking female jihadists' (Rafiq & Malik 2015: 11). Investigation of the involvement of women in jihadist networks that moves beyond the domains of social media and chat rooms is just as vital. We also need to engage directly with the personal experience and views of women who either encourage, support and participate in, or alternatively oppose and work to prevent engagement in violent extremism. Indeed, the role of women in preventing violent extremism through CVE initiatives is significant. A 2014 Brookings report (Couture 2014), comparing the CVE approaches of Morocco and Bangladesh with a specific focus on gender, found a positive correlation between women's empowerment and a reduction in acts of violent extremism more broadly in these locales.

The ways in which women engage with violent extremism, and how violent extremism engages women in turn, must therefore be considered through a gendered lens. This is critical in helping to rebalance the over-emphasis on male-focused research inquiry and commentary, which has meant that 'the role of women in promulgating and countering violent extremism is an understudied but critical contemporary security issue' (Nusseibeh and Verveer 2016: 4). Some feminist theorists and activists have already heeded this call, engaging extensively with the topic of gender, terrorism and human rights, particularly from 9/11 onward (Satterthwaite & Huckerby 2013), and highlighting the many and nuanced ways gender must be considered when engaging with the topic of terrorism.

In line with this, the literature also cautions against assuming we can easily profile women's experience, involvement or perspectives based on gendered assumptions, any more than we can that of men. As Sjoberg et al. argue (2011: 2), we need to 'understand that women terrorists (like all terrorists and all people) live in a gender-unequal world but also remain open to understanding that individuals' personal and *political* choices are complicated and contingent' (emphasis in the original).

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[2]At the time of writing, new reports put the number of French nationals leaving France to go to Syria at more than 900 (Nossiter 2016).

When considering the role of gender in the context of violent extremism, it is crucial to keep in mind that out-dated gendered perceptions of women who engage in these activities may be hampering our understanding of (and thus effective engagement with) the motivations and behaviour of women who support and participate in, or alternatively work to prevent, violent extremism. Outmoded perceptions reflecting oversimplified biases about women and violence produce unhelpful generalisations about women (just as they do about men) that can obscure the complexity of how they intervene in and both influence and are shaped by violent extremist trajectories on many levels. As one example of this, female terrorists have traditionally been explained either by a need for revenge, or otherwise traumatised or tricked (see Speckhard 2009, who notes such explanations are not used with nearly the same frequency towards male terrorists), or else viewed dichotomously as either sexy *femmes fatale* or heartless, icy terror queens (Gentry & Sjoberg 2011).

In a related vein, female terrorists were often explained through their relationships to men in terms of their appearance and accompanying desirability: either as so ugly that the only way they could attract men's attention was through becoming violent revolutionaries, or because they were so attractive that they had been hyper-targeted by men and seduced by them into evil (MacDonald 1991). Framing violent extremist women solely in connection to men, as McDonald (1991: 9) notes, 'conveniently serves all ends': it privileges men as powerful, women as weak and acting solely in relation to men, and frames women's decisions as entirely emotional rather than ideological or otherwise cognitively oriented.

It also frames women primarily as victims rather than as agents of their own decisions and behaviours (an aspect of gendered discourse not lost on Islamic State propagandists, who routinely position women as victims who require protection – or, in the case of non-believers, deserve their punishment – in social media messaging [Grossman 2016b]). As Patel (2017:26) explains, 'The language used by media and by governments to explain women's involvement in violent extremism remains rooted in a victim narrative that denies women agency in their commitment and desire to be part of the cause'.

More recently, women have been portrayed primarily as playing only subservient and minor roles in terrorist groups (Manrique et al. 2016), or else as joining groups such as IS simply because they are 'fangirls' who see IS as being like a boy band with guns (Cottee 2016; Huey & Witmer 2016). The reductive term 'jihadi bride' is routinely used by media and others when discussing women and girls who have travelled to join IS, implying that the only possible motivation any female could have for going is a naïve one based on a man. However, as Rafiq and Malik point out, female involvement 'is just as inevitable as that of their male counterparts' (2015: 15). Women and girls who support or join ISIS tend to be described as being 'lured' or 'groomed', whereas men are said to be 'recruited' (Manrique et al. 2016; Cottee 2016), a gender-based distinction that assumes a higher level of victimisation and correspondingly reduced level of agency or self-determination on the part of women and girls compared to men. The distinctions made through such gender-based terminology also ignore 'the striking degree to which young women themselves are actively involved in recruiting like-minded "sisters" to the cause' (Cottee 2016: np). In addition, this perspective also ignores what we already know about the interactive nature of the process of radicalisation and online networks: far from being hunted down by online predators, potential recruits are themselves actively searching for violent extremist content and sources (Cottee 2016; see also Sageman 2016; ARTIS 2009).

Nevertheless, it is also possible that, at various points, women's positions as both passive victims and active participants are not mutually exclusive but simultaneously interactive, as Wilmot (2015) argues in relation to women's involvement in Boko Haram.[3] 'Either/or' paradigms may less useful, in other words, than scenarios that permit 'both/and' analyses when it comes to women and terrorism in specific contexts and circumstances.

Women's interest and participation in violent extremist groups is certainly not new. Huckerby points out that women becoming radicalised and involved in terrorism is a historically well-established phenomenon: 'Women have long been involved in terror of all stripes, from female neo-Nazis in Europe to Chechen "black widow" suicide bombers' (2015), and the CPRLV (2016) reminds us that women have been actively involved in violent radicalisation since at least the eighteenth century, and employed in a diversity of roles. In this sense, 'women's active participation as terrorists both defies and exploits conventional gender stereotypes' (Laster & Erez 2015).

Yet, as noted above, the ways in which gender and terrorism are traditionally conceived of tends to circulate largely around the idea of women as victims of terrorism (for example, Boko Haram and the Chibok girls, IS and Yazidi female sex slaves), as opposed to active participants in terrorism who chose to join autonomously, motivated by many of the same things men are. As Huckerby (2015) observes, 'Despite stereotypes about their domesticity and passivity — the idea that they must always be under men's influence or tricked into joining — women are drawn to groups like the Islamic State by many of the same forces as men: adventure, inequality, alienation and the pull of the cause'. Relying on insufficiently nuanced or contested gendered assumptions about the reasons and paths women take to violent extremism significantly limits our interpretation, and thus potential prevention, of women who engage in such behaviour.

Nor are the gender biases present in the way in which female involvement in terrorism is represented limited to Muslim-affiliated violent extremism. The Expert Centre on Gender and Right-Wing Extremism in Germany, for example, similarly identifies problems with the way terrorism is perceived and the need for gender sensitivity when studying areas such as white supremacy: 'Right-wing extremism continues to be perceived as a "male problem"', they write, and 'this is highly problematic, as it hinders an accurate perspective on the power, influence and activities of right-wing women in Germany and therefore impedes the development of effective counter-strategies to deal with them' (RAN 2015: 17).

However, while gender biases and blindspots can hinder accurate assessments of the complex ways in which the lived experience of gendered identities, frames and contexts impact on women's (and men's) terrorist support and involvement, it would be equally problematic to believe that gender plays no role at all in how both women and men experience and participate in terrorist networks

and activities. While men and women have very similar, often identical, motivations for joining IS (Khan 2015), such as distress over perceived grievances and unanswered injustices to the ummah or sincere religious commitment, their experiences of these motivations in terms of both push and pull factors are often highly gendered. The gendered nature of female experience (as distinct from motivation) in terrorist and violent extremist contexts is therefore a critical element in understanding the various pushes, pulls and roles of women in both supporting and opposing violent extremism.

Research also suggests gender is a key factor in the specific roles men and women play in supporting violent extremism and terrorism, particularly in the case of terrorist organisations such as IS and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA). Manrique et al. (2016) have found, for example, that women have 'superior network connectivity' in terrorist networks compared to men, most notably in those parts of terrorist networks that signal 'robustness and survival'.

This translates into women 'play[ing] a more central role in passing items such as recruitment messages, files, prayers, and video and audio propaganda; brokering distant parts of the network (for example, aligning narratives), and channelling funds' (Manrique et al. 2016). It also means the presence of women in violent extremist groups enhances these groups' durability: 'The longevity of an online pro-ISIS group does indeed tend to increase with the fraction of women that are in it' (Manrique et al. 2016), with similar results found offline for women involved in the PIRA. The interconnectivity and the perceived protective socialising presence of women, particularly in online extremist networks, indicates prospects for thinking further about how women may be effectively and proactively engaged in prevention initiatives, including but not limited to counter-narrative initiatives.

[3] As Wilmot (2015) argues: '*According to at least one credible source in northeastern Nigeria, most women in Boko Haram are acting voluntarily. They become suicide bombers to seek revenge for the deaths of their spouses or parents, as well as reunification in the afterlife. Detailing the dire humanitarian situation in the northeast, the source reported that many girls and women in Boko Haram controlled areas feel there is little prospect of a return to civilian life. Those who choose to return face ostracism, and would be ineligible for marriage. In a context of loss and hopelessness, martyrdom becomes an acceptable option. Incidences of gender-based violence and other human rights violations by Nigerian security forces could also push women to support or join Boko Haram out of fear. In the early days of Boko Haram's insurgency, one source emphasised that female support for the group's activities has been understated. Women were reportedly converting female family members, and receiving training in the group's former stronghold of Markas. That source also claimed that some women had donated their daughters to carry out suicide bombings. Last year, several members of a 'female cell' of Boko Haram were apprehended in Abuja, charged with recruiting female members. **The two narratives of female involvement in Boko Haram— passive victims versus active participants—are not mutually exclusive. Both reflect the complexity of gender in insurgencies**, and should contribute insight into post-conflict policy*' [emphasis added]. (See also: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28168003, 'Three women have been arrested in Nigeria for recruiting female members for the Islamist militant group, Boko Haram, the country's military says.')

GENDERED PATTERNS OF EXPERIENCE: WOMEN AND ISLAMIC STATE

It is understandable that terror organisations would want to recruit girls and women: gendered perceptions of girls and women make female terrorists (especially suicide bombers) useful and agile actors (Bloom 2011), and as recruits to movements such as IS focused on social futures and the building of a new society, as well as winning battles in the present, they provide useful services and enticements that are used to appeal to male recruits. Less immediately clear is why girls and women themselves would want to join terror organisations, an observation compounded by the absence of any definitive or reliable predictive research on why women or men join violent extremist groups, as Aly and Lucas (2015: 81) highlight:

> Despite growing interest into the role of the internet and social media in the process of radicalisation, we are still no closer to understanding why some individuals engage with online violent extremist content in ways that influence their offline behaviour. Nor are we any closer to understanding why the messages of global jihadi movement groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) appeal to some individuals but not to others.

Keeping in mind that that 'women are susceptible to the very same processes [of radicalisation] as men: narratives, ideology, grievances, and various push and pull factors' (Rafiq & Malik 2015: 10), and that while women's experiences of these motivations may be gendered, the motivators themselves often are not, a number of researchers have developed models revealing various patterns that may be useful and which we summarise further below.

Rafiq and Malik (2015), for example, state that the recruitment of males and female to extremist groups is commonly preceded by an identity crisis. Such an identity crisis in the West, they postulate, can be instigated by legitimate grievances, such as experiences of Islamophobia, racism or bullying, and also perceived grievances, such as conspiracy theories, dislike of democracy, etc. However, as Khan (2015) observes, most attempts to understand why women want to join IS often bypass such issues and instead jump straight to the 'jihadi bride' trope, eclipsing these other factors:

> Since most of the women are adolescents, it is assumed the 'holy warriors' of the Islamic state have a dangerous sexual allure, like a boy band accessorised with beards and semi- automatic weapons. However, most of the recruitment of women is carried out by women themselves, so assuming the only factor is a teenage crush trivialises their decision-making. Often, women's participation in Islamic State does not require a gendered explanation. They can be just as bloodthirsty, disaffected and politically engaged as men.
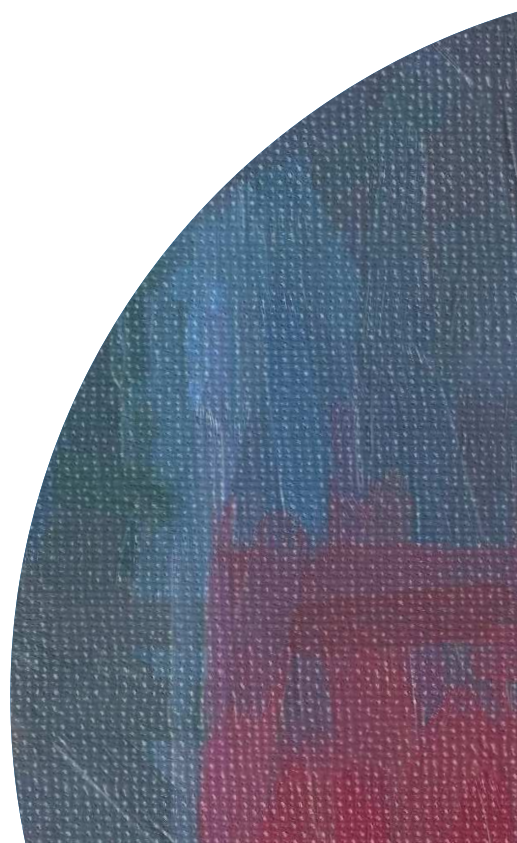
PUSH AND PULL FACTORS FOR WOMEN WHO JOIN ISLAMIC STATE

Further to this, different researchers and theorists have identified different push and pull factors for women and girls who support IS, who encourage others to join IS, and who (attempt to) move to IS-controlled territories themselves. As noted above, while these categories are equally relevant to both males and females, the way in which they are differentially experienced can be gendered.

For example, feelings of discrimination are applicable to both males and females. However, the way a young Muslim man experiences discrimination, and the form that discrimination takes, may be different to that experience by a young Muslim woman. The man may be harassed by police while driving, whereas the woman may be abused on the street because of her head or face covering. Similarly, the feeling of, and reason for, rebellion that both males and females experience can also be gendered: girls may have had a more constrained upbringing than their brothers because of cultural attitudes towards appropriate behaviour for sons and daughters, which can lead girls to rebel by running away from parental restrictions, whereas males may be attracted to the macho, rebellious image of the hyper-masculine jihadi. There can also be overlap; for example, both men and women experiencing verbal taunting or abuse based on their visibility as religiously, ethnically and/or racially 'other'.

PUSH FACTORS

Push factors identified in the literature dealing with women and involvement in Islamic State include the following:

Feelings of discrimination and alienation in their home Western countries (Huckerby 2015; Saltman & Smith 2015). Huckerby argues that 'more attention must be paid to the specific factors that attract women to terrorist groups and the roles they play once there. For example, European women in the Islamic State have spoken of how alienation and restrictions on their religious practices back home, like France's ban on wearing burqas in public, helped push them into the group' (2015). This is a clear example of a push factor that on the one hand is common to both males and females (alienation and restriction on religious practices), but on the otherhand is manifesting in distinctly gendered ways for females (e.g., the *hijab* and *niqab* ban in France).

Clarity of gender based identities and roles (Cottee 2016). The aspect of free-mixing in the West between the genders is also a crucial point, as it helps address the confusion many people have over why women would choose to join ISIS with its rigid gender-based restrictions for women, abandoning the relative freedoms and feminism of their Western existence. However, as Cottee observes, 'they support the Islamic State not despite, but *because of*, its aggressively patriarchal worldview' (2016, emphasis in original). The militantly strict ideas about the appropriate roles and behaviour of women (and men) is seen as religiously mandated and thus a welcome relief from the perceived anxieties and tensions and threats to cultural or religious integrity of their Western lives.

Rebellion (Benhold 2015; Nacos 2015; Marcoes 2015). While seemingly counter-intuitive for those socialised into to Western norms around gender identity, freedom and mobility, for some girls and women, joining IS can be about rebelling against patriarchal structures in the home or community environment. Baselines for measuring or seeking to rebalance gender equality, however, vary significantly across different social and cultural settings. Marcoes, for instance, discussing Indonesian girls who join IS, asks us to:

> Look at the patriarchal structures in Indonesia, particularly among conservative Muslim communities, which places women in subordinate position to men. In fundamentalist movements, however, women feel equal. In groups such as ISIS there is an ideological recognition of their unique role in building an ideal state (2015: 3).

> A similar observation has been made by Gonzalez-Perez (2013: 252), who notes that 'women involved in terrorism are often fighting both a discriminatory global hierarchy and a male-dominated society'. This in itself builds on a phenomenon described decades ago as women combating the 'two colonialisms', where female rebels fight both foreign powers and domestic patriarchy (Urdang 1979).

Similarly, Benhold (2015) argues:

> For the girls, joining ISIS is a way to emancipate yourself from your parents and from the Western society that has let you down … For ISIS, it's great for troop morale because fighters want Western wives. And in the battle of ideas they can point to these girls and say, Look, they are choosing the caliphate over the West.

Additionally, **feeling the global ummah is being violently persecuted** (Saltman & Smith 2015; Hoyle, Bradford & Frenett 2015), and feeling **anger, sadness or frustration at perceived lack of international action** on this persecution (Saltman & Smith 2015) have also been identified as push factors that women, as well as men, identify with as significant motivators for adopting violent extremist standpoints.

PULL FACTORS

For almost every push factor identified, IS and its online influencers and promoters have developed narratives and inducements that represent a corresponding pull factor. Thus, if a man or woman is feeling alienated, IS offers brotherhood/sisterhood and solidarity. If a person is angry at injustice, IS assures a vigorously and violently defended moral code within the state, and fierce justice outside it.

If a person is feeling victimised and vulnerable, IS promises protection and the reversal of humiliation and insignificance. Indeed, the belief that joining Islamic State is a religious obligation (discussed further below) creates a push factor by recasting the current Western environment in which many IS recruits live as being, by definition, un-Islamic and *haram*.

Pull factors for women that emerge in the literature include:

- **Genuine religious obligation to go to build the caliphate** (Saltman & Smith 2015; Hoyle, Bradford & Frenett 2015; Cottee 2016)

- **Belonging and sisterhood** (Saltman & Smith 2015; Hoyle, Bradford & Frenett 2015; CPRLV 2016)

- **Romanticisation and idealisation of experience,** i.e. adventure, marriage, material security through the state (Saltman & Smith 2015; Hoyle, Bradford & Frenett 2015)

- **Security of caliphate-based gender roles, boundaries and structures** (Cottee 2016; CPRLV 2016)

The pull of such strictly enforced gender roles is not unique to IS, as Khan (2015) explains:

> As for the constricted lives they will encounter, some can be attracted to the security of traditional family roles. Although Hitler's roles for women were limited to *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* (children, kitchen, church), almost half of

the votes he gained were from women. They preferred a model of gender relations that allowed them a degree of domestic autonomy and status as wives and mothers – if nothing else.

One notable pull factor that both conforms to but also revises the emphasis on domestic roles for women within IS may be the **al-Khansaa Brigade**. IS recently launched this all-female religious enforcement unit, which travels through IS regions and polices women's behaviour, dress and perceived adherence to gender-based moral codes based on the IS interpretation of *shariah*. This brigade, with its shrewd combination of domestic and quasi-military styling and focus, is the closest women are permitted to get to conflict or fighting within IS. The Al-Khansaa Brigade may serve as a pull factor for women who are drawn to violence and power in ways similar to male recruits (Winter 2015). Because women and girls are not permitted to engage in combat in Iraq or Syria, the hope of joining an all-female militia that doles out violent punishment and increases status and power may appeal to some female recruits, particularly those who are highly attuned to power dynamics within female-dominant as well as mixed-gender settings.

In February 2015, the al-Khansaa Brigade released a manifesto titled *Women of the Islamic State: A manifesto on women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade* (trans. and analysis, Winter 2015) that covered a range of topics including the **failures and falsehoods of Western civilisation and daily life** (a critique of Western education, feminism); the **daily life of the *muhajirat*** [female migrants to IS territories] (the appeal of hijab, security, justice, society, medical care and education), and the **benefits of life under IS** when compared to life in the Arabian Peninsula. What is most significant about this manifesto is that the original document released by IS was only offered in Arabic, suggesting it was specifically targeting a local and regional Arabic-language audience without reaching out to the Western women it was simultaneously trying to entice; Winter (2015) suggests the document appears to be specifically targeted at local Arab women by dwelling on the excellence of IS over other Islamic-grounded governance locales, and it may therefore have been considered irrelevant for potential female Western recruits to pore over. Regardless, it demonstrates IS's keen awareness of multiply positioned female audiences and potential recruits through the segmentation and tailoring of its messaging campaigns.

Beyond this, Fernandez (2015) argues the four themes that summarise IS online propaganda appeals in terms of pull factors, all of which are equally attractive to women as they are to men, are *urgency, agency, authenticity* and *victory*:

1. **Urgency** (injustices are happening to Sunni Muslims and the time to act is now – urgent grievances and urgent need for engagement and action)

2. **Agency** (the individual Muslim watching IS propaganda online can do something herself to change the situation for oppressed Muslims around the world and belong to a legitimate religious structure)

3. **Authenticity** (IS positions itself the authentic version of Islam, and works hard to ensure people are aware of the alleged religious justification for what they do, legitimising their very savage acts)

4. **Victory** (IS is still here and its survival, even in the face of military and other setbacks, is proof of success and divine endorsement).

Similarly, Rafiq and Malik (2015) also identify four 'promises' that function as pull factors in what IS offers recruits, which they believe encourage women specifically to support or join IS. These promises are *empowerment, deliverance, participation,* and *piety:*

1. **Empowerment**: Similar to the push factors listed above of 'rebellion' and 'feelings of discrimination', the promise of empowerment offered to female *muhajirat* speaks to the desire that all the humiliations they face in their current lives will be removed once they experience life in the Islamic State. This directly counterposes the common discourse on women and girls who join IS, which portrays them as mere victims. While to outsiders, joining IS may seem like the antithesis of female empowerment, for women who subscribe to this ideology, it is the ultimate form of both rejecting enemy ways and embracing of divinely-mandated gender roles.

2. **Deliverance:** By migrating to IS, women are liberated from their previously compromising lifestyles and finally free to live in the reassuring comfort of a perfectly-run caliphate that delivers them from injustice, indignity, oppression and social conflict.

3. **Participation:** One of IS's most distinctive features is its twin imperative to serve not only as an avenging terrorist organisation, but also as an expansionist nation-building endeavour. Thus, women who join IS can feel they are usefully participating in an important religious and political act by relocating to the caliphate, raising a family, and engaging in some of the few permissible roles women there may have (doctors, nurses, teachers, etc.), even if fighting is out of bounds. And if the women do not engage in work, their roles as mothers and wives are repeatedly praised as active engagement in the caliphate. It is the wealth of non-militarised roles and contribution that is a vital expansion of the 'foreign fighter' repertoire regarding female participation, and this helps explain IS's popularity with women and girls in ways that groups like Al-Qaeda were not. Participation can also encompass a strong desire for civic engagement, particularly when tied to the push factor of believing that the *ummah* is being persecuted. This desire for enacting change has been reportedly been preyed upon in women and girls by jihadist recruiters (CPRLV 2016).

4. **Piety:** The religious motivation for women to join IS is a very powerful motivator and must not be underestimated. For those women who believe it is an Islamic obligation to join IS, it follows that almost anything – from sadness over saying goodbye to family to horrific acts of violence and abuse – can be rationalised as acceptable, even desirable under some circumstances. Whilst some commentators may, for various reasons, choose to downplay the religious legitimacy of IS, this does not mitigate the religious appeal that IS narratives can hold for women: 'While some experts claim the appeal of ISIS has little or nothing to do with religion but is more a reflection of a youth revolt among Muslims, the position taken here is that ideology and religion are crucial and central for *legitimizing* jihadist violence caused by a variety of mainly political factors' (Schmid 2015: 68).

Finally, when considering the recruitment of women to Islamic State, it is worth noting Olivier Roy's observation that:

There is no third, fourth, or nth generation of jihadis. Since 1996, we have been confronted with a very stable phenomenon: the radicalisation of two categories of French youth – second-generation Muslims and native converts.… This means that, among the radicals, there are practically no 'first-generation' jihadis (including recent arrivals), but especially no 'third-generation' jihadis. [And] the third-generation category in France is growing (Roy 2016).

Whilst this analysis is limited to France, it is worth keeping his arguments about 'generational revolt' in mind regarding the circumstances unique to second-generation youth that may act as kindling to violent extremism for young women, as well as young men.

Malik suggests that in order to recruit, IS offers a vital third option to people disaffected with either or both their parents' traditional views and the local Western culture they inhabit: 'IS recruiters offer a third way between parents' traditional rules and the mainstream liberal expectations of friends – a sense of belonging to a global cause with war' (2015: np). This point is well worth remembering, especially when so many people express surprise and confusion that women and girls raised in the free and liberal West would then choose the repressive and sexist life of an IS citizen; this 'third option', especially if it has an authentically religious sheen, offers young women who are feeling persecuted in their Western home country, a *freedom* to live a life of religious ease without compromise. We cannot underestimate the profound spiritual tension experienced on a daily basis by women and men who sincerely believe living in the non-Muslim West is sinful, and the motivating role that can play.

These considerations explored in recent literature on women and Islamic State demonstrate the varied themes that are emerging in attempting to understand what motivates women and girls to join violent extremist groups like IS. It also highlights that, far from the clichéd headlines of jihadi brides or 'fangirls', the reasons underlying the motivation of women who join IS are generally as coherent, complex, ideologically and personally driven as they are for men. The experiences of pathways to and life within Islamic State may be gendered, but the motivations themselves are often the same for women as for men. It would be a category error, given the profound unreliability of predictive and profiling models referred to above, to assume any one of these models could be transplanted as a template onto an individual girl or woman and explain her attachment to IS. However, when used as a guide to 'think with' rather than as a prescriptive map of orientation or likelihood for women to become involved in violent extremism, the explanations they offer may prove useful insights at various stages of analysis, policy and program development.

WOMEN AND IS RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

IS makes use of a sophisticated array of online tools to recruit women and girls, both via social media, such as its army of unofficial Twitter accounts, and also through its official online publications. Its pre-eminent official online vehicles, published by IS's online Al-Hayat Media Centre, commenced in July 2014 with the English-language magazine *Dabiq*, which ran for about 2 years over 15 issues. *Dabiq* was replaced in September 2016 by the magazine *Rumiyah* (continuing to September 2017) when IS looked set to lose its hold on *Dabiq* as a territory, accordingly diminishing its propaganda value as a triumphal signifier. The name *Rumiyah*, meaning 'Rome', with its aspirational connotations of empire and its implied threat to overrun the seat of global Catholic institutional power, was likely deemed a safer propaganda choice in a volatile conflict environment where IS military success on the ground in Syria and Iraq was beginning to look shaky in the second half of 2016. However, comparison of the focus, content, design and messaging between the two publications suggests they do not differ significantly.

Indeed, the professionalism and ubiquitous nature of IS online engagement is one of the movement's defining aspects when compared to other organisations such as Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, including al-Shabab and the former Jabhat al-Nusra. Unlike violent extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda, IS goes out of its way to encourage women to join and support the cause by delineating the special roles they will place in the caliphate, and repeatedly conveying the importance of these roles t*hat can only be fulfilled by women*. These two distinct aspects intertwine when considering how online engagement by IS specifically targets the recruitment of women and girls.

Dabiq and *Rumiyah* often have sections dedicated to, and written by, 'sisters', and these sections engage in highly gendered propaganda with specific appeals to female audiences. For example, issue 11 of *Dabiq* has a chapter entitled 'To our sisters: a jihad without fighting' that extols the spiritual rewards for a woman who domestically supports a male jihadi and raises 'lion cubs' who go on to engage in combat; these rewards are rendered as equivalent to those received by a man who himself engages in physical battle. The article is replete with assurances that a woman's reward and place is in the role of domestic support, which reinforces not only the valid and necessary role a woman plays in IS state-building, but

also assuages any lingering doubts about the religious or political merits of her relevance to the caliphate in non-combat roles and emphasises the benefits of IS's clearly gender-defined roles:

> Indeed you are in jihad when you await the return of your husband patiently, anticipating Allah's reward, and making du'a for him and those with him to attain victory and consolidation. You are in jihad when you uphold your loyalty to him in his absence. You are in jihad when you teach his children the difference between truth and falsehood. (al-Muhajirah 2015: 41)

Such propaganda, awash with religiously framed support for IS's view of the world, serves to further buttress the religious legitimacy of the call. Interestingly, the article also appears to directly quash the 'jihadi bride' aspiration, bluntly criticising women who might be migrating to the caliphate merely for a husband instead of for God: '*Whoever made hijrah for the sake of her husband, then know that he is indeed departing, without doubt, if not today then tomorrow. And whoever made hijrah for the cause of Allah, then know that Allah will remain, ever-living, and He does not die*' (al-Muhajirah 2015: 43).

Similarly, the second issue of *Rumiyah* spends two pages appreciatively recounting stories of pious women from Islam's history who suffered hardship with patience, focusing especially on women encouraging their male family members to engage in jihad and martyrdom. Of particular note in *Rumiyah* No. 2 is the story of al-Khansa bint 'Amr, the namesake of the Al-Khansaa Brigade.

The historical figure of Al-Khansa is described as actively encouraging her four sons to fight 'the kuffar' and be martyred, and happily celebrating when these deaths eventuate. A significant addition to this approving retelling is the conceit of al-Khansa telling her sons, *before* encouraging them to die in battle, that she had been chaste, thereby neither bringing shame on the other men in her family nor endangering her son's ancestral line: '*I swear by Allah who there is no god but He, you are the sons of one man and of one woman. I never betrayed your father. I did not disgrace your uncle [her brother]. I did not spoil your heritage. I did not soil your lineage*' (*Rumiyah* 2, 2016: 30).

After this assurance of her purity as a woman, Rumiyah enthusiastically recounts Al-Khansa ordering her sons to be martyred. This passage reinforces the twin ideas of how womanhood is conceptualised within the caliphate: women are to be active supporters of the men in their family engaging (and dying) in battle, and to maintain their men's honour (whether husband, sons or brothers) through sexual purity. The same article includes similar stories of other women in early Muslim history exhorting their sons to be martyred in battle, such as Asma, whom Rumiyah says declared: '*O my son… if you are upon the truth, then the religion has not weakened. And how long will you remain in this dunya? Being killed is better*'. *Rumiyah* reports that she then reminded her son of his brave Muslim lineage in the '*hope that he would meet them if he were to be killed as a shahid. He then went out, and that was the last he saw of her*' (*Rumiyah* 2, 2016: 30).

These accounts serve as propaganda, encouragement and reminder to ISIS's female base of their important role in the success of the state. Active support of men, especially men who may be faltering in their embrace the battlefield, is seen as both an imperative duty and considered just as meritorious for women as the acts of men themselves on the battlefield. *Rumiyah* reminds women: '*How great Allah made these women! They did not sit and cry, lamenting during the hours of hardship and tribulation. Instead, they carried the weight of the religion and the Ummah on their shoulders, helping a husband, inciting a son…*' (*Rumiyah* 2, 2016: 30), reinforcing yet again the vital if restricted support roles (as influencers, encouragers, enablers, etc.) that the women of IS are expected to play.

In terms of IS's use of social media, the picture is similar. While the vast majority of Twitter accounts purporting to support IS are not officially endorsed or managed by the terrorist state, unofficial accounts nevertheless do the work of IS propaganda and recruitment. Significantly, the online IS Twitter community (often referred to by its members as *baqiyah*, a reference to the 'everlasting and remaining' slogan of IS and also to the fact that Twitter so regularly shuts their accounts down) also reflects some of the push and pull factors for young women discussed both above and below, even if they never migrate or plan travel to IS territory. For example, Huey & Witmer (2016) argue that IS 'fangirls' (a small subset of young women in the broader cohort of female support for Islamic State) participate in the IS Twitter community based on dynamics relating to rebellion and sense of belonging. In this sense, IS as a virtual online movement, rather than a physical or material entity, is in some cases fulfilling the function of the violent extremist end point, at least from a propaganda and social resonance perspective.

However, online influence and propaganda aimed at women is not the only recruitment technique employed by IS. Berger suggests that IS goes beyond 'passive' propaganda and utilises 'interventions' in which they lavish attention on potential recruits 'in order to shape their worldview and encourage direct action in support of the Islamic State, ranging from lone actor–style terrorist attacks to migration to Islamic State territories. Some interveners are more formally affiliated with the Islamic State while others appear to be informal volunteers' (Berger 2015). He proposes that IS recruitment follows the standard model outlined below, which can involve either online, offline or combined modes of contact, and many features of which are reflected in the case histories of individual women from Western countries who have travelled overseas to join Islamic State:

- **First contact**
  - Islamic State seeks out target, and/or recruiters respond to targets who seek out Islamic State

- **Create micro-community**
  - Maintain constant contact
  - Encourage target to insulate against outside influences

- **Shift to private communications**

- **Identify and encourage pro-Islamic State action suitable for recruit, e.g.**
  - Social media influence and activism
  - Travel to Islamic State territories
  - Terrorist action within or outside Islamic State territories. (Berger 2015)

Berger's model is at odds with those of other researchers such as Cottee (2016), who argue that far from being sought by IS recruiters, women often go looking for resources themselves. However, this divergence again highlights the lack of a singular, cohesive model for recruitment or attraction to violent extremist groups such as Islamic State. Regardless of these differences, there is broad consensus that IS has consciously engaged and prioritised women in its propaganda.

One example of this was the proposed exchange for the captured Jordanian pilot who in January 2015 was subsequently burned alive across television and computer screens around the world. In this case, IS demanded the release of Sajida al-Rishawi, a female Iraqi prisoner and would-be suicide bomber held in Jordan, calling her 'our sister'; this was an important and very public prioritisation of women within IS discourse (Saltman & Smith 2015).

Such demands also re-emphasise the important role that women play in the caliphate. Whilst these roles are firmly relegated to the domestic sphere[4] (including the Al-Khansaa Brigade) they nevertheless mark the departure of IS from other conflict zones, such as Afghanistan, which limited or ignored women's participation. IS has thus welcomed the contributions of women through clearly identified roles, with service to the cause as mothers and wives constantly highlighted as important and valuable. The recruitment strategy of targeting women with specifically gendered forms of invitation and influence, combined with the global reach and appeal of IS based on narratives that revolve around the ummah, helps explain why women travel there in greater numbers than in the case of similar movements such as Al Qaeda or Boko Haram (Saltman & Smith 2015).

IS also capitalised on the (real or imagined) persecution of Muslim women as an element of their recruitment strategy in the online IS magazine *Dabiq*. In a textual analysis of *Dabiq*, Huey (2015) found the 'overwhelming majority' of instances where women were referenced in the magazine were as victims of anti-Muslim persecution in need of defending by males (2015: 8). These references are sometimes used to legitimise jihadi violence against non-Muslim women as a form of just revenge. This is further supplemented from a different angle by IS's emphasis on the unique mode that the jihad of women and girls can take (Rafiq & Malik, 2015), built not only around supporting armed conflict in non-combat roles, but also around pioneering through the creation of a new state and a new social order (Grossman 2015). Through this aspect of nation-building, and the repeatedly articulated need for women as wives and mothers to serve the state-building project, girls and women can feel confident they are playing an important role without the need to pick up a gun or strap on a bomb.

Finally, Rafiq & Malik (2015: 39) also remind us of the crucial role – for women as for men – of social relations and networks, primarily through the figure of the online 'friend' in recruitment encounters, and how this becomes entwined with radicalisation. As they note, 'Propaganda alone does not tend to make someone take action'. This highlights the ongoing relational dimensions of social influence, bonding and social support that are so critical to the success of recruitment to violent action.

[4] It should be noted that recent reports have emerged of women engaged in combat in IS territory, specifically in Libya. While they have not been given this permission in Syria or Iraq to date, it may reflect a new development or transition in IS tactics and strategies (Trew 2016).

WOMEN PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The role of women in countering and preventing participation in violent extremism rightly forms the second element in the two-pronged approach of our study. As the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security's panel of experts has noted, 'It is important that countering violent extremism efforts recognise [women] as partners in prevention and response frameworks, as well as agents of change. As such, women must be included in the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of strategies to counter violent extremism' (2014: 1-2).

THE ROLE OF MOTHERS

Women have increasingly been emphasised as having a strong role in preventing people, especially family members, from becoming involved in violent extremism. The role of mothers in this regard is particularly well highlighted in the literature (Briggs & Silverman 2014; Safi 2016; Saltman & Frenett 2016). Indeed, the role of women as agents of prevention is seen as so important that a specific counter-terrorism campaign, the 'Syria Awareness Campaign', was recently launched in the UK, focussing on women as preventers of young people travelling to join ISIS or being radicalised (Briggs & Silverman, 2014). Another recent initiative is the Mothers' School program (Schlaffer & Kropiunigg 2015), which operates in various countries around the world and is designed to strengthen and empower women's capacity and networks to counter violent extremism in their own local settings and locales. Schlaffer and Kropiunigg (2015) also report on the crucial and under-utilised role mothers can play in countering violent extremism in their children. They discuss related research showing that mothers' willingness to hinder their children's involvement in violent extremism was matched only by their lack of confidence and skill in the area.

A notable feature of Schlaffer and Kropiunigg's report on their study, which involved more than 1000 women in several different countries, is the issue of whom mothers of children involved in violent extremism feel they trust most when looking to source help and support for diverting their children from this path. Revealingly, 94% of women responded that other mothers were those they trusted most in this context. Fathers were next at 91%, followed by other relatives at 81%. In a crisis situation, the family circle is clearly seen as the first port of call and primary source of support, and women's first choice is other women whom they feel can identify with their situation and concerns.

Institutionally speaking, teachers, listed fourth with trust scores of 79%, and community organisations at 61%, ranked most highly as trustworthy institutions that lie outside local social networks. Religious leaders earned a 58% trust score, potentially suggesting some ambivalence or lack of confidence in their ability to deliver what is required to mothers when addressing this issue.

State organisations displayed some of the weakest trust scores, with police at 39%, the army at 35% and local councils at 34%. International organisations did not fare much better, earning similarly weak trust scores of 36%. However, governments earned the lowest trust scores of all at 29% (Schlaffer & Kropiunigg 2015: 23).

Schlaffer and Kropiunigg (2015: 23) highlight the fact that 'of all needs provided in the survey, 86 percent of mothers considered increasing their knowledge about the warning signs of radicalisation to be of highest importance'. Given the crucial family 'insider' role that mothers play, coupled with their strong desire to prevent their children being involved in violent extremism, the question of whom mothers do and do not trust is especially relevant when planning and implementing policies and programs and policies on this issue. If CVE programs rely solely on government-led programs, for example, there may be serious obstacles around trust, even for a group of women who are otherwise very willing to take up the services being offered.

Saltman and Smith (2015) similarly emphasise the crucial role of the mother in the case of girls who (attempt to) join IS, commenting, 'There is evidence to suggest that women's families have a strong influence in terms of persuading prospective female migrants at least to delay, if not reject migration entirely'. Families can also be instrumental in mounting both emotional and also practical challenges to women attempting to join foreign conflict (utilising the emotional wrench of separation, for example, but also hiding passports).

However, that there is also some criticism of the focus on mothers in CVE contexts. Naraghi-Anderlini (2016) is particularly critical of this approach for the following reasons:

> The motherhood paradigm [in CVE] is a way to package and present women in apolitical and non-threatening ways according to traditional, and even biological norms of femininity it is the image of the lioness protecting her cubs. As they strive to keep their own boys and girls out of trouble, of course, the mothers' interests intersect with those of governments. But by virtue of being pressed to act as frontline whistleblowers, they are also at risk of being used or 'instrumentalised' by many of the same states whose policies may be contributing to the growth of extremism.

We would add that mothers are also at risk of being unfairly responsibilised (Grossman 2016a) when young people do slip through the net to become involved in violent extremism. If mothers are uncritically vaunted as the key to addressing early signs of radicalisation but, as a logical consequence, are then blamed for failure to prevent their children from radicalising, this will have a chilling effect for other women to act. They are unlikely to want to risk shame, censure or disapproval for their efforts if they are ultimately unsuccessful.

Naraghi-Anderlini goes on to argue that we must look beyond mothers to women in general, given the very long history of women – not all of whom have been mothers – who have been effective as social activists. She suggests this includes the importance of engaging women who understand the dynamics of social influence and change and who have experience of activism in the public as well as the private sphere in order to enhance the robustness of CVE thinking and action more generally.

BARRIERS TO WOMEN PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

It is also important to consider what some of the barriers might be for women who wish to become more involved in countering violent extremism. Grossman et al.'s 2014 Australian study on *Harnessing Resilience Capital* to counter violent extremism in culturally diverse communities notes women and girls report being excluded by CVE strategies that rely solely or primarily on established community structures featuring male community leaders to influence family and friends away from violent extremism. This was seen as unhelpful because it closed off or limited

opportunities to engage with diverse forms of community leadership and influence exercised by women that could make positive inroads from different angles.

In the same study, Grossman et al. also note that some women said they often felt isolated and excluded by the very structures that helped men feel a strong sense of belonging and connectedness. They pointed to the fact that women's involvement in formal community structures and governance was often not a high priority, particularly when it came to being heard on religious matters. In this sense, *religious inclusion* was distinguished sharply from *cultural inclusion* by female study participants. They felt welcomed and embraced by their religion's principles and values, but excluded and disavowed by what they saw as cultural practices governed by men and privileging men's views, needs and wishes to the disadvantage of women's voices and capacities.

Younger women especially spoke at length about their search for alternative sense of belonging outside the social and religious traditions of their communities, which they felt relegated women to private domestic spaces and relationships built around cooking and marriage, foreclosing on opportunities for broader community and civic participation by women. And in some cases, older women in the community were seen as complicit with these exclusions, highlighting the work needed around improving intergenerational understanding and tolerance. The challenge here, says Grossman, is thus how to broaden effective community leadership-government relations and cooperation with previously marginalised segments of communities, without wholly alienating traditional structures of power within communities where these tend to be concentrated amongst men and/or amongst older people. This means that much more effort is needed to forge effective government relationships with women in communities where there may be vulnerabilities to violent extremism.

Women are also key influencers within families (Grossman et al. 2014; Grossman 2016a). As Grossman et al.'s (2014) findings indicate, women in each community participating in their study were often more likely than men to adapt and accept cultural change, and turn such adaptation into a positive. They also showed great resourcefulness, adaptability, positive outlook and creativity in coming to terms with change and driving healthy, prosocial attitudes and practices towards their capacity to live well and feel empowered in respect of their status and their

future. In order to maximise this capacity, the authors argue for the need to increase opportunities for women in communities to work more closely with government and non-government agencies in order to reduce any potential overreliance on male-dominated frameworks of community representation and advocacy. Women remain an important resource in countering violent extremism at family and community level, and operationalising cultural resilience should draw significantly on strengthening the ability of women to contribute to CVE efforts and approaches at the local and broader community level.

However, as noted above, while it is important to emphasise and build on the strengths that both individual women and collective women's networks can offer to the project of countering violent extremism, countering violent extremism is not a science, and increasing women's exposure to blame when others go down the wrong path must be a carefully managed risk (Grossman 2016a).

Additionally, the role of Muslim women publicising their positive and successful life experiences in Australia to their audiences, particularly through social media, is a little-considered but potentially useful CVE strategy. Patel (2017: 29) observes, 'Women's positive lived experiences might provide a solid basis for a different dialogue to develop in creating counter-narratives. This approach is currently under-researched and neglected in favour of harnessing the negative experiences of violent extremism to counter its appeal'. As will be discussed in our findings, participants (generally female Muslim community members) raised this issue without prompting in our interviews, suggesting women are not only already engaged in this, but have organically identified its value in their grassroots work.

WOMEN AND MUSLIM COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TO CVE

It is worth keeping in mind the different politics that play out at community level concerning the dynamics around both violent extremism and how to counter it, in which of course Australian Muslim women, like men, may be deeply involved in and impacted by. This has implications not only for understandings about how people are recruited to violent extremism but also about receptiveness to suggested programs and policies for preventing it that may arise from this research. Bokhari (2015) discusses the differing receptions towards CVE in American Muslim communities, including the 'elites' who exert strong critical influence in Muslim opinions in this space. Bokhari (2015: 4) potentially underplays the role played by online influence by some of these elites when he argues that these people 'do not supplant local experiences', since many of those influenced may not be attending their local mosque or Muslim community centre to receive any local counterpoint. Indeed, as Roy (2016) and others point out, people who are moving towards violent extremism are often isolated (either by themselves or by those 'grooming' or guiding them) from the wider Muslim community and become particularly distanced from voices that may challenge IS mentalities (see also Berger 2015). START (2015) has also researched attitudes towards CVE in the US Muslim community, categorising community advocates as either 'engagers' or 'disengagers'. Engagers believe the terrorist threat is real and that there is benefit in cooperation, whereas disengagers focus on the problems of surveillance and targeting of the Muslim community, and believe the threat to be exaggerated. Whilst initially START found that law enforcement was able to bypass disengagers and just work with engagers, the ongoing controversies surrounding CVE models and tactics in the US has increased pushback against it by many in American Muslim communities, and a similar picture has emerged in the UK in relation to Prevent and its allied programs (Thomas 2012, 2016).

What is still not well understood, however, is where and how the gendered experience of Muslim *women* community members sits within such dynamics and paradigms. We hope that the emergent research findings from the current study presented below go some way towards beginning to address this gap.

CONCLUSION

This literature review has considered the nature and scale of the violent extremist problem for Australia in relation to female participation, and highlights the problematic ways in which untested or inaccurate gender assumptions about terrorism, terrorists, and those who engage in violent extremism may be impacting on counter-terrorism and CVE research, policy models and practice. It has canvassed a number of theoretical and conceptual models for understanding the motivation to join groups like but not limited to IS, and stressed the need to see each as potentially useful but not prescriptive. It has also emphasised that the gendered element of violent extremism lies not so much in the area of motivational push and pull factors, which tend largely to be the same for men and women, but rather in the distinctively gendered *experiences* of these push and pull factors.

The review has also highlighted the most recent research on recruitment models employed by IS that have been identified thus far, and their implications for the increased number of women globally becoming active in violent extremist movements. It has also considered what the latest research has revealed about how women's involvement and interactions, both offline and through internet and social media technologies, can accelerate support for but also prevention of violent extremism. Finally, it has considered the broader context of how CVE programs have been received and engaged with (or not) by Western Muslim communities, and the implications of this for better understanding of the roles that women may play in preventing and countering radicalisation to violence.

Research on women's involvement in supporting and opposing violent extremism is relatively underdeveloped, especially when compared to men, but also rapidly growing. We have aimed to provide here a summary review of a number of key issues and insights in the literature on which we build in order to help contextualise and focus the discussion below of our own study's research findings and implications.
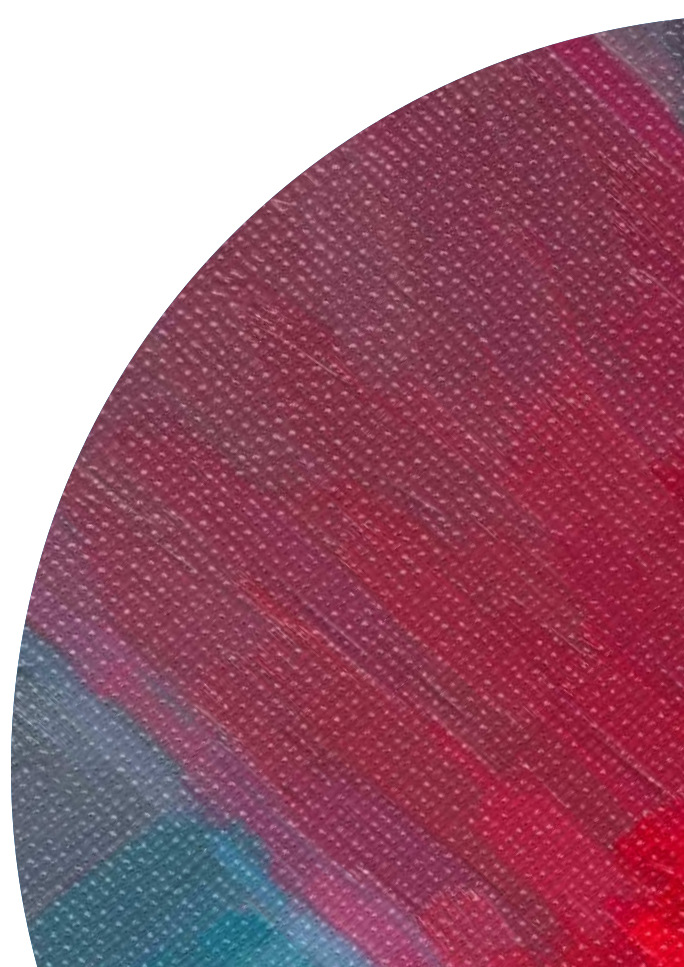
CHAPTER TWO
ROLES OF WOMEN IN SUPPORTING
VIOLENT EXTREMISM

In attempting to understand the roles that women may play in supporting or pursuing contemporary violent extremism in Australia, it is important to explore, first, whether there are gender-specific elements that push and/or pull women to support or engage in politically motivated violence, and if so how these may be different to drivers for men. Second, we need to ask, if there are gender-specific dimensions, how we might understand and use these to support community and government efforts to prevent or mitigate women's involvement in violent extremism. These considerations have gained further momentum since the rise of Islamic State in 2014, which has seen unprecedented numbers of not only young men but also young women in Australia, as elsewhere, take on active roles in relation to supporting both domestic violent extremism and travel to foreign conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. These roles have included supporting, influencing, promoting and prosecuting the Islamic State cause in a variety of ways at home, abroad and especially online.

As noted in Chapter 1 above, the roles played over time by women who support or are actively involved in terrorism are varied and complex (Huey and Witmer 2016; see also the review of women's historical involvement in political violence conducted by Patel, 2017). They are also highly contextual, reflecting what Tahiri and Grossman (2013: 32) term the 'convergence paradigm', in which the interplay between a range of personal and environmental factors must coalesce in order to radicalise an individual or group. In the case of women radicalising to violence, as for men, these factors may include individual choices, influences, motives and pre-dispositions; local and transnational social and cultural dynamics, settings and networks; social and ideological opportunities and constraints; and pragmatic considerations such as access to means and resources.

As we have also seen, the emerging scholarly consensus is that women generally radicalise to violence for the same reasons that men do, largely through processes related to 'narratives, ideology, grievances and various push and pull factors' (Raqiq and Malik 2015:10). Thus profiling women who radicalise to violence based on oversimplified assumptions, biases or myths about gender is as likely to fail in the case of women (Sjoberg et al. 2011) as it is for men. In fact, a substantial risk when trying to understand what, if any, role gender differences may play in radicalisation to violence is relying on outmoded or stereotyped assumptions about women based on gender bias (Speckhard 2009; Gentry & Sjoberg 2011; Patel 2017) for at least three reasons.

First, terrorist movements have been able to exploit gender biases and blindspots by making strategic and tactical use of women in conflict settings through the failure to imagine women as serious terrorist actors (Bloom 2016). Second, as Roworth (2015) notes, disregarding the complexity of women's reasons for involvement in violent extremism in favour of stereotypes will constrain the reach and impact of any policy or programming initiatives designed to reduce or eliminate their participation in extremist violence. Third, efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate female violent extremists will founder because inaccurate or banal gender-based assumptions and approaches will not resonate or be effective with those women who – for a variety of reasons – may disengage or be diverted from violent extremist ideology and action.

Nevertheless, as noted in the literature review, this is not to say that gender, and gendered experience in particular, have no bearing in understanding the landscape of women within violent extremist settings. It is widely acknowledged that gender issues play a role in, and are exploited by, processes of push, pull and recruitment for men to violent extremism, particularly in relation to various constructs of masculine social identities (Roose 2016). In the same way, we need to understand not only *whether* but *how* constructs of female social identities are reflected by and deployed within radicalisation processes and pathways for women.

As discussed below, the Australian data collected and analysed here suggest that the chief *drivers* or 'push factors' of radicalisation to violent extremism for women bear little if any distinction from the drivers for men. Nor do the *attractors* or 'pull factors' differ significantly, although some gender-specific aspects of pull factors for women have emerged in relation to sense of empowerment, as discussed in more detail below.

However, important differences and specificities do emerge at two levels:

1. The *pathways and networks* by which Australian women appear to radicalise to violence.

2. The *gender-specific experience* of women within violent extremist circles and settings once they have started to travel down this path.

Despite these insights, it is important also to note that many participants – in particular, government stakeholders – emphasised that there is much we still do not know about women who radicalise to violence. The legacy of policy attention devoted toward male radicalisation over the last two decades, combined with the challenges of collecting robust and verifiable data on internet and social media channels; the more privatised sphere of women's activity, and the very small number of both men and women who have come to the attention of law enforcement in relation to terrorism in Australia mean that solid empirical evidence can be more difficult to obtain and analyse. Government policy makers were clear about the fact that, in a number of instances, there is a lag between what is suspected or hypothesised about women's involvement in supporting violent extremism on the one hand, and obtaining the research or other data that would confirm or modify these assumptions on the other.

Nevertheless, despite these identified limitations, much of the data provided by participants below is firmly grounded in knowledge supported by field-based contact and insights in both community and government contexts, offering a critical window into on-the-ground understandings of knowledge and challenges around women and violent extremism at the present time in Australia.

A NOTE ON IDENTIFIERS FOR PARTICIPANT QUOTATIONS

In our use of quotations from project participants to illustrate or amplify various points in the discussion, we have been mindful of the risks of identification for people who contributed their very valuable time and insights to the study on a strictly confidential basis. For this reason, we have adopted a limited form of identification that indicates only cohort (e.g., community member, government stakeholder) and gender (e.g. female, male) for individual participants.

For quotations from participants in focus groups, only the location of the focus group is given (e.g. Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane), since participants in all focus groups were female community members.
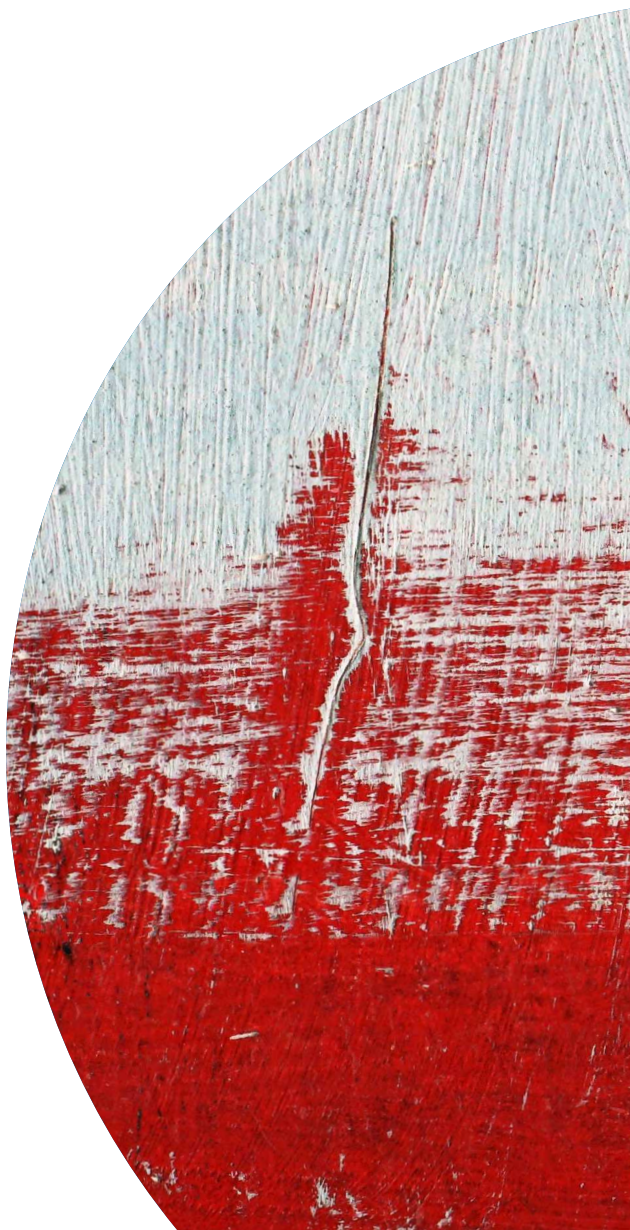
PUSH: WHAT DRIVES WOMEN TO RADICALISE TO VIOLENCE?

In terms of whether or not there are gendered differences in what can push or pull women towards violent extremism, a significant majority of study participants from both communities and government felt there were little if any meaningful differences between women and men:

There's not much gender difference anymore in the behaviour of men and women in the younger generations. Those gender roles aren't as defined as for the older generations, so I think this is probably not playing to their heads as much. [Community member, male]

There hasn't been a huge difference between the motivations of why young blokes and young women get involved. We are still talking about relatively small numbers, and the range of motivations is similar as for men. If there are particular influences for women, we haven't seen evidence of it yet. [Government stakeholder, female]

Let's face it, young girls can be just as counter-cultural and revolutionary as the young men. The [radicalisation] narrative encourages that. [Government stakeholder, male]

Most of the reasons [women would be attracted to political violence] would overlap with men: sense of belonging, fulfilment and achievement. [Community member, male] *… I think the underlying motivations are pretty much the same – identity, hope, disenfranchisement, etc.* [Community member, female]

Accordingly, the most common push factors identified by both community members and government stakeholders for Australian women were:

1. **grievances,** particularly those relating to conflict, sense of victimisation and sense of injustice;

2. **lack of connection/belonging to mainstream society,** especially for those from minority or marginalised backgrounds, and

3. **social vulnerability,** including lack of knowledge and/ or skills, social isolation, and lack of confidence.

These push factors are by and large not distinct from those seen as influencing men to radicalise to violence.

GRIEVANCES: FEAR, LOATHING AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

Both community-based participants and government stakeholders felt that grievances, both specific in nature (for example, the conflict in Syria) and also a more generalised and deeply felt '*sense of injustice in the world*' [Community member, female], were important push factors for women. A government stakeholder summed up this view neatly: '*Personal and collective grievances; whilst there are some who pooh-pooh and downplay that now, I think that this remains a pretty salient driver*' [Government stakeholder, male] for both men and women who radicalise.

This was specifically linked by study participants to perceptions of '*injustices of crimes being committed against Muslims*' [Community member, female] through both foreign policy and domestic discourse. Sense of injustice was in turn seen by participants to be combined with a range of social and emotional dimensions, including the experience of fear (including fear of Islamophobia), the desire to protect those in need, and the desire to create change for the better through social activism.

The linking of grievances with fear largely concerned the sense of acute precariousness and vulnerability faced by Muslim communities as a result of rising Islamophobia in many parts of the non-Muslim world; as one woman in a project focus group put it, '*You have people joining IS because they are fearful that they will be eliminated just like that. All these atrocities, bits and pieces coming together and then we have huge crises*' [Focus group, Sydney]. This was echoed by government participants who pointed to current debates about '*whether an increase in anti-Islam and other discrimination experienced by women who are visually identified as Muslims is linked to pushing people to feel they don't belong, are unwanted*' [Government stakeholder, female].

As a number of other studies have suggested (Tahiri and Grossman 2013; Williams 2016), the role of both mainstream and social media was perceived by some participants to further stoke such anxieties through socially divisive and inflammatory language and commentary, '*creating fear to a level that is dividing the community*' [Community member, female] and further exacerbating the sense of embattlement and vulnerability felt by some Australian Muslim women:

> *We need to talk about Islam less – they're obsessed in the media! It's relentless. It really wears you down. You'd think [Australia] was a Muslim country given how much they talk about it, and everyone is apparently an expert.* [Community member, female]

> *They feed on the negativity side of it on social media, so the narrative of a girl being abused for wearing hijab on public transport will get magnified and feed into this negativity.* [Government stakeholder, female]

These factors have combined to create a keenly heightened sense of urgency for some Australian Muslim women:

> *More recently, with the rise of Islamophobic discourse, everyone and his dog wants to pick on Islam. It's causing a lot of anxiety in the Muslim community – even for the most resilient Muslims. … Six months ago people would've loved Waleed [Aly]'s public statement on love rather than hate [on Channel 10's The Project], but now that message is not cutting through as much. As a Muslim, I feel now I need to do more. I feel a strong sense of urgency.* [Community member, female]

Such perceptions of fear and embattlement can also coalesce with an everyday sense of '*disillusionment with society [and] government*' [Focus group, Sydney] to create perceptions of '*always being under siege*' [Community member, male] for women who come to '*feel like [political violence is] the only response that people can have to injustices of crimes being committed against Muslims*' [Community member, female].

Participants also noted that perceptions of injustice can shade into the desire to become social activists for change, either to defend and protect, or else to reverse humiliation and injustice:

> *It's almost well-meaning radicalisation, like we want to do something good. They all have this intention to want to go and help their fellow brothers and sisters in strife. They also see things like proper recognised aid being stopped from going into these areas. So now they think, well, even if I wanted to go through the right channels to go help I can't. The only way to try and go and help them is to get in there and be there and go through the back channels which again they get caught up into.* [Focus group, Melbourne]

> *They think, 'There is a conflict overseas and I need to be involved to defend my faith or defend my people or defend whatever the cause is.'* [Government stakeholder, male]

> *I think that's been one of the major factors in luring young girls, where somebody complains about what's happening Syria or Palestine or Iraq and then somebody else comes in and says, yeah, well let's do something about it. So they create a group [online] and then what happens within that space is that you're all just complaining and no solution except we need to go and do something about it.* [Community member, female]

> *In their own reality it makes sense to go there and kill those who are killing the Muslims in Syria and Iraq or Palestine or whatever around the world right now.* [Government stakeholder, female]

And some participants linked this to women, especially mothers, who feel protective towards children or the vulnerable and who want to take a stand, especially those who have suffered a personal loss as the result of political violence:

I think it also depends on whether you're a mother. … In my childless days I didn't care to the same depth. This has an impact on your decisions and response to things. If you've lost all your children, then anger can get the better of you, or lost your husband. [Focus group, Sydney]

They want to defend their children, they are seeing a lot of kids being killed and the motherly instinct comes up and they want to do something about it. It's the same empowerment that the men get – if they die fighting or contributing, they die a martyr. Women can be martyred just as well as men. [Community member, female]

In fact, a number of participants stressed the **personal and emotional dimensions** of grievance-led radicalisation for women who support violent action. This was especially emphasised by participants in relation to young people's responses to grievances and sense of injustice:

[Their perception is that] people are ignoring what's happening overseas. The rest of the world's just rolling by and not actually seeing what you're seeing and feeling the passion of that particular street which was once a beautiful street is now rubble kind of thing. They do become very, very passionate about injustices and it's no longer just something that pops up in the newspaper that happened five days ago. Now we're getting internet, Facebook, social media, tweets that five minutes ago this happened, yesterday this happened, with photos. So I think that information is far more compelling and more powerful and I think that it can draw a passionate response much faster than what would have happened in previous years. [Government stakeholder, female]

So often when I talk to young people, in particular, the connection is real and emotional, it's not just a perceived sense of injustice, it's real. It's my aunty, it's my uncle, it's my cousin, for example. [Government stakeholder, female]

There's a lot of frustrations about things that are happening around the world – some of them will stay home and do nothing about it but maybe the 1% will stand up and say – do something to show them what Muslims can do if they want to do something about it. [Government stakeholder, female]

In turn, this creates an environment in which the

boundaries between 'feeling' and 'doing' become less clear and the translation from thought to deed more compelling and acceptable:

When you have broad acceptance of some injustice, ramping it up to intensifying this sense and then fighting against it, there are fewer barriers to taking action. The general sense that what's happening is not right means more permissive and enabling conditions for this to be translated into sense of grievance that can lead to action. [Government stakeholder, female]

'I CAN'T FIT IN': LACK OF BELONGING, SOCIAL CONNECTION AND POSITIVE IDENTITY

A strong majority of community-based participants identified lack of belonging and minimal or problematic social connections as a major push factor for women radicalising to violence, as it is for men. For many community participants, lack of belonging largely concerned feeling discriminated against, socially excluded or negatively targeted by mainstream society. The driver for women, as for men, is to seek out alternative identifications and sense of belonging with other groups in which to turn negative experiences of marginalisation into positive experiences of belonging:

In some ways life in Australia is so difficult, why stay in a place where you're going to continue to be mistreated? [Community member, female]

I work with a lot of young people who are disgruntled, who may not feel well connected to the society that they live in and from what I understand from them they don't have a sense of belonging and so they get drawn to foreign conflict and foreign politics. [Community member, female]

So, it's that everyday discrimination that people continue to face from Islamic backgrounds, and women in particular. … Sometimes they're persecuted or perceive persecution, whether real or in their head. Persecution includes the feeling of being 'other' in your own community. [Community member, female; Focus group, Sydney]

Several community members pointed to the contrapuntal nature of this disengagement, in which young people choose to 'live down' to negative stereotyping out of '*anger and frustration that gets mixed up together with the victimhood narrative*' to create a self-fulfilling prophecy [Government stakeholder, male]:

> *So there's this counter-reaction. Might say, okay you know what, if you guys are going to consider me as a Muslim I might as well become a Muslim with a purpose. So the Muslim world is in a state of loss and this mob here is claiming they're going to offer a ticket to utopia. I might as well join them since I can't be Australian and I'm a Muslim.* [Community member, male]

> *It's feeling chronically defensive and having to feel you need to justify yourself all the time, your identity as a young Muslim. They can't be normal, I'm a teenager, I'm doing the wrong thing as a teenager – it's always I'm doing the wrong thing. They feel, 'If I have to justify myself like this all the time, I might as well be the stereotype that's being imposed on me.'* [Focus group, Sydney]

But the issues are not merely isolation or disconnection from the broader society at large, or a response to negative media and community commentary on Islam. Important nuances on this topic were teased out by community participants in relation to local environments in the home and at schools. This emphasis on how local environments can feed into experiences and narratives of social disconnection is vital in understanding the challenges faced for women, like men, in relation to building personal and community resilience in the face of intensified community debate around the politics of social belonging:

> I *think it's borne out of a massive isolation from the Muslim community and from the non-Muslim community. I work with Muslim youths and the common theme is that they're not fitting in with their family at home. Because they speak English as a first language, but very often their parents won't speak English fluently or their accent [creates] a sense of embarrassment. They go to school and they're treated as the outsiders, especially if they've got very prominently Muslim names. So there's resentment, isolation, marginalisation, they're constantly questioning their Australian identity, always trying to prove that they're more Muslim or they're not very Muslim.* [Focus group, Melbourne]

> *It goes back to belonging – who are you conversing with? It's the parents and teachers. As a teacher I talk to other teachers who feel they have a free card to say what they want. But you can't alienate your students – you can have a conversation but if you impose your views as a teacher and authority, there are boys and girls in your class who will know they don't belong. They are not playing the teacher's role of nurturing and we are now seeing this [arising] in terms of discrimination complaints, etc.* [Focus group, Sydney]

Government stakeholders agreed, citing lack of sense of belonging and threatened or fragile social identities for Australian Muslim women and girls as a critical node of vulnerability to the appeal of violent extremist narratives. In some cases, this vulnerability may be linked to experiences (either directly personal or that of social intimates or associates) that can heighten sense of exclusion and persecution (Huckerby 2015) and erode self-confidence and sense of efficacy:

> *I met a girl yesterday, she goes to [Islamic school] in [suburb] and she said I don't want to go out of the house, I'm worried that someone will attack me because of my hijab and I said to her, 'Look at me [wearing a hijab], don't worry about it'. But there's a lot of that happening lately.* [Government stakeholder, female]

> *'No one likes you in Australia, look how they treat us, look how this is happening,' the usual stuff, the victim mentality and you in particular because you have a hijab, you're going to be treated worse, you can't drive, you can't, you can't, you can't.* [Government stakeholder, female]

Other made similar points regarding broader lack of belonging, what one government participant called *'the inhospitable environment here in Australia in terms of media reportage, political language and the impact that has on people's sense of belonging and acceptance, sense of hope for the future and, I guess, just connectedness to Australia as a place where they belong and see themselves*' [Government stakeholder, male] and another saw as 'f*eeling a sense of alienation and disengagement from their own society'.* [Government stakeholder, female]

For women, as for men, feeling that they don't fit in with others around them – whether at the micro-level of everyday local life or the macro-level of broader community and political discourse – can lead to chronic inner conflicts and vexations around identity and sense of belonging: as one government participant observed, '*The conversations I've had with colleagues from different agencies involved always leads back to sense of identity for men. But there's no reason why women aren't going to think about identity*' [Government stakeholder, male]:

> *I think that if you don't have a strong sense of yourself and your own identity it can be very easy to get swayed. Those political messages are quite strong and vulnerable people whether they're young people or adults those messages appeal to them because it gives them a sense of power and a sense of purpose.* [Community member, female]

> *They may have undergone what people like Wiktorowicz [2005] call a cognitive opening, precipitated by a range of factors such as ideological, economic, social, driven by marginalisation, humiliation, whether direct or by proxy, whereby they then become more receptive to alternative ideas, belief systems, explanations, and their place in the world. This serves as a precursor to the radicalisation process.* [Government stakeholder, male]

In this regard, some women who experience the '*vulnerability of not having a strong sense of self-worth*' may seek '*the same empowerment as the men – the alleged empowerment being that they die fighting, they're actually being a martyr, men and women are the same level if they die as martyrs*'. [Focus group, Sydney]

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS CREATES SOCIAL VULNERABILITIES

The third major driver for community and government stakeholders revolved around lack of skills and knowledge for women, creating social vulnerabilities for which radicalisation to violence may seem to compensate and which violent extremist narratives can both target and exploit.

Lack of knowledge about how to seek '*the right people and the right information*' [Community member, female], both about religious doctrine and about support networks, pathways and resources, was a significant element in relation to this driver. In some cases, this was compounded by the decreasing age and maturity levels of those drawn to radicalised violence; as one community member put it,

'*most of the kids who are going are naïve, vulnerable, foolish kids who don't know why they're going in the first place*' [Community member, male]. In terms of general lack of knowledge, participants highlighted the following:

> *I think it comes from lack of confidence, lack of skills, lack of even knowledge about what pathways are available, that's a big part of it as well; resources and skills is definitely something that they lack in that regard.* [Community member, female]

> *Extremists prey on vulnerable people, they recruit in the community because of early school leaving, lack of employment.* [Community member, female]

> *The impact of age has been that their vulnerability is increased if they're young. Fast radicalisation, very little constructive or deep thinking.* [Government stakeholder, female]

> *I think there is still that element in the community, within the older generation, a certain belief or thinking that affects young people. They don't necessarily encourage violent extremism, but they're not, I suppose, savvy enough or they don't have enough knowledge to explain it properly, which could lead someone down any path, because they become very vulnerable then to start listening to other ideas.* [Government stakeholder, male]

Another concern was the specific lack of religious knowledge and the absence of female religious leadership and knowledge transfer that could help build resilience for women to radicalised religious narratives and frameworks:

> *There's no female religious information. They don't have female leaders that they can talk to. So a lot of the information if not all the information they receive is online. It's not that they need to be getting that information from a woman, but I think having that one on one conversation is going to do a lot more than anything that you're going to listen to online. So I think they're misinformed, there's lack of education, they don't have the right information and the wrong information is way too readily available.* [Community member, female]

> *The group of at-risk women I worked with] don't really know much about Islam – they admitted this themselves.* [Community member, male]

> *Those [women] that have no understanding or are converts, they haven't got the scope of discernment, so they just jump straight into it.* [Community member, male]

ADDITIONAL PUSH FACTORS

While the non-gender-specific categories of *grievances, lack of belonging and lack of knowledge and skills leading to social vulnerability* were the three top push factors identified by participants, a range of additional drivers were also identified.

REBELLION, EXCITEMENT AND ADVENTURE

Rebellion, excitement and adventure were cited by a number of participants as relevant to understanding what pushes women toward violent extremism. As Grossman (2015a, 2016b) has pointed out, rebellion for women, like men, can involve seeking freedom *from* (gendered and non- gendered constraints, limitations and conflicts) as well as seeking freedom *to* (think, act or behave in new ways that push or redefine conventional gender boundaries). This was borne out by a number of community and government participants, who saw both push and pull at work in relation to the role of both adventure and defiance in the violent radicalisation of women, as this government stakeholder comment on Australian women who have travelled to foreign conflict zones neatly demonstrates: *'They came to the conclusion, I think, that, well, this is the way I am, this is who I am and I'll show you that I'm not just this meek mild Muslim woman that everyone thinks I am. I can be just as politically active, I can be just as assertive, and I can have a view, and I can take action'* [Government stakeholder, male].

While excitement, rebellion and adventure is more commonly dealt with as a pull factor, we have included it under 'push' here (recognising that push and pull frequently overlap in any case) because of the emphasis in the data on women who seek escape or are 'running away' from problems or constraints, including those of gender-specific domestic or cultural restrictions for women (Benhold 2015; Gonzalez-Perez 2013):

> *I'd be looking at whether this is this a rebellion act, where women think their faith has been hijacked. We talk to a lot of young women and mothers and whatever, and the most common theme that comes through is rebelliousness: 'I disagree with this, therefore I'm going to do that'.* [Community member, female]

> *For some young girls, if they have come from very religious and very restrictive parents, they can rebel and that's perfectly normal and happens in every religion and every culture acrossthe board. But particularly with the political violence, I think you'll have young people who will rebel, who find a cause and cling to it.* [Government stakeholder, female]

> *From some of the language [women] have used, they've found Islam to be restrictive, the way they have lived. So they have seen this as a way of expressing themselves in whichever way they want to the extent of a risky extreme action.* [Community member, male]

> *There is a British South Asian comedian who talks about the fact that if Islamic State was around when she was a teenager, she would have got involved just to get up her parent's noses, because they would have disapproved. Some of the motivation, we've been told, is about rebellion, backlash against control.* [Government stakeholder, male]

BROKEN OR DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY LIFE

The impact of family stress and breakdown was a big theme for community members, though not for government stakeholders. Many community participants felt that the disintegration of family relationships – whether in marriages or between parents and children – played a really key role in fostering increased receptiveness to the appeals of violent extremist ideology, sociality and action. They thought strengthening skills in family communication and providing positive engagement, education and role models were strong elements to consider in developing prevention strategies. The following personal vignettes about young women from insider community perspectives compellingly illustrate these points:

> *One of the girls, she had a lot of underlying issues: family violence, break-ups, drug abuse, a broken family, so for her she probably wanted a sense of belonging. I think she got it from the wrong people, the wrong crowd. Whereas the other girl, apparently she was from a religious-based family, but to an extreme. They wouldn't allow her to breathe, basically. Even just going out the door was a major issue, and the family had only one child, so for them it was [devastating] that their daughter could even think of things like that. The hints that we were getting… Initially they said, oh, look, I want to get married. This is the ultimate for me because it'll mean I'll get out of the situation that I'm in. They were hostile with their families anyway, so they thought this was a way to get out. The influences that they were going to, the groups that they were seeing promoted about being a 'jihadi bride', they didn't really understand what that meant. Thank goodness that they were caught and brought back, and their ideology has changed since then. But yes, the family [dysfunction] did contribute.* [Community member, female]

I was in [Middle Eastern country]. I know how they break the relationship with family. He was very much – everything is fine and dandy [at first]. Then it's, 'Your parents are not good Muslims because you go to a mixed school'. I was very unhappy anyway, so I was not in a good place, and I didn't have positive relationships. If I had good family relationships, then I would have been deterred from breaking my family relations. But in fact what I wanted was justification to hate my parents, which only drew me further to him. We need the same approach to look at any young person who was having family issues – what tools do we have to build resilient families with good communication, those are the tools we need to develop and apply. To help families protect young people from falling into [violent extremism]. [Community member, female]

Nine times out of 10, most of the people … who are going out to become radicalised are often coming from families which are in one way or the other dysfunctional. It could be something as mild as parents just not talking to [their kids] … being very disconnected and then … levels of domestic violence as well. These are those elements [that make young people] try to look for some kind of life elsewhere. So family, to me, is number one in the entire equation, well before ideology [or] political circumstances in the world. [Community member, male]

While government stakeholders did not generally focus on this issue, one did highlight the need to gather more empirical data that might shed further light on the role played by family issues in propelling women to seek an 'out' through alternative relationships or social networks that may involve them in violent extremism, noting, '*It would be interesting to look at how many of the women/girls [who radicalise to violence] come from families where there is breakdown, death, widowhood, dysfunction, or other family dynamics that relate to the problem*' [Government stakeholder, male].

CULTURAL OR RELIGIOUS LIMITATIONS ON WOMEN'S AGENCY AND FREEDOM

By contrast, significantly more government stakeholders from both Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds highlighted **cultural or religious limitations for women's exercise of agency** and linked this to push factors related to a gendered upbringing for young women, in which lack of education and employment opportunities combined with pressure to marry and '*follow your man*' [Government stakeholder, female] are prominent features. However, a small minority of community members also supported the relevance of a gendered upbringing for women as a push factor, citing cultural traditions that favour male over female siblings in terms of support and opportunities, and lower expectations within families for women compared to men in terms of economic and educational access and development.

There was very little to no support for the idea that *women are pushed toward violent extremism for gender-specific reasons* or that *peer pressure plays a role in the radicalisation of women*, and only limited support from community members that *mental health issues; lack of alternatives for social change and political engagement*, or *lack of hope for the future* can be a significant push factor.

CHERCHEZ L'HOMME? THE ROLE OF MALE INFLUENCE

While, generally speaking, push factors toward violent extremism for women may largely be the same as those for men, gendered experience does emerge as significant when it comes to the pathways by which women are drawn into violent extremist networks and settings. Overwhelmingly, both community and government participants identified *male influence* as a chief push (and to a lesser extent, pull) factor in women's trajectory towards support for or involvement in radical violence.

In this sense, a major emergent difference between radicalisation pathways for women versus men may lie at the level of social networks and relationships. While a wealth of studies have demonstrated that social networks in general are core mechanisms in terms of pathways to violent extremism (see for example Gable and Jackson 2007, Gill and Corner 2015, Passy 2003, Sageman 2008, Weimann 2012), these networks – especially those forged on the basis of existing ties and emotional bonds that can precede radicalisation trajectories (Passy 2003, Sageman 2004, Alonso 2010) – are often gendered in nature, with men radicalising to violence based on social network ties, friendships and activities involving other men who are either peers or figures of authority or other influences in their lives.

While Harris-Hogan's (2014) work shows the far-reaching impact that actively radicalised women such as the Australian militant extremist Rabiah Hutchison can have in facilitating the involvement of social and family networks in their cause, the reverse does not appear to be the case. There are only a few known instances of female *muhajirat* networks in which peer influence *between* women, whether as friends, siblings or through recruitment campaigns, have been identified as significant in women's pathways to radicalisation.[1] Gender-specific peer networks *do* become important for women once they have joined a violent extremist movement and can serve as a pull factor in relation to sense of solidarity and sisterhood. However, as we will see below, same-gender networks – in contrast to the embodied social networks of radicalised men – do not seem to be the major pathway along which Australian women make their first moves towards radicalisation to violence.

This observation is borne out by the data provided by both community and government participants experienced in working locally with Australian women who have radicalised or are at risk of radicalising to violence. These participants were unequivocal in their view that significant male influence within these women's lives, whether through marriage, kinship or other social networks, was the chief pathway through which they came to support or become involved in violent action. As one participant said, '*I think it's very much driven by the relationship with the person who is wanting to become a violent extremist. It's the extent of that relationship that may pull the [female] partner along as well. I see it more as because it's a personal relationship that's developed first, then the move to follow their beliefs*' [Government stakeholder, male].

Community members offered the following comments based on specific Australian cases with which they were familiar, in some cases citing cultural traditions about 'following the man' as the primary motive for women's involvement:

> *The main pathway is through significant men in their lives. It's rare to have women independently choose to become involved in violent extremism in their own right. I can't think of one case of women involved in foreign conflict who have gone without their partner.* [Community member, female]

> *My direct experience one-on-one is with these two girls. … I believe, especially in the conservative circles, it is the influence of a man on a woman. I hate to say it, but ISIS women, these two women, they think that their life is about serving the Mujahedeen. That's it. I said, look, what if your daughter is married to somebody who is married three times before and he's 50 years old? It doesn't matter. If he's Mujahi, that's my daughter's destiny to service him. They draw examples from Islamic history and of where women have been subservient rather than independent.* [Community member, female]

> *It was the fact that she wanted to be with her husband. Her husband made that decision and she wanted to be with him. So in that sense, she felt like she was there to be his wife and to keep their family intact. [*Community member, female]

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[1] See for example Shamima Begum, Kadiza Sultana and Amira Abase in the UK, alleged to have been recruited to Islamic State by Aqsa Mahmood (also known as Umm Layth) (http://www.news.com.au/world/europe/missing-british-schoolgirls-islamic-state-recruiter-branded-a-disgrace/news-story/a4cebd4f4e26cf32c3a138e6aac3d59d), and the alleged recruitment of Jasmina Milovanov by Australian IS influencer Zehra Duman (also referred to as Umm Abdullatif) (https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/sydney-mother-jasmina-milovanov-left-children-to-join-is-fight-in-syria-report-20150526-gh9hwh.html).

Government stakeholders with experience and knowledge of Australian women who have radicalised held similar views:

> Women are subjected to the same influences and, going back to kinship and social networks, especially if their husbands and boyfriends are operating in this space. Those who have gotten involved in violent extremism, or are at risk of it, are those, in our own experience, who have succumbed to either the pressures of their own husbands or close family members who have been connected to terrorist organisations, and I think as part of their perceived duty or role, they believe that they need to be with them and support them where they can. [Government stakeholder, male]

> I had one case where this lady was going out with one of these presumed naughty boys and was attending religious lessons. He was into the heavy stuff, I want to go to Syria, etc. He did go. She was waiting behind to follow him. It fell in my lap because I knew her sister and she said I'm going there, she was 16. I said what's going to make you go? Love? She said he's not coming back, he's going to die and I want to be next to him when he dies. I'd be next to him when he dies and carry a gun – this is the woman's role, she said. Alarm bells rang. [Government stakeholder, female]

> In the case of women, it's more common to see female social orientation toward violent extremism in the context of relationships with men – partners, etc. There are a low percentage of women who are entering the violent extremist space independently as actors. [Government stakeholder, female]

> It was surprising because initially some of them, or one or two of them that we knew of, had no real religious connection or affiliation. I think that sort of came later on and with the influence of the husband and the whole business of whatever he got involved in, how he got involved in, how he started and perceived his role or what he felt he had to do, it was then at that point the [female] partner decided to go the same way. [Government stakeholder, male]

One government participant noted that male influence could arise more in the context of pull than push: 'We're talking 15 [years of age] onwards because we've seen a bit of some girls getting attracted to those naughty boys, religious naughty boys; rather than go and being attracted to gangsters, they're attracted to someone who is very religious and very into the "let's do something bad because this country doesn't like us"'. [Government stakeholder, female]

Others, however, pointed to the circumstantial nature of how women become involved, not always deliberately, in violent extremist settings, continuing the theme of loyalty to, prioritising or protecting the family unit as a whole:

> I think there were also those women who involuntarily got caught in conflict because of family; they felt they had to go and support their families with their husbands. But, unfortunately when you get there you can't be independent. You are forced to have a side and you may go with the feeling or the notion that 'I'm here to protect my family.' [Government stakeholder, male]

> They go because their partners go. The women are emotionally attached and this is what really – negative or positive – affects women's decisions in a big way. If they've lost a son, or women who have lost a husband, and they really say I don't care if I die. That important person in my life has died in that cause. I don't agree with the decision, they say, but you never know, I can't say it's bad. [Community member, female]

Beyond the realm of male influence as a result of a male partner's or relative's own radicalisation trajectory, however, a few community and government stakeholders suggested that more active, aggressive forms of male power could also be at work in some instances, including grooming, coercion of and leverage over women:

> A lot of the time, they've been introduced through a male partner or polluted love. They've been groomed [by men]. [Community member, female] … The men can coerce the older women and the older women can't tell the difference between cultural and religious practices. The element of coercion, aggression, manipulation by men is one to consider. [Community member, female]

> Possibly the male may have leverage over the woman, e.g. [she is] under age [and involved in] covert sexual activity – social blackmail. [Government stakeholder, female]

The focus here on the role of male influence should not be taken to signal the downplaying of the agency and independence of women in making choices and adopting beliefs, behaviours and orientation that align with or assist in how they understand and negotiate their sense of self and place in the world. In fact, the data suggest that male influence *on its own* is insufficient in driving women toward violent extremist beliefs and activities, unless clear evidence of coercion or leverage and manipulation is involved.

What does appear to be the case is that male influence, when this *converges with other drivers* of the kinds discussed above, may provide an accessible and meaningful route for women who are seeking ways in which to express and mobilise their responses to such push factors.

It also points – as do the radicalisation pathways of men themselves – to the deeply relational underpinnings of how people radicalise, full stop, across the broad spectrum of violent extremist political movements, in which women actually demonstrate superior connectivity capacity and longevity in relation to sustaining terrorist networks compared to men (Manrique 2016). The fact that *pathways* to violent extremism in the Australian context are often (though not exclusively) characterised by cross-gender kinship or social network ties between women and men, rather than same-gender ties between women and other women, does not alter the finding that the main push factors for women are little to no different from those driving men towards radicalisation to violence.

PULL: WHAT ATTRACTS WOMEN TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

As indicated above, pull factors often work in dialectical relationship to push factors. They frequently comprise apparent antidotes or solutions to the grievances, frustrations, deficits and tensions that people are seeking to resolve, overcome or eliminate. As we will see below, the main 'pull factors' identified by community and government participants correspond closely to the main 'push factors' discussed above, and they are explicitly promoted and exploited by the narratives of contemporary violent extremist movements.

In relation to grievances and sense of injustice, violent extremist movements – whether promoted by neo-jihadist (Lentini 2013) or right wing violent extremist movements – appear to offer focus and sense of purpose in righting past and current wrongs and creating a new world order in which the movement's version of a refashioned 'just' and 'righteous' society will triumph over the corrupted and irredeemable present: '*Here you can be the Muslim you want to be, live outside the corrupt apostate governments, the kufr society. This is where you need to be*'. [Government stakeholder, female].

As one government participant cautioned,

> *We should not underestimate the ideological component when it comes to women. … Being able to take action is an important driver, not just feeling a sense of outrage about injustices but being able to do something about it. The new element is the state-building and more future-focused idea.* [Government stakeholder, male]

In relation to lack of social belonging, violent extremist movements offer solidarity, acceptance, and the embrace of like-minded advocates for a collective cause with a deeply rooted sense of mission. In relation to social vulnerability, Islamic State in particular has shrewdly capitalised on differentials in skills, knowledge and education amongst its recruits and supporters by offering a variety of roles and functions in building the caliphate as well as defeating the 'enemy'. Many of these roles explicitly target women and play to the desire for clarity, boundaries and sense of value and importance as a contributor to a new state-building enterprise.

Beyond this, it is also important to consider the context in which participants in this study perceive the specific 'pull' of jihadist violent extremism for women. Whereas analyses of push factors have not substantially changed in the transition from Al-Qaeda inspired to Islamic State inspired jihadism, the nature and understanding of pull factors has. Many participants observed that new dimensions of the pull towards violent extremism were now driven more by 'strong narratives around the utopian idyll of living "*the true Islam*", where there was a lack of that before'. [Government stakeholder, female]

Indeed, the exploration of pull factors for women was framed by participants' overall sense of revitalised directions and opportunities created by two recent phenomena: first, the rise and magnetism of Islamic State as a highly multifaceted and complex social movement deploying both antisocial and prosocial messaging strategies; and second, the range of new opportunities and potentialities created by the surge in online social media and communication technologies, platforms and global connectivity. These two contextual factors, with varying emphases, informed almost every dimension of participants' thinking about the nature of what now attracts women toward support for or involvement in radicalised violence.

SENSE OF PURPOSE, IDENTITY AND MEANING

By far the strongest identification of 'pull' for women amongst participants in both communities and government was the attraction of sense of purpose, identity and yearning for meaning and reward, also a significant attractor for men radicalising to violence.

A number of participants identified this yearning specifically less in terms of socio-political drivers and more in terms of genuine religiously-based impulses and convictions that fuse with the desire for sense of purpose, whether this meant living a life of greater religious integrity, purity and holism, or the felt need to defend and protect one's faith from threat and debasement:

> If their religion is what they find comforting and they want to defend their religion, it gives them a purpose in life. [Community member, female] …The Salafi hard core interpretation and the desire to lead the pure life delivered to them via the caliphate. [Government stakeholder, female]

> 'I'm going on this adventure which is for God', so in their own confused justification – you're breaking rules of respect for your parents, but this becomes secondary. So the mentality is, 'I'm going, and this is going to be my stamp on the world'. [Focus group, Sydney]

> There are Australian women who are true believers in what they understand the cause to be. [Government stakeholder, female] … There are a group of women who on their own or with husbands and families feel a religious obligation – making hijrah, going to the caliphate, etc. They respond to an interpretation of Islam that says this is a legitimate call from a legitimate religious authority and these things tell me that I'm obliged to go. [Government stakeholder, male]

> If I marry and my new husband becomes martyred, that's a good thing for me. It's because they are supporting a cause and marrying a lion, supporting him. They are contributing to a broader cause through a 'blessed relationship'. [Government stakeholder, male]

For the majority of participants who commented on this theme, however, sense of purpose was much broader than just religion. Instead, they saw sense of purpose as providing an explicit point of focus through which women, as do men, could channel grievances, frustrations and desires into purposeful activity and goals that legitimate and enhance their own sense of agency, value and achievement: 'Everyone thinks they're right. Once they're in position, they're completely, like, that's it. They're fixed in going in a particular direction.' [Focus group, Sydney]

In particular, the allure of the 'pioneer' or 'frontier' narrative (Grossman 2015a), in which both women and men feel empowered to create their own destiny, reinvent themselves and redirect the flow of both personal and political history was highlighted by a large number of community and government participants. As one community member put it, 'Women are emboldened to actually go and travel there with the idea that they'll find some sort of life there for themselves' [Community member, female], while others said:

> I think it's more about a wanting to be part of some space or purpose in life. They see that as, this is my role. I'm going to choose my own role. I'm going to go there and serve a purpose… I might as well join a revolution and count for something. [Community member, male]

> We often see that women who go down this path are looking for meaning and purpose in their life. It's about being part of something bigger than yourself, not just spiritually, but terrestrially – being a mover and shaker, involved in a huge experiment to create something new. [Government stakeholder, male]

> That concept of being involved in creating something new, the idealism, is important. They are both common to men and women, but in a different way, having a role in developing something. That may be linked [to the question of] to what extent do these young women feel they are able to contribute within Australian society and they may feel they are limited, but here is an opportunity which they are not offered in Australia, and this is an important factor. [Government stakeholder, female]

However, while the yearning for identity, meaning and purpose may straddle both genders, the ways in which this plays out can be highly gendered with reference to established cultural and ideological frameworks around the role of women in movements like Islamic State that display a high degree of cultural conservatism. In this sense, the pull factor is about finding identity, meaning and purpose within specific roles and boundaries that are explicitly gendered in nature, allowing a strong sense of agency, efficacy and active participation for women while simultaneously avoiding conflict with social or cultural codes structured around distinctions in gender identity.

Participants thought that vital to this was the specific role played by Islamic State's effort to establish a territorial caliphate in which women and children are promoted as having a clear and valued place. This was seen as a critical element in pulling women toward the promise of a new and different life in which they are active contributors:

> In terms of the pull factors what's different is that first, the idea of the caliphate, of a state, realising a dream, of the real Islam – in a way that perhaps in the days of Al Qaeda was not the message, even though it was part of the overall vision … The state building and caliphate enterprise has definitely acted as a pull factor for Australians. [Government stakeholder, female]

> Certainly for some of the women it's around how do we make the ummah stronger, how do we grow and have and raise children in an Islamic state, far away from this space that doesn't appreciate them, doesn't treat them well. [Community member, female]

> For women in terms of establishing the caliphate, the messaging is around, 'This is a good place to raise your family: we have schools, this is a fully functioning, fully formed state'. They disseminate little storyboard photo [sequences of] parks, zoos, street-sweepers – a normalising regime and narrative. Not only do you have an obligation to perform hijra, but the time is now and this is a good place to support families. [Government stakeholder, female]

> The notion of the caliphate is particularly strong: IS promotes this strongly as a historical reestablishment of the glories of past Islam and its dynasties [Government stakeholder, female] … Active involvement and state-building [Government stakeholder, female] … Some of them go to migrate, not to become terrorists – they see it as a migratory pilgrimage to a 'state'. [Government stakeholder, male]

But participants were also careful to point to the potential gap between the promises made by IS propaganda campaigns and the reality on the ground for women who travel to IS territories in search of grand challenges and transformations. As one government stakeholder noted, despite the need for further empirical data, there is a *'disconnect between the way that potential migrants to the caliphate who are women discuss why they're going and what they're going to do and whether they have a specific operational function, e.g. jihad like the men, and the reality of what they do. You have the Al-Khaansa Brigade, but these are no more than morality police. So the gap is between pre-migration aspirations versus on-ground, post-ground reality, [which involves] playing a purely domestic role'* [Government stakeholder, female].

Others commented:

> If you are looking for sense of purpose or meaning and you are getting validation that what you're doing is making big difference to something, that's rewarding. But the gap between expectations and reality may be another story. [Government stakeholder, female]

> The other [thing] has been the whole online IS appeal of the five star jihad concept, you know, 'Come over and do this and do this and we'll give you this, we'll give you that, and, you know, you can still have your favourite American junk food and we'll give you mansions and you can have BMWs and AK47s. You can't fight, but you can be a policewoman or you can supervise, you can this or that'. We've found that some women, when they do get there, they can't necessarily get involved in, you know – it's not like the Kurdish women [who play active combat roles]. [Community member, male]
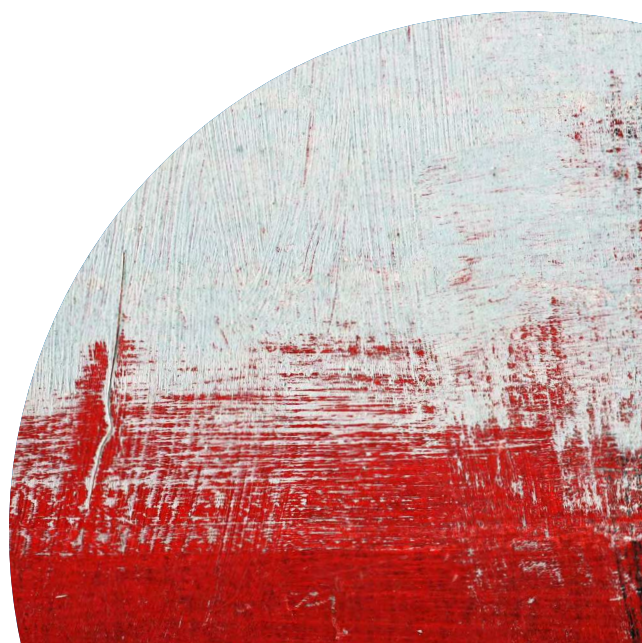
NEW HORIZONS: EMPOWERMENT, FREEDOM AND CONTROL

Closely linked to the pull factor of women's search for purpose and meaning through violent extremist social movements like Islamic State is the theme of empowerment and independence, continuing the earlier thematic focus on how women attempt to negotiate restrictions, constraints and limitations by seeking, and sometimes gaining, more control and sense of choice and efficacy through radicalisation to violence. This has puzzled some analysts, who question why *'fairly strong-willed individual [women] who have a fairly refined sense of independence and inner strength … would find any benefit and appeal in the IS conservative doctrine. I don't know what this means, but it is mighty odd'* [Government stakeholder, male].

However, it is clear that a key pull factor for at least some women who radicalise to violence is the belief that they will be empowered more effectively, or at least differently, than is possible within their current circumstances. This sense of empowerment revolves around two key dynamics, both of which are fundamentally related to the overarching dynamic of **change** and **transformation** (of self, life and/ or world).

First, there is the dynamic noted earlier of both *freedom from* (limitations, restrictions, constraints, sense of victimisation or humiliation) and *freedom to* (explore and challenge boundaries, reinvent the self, choose and pursue roles and goals). Second, there is the strong pull towards being active participants and contributors, rather than passive witnesses or observers; to be at the centre of change and movement, rather than sitting on the sidelines of both personal and collective history. Both of these are related to the substantial pull toward seeking greater control, agency and independence.

A few community and government participants framed the pull factor in this context as that of *escape*, a kind of exit strategy that re-energised women whose sense of self-respect, options or engagement had been diminished for a variety of reasons:

> *It's more about respect and an escape from bad aspects of their lives. It's an exit. We have all sorts of people who live in good circumstances, but they still try to escape.* [Community member, female]

> *From the woman's point of view, they are restricted in what they can achieve in terms of fulfilment here [in Australia]; there [in IS-controlled territories] they have no limits, apparently, to what they can achieve by way of political and religious fulfilment.* [Community member, male]

The prospect of having 'no limits…to what they can achieve' in an imagined world of 'endless possibilities' [Community member, female] was emphasised by participants for whom freedom to explore, to gain control and be heard, and to challenge boundaries was a paramount attraction for women:

> *I think empowerment is definitely part of it, a way of gaining more control over your life and having a voice.* [Community member, female]

> *In their own families, they may not have much power, for example they may be under-age, etc. Now they are off doing something they can direct, be taken seriously, etc. – it's a huge boost for sense of efficacy, control.* [Government stakeholder, female]

> *[The violent extremist space] is a broad objective, with a lot of freedom to explore, a space of no boundaries.* [Community member, male]

This element of 'pull' combines with narratives of active involvement rather than passive witnessing to turbo-charge women's sense of efficacy and agency, and it is further enhanced by the possibility of making an emphatic bid for self-transformation that signals rupture, rather than retreat: '*So breaking free needs to be significantly breaking free, not just edging out'* [Government stakeholder, female]:

> *In this pursuit, the women are the actor not the spectator, not listening to women talking about who they are and how oppressed they are. Action is definitely more empowering than just hearing something about yourself. Especially those women who are interested in adventure – packing up, seeking something new, leaving their families.* [Focus group, Sydney]

> *They are not victims with no control over their own destinies. They are making a choice – bad, perhaps, but they are not passive observers but active participants.* [Government stakeholder, male]

> *Women are given the agency to act and to influence in what could be a big event. If they are attack-planning they are given an opportunity to play a big part. They are given the opportunity to drive elements of this that were unavailable earlier.* [Government stakeholder, female]

And some women may align their own rejection of constraints and desire for empowerment in the present with the continuity and prestige afforded by female role models from the past, an aspect of 'pull' that is heavily exploited by Islamic State in propaganda targeting women (see for example Islamic State's *Rumiyah Magazine*, Issue 2):

They're like wow, we can be those women that we have heard about, we can be at the forefront of the battleground and actually be doing something. Whereas here in the house I'm not allowed to go to university, the fact that I got a great [university entry] score means nothing because I'm not allowed to proceed further. I've been engaged to this guy I don't want to be married to and I have this opportunity of being this woman who could go down in history or could be emulating the past where I could be useful. [Government stakeholder, male]

Finally, the desire to be freed from the burden of guilt or anxiety over past misdeeds, failures or troubles can also be a powerful attractor, promising to erase the past and replace it with a better, stronger sense of self:

They will be on the wrong path to begin with – generally anti-social behaviour, say drugs, and either bullying or being bullied in their youth. … They look back and decide it is time to turn to my religion, turn to politics and do good. [Community member, male]

[In religious terms] the good life starts after you die if you're a good person. If you see this life as short and a journey, and you have failed miserably, you want to secure your second life after death. [Community member, female]

BELONGING, SOLIDARITY AND ACCEPTANCE

As noted above, pull factors can serve as counterpoints to the problems that lead push factors to emerge. Lack of belonging was a key push factor identified by participants from both community and government settings, and the correlating pull factor of finding a positive sense of self and place in a new setting where marginalisation, disengagement and feeling rejected, devalued or humiliated recede into the background is powerful for women as for men:

This is a group of young women disengaged from their families and from employment and education systems, and they find a sense of belonging [in extremist settings] through friendship and support and respect – so it comes about through [extremist recruiters] identifying these single young women who are disengaged. [Community member, female]

Finding sense of belonging or connection through the narrative that if we had Islamic law or a caliphate, everything would be perfect, we'd be able to live a better life, feel like we belong, not like outcasts. [Community member, female]

It's a case of 'if you're not going to accept me for who I am here, because I wear a hijab and the way I look and because of my religion, well, they'll accept me over there.' [Government stakeholder, male]

Some of the propaganda videos that are out there will certainly talk about there being a place where you can actually contribute; you could marry someone, you could have a family, there is a place there where you may belong. Where you're not an outsider. Where you're not being criticised. [Government stakeholder, male]

And while male influence may represent a significant pathway for women on the road to violent radicalisation, it is sense of solidarity and sisterhood with other women and with common approaches to family life that matters once they have started to form bonds of sociality within violent extremist circles:

In their minds they're getting recognition, they're getting support, there's a sense of sisterhood. [Focus group, Melbourne]

Then there is the sense of sisterhood which you see in some of the social media stuff that comes out of IS controlled territory. These are some of the carrots or pull factors, and they would be very similar between men and women. [Government stakeholder, male]

So, the narrative of the caliphate is very potent – aiming at families. While the notion of belonging and fulfilling self as Muslim through jihad for men is potent, it is also potent for women vulnerable to Islamist extremist narratives. Sense of belonging as part of the ummah, and this is where the ummah is at now. [Government stakeholder, female]
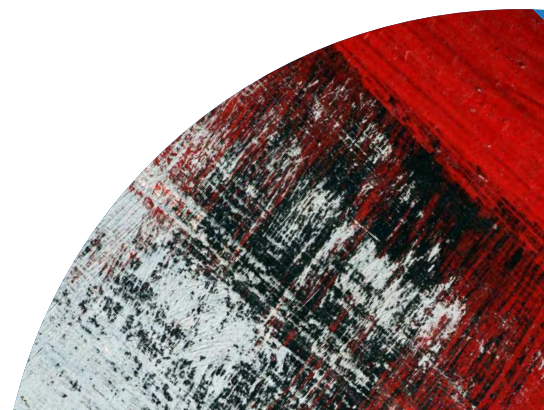
EXPANDED OPPORTUNITIES: THE ENHANCED DIVERSITY OF ROLES FOR WOMEN

The literature is clear on the persistent involvement of women in terrorism who have played and continue to play multifaceted roles across a wide swathe of historical periods and regions (Huckerby 2015) in both global and localised conflicts. However, many community and government participants drew clear distinctions between the lack of recent opportunities for Western women to mobilise to direct involvement in violent extremism through Al Qaeda and its affiliates, for example, when compared to Islamic State, citing very limited roles for women even in relation to support or facilitation. They also pointed to differences between Islamic State's global reach, recruitment and ambitions compared with other localised or regional movements and insurgencies such as the Tamil Tigers, Boko Haram and the IRA, in which women have played various roles (both voluntary and coerced) linked to social influence and direct violent action:

> It's the inevitability of ideological doctrines assuming much more multi-gender activity. Al- Qaeda never thought, 'We're going to have women here delivering babies and we'll need women doctors, nurses, schoolteachers, administrators', etc. AQ was a much more violent enterprise, focused on male-oriented tasks. Their attack planning was to bring about this conflict and after this, then we have the caliphate, end of days, etc. But IS is trying to do both at the same time – the state building enterprise provides expanded opportunities through various infrastructure needs and goals. They struggle with how to use the female population in a way that still fits with their interpretation of Sharia as well as supporting others. [Government stakeholder, male]

Domestically speaking, there is currently a very low percentage of women involved in direct violent action: '*At the moment in Australia, we are not really seeing the direct involvement of women in planning for or executing violent acts in domestic contexts that are inspired by involvement in violent extremism*'. [Government stakeholder, male] Moreover, Islamic State, unlike a range of both state and non-state military organisations elsewhere, does not sanction direct combat roles for women at present. Consequently, the diversity of roles for women promoted by Islamic State makes more sense in terms of women's desire for empowerment, freedom and control:

> In terms of [assumptions about] Muslim women as being meek and mild and subservient to their husbands, this is not the case with IS. That was one of the biggest elements for a lot of those thinking women, a way of getting them involved. Whether men or women, it didn't matter to IS because they would use the women in other ways. A lot of the women do a lot of the IT behind the scenes. So they were looking for journalists, doctors, all of those sorts of professionals to come and 'we will find a place for you'. If you had a young woman here that was really being bullied or abused, marginalised, or her religion was being attacked or she wasn't being accepted for whatever reason and she was an activist, had her own mind, and then saw this [propaganda], you know, sometimes the enticement was very good. [Government stakeholder, male]

This is given further impetus by IS's shrewd appeal to women based on the contributions they can make in building the caliphate and supporting the cause more generally, thereby encouraging women to say '*I have to do my bit*' [Community member, male]. The call to support Islamic State can become a simultaneous call to selfhood for women, in which they are enjoined to realise their ambitions, dreams and hopes for the future in both spiritual and material ways. In practical terms, this has been further facilitated by easier access to IS territory and the capacity to travel as a family rather than leaving others behind:

> It was hard to navigate Al-Qaeda territories, and no one encouraged women to go to the AQ training camps or the Pakistani Taliban territories. Whereas ISIS territory is easier to access and there is more support for getting women there. There was no 'bring your family with you' for AQ. [Government stakeholder, male]

These aspects of pull factors were seen by many participants as critical because the wealth of roles, combined with greater ease of physical access for both women and families, allows women to contemplate active support and involvement in Islamic State without resorting to direct violent action:

> Women [are] raising the next generation, so therefore the way they influence and impact the next generation and gear them towards political change – I can see how mothers might feel like this is a sphere where [they] can be influential without necessarily taking up arms. It's definitely a sphere that they can support whichever way they can. [Community member, female]

I think with women it's less about the appeal through guns and … more about playing a real role in both avenging and promoting this extremist cause. [Government stakeholder, male]

There are other roles there in terms of state building that people can be involved in. I think the attractiveness of the messaging that IS has put out has perhaps enabled people to see themselves playing a role that doesn't necessarily require them to go over and pick up a gun. [Government stakeholder, male]

Even within IS, women do not engage in violence and are prohibited in engaging in combat roles. There are the 'moral police' [Al-Khaansa Brigade], but they're exercising their influence against other women. To the extent women might have a direct role in violence, I'd see it as fairly minimal. But I understand it is changing in some parts of world, including Libya, where women are making the transition to Libya in combat roles. The extent to which this is endorsed by IS or [it's about] individuals making that decision, I'm not sure. [Government stakeholder, female]

ADDITIONAL PULL FACTORS

Validation, prestige and sense of superiority were also seen by some participants as important dimensions of pull factors. In some cases, the prestige was felt to be aligned with religious zeal or exclusivity: '*I think there's obviously a sense of prestige involved in that, that I will now be able to enter this very holy, religious, sacred space*' [Community member, female]. In most instances, however, validation and prestige were more generally linked to notoriety amongst peers and through media and online networks:

They get the notoriety after the fact. If you get famous for violent extremism you get locked up or dead. … Delusions of grandeur. [Focus group, Sydney] *… Elevated status within the group and gaining legitimacy in eyes of others, especially those more powerful.* [Government stakeholder, female] *… People have made the comment that our more notorious fighters are in the international consciousness, whereas in Australia they'd be leading normal lives.* [Government stakeholder, male]

However, while both community and government participants felt that **sense of purpose and meaning; empowerment, freedom and control**, and **diversity of roles and functions** were the major pull factors for women in relation to involvement in contemporary violent extremism, several other attractors were also identified.

These included **clear structures, boundaries and rules** for women, which may provide redress for internal conflicts, tensions or uncertainties about gendered identities and roles for some women, a view shared more by government participants than community members:

Gender roles are breaking down, from an Islamic point of view, in other societies [besides Australia] too. Your duties, roles, rights and responsibilities, if you know what they are, you're more likely to pursue and complete those duties, rights and responsibilities. If you don't know what they are … it changes the whole dynamic. [Focus group, Sydney]

Having more defined gender roles being an attractor is an important insight. It's not only in this context in which I've seen that kind of rigidity, a rejection of feminism or blurred lines between genders, almost a nostalgic kind of reversion, articulated as a critique of Western feminism and what had come before. This appeal goes hand in hand with the anti-Western thrust of the narrative more generally. The gender divide becomes a critique of the West. [Government stakeholder, male]

So you have role confusion, identity confusion, social confusion regarding what your religion versus your social network says. IS says, 'Here are defined, clear roles, even if inequitable.' [Government stakeholder, female] *… Some of the conversations we see between women [on social media are] about whether to wear the hijab, [the issue of] western feminists wanting to 'rescue' them, etc. – the hijabista crowd. Does this clear, simple, rule-bound life become attractive? I think so.* [Government stakeholder, female]

A minority of community participants felt that **sacrifice** could be a dimension of pull factors for women who are primarily motivated by religious devotion:

My mother was raised in this country. … I grew up most of my teenage years with my mum talking about wanting to go overseas and fight and for her it was always about the sacrifice and the jihad and she believed – I remember how fixated on it she was. She wouldn't necessarily talk about it all the time but it was this self-sacrifice, so I think being a mother for her was I've done my part for my family and now I'm going to do my part for the greater good. [Community member, female]

A tiny minority of community members also focused on pull factors relating to **humanitarian or altruistic impulses; wanting a macho jihadi husband**, and getting **carried along by the momentum of others.**

WOMEN'S ROLES AS INFLUENCERS, ENABLERS, SUPPORTERS AND VIOLENT ACTORS

Overwhelmingly, community and government participants identified the major role played by women who support violent extremism as that of manufacturing and exercising *social influence* over others. The project data suggest that at present women are much more likely to be influencers, facilitators or enablers and supporters of violent action, rather than engaging in direct violent action themselves, although this may change in future, with a recent observed increase in the role of women involved directly in attack planning: '*Domestically [in Australia], over the last 12 months, the role of women in planning domestic target activity has increased*' [Government stakeholder, female].

However, social influence remains the strongest sphere of activity for women to date. The words most commonly used by participants with detailed knowledge of Australian women's activities in violent extremist contexts to describe women's roles were '*influencers', 'incubators', 'facilitators', 'supporters', 'active radicalisers', 'amplifiers' and 'recruiters'* who may be active in either or both face to face and online settings. This view is summed up by these representative participant comments:

> *[While] men maybe more willing to actually engage in violent acts, women will not be as willing to engage. Rather they would be playing supportive roles such as tending to the injured or just being there to help out in terms of finding food and finding shelter.* [Focus group, Melbourne]

> *I see their primary role as influencers and enablers, incubators and facilitators. The number of females of interest in the violent extremist space is low but growing.* [Government stakeholder, female]

> *While there are some cases of women actually involved in the violence itself, it's a very small number. To the extent that I know, women are more influencers and supporters and encouragers, but not in the front line in foreign conflict. When people do travel to Syria or Iraq, the roles assigned to them there will be different.* [Government stakeholder, male]

> *[Their role is] primarily as a supporter and an encourager, [providing] emotional support in convincing people they are doing the right thing.* [Government stakeholder, female]

Also present, but less common, are women's roles as *enablers* of violent extremism, involving direct but non-violent forms of action, such as practical or material support for others in relation to financing terrorist activity, strategic planning, passport or other facilitation of travel to foreign conflict zones, and the relaying of information, intelligence or messages between parties involved in planning an attack: '*You can have violent extremism without the violence. If you sympathise with IS, you are sympathising with violent extremism as a principle or a cause, but you yourself are not a violent actor. It is not about the violent action – it is about the action*' [Government stakeholder, male].

Overall, the number of women identified by community and law enforcement members who may play various roles in violent extremist contexts remains small, with these roles generally falling short of participation in direct violent action. As government stakeholders noted,

> *Numbers are still small. The first thing is that probably not a very large number of women are drawn in. It's a question of [the number of] domestic terror [actors being] even smaller than those interested in going overseas. We are not talking large groups, but little clusters – not whole communities. You cannot demonise a whole community because of what's going on in small networks. Sometimes it's just chance.* [Government stakeholder, female]

> *Not all radicalised individuals are going to Syria, Iraq, Libya. Some of them will stay here and some of them will be ideologues, some of them supporters and organisers.* [Government stakeholder, male]

Government participants also cautioned, however, that while this may characterise the Australian landscape for women's roles in violent extremism at present, these roles may shift as the dynamics of transnational violent extremist movements across the political spectrum transform and morph. This trend is already apparent in France, where 'cells' of women are alleged to have been directly involved in planning to execute terrorist attacks (see for example Peter Allen in the unhelpfully titled article 'Femme Fatales', *The Sun* (UK), 9 Sept. 2016; Tom Batchelor, 'Europe braced for terror attack by female ISIS assassin after arrests in France', *Sunday Express*, 25 Sept. 2016):

From what I see, women are really part of the whole foreign fighter cohort via IS. While there were individual women in Al-Qaeda and in other terrorist movements, it was essentially a man's world. That has shifted. And as IS gets further squeezed, we may see a further shift towards more female combatants. They may not be encouraged but they may also not be opposed. [Government stakeholder, female] … *As the circumstances get grimmer, IS may be more flexible about what women can and cannot do.* [Government stakeholder, male]

In terms of lone wolf female actors – there have been a couple of Australian instances. [Government stakeholder, male]

A key point made by several participants involves recent changes in *conditions of accessibility* under which women have found new spheres of opportunity as supporters of and social influencers for violent extremist causes, including but not limited to Islamic State. These include increased accessibility in terms of travel to foreign conflict zones, and especially new forms of access to social media platforms. As one government stakeholder noted, '*Access to social media … it's about technical access to devices and coverage, as much as any intentionality or selection of women as influencers*' [Government stakeholder, male].

SPREADING THE WORD: WOMEN AS SOCIAL INFLUENCERS

The main role of women as social influencers who support violent extremism was seen by participants to focus heavily on encouraging, supporting or recruiting both men and women to become active in violent extremist ideology and activity by '*facilitating the spread of narratives, ideology and information*' [Government stakeholder, female]. Some of the focus on support and encouragement for men's involvement was understood to be legitimated by gender-specific Islamist narratives based on conservative ideology: '*It's the woman's role to be next to her husband [when he dies] and help him … they can be, "I'm the wife, I will do anything you ask me to do"*'. [Government stakeholder, female]

INTERGENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

A robust number of government participants highlighted a generational divide when thinking about women's influence in this context in both social media and offline settings. While we deal separately below with intergenerational differences in the social media context, where younger women's social influence comes into

its own, in offline terms participants thought that while older women tended to serve either as moral compasses, influencers or active '*movers and shakers*', younger women and men were more likely to be those who acted on the influence of others. As one government stakeholder noted, '*The question of age comes back to this phenomenon of the opportunity to participate, to be included, to not be merely a spectator. There is a generational dimension to that – this is an appeal, especially for the young women*' [Government stakeholder, male]. Many participants concurred:

The matriarchs [are] the movers and shakers and the youngest are the go getters and gofers in the background. [Government stakeholder, female] … *The older age groups are more the influencers; the under 25s are the actors.* [Government stakeholder, female]

The young women may be freer to follow their hearts and take risks, which older women are less free to pursue. [Government stakeholder, male]

I think the older the woman is, the more likely they are to be a matriarch and try and guide the whole family. If it's a younger woman, it's more a case of the support, and it's direct support. [Government stakeholder, male]

You have to wonder about the influence of Islamist female elders in the community. Men who have some pedigree in this space have proved to be strong social influencers, and the same would go for women, as the wives of the recognised and convicted jihadis. [Government stakeholder, male]

However, a few others disagreed, saying: '*The numbers are so insignificant we can't really draw any conclusions from that; the number of senior or older women in this space is really quite small. Essentially this is a young person's game, and this applies not only to the men but the women: it's definitely a Gen Y undertaking*' [Government stakeholder, male].

A significant distinction for participants also revolved around differences in the theatre of influence for older and younger generations of women: older women were perceived as more likely to exercise social influence in embodied contexts, especially over family members, whereas younger women were seen to practice social influence aimed at peers and wider audiences more readily through the internet and social media, which we take up in more detail below.

ACTIVE ENCOURAGERS AND RADICALISERS

Regardless of the theatre of influence, some participants thought the primary aim of women's influence was to provide an environment of moral and practical support for men already involved, or wishing to be involved, in violent extremist activity:

> The woman's role is to support him, he is the active participant, but she is the foundation for his ability to offer this to the cause. [Government stakeholder, female]

> Moral support, because obviously the male has made the decision to do what he's done, whether it's travel overseas, whereas his partner, his wife, may [say], 'You want to go overseas. I'll support you. I'll make sure that we are catered for.' … Ultimately, most of the support comes in that physical managing of the family, managing him, managing what he does. So food on the table, [so he can] concentrate on what he considers is his calling. [Government stakeholder, male]

However, other participants felt the role of women's influence, particularly within families, was more focused on actively encouraging men to join Islamic State or similar extremist movements:

> Encouraging them: that is something I have come in contact with, where I may have heard a couple of mothers saying, I would want my sons to do that, I would encourage my sons to be martyrs, it's an honourable title. I see them as being the agents of change for the menfolk in their families – the warriors behind the warriors. [Community member, female]

> Mothers, wives, sisters who encourage or who through t heir own views galvanise males into action – sometimes other women, but mostly aimed at men. You find a male who's travelled and the world view of the family has played a role, including that of the mother. [Government stakeholder, male]

> Some of them love their mummies and want their approval. The young male feels he wins support from his mother/sister/wife if he tips over from just sympathising to active support, making it not only a permissive environment but active encouragement. We have seen some examples of that in Australia, where the women close to someone involved have sent off signals to someone who is not thinking especially clearly, 'This is a good thing.' [Government stakeholder, male]

Beyond this, government participants emphasised the broader role of female influencers who serve as agents of radicalisation and recruitment of other women as well as men, what one participant called '*active radicalisers*':

> Propagators of the message – that's what women have become. …We can use the term **active radicalisers** – they are out there with the conscious, deliberate intention of spreading the narrative and message amongst other women in particular. My definition of active radicalisation would include both the influencers and groomers. I think you'd probably say that both exist domestically, but obviously also those offshore who are doing that and reaching back into countries like Australia for this purpose. [Government stakeholder, male]

> Recruitment: we've seen peer groups where there have been females involved actively in promoting engagement in their social networks; they've been the ones sharing the material, encouraging people to find out more, get engaged. [Government stakeholder, female]

Several community participants hypothesised that the rewards for such active influence were to be found in a sense of power over others:

> It's that sense of power and control that you could have over some people in the process as well. That's the only think I could really think of in terms of why it would be satisfying in terms of not only you participating, but getting the others to join is that sense of power you gain from making people do things that you think should be done. [Community member, female]

> These women who are not [physically] in the battlefield, so to speak, the voices in social media or even in the vocal communities, that is about power and influence. They utilise the exaltation of this idea, you know, go fight, this is our jihad, etc. because a lot of the young girls [fall for them] as their leader, or for the people that they look up to. [Community member, male]

This contrasted with what one participant termed 'expressive' rather than 'deliberative' influence: '*You have those who are passively espousing these beliefs and views, but without any specific desire to convert people to their views – expressive rather than deliberative. I think to be honest we are seeing both*' [Government stakeholder, male].

Several participants highlighted the gendered nature of women's social influence aimed at encouraging other women to adopt the behaviour, values and attitudes of a '*proper Muslimah*', thus exercising a form of more privatised, indirect social influence. Such influence around defining '*clear roles of what you should be as a good Muslim woman*' [Government stakeholder, female], participants argued, can seed the ground for subsequent receptiveness to more overt messaging around the 'us' and 'them' narratives that underwrite violent extremist ideology. In effect, it means that, as one government stakeholder astutely commented, '*Gender becomes the marker of purity or other kinds of identity politics – woman becomes the battlefield*' [Government stakeholder, male]:

> There is a movement here in Sydney that women who wear hijab are actually lesser of a Muslim [than those who wear niqab]. So this mindset to actually look down upon other women who wear simply hijab is actually built in somebody's lounge room. [Community member, female]

> Social media is used to continue to reinforce this idea of what makes the ideal Muslimah or the ideal wife. [Government stakeholder, female] … They are posting stuff that valorises the traditionalist values associated with male/female relations. [Government stakeholder, female]

This was considered by community participants to be especially concerning when it comes to women who are more vulnerable to such narratives because they are ignorant about their faith and do not have the tools to contest who the '*experts are*' in the arena of social media formats that are at once pervasive and persuasive:

> They buy into that stuff. Like they know that they're Muslim, but it's not like their dad's a scholar. Social media has all their friends who are sharing things and around them and they can connect to people who like the same mosque group or like the same scholar like [name] because they see all these other people who like [name] but they don't really understand, don't know anything, right? Imagery on Facebook videos, it might even be one minute part of a lecture from a scholar with dramatic music over it, or imagery of horses, women, etc. [Community member, female]

> They say they're doing it for Islam and it becomes very messy, trying to unpack it in order to prevent people from hating Muslims and ending up destroying our own understanding of our religion – even Muslims don't understand anymore what the Koran says, what IS says, etc. We are so bombarded with messages about what Islam is, and so-called experts on the matter, and they're not experts and they don't know. [Community member, female]

WOMEN AS ENABLERS: TACTICS AND TECHNIQUES

As we have seen, the ways in which women exercise social influence directed at encouraging, supporting or recruiting others to become active in violent extremism can vary considerably in terms of focus, intent and motive. How did project participants understand the methods and techniques by which women promoted their influence, reach and support for violent extremist causes, particularly in offline environments?

UNDERMINING FAMILY, SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT NETWORKS

Both community and government participants emphasised the importance of understanding how women's social influence can be deployed to target those who may be vulnerable as the result of family dysfunction or social isolation by undermining their connections to family, social and community networks that may function as protective factors for resilience to violent extremism:

> They focus on people who have weak links with family/ community and then breaking those links to rely only on the violent extremist network for support and building that echo chamber around them. …To make them feel what their family or community says is wrong, your imam has sold out, your family lets your sister go to co-ed school. That is the first threat, breaking that link between the person and their family/community. [Community member, female]

> The recruiter seemed to be very good at understanding the dynamics of this family. Single mum, husband around but had issues. Recruiters knew that and went after the daughter. They approached her as a young Muslim woman, and that suggested that they look for families with issues where there are vulnerabilities, and then make their approach – drawing her into a young female peer group, whereas if they'd tried to draw her into a mixed group they would have been much less successful. [Government stakeholder, male]

But one government stakeholder shared a story in which the effort to radicalise a young woman by isolating her from her family and community support networks backfired dramatically on the recruiter, noting that the use of humour and direct verbal challenge by older women could be powerful tools in countering efforts to draw young women into the sphere of violent extremist influence.

ONLINE AND OFFLINE INFLUENCE WORK IN TANDEM

While we discuss the specific role of social media for women in relation to social influence and violent extremism in the next section below, it is worth noting here that government participants were of the view that – despite the ways in which the internet and social media have accelerated and amplified women's capacity to influence others towards violence – it is important to recognise that social influence is a distributed phenomenon in which online and offline networks frequently coalesce, overlap or reinforce each other:

> It happens both online and offline, Facebook and social media connections. Social media leads to face to face contact. … There might be established offline interactions, but the traffic is two-way – definitely not just online. [Government stakeholder, female]

> [Social media is important], but also pursuing one-to-one engagement based on direct relationships, whether kinship ties or other. [Government stakeholder, male]

In this context, the technique of exploiting the emotions of others was seen by community-based participants as a key strategy used by women seeking to influence others to the cause in both online and offline settings:

> Much of what they actually are sharing, they often make it very, very emotional and very, very personal in terms of the stories; they might not be true most of the time, but it certainly makes a difference. [Community member, male]

> It's not actually telling them I want you to go and do this, but it would be inadvertently said that what an honour, this person has died, he's a martyr, my son, if you were to be martyred it would be such an honour, it's that kind of way; it's the subtleties. [Community member, female]

And offline disengagement from mainstream community and religious settings was also seen to be just as relevant for women as it was for men, albeit harder to detect:

> When we had a meeting with the National Imams Consultative Council, they said, regarding men, look: these are people who do not come to the mosque and the community centre. They are disengaged from the mainstream. I would speculate that women are also disengaged from the mainstream – but it's very hard to tell because of the lack of visibility of women in public spaces. [Government stakeholder, male]

COUNTER–INFLUENCE

Women were also perceived to be active contributors to counter-influence targeting other women, aimed either at glorifying and normalising life in foreign conflict zones, or else at damaging social cohesion to intensify grievances through techniques such as promoting conspiracy theories and counter-readings of media reports, often but not exclusively through social media channels:

> Pictures of their cars, kebabs, attractive jihadi fighters, AK47s – they are putting out the global call to girls in other countries, they're very clear about what they're doing. They are saying we are here, this is our life, don't believe what the media say about us – we go shopping, have big houses, there are certain rules but if you want to you can join us. They are advertising – they are countering the popular anti-IS narrative regarding women's lives. They are targeting other women explicitly. [Government stakeholder, male]

> [Women who] act as facilitators and influencers, encouraging other to migrate, promoting the caliphate as a good place to be. [Government stakeholder, female]

> The damage that sympathy to violent extremism does to social cohesion is just as damaging as any act of violence. We talk about this in terms of the damage of hate, fear, conflict, which creates the ripple effects of violent extremism. And it is the influencers who are causing this, and many are women. These other impacts are not about the violence but the divisions that the violent extremist mindset creates. [Government stakeholder, male]

Such counter-influence is given added impetus by the enabling capacity of social media to destabilise traditional concepts of authority and expertise and also to award status and recognition to self-proclaimed experts or authorities, as we have recently seen in a wide range of global contexts both within and beyond the sphere of violent extremism. This is an especially vexing issue when it comes to young people, including young women, who may lack the critical literacy to distinguish between agreed and verifiable interpretations of religious or political doctrine versus those that offer radically selective or de-contextualised accounts of a particular belief system:

> Young people will look to those of authority over the internet or social media – and you can't authenticate them. [Focus group, Sydney]

The general preaching influence on public platforms is still very important – plucked rulings or fatwas, and you're starting to de-contextualise the issue. If you pluck out a verse that says you can't make an alliance with the Christians and the Jews, they just throw that out there. [Community member, male]

[Some women may gain] enhanced self-esteem [through being] touted as experts in what they're proposing online. [Government stakeholder, female]

FUNDING AND OTHER MATERIAL SUPPORT ROLES

Outside the realm of social media, a number of roles for women were identified by participants in relation to practical enablement and support for violent extremist activity, including fundraising, tactical planning, the networking of information-sharing and sources, and other forms of direct and indirect support. As suggested earlier, *'Women are not playing secondary roles in relation to things like tactical planning. They are driving, encouraging, planning, aiding husbands, brothers, other male actors'* [Government stakeholder, female]:

The women sometimes make the practical aspects easier – passport, cash support, not standing in the way. So it varies. [Government stakeholder, male]

Now there is more tacit approval and support [than before], and potentially even more active support. This goes into reinforcing support for overseas involvement, travel, financing, etc. [Government stakeholder, female]

There are concerns re women in families of people in prison, [with measures taken] to impede facilitation activities such as the passing of instructions, messages. … There is concern on the basis of intelligence that women were [facilitating terrorist activities by serving as communication proxies for male inmates]. [Government stakeholder, male]

Then there's the fundraising-financing role [sometimes without direct knowledge of where the money is going]. Or else suggesting visits with other relatives – 'Would you take a cake to your cousin who's in Syria?', and the rubric of extended family support: 'It's cold, they need warm clothes'. This is indirect support of the people, not the cause, or else it wobbles between the two. [Government stakeholder, male]

DIRECT ACTORS VERSUS VIOLENT ACTORS

By contrast to the extended commentary on the roles of women as social influencers and practical enablers in supporting violent extremism, very little comment was made by participants on women who are merely supporters (as opposed to influencers) or alternatively, women who are direct actors in the sense of being personally involved in violent action themselves.

However, there is a conceptually fine line to be drawn in what we mean by the phrase 'direct actors'. In this study, we distinguish between 'direct actors' who use means other than violence to promote a general or specific orientation towards violent extremism, and 'violent actors' – that is, those women who are prepared to use violence themselves in order to achieve their aims.

The role of women as social influencers, in our view, falls squarely within the category of women as *direct actors* who actively support and promote the use of political violence by others without necessarily choosing to engage in direct violent action themselves, for a variety of reasons. The data suggest that the clear majority of women in Australia who support violent extremism play roles as influencers, amplifiers and recruiters, making them *direct actors*, whereas very few women at present appear to playing roles as *violent actors* (see analysis of the Australian case study sample in Chapter 3 below).

IDEOLOGICAL ENABLERS VERSUS RELATIONAL ENABLERS

By contrast, however, based on the data and insights canvassed above, women as enablers would seem to fall conceptually into two different categories: i*deological enablers* versus *relational enablers*. Ideological enablers are those who, as 'active radicalisers', deliberately provide and facilitate support for acts of violence by others because of their own ideological commitment to violent extremist movements. By contrast, relational enablers are those who provide practical support for violent extremist activities out of loyalty or commitment to partners, family or others, but who may not personally share an ideological commitment to political violence.

WOMEN, SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Social media and the internet, of course, are now a ubiquitous part of everyday life, especially for young people. They are core elements of how we need to think about and understand the flows, dynamics and trends in social networks, connectivity and influence in both local and transnational contexts, many of them completely unrelated to concerns with or implications for violent extremism and terrorism. It is precisely this ubiquity that means we need to pay special attention to the intersection between online and offline environments for women involved in violent extremism.

It is particularly important to unpack key features of how they express, negotiate and manage their relationships to self, others and world as these are mediated by the relatively new social and technological affordances offered by online modes of engagement. In social media terms, technological affordances are defined by Majchrzak et al. (2013: 55) as 'the mutuality of actor intentions and technology capabilities that provide the potential for a particular action (Faraj & Azad 2012) … The entanglement between…human action and technological capability as a unit of analysis…provides a language for beginning to examine social media and its role in affecting the process of online knowledge sharing'.

As the authors go on to note, 'social media creates the opportunity' to transform centrally organised and held, intermittently shared knowledge processes into a 'continuous [rather than intermittent] online knowledge conversation of strangers, unexpected reinterpretations and re-uses, and dynamic emergence'. They propose four affordances created through the 'leverage' of latent technological capability by human actions within specific domains. These four affordances are:

1. **Meta-voicing:** Adding, amplifying or expanding support for the comments or contributions of other social media users, for example through re-tweeting, reposting, tagging or hyperlinking.

2. **Triggered attending:** Setting and receiving automated alerts that signal new content events to users, allowing targeted engagement and involvement that streamlines and reduces overall social media 'crowding' and noise.

3. **Network-informed associating:** Engaging in online interactions based on relational and content-driven ties, for example, Facebook, Linked In, cross-platform content connections.

4. **Generative role-taking:** Engaging in patterned or repeated online actions that reflect 'community sustaining roles in order to maintain productive dialogue among participants'. These are actions that facilitate dialogue through emergent actions taken by individuals in online settings, for example by arguing, complaining or sharing frustrations (Majchrzak et al. 2013)

When we turn to the online environment in analysing both community and government participants' perceptions of how women who support violent extremism are engaging with social media, and also how specific women who support political violence use Twitter, we see aspects of all four of these affordances at work. We also see close alignment for participants between how some of the unique opportunities created by social media tie in with key themes identified above relating to push, pull and social influence, and how these are expressed, negotiated and managed online by women involved in or vulnerable to violent extremism. And as we saw earlier, the advantages and opportunities created by greater accessibility – independent of women's physical mobility – to largely unmediated ideas, content, platforms, audiences and conversations has further accelerated some of these trends.

ATTENTION-SEEKING AND ENHANCED SELF-WORTH

Community and government participants alike felt a key drawcard of being active on social media for women who radicalise to violence is the attention and status they achieve within violent extremist online networks, which may compensate for social vulnerabilities linked to restrictions or limitations in their offline, everyday lives, or simply keep what Saul Bellow (2004: 156) calls 'the wolf of insignificance' from their doors:

Social media gives them that attention if they feel they've been deprived [of this elsewhere], whether from their parents, their community, their boyfriend, whatever. Anybody who knows that vulnerability… would be able to appeal to and approach these individuals [on this basis]. [Community member, male]

I guess it's a matter of feeling the need to be loved. To be wanted. To feel important. [Community member, male]

Some women… have a need to get that public echo; they have an opinion and now the means to disseminate it. [Government stakeholder, male]

INTERGENERATIONAL DIVIDES

And they are doing so on social media platforms and applications that represent a marked generational divide between their world and that of their parents and elders. This also allows for escape from the controlling gaze of family or others, especially for young women who, as we saw above, may be looking to elude gender-based constraints imposed by family, culture or community. This can be frustrating for those working to influence young people away from violent extremism:

I know Facebook is apparently not the way to go now with young people. It's for older people. It's not the forum to use. [Community member, female]

People think it is your Facebook group and Snapchat and Instagram, but what I've found when I talk to young people in general is that they are on so many more [social media platforms] than the ones that we know. I'm not on those [platforms] and I can tell you most … community workers or agencies [are] not using those mediums themselves. Kids use a lot of messenger tools, like Kik, WhatsApp, iMessenger. Whatever it is, kids are in all of them. I'm not in their groups and I'm not talking to strangers on Kik who have access to me from overseas, so it's not possible to be discouraging them and telling them to reject their notions [through these platforms]. [Government stakeholder, female]

The online environment can strengthen relationships [with others involved in violent extremism] – they are able to hide from parental control and oversight. [Government stakeholder, female]

This may also help explain the popularity for young women of cheap closed messaging platforms that offer independence by combining affordability with privacy to enable end-to-end encrypted sharing of text, photos, videos, documents and location data: '*They are using WhatsApp. People will believe what they read and see. And then they forward it on, and WhatsApp is a closed group. It is especially popular with women as far as I can see. Every woman I know has it now – it's cheap [to use] and free [to download]'* [Government stakeholder, female].

FREEDOM FROM AND TO: ANONYMITY AND PERFORMATIVITY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

The theme of freedom from the interference of others was continued by community participants when thinking about the benefits and attractions that social media offers to women through being anonymous. These freedoms include the opportunity to say things that might never be articulated in face to face settings where one can be challenged, judged or prevented from continuing; freedom from being monitored by authorities; freedom from sanction or censure by family and friends; freedom to push social boundaries, including those of gender; and '*freedom from responsibility*' [Community member, female] for the impact of one's words on others:

They can express themselves in ways on social media that they couldn't in the household or face to face. Put up a status on Facebook and you have a lot of freedom of expression. [Community member, male] … *When talking about influence and responsibility, a lot of women write up stuff and don't feel responsible for others.* [Community member, female] … *Social media is providing a lot of noise and platforms for people who continuously go against and push the boundaries.* [Community member, female]

People create private spaces and [there are] lots of different forums and fake accounts I have noticed where people feel they can go and say and do whatever they want because it's a fake account and it can never be traced back to them. They can conceal their identity and create fake accounts and contact people that way. [Community member, female]

If you choose you can have anonymity – maybe a lot of women desire this, able to express themselves, in their own time, unrivalled audience – very fulfilling. [Focus group, Sydney]

In this sense, social media can enable **empowerment through the performance of multiple, risky or forbidden identities** in an environment de-coupled from offline life, allowing women to find a voice (or a different kind of voice) and sense of empowerment and impact that may be unavailable or unwanted by them in face-to-face social contexts and settings:

> They are active only on social media, and it's a whole different persona. I know plenty. You read the posts on social media, and they are totally different personalities when you meet them in person. It's a performance, role playing. You feel like you can just put up a group and then find solutions. [Community member, female]

> The interactions are outside the realm of what you'd find in face to face, real time dialogue. People who don't find their voice outside of social media will find their voice inside of social media. This might be people who are vulnerable to influencers. We can't underestimate the power of the virtual world, even in shaping your thoughts. [Focus group, Sydney]

One of the most compelling comments in this vein was the observation that social media is a 'gender neutraliser – you can be who you want to be and say what you want to say' [Government stakeholder, female], so that women are arguably able to take on more or different risks and behaviours as a consequence:

> Social media provides opportunities for women to express their voice through social media, whereas in the past you had to stand in front of a microphone or not and get heard or not. I think that's a real opportunity. There are no particular barriers on using social media from a gender point of view. [Government stakeholder, male]

> The girls had more of an online persona than the young men. Certainly they were taking more risks as well. Some of the conversations with the girls [in their young teens] were just around what people would ask them to do online, that they might be more comfortable doing online than in person. [Community member, female]

VALIDATION AND AMPLIFICATION

The performative dimension also relates back to the rewards of attention and sense of connection through the amplified responsiveness enabled by social media: 'It's a performative thing. When you see something, write an article and get 2000 comments, it's clearly a performance, performing for each other' [Focus group, Sydney].

This amplification or 'echo chamber' effect, reinforced by social media-specific affordances such as meta-voicing, trigger-attending and network-informed associating (Majchrzak et al. 2013) was in turn seen by participants as helping to consolidate this aspect of social media engagement for women. In part, this occurs simply through the friendship and sociality networks created by the broader contexts of how social media signifies in everyday life: 'It is very normal for my group of friends to be sharing exactly the same thing on Facebook. For example, [name] and I are likeminded. I want to share something but before I share it [name] has shared it before me because we're on the same page' [Focus group, Melbourne].

The practice of meta-voicing (e.g., re-tweeting or reposting content and comments by others) also came in for extended commentary by community participants who pointed to the broader 'bubble' of influence created and sustained through insular exchange untested by exposure to different viewpoints:

> Reposting stuff, for example, there might be some jihadi attack somewhere. When you see constant reposting of these incidents, you get the sense that this is good, this is supportive and you see it over and over again. You create an online culture where this is a good thing. The people that you socialise with on a normal day, you see them reposting negative events and it becomes your normative thinking as well. I don't think we can underestimate what that does, whether it be images, small statements, articles, etc. [Community member, female]

> With social media, you're attracting the same community of people that you've liked [previously] so you're reinforcing that message in your head over and over again. You think the whole world is thinking that way, but in reality it's that small network of friends that you've associated with – you're reinforcing that negativity and you're not exposing yourself to other views. … It's very hard to break away from that, and say something different to what your friends are saying. And you don't want to engage with that amongst family because you know it causes friction. So you just keep away, you keep silent and they keep silent. [Community member, female]

Because '*people who are pro-IS supporters are addressing those who are already in the cohort; you are talking to your peeps'* [Government stakeholder, female], a key issue for government participants in thinking about '*how to puncture these echo chambers'* is the importance of experimentation and persistence in tackling social media-led influences and impacts: '*That's why it's not always predictable where something becomes a cut-through message. There's a lot of content and agility and experimentation required. 90% of it will fail, but people need to keep doing things and trying'* [Government stakeholder, male].

However, what gets amplified through social media is not merely content, influence or messaging: **sense of belonging, impact and validation** can themselves can be amplified through social media's connectivity, reach and the immediacy of enhanced global identification and affirmation that links more local concerns and experiences with transnational actions and impacts:

> *Social media has a part to play here. It's about identifying with a global community, not just those in their local community… It's a platform to reach out to those you don't have contact with face to face, or those higher up – social media extends their reach.* [Focus group, Sydney]

> *The directness of mobile contact makes it about instantaneous mobility and connection.* [Government stakeholder, female] … *Obviously sometimes social networks within the country do play a role: your friends, people you know in your own country. But [these networks] can also be borderless and far away.* [Government stakeholder, male] … *Social media is very critical for those reaching back into Australia from overseas.* [Government stakeholder, male]

SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND SOCIAL MEDIA: TACTICS AND TARGETS

We turn now to the question of how women are perceived to practice social influence in social media contexts in terms of tactics and targets. What did participants think were the main strategies and techniques used by women on social media to promote support for violent extremism?

DARK HEARTS: THE APPEAL OF NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

The benefits of anonymity discussed above, which can free up women's ability to express themselves and influence others without fear of offline censure or detection, can also deliver new freedoms in strategic communication efforts for the purpose of online social influence, much of which involves the sharing or distribution of image-based content accompanied by tactically shaped commentary. Crucially, this means that women are able to engage in and experiment with modes of social influence that may usually be coded as conventionally masculine, or that may re-define what is and isn't classed as 'appropriate' for women in terms of gendered social discourse and expression.

One dimension of this is women's pervasive online circulation of very violent, graphic imagery of atrocities to inspire negative or uncomfortable emotions such horror, disgust, anger, or fear, which in turn is designed to invoke support for a violent counter-reaction – '*A lot of this is about fear and the emotions'* [Government stakeholder, female]. Alternatively, graphic violent imagery can also be used to inspire and reinforce, for example in celebrating the defeat and humiliation of 'the enemy'. Taunting, baiting and shaming as well as witnessing techniques and appeals to heroism and martyrdom, generated by women but primarily though not exclusively targeting men, are part of the same tactical matrix. As participants noted, this approach can be highly effective in terms of influence, and women are just as likely as men to respond to this:

> *Negativity sells: When things are pretty and pink, no one pays much attention. Negativity – things going wrong – I'm much more attentive.* [Community member, female]

> *Emotive videos. A lot of the videos that some people post to invoke more emotion are with the [Quran] over the top just to get people's attention, and then you're listening and looking at innocent Muslim children being killed. I try not to look at it, but certainly I know a lot of people are really drawn to it.* [Community member, female]

> *You'll find more and more that people are using social media to push their own views and because it is so powerful, they are able to glean support by continually posting things that are inflammatory, that might be edgy or funny or even nasty; people will laugh at nasty things.* [Government stakeholder, female]

Another community member noted, however, that heightening or manipulating emotions through circulating confronting or disturbing violent images can cut both ways:

> [Their audiences] are behind a screen, so for them it's not about them being out in front or recognised, but they do take shots of the atrocities that are happening out there. [To justify] the reasons for them going [to conflict zones and for being] pro-violence, they'll say, 'Look what they're doing to our people'. They'll show things like what's happening in Syria, they'll show atrocities that other countries are contributing to [this situation], so [others] think, you know, we have to go out and we have to save the world. We have to go and be part of it because God wants us to be part of the solution. In their minds they want to do the best. But on the other hand, you've got women who try to oppose it by using the same tactics, saying look at the atrocities that are happening out there. How do we stop this from happening? So [the strategic use of emotion is used] on both sides, for going towards terrorist activities and again, using it against. [Community member, female]

INSPIRE AND REASSURE: THE APPEAL OF POSITIVE EMOTIONS

However, negativity is not the only emotional dimension of social media influence practiced by women who support violent extremism. Negative emotions can combine with more positive, inspirational calls to support or action, reflecting an integrated approach that deploys a range of emotional investments and responses amongst target and potential audiences:

> Content sharing videos that inspire, with music in the background, an extremist sheik – that gets shared a lot. It's a softer approach that gets you on an emotional level, rather than getting you angry. It creates a sense of guilt – if you don't understand your religion in the way you're meant to, it's incredibly attractive and you feel guilty, God has said this, here's this sheik explaining, why aren't I joining and helping? [Government stakeholder, female]

> I saw recently an IS video of a man with his daughter by the lake washing dishes, very serene. It was trying to appeal to this idea … about family life, you can have a family life here. [Or] you'd see the kittens [video], for example, or food and the meals, it's the same message, we are having a nice normal family life. [Community member, female]

CHALLENGES OF MONITORING AND DISRUPTING SOCIAL INFLUENCE ON (AND OFF) SOCIAL MEDIA

The challenges of using social media data to provide an authenticated window of intelligence onto real-time activity and influence are multifaceted, and government participants were keenly alert to the obstacles and limitations created by the unreliability of social media tracking in accurately gauging developments on the ground. These challenges are further compounded by violent extremist influencers on social media working hard to stay ahead of detection and shut-downs, and exploiting their position as 'underdogs' pitted against the resources of the state in so doing.

These challenges bleed into the offline space as well, where social media visibility is often the only indicator of activity, so that offline trajectories of social influence within various social networks and settings are either inaccessible or difficult to track.

This account of participant views from community and government stakeholders has illuminated the complexity of how women are perceived to engage with support for, influence in and facilitation of violent extremism, engaging both domestically in Australia and reaching back to Australian (and other) audiences from abroad through both online and offline channels. Confirming a number of analyses in the recent literature on women and radicalisation to violence, participants in both cohorts were very consistent in their views that the most significant push and pull factors for women involved at any level of violent extremism were very similar, and at times identical, to those motivating men's involvement. They saw gender issues arising primarily in relation to a) distinctive *pathways* for women into violent extremism, which unlike men's same-sex peer networks tend to be characterised by male-female relationships; and b) differences in how women may *experience* common push and pull factors in specifically gendered ways. They also thought that gender becomes more significant in contextual as well as direct features of women's experience once they become active in violent extremist settings, especially in relation to social networks, and to opportunities and constraints on the roles they can fulfil within violent extremist movements such as Islamic State.

Overwhelmingly, women have been identified through these consultations as playing active roles across spheres of violent extremist support, influence, facilitation and enablement, whether as ideological or relational enablers. However, their influence, especially online, is disproportionate relative to their small numbers, though these may be growing. They are emphatically participating in violent extremism as *direct actors* but very rarely, at least at present, as *violent actors*.

CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN RADICALISING TO VIOLENCE:
AN AUSTRALIAN SAMPLE

Firm data on the number of Australian women who are known to have radicalised to violence are hard to come by – partly because of the less visible profile of women in offline local and community contexts, partly because of the difficulty of verifying online identities ascribed to women, and partly because of the generalised challenges of identifying and monitoring persons of any gender in violent extremist settings. In addition, there has been less impetus in tracing the development and movement of women within violent extremism because the primary threats and risks have been perceived, until relatively recently, to come almost exclusively from men who have actively radicalised to violence.

Public estimates of the number of Australian women who '*are known to have taken part in or supported terrorist activity in Syria, Iraq or Australia*' stood at around 40 women in 2015, according to Foreign Minister Julie Bishop (McDonald 2015). Some of the Australian women known to have been involved in or supportive of Islamic State have received moderate to heavy coverage in the media and other publications. These include figures such as Tara Nettleton, the deceased wife of IS fighter Khaled Sharrouf; Zehra Duman, a prolific social media influencer and supporter of Islamic State and the widow of deceased IS fighter Mahmoud Abdullatif; Amira Kassoum, married to Al-Nusra supporter Tyler Casey, both of whom were killed in early 2014 after arriving in Syria; and Zaynab Sharrouf, daughter of Khaled Sharrouf and Tara Nettleton who, at 14 years of age, married and bore a child to her father's friend and comrade-in-arms, Australian IS fighter Mohamed Elomar, and was widowed while still pregnant.

The case of a 16-year old girl arrested and charged in early 2016 on charges of facilitating terrorist finance in association with others has also received a high level of media attention, but has not been publicly identified because of her status as a minor. A number of other women have received little or no publicity but are nevertheless figures of significant concern to authorities in relation to their support and facilitation of both domestic terrorism and involvement in overseas conflict.

APPROACH TO ANALYSIS

In this section, we consider a small (n=<10) de-identified[5] dataset of Australian women known to authorities to assess how information regarding specific female violent extremist supporters, influencers and actors compares to perceptions about Australian women involved in violent extremism expressed by community and government participants.

The sample size represented by this dataset is both small and specific, comprising women who have become known through activities that have crossed thresholds of criminal action and intent. Because of differences in investigative focus and methodology across cases, the level and quality of detailed information available for each case varies considerably, and not all categories of information could be populated for each woman as a result. This has meant that the building of consistently rich individual profiles or histories was not viable in terms of scientific analytical value.

In addition, we have been mindful, because of the size and specificity of the dataset, of the risk of identification for particular individuals. Needless to say, the small sample size means generalisation is not possible.

Finally, while individual case study methods have been applied by other researchers in relation to women radicalising to violence (see for example Saltman and Smith 2015), these have been developed wholly on the basis of mainstream media reporting and social media data captured in the public domain. As such, while they can provide important insights, they are not always reliable in terms of accuracy or completeness, particularly given the performative aspects of much social media content that we have touched on earlier. Similar issues with completeness and comparability arise here in our consideration of the current small case study sample. As a consequence, we focus here instead on common and distinctive features across this small sample dataset in relation to push, pull and influence factors, rather than on building and analysing individual case studies.

[5] This dataset was de-identified by government agencies prior to its access by the research team.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The data we analyse here for the case study sample vary in the amount of in-depth detail and information available for each person. Taken as a whole, however, they confirm Saltman and Smith's (2015: 5) observation[6] that the 'diversity within the profiles of women becoming radicalised' means it is 'not possible to create a broad profile of females at risk of radicalisation based on age, location, ethnicity, family relations or religious background'. Indeed, the cluster of Australian cases surveyed here sometimes share common features but also display unique characteristics on a case by case basis.

AGE AND PLACE OF ORIGIN

The age range of the sample is 15-44 years. Three cases were teenagers at the time of investigation, two in their early twenties and the remaining two 30 or more years of age. The fact that a majority within the sample are between the ages of 15-29 tends to confirm the general consensus that violent extremism is currently a '*young person's game*' (Government stakeholder, male) for women as for men.

Geographically, a high proportion of the women in this sample size come from major capital cities, reflecting the general trend of urbanisation as an enabling factor in relation to radicalisation to violence (Francis 2012).

CURRENT STATUS AND LOCATION

The dataset is too small and specific to comment on the current status and location of each of these women without risking the potential for identification.

FAMILY BACKGROUND, NETWORKS AND INFLUENCES

Family background and influence are highly variable, ranging across devout, observant to semi-observant and non-religious family settings, both Muslim and non-Muslim. However, several of the women appear to have had siblings or extended family members who were also attracted to or involved in radicalisation to violence, potentially suggesting that family influence or networks at the level of near-age siblings or other kin may be as (if not more) significant compared to intergenerational influence between parents and children.

However, this is not always the case. In some instances broader intergenerational influence can also have a significant impact, as the post-Pendennis wave of violent extremist youth suggests (Olding, 2014).

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

The spread of ethnicity shows a diverse spread of cultural and religious backgrounds. Some women are not associated in terms of cultural background with either Islamic or Middle Eastern heritage. Some were raised or educated in Christian environments, while others came from a mixed Muslim-Christian household. Some of the women were converts to Islam, and others were reverts, adopting more conservative or fundamentalist Islamic beliefs and behaviours prior to coming to the attention of authorities. In some cases, conversions and reversions were over a period of years or many months; however, in other cases the transformation to radicalism could also seem relatively abrupt, apparently taking family and friends by surprise.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Education and employment experiences for women in the case study sample ranged from university degrees at Bachelor's level to completed or in-progress educational qualifications at secondary level. At least some within the sample who were in secondary school at the time of analysis had aspirations to attend university. A complete picture of educational status for all women in the sample was unavailable. In terms of employment, experiences ranged across unemployment to working in instances where sample members were not studying full time.

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[6] Based on their 2015 Institute for Strategic Dialogue analysis of women active in violent extremism, including three case studies of Australian women.

SETTINGS AND INFLUENCES

LOCAL COMMUNITY TIES AND NETWORKS

The majority of women were born in Australia, but little is known about the extent or depth of their ties and networks within their local community. Strong community ties and networks are a known protective factor in promoting resilience to violent extremism (Grossman et al. 2014), but the data linked to these cases is generally too thin to support any analysis or conclusions based on this aspect of the sample. Some cases within the sample suggested that opportunities to interact within the community were constrained by the wishes of family members.

Such instances recall the recent account from officials in another country (pers. corr. 2016) of a young woman outside Australia whose parents – both high achieving professionals – imposed very rigid restrictions on their teenage daughter's movements, effectively allowing her to travel only to and from school on foot, with no friends of either gender allowed in the home and no visits to other people or places unaccompanied by the family. The young woman's response to this social quarantining was to forge a series of online relationships and networks in the privacy of her room at home, which led to her subsequent attempt to travel to Islamic State territory.

Such individual cases of young women whose families largely confine them to the home, denying them broader spheres of social contact and experience, resonate strongly with the data above from community and government participants which identifies both *freedom to* and *freedom from* as motivators in radicalising to violence as a form of rebellion and defiance against culturally inspired gender-based constraints.

CRIMINAL HISTORY AND ACTIVITY

Although criminal orientation and activity has been identified as one of several pathways into violent extremism for men, along (and sometimes intersecting) with social relations and ideology (Attorney-General's Dept. 2015), the same does not appear to hold true for women in this sample. By contrast, the criminal activity of women would seem to occur more often after, rather than before, radicalisation to violence. In the sample, only two women had prior histories of minor traffic-related offences (traffic stops, car accidents, speeding tickets). However, four of the seven appeared on law enforcement, border control and/or criminal justice system databases once they became active in violent extremist circles: for example, through precautionary border alerts, arrests, charges and court appearances relating to facilitation of terrorist financing, weapons carriage, and refusing to cooperate with court proceedings.

RADICALISING INFLUENCES AND NETWORKS

When it comes to what the sample suggests about the specifics of how these women radicalised to support for extremist violence, the data appear to support the emphasis on individual relational pathways, involving husbands, partners and family members as the leading influences. In summary, they support the observation that pathways for women into support for or enablement of radicalised violence are frequently through significant men in their lives, whether husbands, lovers, brothers or fathers. In some of the case data we examined, multiple men in women's lives were influencers towards violent extremism, but so too were mothers. A minority of women in the sample appear to have initially been radicalised not through intimate partner or kin-based relationships, but via ideological or social networks to which they were independently attracted, sometimes selecting partners with similar views only after they had radicalised to support for political violence on their own. The role of recruiters in influencing those women in the sample who came to radicalisation through social, political or community networks is not clear because of the limited data available.

These data are also notable for what they do not signal: any clear indication that women are being radicalised by other women within their peer groups. This would tend to confirm the hypothesis advanced above that, whereas men tend to radicalise through social networks of same-sex friendships, bonds and ties, women are more influenced by inter-sex relationships and at times by family, community or broadly political networks. However, the data is not detailed enough to provide insight into whether any of these women may have had contact with or been targeted by female as well as male recruiters in either offline or online contexts.

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

When it comes to psychological history, again the data are incomplete. In several of the cases, the psychological history was not known at the time of the data collection. In the remaining cases, however, mental health issues are present. Diagnosed conditions included instances of psychosis, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, bullying and depression. While hardly conclusive, and certainly not confirmatory of any link between mental health status and orientation toward violent extremism, these instances remind us that women (like men) may be marked by psycho-social vulnerabilities that can render them more susceptible to influences and behaviours across a broad spectrum of anti-social orientations, violent extremist or otherwise. This highlights the need for early detection, prevention and intervention efforts and resources when such vulnerabilities are present.

ROLES IN VIOLENT EXTREMIST ACTIVITIES

The roles played by the case data available in this small sample tend to confirm the perspectives offered by community and government stakeholders above: at present, Australian women are overwhelmingly positioning themselves, or are positioned by others, as direct but non-violent actors through adopting roles as supporters, influencers, and facilitators.

SUPPORTERS AND INFLUENCERS, ONLINE AND OFFLINE

The sample data, while limited, also supports participant perspectives on the critically important role of social media for women who radicalise to violence, and the shift toward female-centred peer networks when advanced along the radicalisation pathway. Several of the women in the case study sample are active supporters of violent extremism online – associating with other like-minded women through social media networks and using social media platforms to vocalise and reinforce prolific support for extremist movements; upload images and videos celebrating Islamic State and related propaganda; produce or recirculate rhetoric celebrating and advocating violence; champion travel to and life within the caliphate, and seek to influence and recruit other women to join the cause. The majority within this group have had social media accounts suspended or taken down but have found other platforms or mechanisms through which to rebirth and reinvigorate their social media presence. This is an important dimension in understanding the way in which these women may experience sense of **empowerment** at multiple levels – not only, as we note above, through their reach, influence and freedom to transgress various social boundaries in the online environment, but also through sense of efficacy at outwitting or defeating attempts to silence them by authorities.

This suggests that for at least some women, the satisfaction and rewards they experience through being part of a violent extremist community is not merely about *having* a voice, but also about *keeping* a voice and finding ways to strengthen their ability to be heard, even (or especially) against the odds.

FACILITATORS AND ENABLERS

Beyond the online dimension of the sample's social influence and support for violent extremism, there is also evidence of offline influence and activity, including efforts and plans to travel to conflict zones; meetings and information exchanges with other persons of interest in counter-terrorism investigations; and roles in facilitating and enabling terrorist networks and attack planning. This further demonstrates the way in which online and offline worlds intersect, particularly through active use of both online and offline channels as required to pursue influence and actions aimed at facilitating terrorist financing, training, identity management, marriage brokering and support for the travel of others to conflict zones.

VIOLENT ACTORS

Whether as supporters and influencers or as facilitators and enablers in both online and offline settings, all of the roles and activities identified through the dataset fall into the category of 'direct actors'. These are women who have pursued intentional actions taken with specific goals and outcomes in mind, largely in relation to sharing information, forming or cementing relationships and disseminating and strengthening status, connectivity and social influence. Nowhere in the sample could we find support for the primary intention being expressive, rather than to influence, shape or direct others through either broadcasting or more targeted interventions.

However, direct actors are not violent actors. In the sample, almost all of the women whose cases we examined, while they expressed strong support for or advocated violence committed by others, had not moved toward the commission of violent acts themselves. Where willingness to consider or commit direct violence did emerge for a tiny minority in an already small sample, a range of other specific converging factors offered a timely reminder that such cases can present as atypical and often highly complex.

Our analysis of the case study material available in this limited sample offers a counterpoint to several assumptions made about which women are most likely to radicalise to direct violent action, and demonstrate the futility of developing predictive profiles based on assumptions about gender, culture, ethnicity or religious background when trying to assess the capacity or likelihood of women becoming violent actors. Instead, it points to the relevance of looking at broader influences, factors and behaviours on an individual basis that find new expression, energy or focus within violent extremist settings, rather than focusing merely on post-radicalisation statements and behaviours.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the sample above confirms a number of the insights and hypotheses advanced by community and government participants. It reinforces the widely held view that each case history of radicalisation to violence may share some common features but is also always unique to some degree, needing to be treated on its own merits with tailored analysis and interventions rather than relying on broad templates or profiles.

The data highlight various findings based on participant contributions relating to the relevance of various push and pull factors. These include the intersection of relational and ideological pathways for women into violent extremism; the importance of female bonding and solidarity once radicalisation to violent extremist networks is advanced; the central role played by male influence in terms of women's early entry into violent extremism; and the primary role of women as supporters, influencers, facilitators and enablers – but not as violent actors. They also include social vulnerability through lack of skills and knowledge, and (in some cases) isolation; the young age of women who are being drawn to violent extremism; and the effort of those young women, where they have experienced restrictions or constraints on their social and individual development to make a bid for freedom and empowerment through involvement in violent extremist settings.

Finally, they confirm the enormous importance of social media in terms of providing both connective mobility (independent of physical mobility) and technological access for women to vastly expanded audiences and opportunities for self-expression, reinvention, empowerment and sense of efficacy. At the same time, they demonstrate how important it is to understand the nature of the relationship between online and offline settings, and the ways in which these nurture and reinforce each other in specific radicalisation trajectories and pathways.

Above all, the cases reviewed here demonstrate that women's support for and involvement in extremist violence, and the roles they play in this context, are done a great disservice – both analytically and in terms of remedies – when tagged with labels such as 'jihadi brides', 'Islamic State fangirls', or similar appellations. Instead, what we find in reviewing these cases is that women are their own agents and in some instances are found to play similar roles to their male counterparts. While male influence into violent extremism may be an important variable, it is female self-efficacy; sense of belonging and empowerment; finding or strengthening a voice, a place and a channel for both individual and collective grievances; and a bid for freedoms both 'from' and 'to' that emerge as the core elements that sustain women's involvement in violent extremist causes, even after the men who may have been influential in their early steps towards radicalisation have disappeared from the scene.

In the next section, we turn to a detailed analysis of the social media influence of three Australian women supporting violent extremism who have travelled to Islamic State territory to further examine women's social influence online, and how this relates to some of the key themes identified in previous chapters.
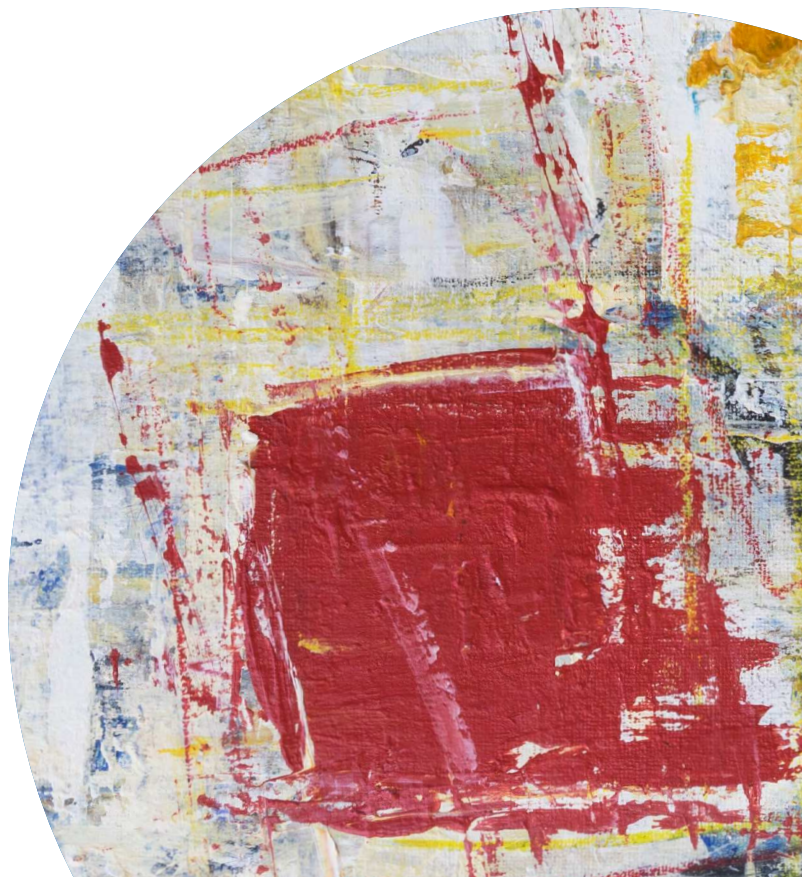
CHAPTER FOUR

AN ANALYSIS OF AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S
ISLAMIC STATE TWITTER ACCOUNTS:
THREE CASE STUDIES

As we have seen in the preceding chapters of this report, the role of Australian women as online social influencers in violent extremism has emerged as a key area of activity and focus. One means through which IS has demonstrated its capacity for exerting social influence via social media is through its unprecedentedly extensive use of online modalities to mobilise and reinforce support. It is thus valuable to examine more closely social media use by Australian women involved with IS.

Social media refers to participatory internet services which enable users to create and share digital content, whether textual, audio or video, the most famous of which are Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, along with a range of other platforms such as Tumblr, Kik, Surespot, Ask.fm and Telegram (Bartlett and Reynolds 2015). The most prominent social media platform used by IS up until 2016 was Twitter, a micro-blogging service that allows users to post messages up to 140 characters long and share various types of media (such as sound, image and video files).

A number of Australian women who travelled to Syria to join IS created Twitter accounts, and used them repeatedly around late 2014 and early 2015. Examining these Twitter accounts adds an extra layer to the insights gained for this project from community members, government stakeholders, law enforcement data and existing academic literature. It also provides a way to learn directly from the Twitter accounts of Australian women involved in violent extremism.

However, this does not mean taking their tweets at face value. As the women we discuss below have joined IS and are tweeting from IS territory, their Twitter usage presumably is conducted in line with IS's purposes. Therefore, examining these accounts provides insight into how Australian women have played a sanctioned role as social influencers for IS, by analysing how they use Twitter and what type of messages and influence they communicate through it.

All Twitter account data discussed below are open-source, captured using readily available public tools and techniques available to researchers (see 'Capturing Twitter Content' below).
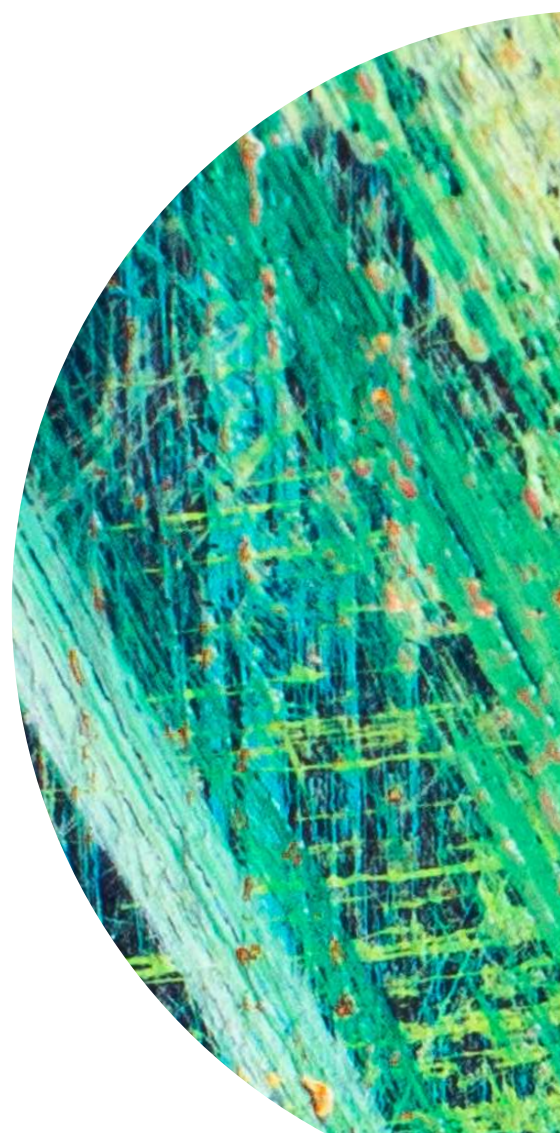
CAPTURING TWITTER CONTENT

This project has been able to overcome a common methodological dilemma faced by anyone researching the use of Twitter by Australian IS members: the constant deletion of relevant material as a result of Twitter's pushback against pro-IS accounts.

Twitter's campaign of deleting pro-IS accounts began in late 2014, after IS supporters used Twitter to spread their message widely, broadcast beheading videos and hijack unrelated hashtags (such as#WorldCup). By August 2016 Twitter was reported to have shut down 235,000 suspected pro-IS accounts in the previous six months, and 125,000 in the six months before that (Woolf 2016).

While helpful in reducing the prevalence of pro-IS content on Twitter, this campaign did cause some trouble for researchers. When a Twitter account is shut down, all the tweets are usually lost, at least for researchers who do not have a partnership with the company.

Australian members and supporters of IS, like others, have been affected by Twitter's campaign and often had their accounts deleted. One result of this was that, at the time we started this project, the most prominent Twitter accounts believed to be run by Australian female IS members were no longer active. These users had once tweeted widely and gained substantial attention, but had since had their accounts deleted multiple times and now either no longer used Twitter or used it much less overtly.

Normally, this would mean little to no capability to collect and analyse Twitter material by Australian IS members. However, some team members had been capturing public Twitter content from apparent Australian IS members through 2014 and 2015, prior to project commencement of account deletions. We have therefore been able to make use of otherwise-missing material generated by Australian IS members.

This previously developed database of Australian IS Twitter material was searched specifically for this project, to see what content it had from Australian women who had travelled to join the fight. Most of the captured content was produced in late 2014 and early 2015, around the time when IS's physical expansion in Syria and Iraq was at its height, and a peak period of IS Twitter activity in general. Database content was found for the following four people, with summary background information derived from public media reporting. ID codes SMA1, SMA2, SMA3 and SMA4 have been assigned to each person throughout (SMA stands for 'social media account/s').

- **SMA1:** Melbourne woman who announced her arrival in Syria in 2014. Married an IS fighter in Syria.

- **SMA2:** Melbourne woman who travelled to Syria with children in 2014. Married to two different IS fighters.

- **•SMA3:** Relative of IS fighter who married another IS fighter in Syria.

- **SMA4:** Relative of IS fighter.

The first three accounts were active for periods that lasted from a couple of weeks to a couple of months, whereas SMA4's content only covered one day. We have thus excluded SMA4 from this analysis, as her captured content consisted only of three tweets and has virtually no analytic value.

This content had been captured in two ways:

- **Manually:** This involved holding 'page down' to view all tweets within an account and then clicking 'save page as' to save in HTML format.

- **Automatically:** This was done with software called TAGS, which scrapes selected Twitter accounts every hour and saves the tweets to an Excel spreadsheet.

This resulted in the content being saved in two different formats, as detailed in the Appendix. To enquire about the Appendix, please email Andrew Zammit, contact@andrewzammit.org

CONTENT CAPTURE SUMMARY FOR EACH USER

SMA1

Twitter content for SMA1 covered the periods 11-23 January 2015, and 18-22 March 2015.

PROFILE NAME	USERNAME	START DATE	END DATE	FORMAT
Redacted SMA1	@redactedSMA1.1	11/01/2015	23/01/2015	HTML page
Redacted SMA1	@redactedSMA1.2	19/03/2015	19/03/2015	HTML page
Redacted SMA1	@redacted SMA1.2	18/03/2015	22/03/2015	Excel sheet

SMA2

Twitter content for SMA2 covered the period 2 October to 17 December 2014.

PROFILE NAME	USERNAME	START DATE	END DATE	FORMAT
Redacted SMA2	@redactedSMA2.1	2/10/2014	17/12/2014	HTML page
Redacted SMA2	@redactedSMA2.1	10/12/2014	17/12/2014	Excel sheet

SMA3

Twitter content for SMA3 first covered one day (21 January 2015), and then covered the period 25 June 2015 to 22 August 2015. For some of that period, her account was shared with an American woman named RedactedUSSMA1 ('RedactedSMAUS'), discussed in the contextualisation section later in this report.

PROFILE NAME	USERNAME	START DATE	END DATE	FORMAT
Redacted SMA3.1	@redactedSMA3.1	21/01/2015	21/01/2015	HTML page
Redacted SMA3.2	@redactedSMA3.2	25/06/2015	20/07/2015	Excel sheet
Redacted SMA3.2	@redactedSMA3.2	25/06/2015	19/07/2015	HTML page
Redacted SMA3.2 + SMAUS1	@redactedUSSMA1.1	25/06/2015	22/08/2015	HTML page

We interrogated the relevance of this material by asking:

- **How representative is this captured content?**
- **How do we know that the accounts are authentic?**
- **What was the context in which the captured material was created?**

ASSESSING REPRESENTATIVENESS

The team considered two questions regarding the *representativeness* of the captured data:

• **How do we know how representative this captured content is of these three women's total Twitter activity during their involvement with IS?**

• **How do we know how representative it is of overall social media use by female Australian IS members?**

This required identifying how much other Twitter content had been produced by these women versus how much we had captured. This was done first by comparing the captured content with four other sources that provided information on their Twitter activity, including:

• **Screenshots:** The team had a small collection of screenshots of Australians involved with IS on Twitter at various times between January 2014 and December 2015. This collection of screenshots was searched to find any which contained tweets from these three female Australian IS members.

• **Press reports:** Newspapers were searched because many journalists closely followed Australian jihadist Twitter activity from 2014-2016 (particularly of high-profile users), and on many occasions reported on these women. The newspaper search was conducted by using EBSCOhost.

• **Specialist literature:** Two reports by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) examined women who joined Islamic State, and mention social media posts from these three Australian women on several occasions. These reports, *Till Martyrdom Do Us Part: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon* and Becoming *Mulan: Female Western Migrants to ISIS*, were examined to again find examples of these women tweeting at times that may not have been captured for this project.

• **The Wayback Machine:** The Wayback Machine is a US-based digital archive that regularly saves online content. It can be a valuable resource for finding websites that have been deleted, so it was used to see if it had saved any of the Twitter that had been missed.

The process and results of the searches of screenshots, press reports, specialist literature, and the Wayback machine, along with the scrutinising of the captured content to assess when the accounts began and ended, are all described in extensive detail in the Appendix.

These steps allowed the following judgements about how representative the captured Twitter content was of the user's overall Twitter activity:

• **SMA1:** We cannot be confident that the majority of SMA1's Twitter content was captured.

However, we can be confident that we captured:

  • Her early content from the @redactedSMA1.1 account (from 18-22 March 2015) but are missing substantial content after that (possibly up to two months).

  • All her content from the @redactedSMA1.2 account (18-22 March 2015).

  • Little of the content from her @redactedSMA1.3 account and no content from her @redacted SMA1.4 account, though these accounts were assessed (through a process described in the Appendix) as likely to have been rarely used.

• **SMA2:** It is likely that the majority of SMA2's Twitter content was captured. We can be confident that we captured:

  • All content from her @redactedSMA2.1 account (2 October to 17 December 2014).

  • No content from her @redactedSMA2.2 account, which was mainly active through August and September 2014.

• **SMA3:** It is highly likely that the majority of SMA3's Twitter content was captured. We can be confident that we captured:

  • Most content from her short-lived @redactedSMA3.1 account (21 January 2015).

  • The overwhelming majority of the content (except for the final fortnight) from her @redactedSMA3.2account, which covered the period from 25 June 2015 to 22 August 2015 and was shared for some of that time with USSMA1.

  • None of the content from her @redactedSMA3.3 account, which appears to have been active for around one week in March 2015.

We are thus reasonably confident that we have captured the majority of SMA2 and SMA3's Twitter content, and a large amount of SMA1's Twitter content, although in all likelihood not the majority.

RELATIONSHIP OF CAPTURED TWITTER CONTENT TO OVERALL SOCIAL MEDIA USE

While the preceding steps show roughly how much Twitter content from these three female Australian jihadists was captured, we still needed to gain a sense of how representative this was of general social media use by female Australian IS members based in Syria and Iraq. We did this by assessing, first, how many other female Australian IS members were likely to have been using Twitter, and second, what other social media female Australian IS members may have been using.

HOW MANY OTHER FEMALE AUSTRALIAN IS MEMBERS MAY HAVE BEEN USING TWITTER?

As noted above, the precise number of Australian women who have joined IS is unclear. On 25 February 2015, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop stated in Parliament that 30-40 Australian women are known to be either engaging in or supporting terrorist activity in Syria, Iraq and here in Australia (Bishop, 2015). The phrasing shows that the 30-40 figure includes those who have remained in Australia, and does not make clear the estimated number of those in the conflict zone, or those who specifically joined IS. On 29 May 2015, it was reported that the Australian Federal Police believed that at least 12 Australian women had travelled to join IS (Terlato, 2015). This figure of 12 should be treated as an underestimate, because more women could have joined in the time since.

There is some publically available information on who these women are. Media reports have covered nine women believed to have travelled for this purpose (News Corp, 2016). A caveat is that there may have existed content from private accounts, or anonymous accounts whose identities did not become disclosed, that were unavailable to open-source researchers. With this qualification, it appears that SMA1, SMA2 and SMA3 were the most prominent Twitter users among Australian female IS members. Therefore, it does not seem likely (though still possible) that much Twitter content from other female Australian IS members has been missed.

WHAT OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA DID FEMALE AUSTRALIAN IS MEMBERS USE?

A media search revealed some answers regarding other social media platforms. For example, one Australian woman reportedly ran a Telegram account (Wockner 2016). Another was reported to have made various social media posts, but the platform was unspecified (Mullany 2014). In addition, the earlier-examined Twitter accounts of SMA1, SMA2 and SMA3 mentioned several other Twitter platforms that they used. For example, the bio for SMA1's @redactedSMA1.2Twitter account mentioned that she had a Surespot account, and in a tweet she mentions having a Kik account. SMA2's Twitter account @redactedSMA2.1 mentioned her having a Kik account. There were also media reports of SMA1 using an ask.fm account (Chambers 2015).

There is no clear way to assess how often they used these other social media accounts. It may well have been extensive, particularly as Telegram, Kik and Surespot have a reputation for being far more secure than Twitter, and Twitter has become increasingly aggressive in shutting down IS accounts. Therefore, we cannot assume that Twitter activity represents the majority of the social media activity by these users. Moreover, different social media platforms tend to be used in different ways, so the captured Twitter accounts cannot be judged as generally representative of the use of social media by Australian women who have joined IS.

From these steps, the project team could be quite confident that we had captured the majority of SMA2 and SMA3's Twitter content, and a significantly large amount of SMA1's Twitter content. We could also be confident that these three people were responsible for the bulk of publicly ascertainable Twitter content from female Australian IS members. This suggests that the captured accounts are highly representative of Twitter use by female Australian IS members.

However, the captured accounts cannot be considered representative of broader social media use by female Australian IS members, because there were several other Australian women in IS, and because they appear to have used a wide range of other social media platforms.

AUTHENTICATING CAPTURED TWITTER CONTENT

Assessing authenticity is important in social media research, as fake accounts can easily be created by pranksters, rivals, security agencies or simply unbalanced individuals. For example, one supposed Australian jihadist who called himself 'Australi Witness' turned out to be a Jewish-American who adopted a wide range of fake personas (Potaka and McMahon 2015). Sometimes fake accounts, particularly if created by activists rather than organisations and governments, can be easily spotted ('Australi Witness' absurdly claimed to have been radicalised by Waleed Aly and Amnesty International).

However, more sophisticated fake accounts can be far more difficult to spot, especially give their prevalence in state-led information activities. Sometimes governments plant false information on social media, as the Russian, Syrian and Iranian governments have been revealed to do on several occasions (Rawnsley 2014). A more sophisticated example is that the US military had created fake al-Qaeda videos and had them distributed among the jihadist community. The videos were almost impossible to identify as fake, because they were essentially compilations of real al-Qaeda footage, with the only difference being that the files were encoded in a way to track the people sharing them (Black and Fielding-Smith 2016). If fake jihadist Twitter accounts were similarly created by a professional military or intelligence agency, and it should be assumed that this sometimes happens, there is a risk that open-source researchers could treat them as real.

Therefore, there are always reasons to be cautious about the authenticity of accounts. Open source researchers must be aware that they would likely not have the skills to spot sophisticated fake accounts, particularly as such accounts are designed to fool members of the group under study (such as jihadists) themselves.

For this reason, the team cannot say with absolute certainly that these accounts studied here genuinely belong to SMA1, SMA2 and SMA3. However, we consider it highly likely that they are genuine for several reasons. These accounts have been treated as genuine by specialist researchers, such as the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Several of the accounts had also been judged as genuine by some journalists whom the team considered reliable and who followed Australian IS involvement closely and were in contact with some of the users and their families.

In addition, the team did not encounter any statements from IS members claiming the accounts were fake (sometimes fake, or suspected fake, accounts result in heated disputes among IS members or online supporters). Nor did we discover any statements by government representatives casting doubt on the veracity of these accounts.

The team also did not uncover any media reports of the women's friends or families disputing that the accounts are genuine. Indeed, the opposite appears to be the case. Journalists have repeatedly interviewed close relatives of SMA1, SMA2 and SMA3, and there is no reported suggestion of any dispute over the accounts' authenticity (Welch and Dredge 2016; Dowling 2015b; Hamblin 2014). Therefore, while we cannot rule out that the accounts could be highly sophisticated fakes, we are reasonably confident of their authenticity.

CONTEXT FOR CAPTURED TWITTER CONTENT

Developing understanding of the context in which these users were operating was done using similar open sources to those used to authenticate the accounts, namely media report and specialist research. These sources could not always be regarded as reliable; in fact, some media reports were themselves based on what the users were tweeting, and thus cannot be considered an independent source on the user's context.

Nevertheless, using this method, a sense of their context was gained. This context will be outlined below, but a key issue needs be highlighted here as it relates to authenticity. Given that these users were operating from IS territory, it is possible that they were being instructed what to tweet or had their tweets vetted. It is at least likely that they would be aware of harmful consequences if they tweeted anything that IS would take objection to. It also possible that they may not be tweeting themselves; other IS members could be tweeting in their names. For these reasons, it cannot be assumed that SMA1, SMA2 and SMA3 are tweeting everything of their own free will. This particularly applies to SMA3, who travelled to Syria as a minor with her family at the time of most of the tweets analysed here. We cannot assume she had independent control over her circumstances, including her communications.

This means that the tweets do not allow us to draw firm conclusions about the intentions or motivations of these women. However, they can tell us something about the messages and themes they are promoting, even if not necessarily voluntarily, and where this fits within a broader analysis of the role of women as social influencers in support of violent extremism.

CONTEXTS AND SETTINGS FOR TWITTER USE

All three women had travelled and joined IS around 2014, had married IS fighters, experienced potentially traumatic events, and were based in IS territory at the time they were tweeting.

SMA1

SMA1 is a Melbourne woman in her 20s who travelled to Syria in 2014. Her family expressed surprise at this development. Once there, she became close friends with other Australians in IS territory and married an IS fighter. Shortly after her arrival she announced her presence in Syria online, along with her marriage (Hamblin 2014). In 2015, her husband was killed. She appears to have set up her @redactedSMA1.1 account shortly before her husband's death. She later set up another account, @redactedSMA1.2, and began using it in early 2015. She was still close to various Australians in the conflict zone. One of her friends, SMAUS1, had just experienced the death of her own husband (ABC 2015). This Twitter account later became inactive, and little has since been publicly heard of her.

SMA2

Less information is publicly available on SMA2. She is known to be a Melbourne woman who travelled to Syria with her children in 2014 (Dowling, 2015a). Her husband had previously travelled to Syria and is reported to have died fighting for IS; the year of his death is disputed (Dowling 2015a; Channel 9 News 2015). Once in Syria, she married another IS fighter.

She had set up one Twitter account, @redactedSMA2.0, in 2012. After the account was shut down, she began using a new account, @SMA2.1, until late 2014. She was reported to be in her late 20s around this time (Schliebs 2015). Little has been heard of her after this point, and it is unclear whether she interacted much with other Australians in IS.

SMA3

SMA3 was brought up in a family highly sympathetic to jihadism, evidenced by her relatives' involvement in radicalised violent plots over a period of years. The family travelled to Syria in late 2013/early 2014 (O'Brien 2016).

Sometime after, the family based themselves in Syria, and formed a tight-knit group with other Australian jihadists. Moving to a conflict zone was clearly a substantial life-change for SMA3. She married an IS fighter and, after his death, married another fighter. She also lost other relatives during her time in Syria. This sets the context for her Twitter activity, which occurred between these various incidents. Her @redactedSMA3.1 account was active in early 2015, after she had married her second husband but before he or her other relatives had died. This was a short-lived account that appears to have done little more than serve as a meta-voicing vehicle for retweeting the posts of others. Her much more active account, @redactedSMA3.2, began being used in June 2015.

Sometimes after, SMAUS1, the American widow of another Australian jihadist, became a co-host of SMA3's Twitter account. The profile name changed from Redacted SMA3.2 to Redacted SMA3.2+ SMAUS1.

This establishes context for the Twitter activity by these three women. They had all travelled and joined IS around 2014. All of them had husbands who were IS fighters and who were killed around the times that they established their Twitter accounts. Other people close to them through kinship, friendship or marriage were also killed.

Two of the women, SMA1 and SMA3, were close to each other and part of a small group of other, mainly Australian, IS members. SMA2 does not appear to have been part of this group. In addition, they were all tweeting from IS-controlled territory, which serves as an important reminder that it cannot be assumed they were all tweeting of their own free will, considering the risk of tweets expressing doubts about IS attracting censure or retribution. This is particularly relevant in relation to SMA3, given her status as a minor and her family context.

FREQUENCY AND TYPE OF TWITTER DATA

Analysis focusing on how frequently the accounts tweeted, and what types of tweets they sent, was conducted on the captured periods of Twitter content for SMA1 (11-23 January 2015, and 18-22 March 2015), SMA2 (2 October to 17 December 2014) and SMA3 (21 January 2015, and 25 June 2015 to 22 August 2015). The results of this analysis are shown in the charts below.

TWEET FREQUENCY

Figure 1: SMA1 tweet frequency - @redactedSMA1.1
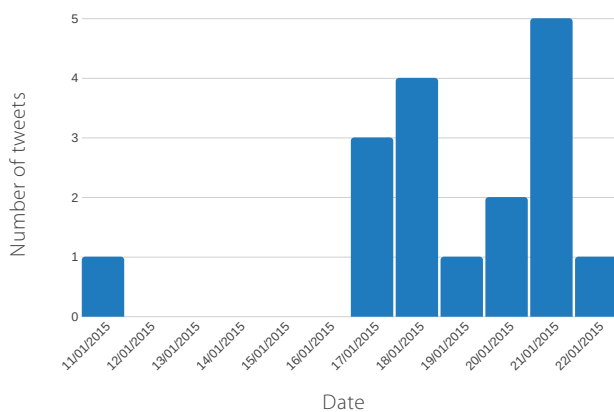

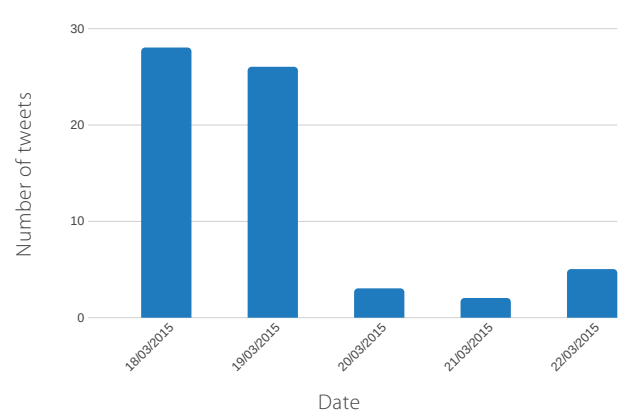**Figure 2: SMA1 tweet frequency - @redactedSMA1.2**

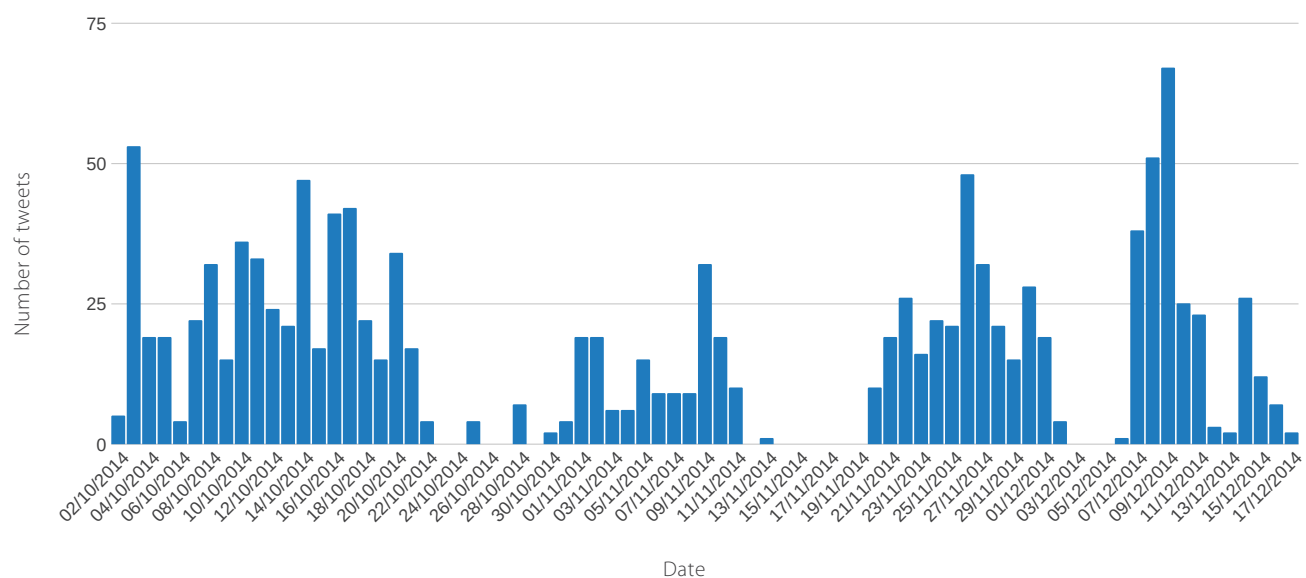**Figure 3: SMA2 tweet frequency - @redactedSMA2.1**

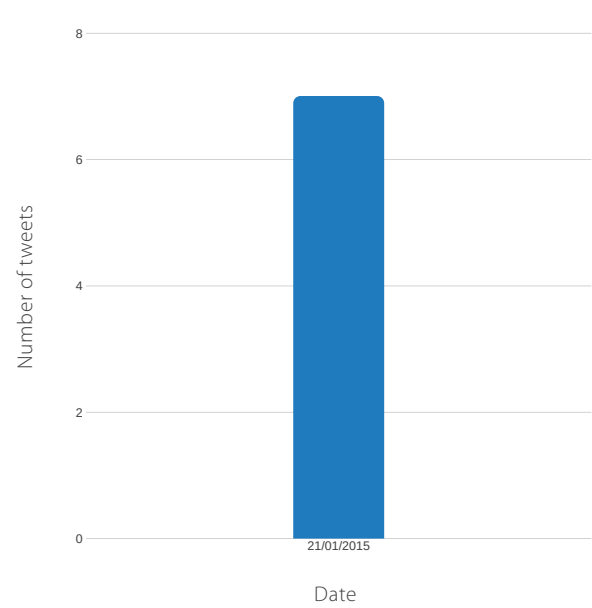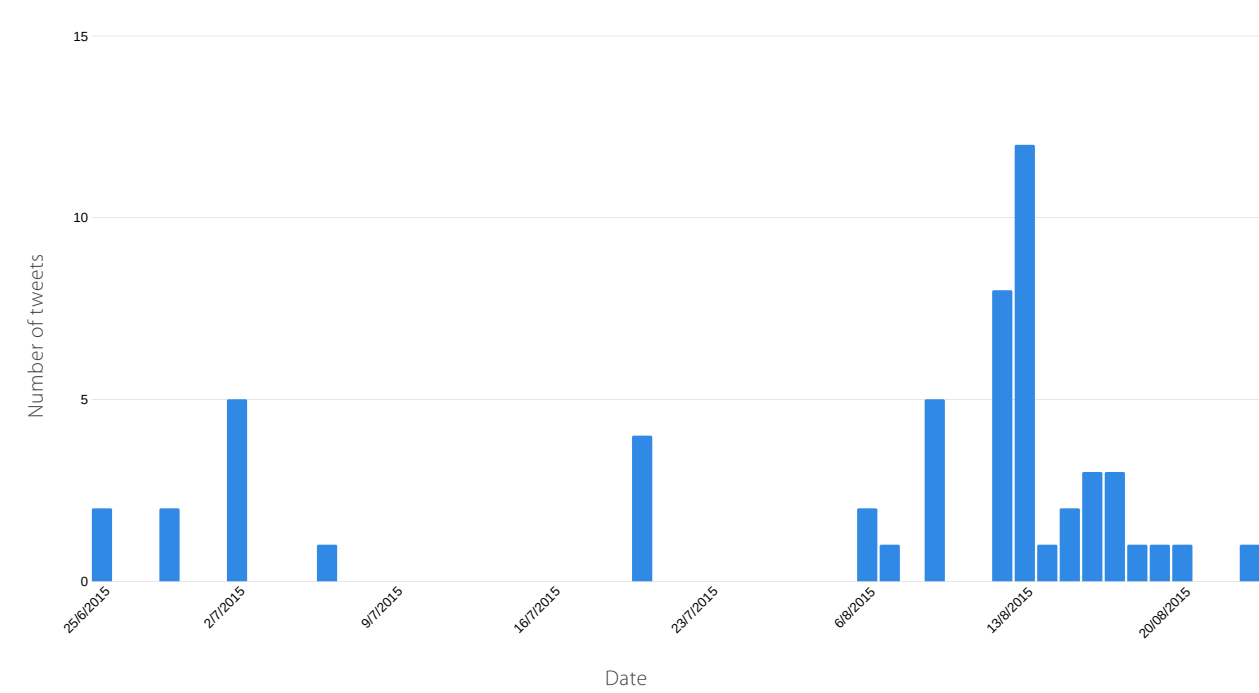**Figure 4: SMA3 tweet frequency - @redactedSMA3.1**

Figure 5: SMA3 tweet frequency - @redactedSMA3.2

TWEET TYPES

- **Normal Tweets:** Public and original tweets for all followers of the account to see.
- **Retweets:** Tweets by other users, shared by this user.
- **Tweets to:** Tweets specifically directed at another account, by starting the tweet with their @username.

SMA1 TWEET TYPES	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Normal Tweets	27	33%
Retweets	44	54&
Tweets to	11	13%
Total Tweets	82	100%

SMA2 TWEET TYPES	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Normal Tweets	420	25%
Retweets	672	41%
Tweets to	564	34%
Total Tweets	1656	100%

SMA3 TWEET TYPES	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Normal Tweets	34	45%
Retweets	35	47%
Tweets to	6	8%
Total Tweets	75	100%

Note that the figure for Retweets includes missing Retweets. As mentioned in the Methodology and discussed in more detail in the Appendix, for two of the accounts (SMA2 and SMA3) it was evident that some of their Retweets were missing (as the Retweeted accounts had been deleted before capture), but still possible to calculate exactly how many. For SMA2, 424 Retweets were missing and 248 were captured, making for 672. For SMA3, 13 Retweets were missing and 22 were captured, making for 35.

The data shows that SMA1 and SMA3 used Twitter in a similar way to each other, but quite differently from SMA2. This is apparent in three ways: SMA1 and SMA3 tweeted less frequently than SMA2, tweeted in more of a broadcasting manner rather than for individual engagement, and mainly used Twitter at times of personal loss. They become more likely to use Twitter in the immediate aftermaths of the deaths of significant male IS fighters in their lives, either their husbands or their friends' husbands. These three differences are shown below.

First, SMA2 tweeted far more frequently than SMA1 or SMA3. Within the captured content, SMA2 tweeted 1656 times, while SMA1 and SMA3 tweeted less often (82 for SMA1 and 75 for SMA3).

It has to be considered whether this simply reflects the amount of material captured, rather than their overall use. We noted earlier that we could not be confident that the majority of SMA1's Twitter content was captured: up to two months' worth might be missing. We also noted that while we could be reasonably confident that the majority of SMA2's content was captured, material from August and September 2014 was missing.

However, it is highly unlikely the difference in tweet frequency simply reflects what was captured rather than genuinely reflecting their use for two reasons. First, the discrepancy is very large, with SMA2's number of tweets being 20 times greater than SMA1's. Second, in both cases, up to two months' worth of material is missing. Given the similarity in time-periods of missing content, SMA1 would have be tweeting at dramatically greater frequency during that period than she was during the captured periods, while SMA2 would have to be doing the exact opposite. Third, the graphs show how often the users tweeted per day. SMA2 sometimes tweeted more than 50 times a day, which SMA1 did not approach. Therefore, the data analysis suggests that SMA2 used Twitter extensively while SMA1 and SMA3 used it relatively infrequently.

The second difference is apparent in the different types of tweets sent. Both SMA1 and SMA3 rarely tweeted to particular people (13% for SMA1 and 8% for SMA3). This suggests that they were largely not using Twitter for individual engagement. In contrast, a larger proportion (34%) of SMA2's tweets was to particular people. It also suggests that she was using Twitter in a more personalised manner rather than for wider broadcasting.

Third, a strong similarity between SMA1 and SMA3 (again in contrast to SMA2) is apparent when their tweet frequency is compared with the contextual information mentioned earlier. They both tweeted more often in the immediate aftermath of the deaths of significant men in their lives.

SMA1's husband died in mid-January 2015. While she appears to have created her @redactedSMA1.1 account shortly before his death, she only tweeted once before he died, and then began tweeting much more afterwards (around 80 tweets in the next five days). The issue of missing content was noted earlier, but this does not undermine this point. For her @redactedSMA1.1 account, it was shown that we could be confident we had captured the beginnings of the account, but not the accounts final tweets. This means that we can still be confident that all the account's tweets, except for one, occurred after her husband died. Her next account, @redactedSMA1.2, only began tweeting frequently after the death of her American friend SMAUS1's husband, another Australian jihadist whom she knew.

SMA3's main account, @redactedSMA3.2, only began tweeting after her second husband died in June 2015, later becoming a shared account with SMAUS1 a few months after SMAUS1's husband died. Again, the issue of missing content does not change this. Similar to SMA1's @redactedSMA1.1 account, we are confident that SMA3's @redactedSMA3.2 was captured from its beginning, but not until its end. The @redactedSMA3.2 account began to tweet with increased frequency after 6 August 2015. It is possible that this is when the account became a shared account with SMAUS1.

That said, some of SMA3's accounts were active before her husband died, but they lasted for less long and tweeted less frequently. For example, there was a missing SMA3 account from March, captured in some of the screenshots, which appeared to be short-lived. This account was active just after SMAUS1's husband died, and mainly retweeted pictures of family (mostly the young boys). There was also her @redactedSMA3.1 account, which was captured, but only tweeted a small number of times.

Therefore, the data shows that SMA1 and SMA3 mainly tweeted in the immediate aftermath of the deaths of significant men in their lives.

This was not the case for SMA2. Though there was variation in the frequency of her tweets, there were no clear events associated with these variations. Whether this was because no such events were occurring, or because there is not enough information available on her offline context, is unclear. Unlike SMA1 and SMA3, there is nothing to indicate any connection to the deaths of significant men in her life. Her husband had died in late 2013 or early 2014, well before these tweets (captured from October 2014) and nothing indicates that her new husband had died.

Overall, the data analysis shows strong similarities between how SMA1 and SMA3 used Twitter, and strong differences when compared with how SMA2 used Twitter. As SMA1 and SMA3 appeared to be close to each other and were part of the same small group of fighters and family, the similarities in how they used Twitter should not be surprising.

However, there was also a similarity across the accounts, in that all three users engaged in extensive retweeting (54% for SMA1, 41% for SMA2, 47% for SMA3). Similarly, 'Tweets to' were a minority for all three. That SMA2 also had a strong individual engagement focus does not change this. This suggests that all three tended to use Twitter primarily for broadcasting purposes rather than individual engagement.

THEMATIC CONTENT ANALYSIS

The accounts of SMA1, SMA2 and SMA3 were coded to identify the prevalence of particular themes. These themes were divided into push factors, pull factors, the role of women as influencers, and the role of women as actors. After identifying the messages they were broadcasting, we then conducted thematic content analysis on the captured data. The coding results are presented below.

THEME	SMA1 #	SMA1 %	SMA2 #	SMA2 %	SMA3 #	SMA3%
PUSH Lack of connection to Australian society			12	8%		
PUSH Grievances (eg, war, perceived injustice)			54	34%	1	4%
PULL Justice			17	11%		
PULL Sense of belonging/acceptance	3	4%	4	3%		
PULL Empowerment	1	1%	13	8%		
PULL Sense of purpose/identity, religious yearning, creating new world	3	4%	2	1%		
PULL Call to sacrifice	33	48%	4	3%	11	41%
PULL Validation/prestige, member of elite and pure few	1	1%	3	2%	4	15%
PULL Many roles available for people who go to ISIS, not all violent			1	1%		
PULL wanting a masculine jihadi husband, appeal of traditional gender roles	4	6%	6	4%		
PULL Adoration of husband	5	7%	2	1%		
PULL Sense of adventure and excitement	3	4%	1	1%	1	4%
PULL Fun, comfort or familiarity			4	3%		
PULL Victory, being on winning side	3	4%	9	6%	2	7%
WOMEN AS INFLUENCERS Reinforcing the idea of the 'proper Muslimah'			10	6%	2	7%
WOMEN AS INFLUENCERS Main role is supporting male	2	3%			3	11%
WOMEN AS INFLUENCERS Calls for action (whether travel or violence)	8	12%	15	10%	3	11%
WOMEN AS DIRECT ACTORS Making threats/advocating violence by others	3	4%				
TOTALS	**69**	**100%**	**157**	**100%**	**27**	**100%**

DISCUSSION

Just as the data analysis found differences in how SMA2 used Twitter compared to SMA1 and SMA3, the content analysis found a similar division regarding the core themes emphasised in their tweets.

SMA1 and SMA3 overwhelmingly expressed pull-based themes, whereas SMA2 expressed both pull- and push-based themes. SMA1 and SMA3 focused heavily on the value of sacrifice, whereas SMA2 focused on perceived injustices against Muslims, including by Australia. However, a key similarity was that all three made calls for action – that is, they attempt to exert social influence on potential supporters based abroad. Finally, the effort to renegotiate gender expectations is apparent, particularly from SMA2's tweets.

SACRIFICE AND MARTYRDOM: SMA1 AND SMA3

There was a strong emphasis from both SMA1 and SMA3 on the value of sacrifice, accounting for 47% and 41% of the coding respectively. As shown in the data analysis, the bulk of their tweets were posted immediately after the deaths of their husbands. These tweets tended to be Normal Tweets, broadcast to all their followers. They were also publicly performative instances of mourning with highly ritualised elements, and should not necessarily be assumed to represent SMA1 and SMA3's genuine feelings, given their clear propaganda value.

These tweets expressed loss and grief, but never in a way that ever suggested that it was not worth it. Instead, these tweets often involved the rewards of the afterlife and the honour of martyrdom. An early tweet of SMA3's was, '*Yous can say what all you want, but I know my husband is in Jannah bithnillah. Remember our dead are in Paradise, your dead are in hell fire*'. SMA1 claimed to long for martyrdom herself, tweeting that: '*Saying goodbye to those who Allah blessed with martyrdom while you still seek it, n being left behind. its all part of it*'.

Sometimes these tweets were about the deaths of others' husbands as well as their own, for example, the death of their friend SMAUS1's husband. SMA1's initial tweets from her @redactedSMA1.2 account were about SMAUS1's husband's death. Shortly after he died, SMA1 retweeted SMAUS1's statement, '*Im the most content I have ever been in my life*'. She then commented herself, '*May Allah accept Abu Jihad Al Australi, obtained Shahada in ayn al-islam. Reunited with my husband in Jannah, neighbors in Dunya and Akhirah♥*' and tweeted to SMAUS1, '*Wish we could be in there position right now.*'

GRIEVANCES AND INJUSTICE: SMA2

While all three tweeted about IS's appeal (pull factors), SMA2 also tweeted extensive material relevant to push-factors. These focused heavily on grievances, particularly perceived Western injustices against Muslims. She also tweeted of Australia being a terrible society she was happy to leave. Together, these themes accounted for 40% of her coding.

For example, she often posted tweets such as '*Thers a genocide against Muslims*', and '*So the perpetrators of our Brs abuse will remain untouched; However we can still inflict terror & harm at the government who officiated it.*' Sometimes her tweets expressed anger at Muslims she portrayed as silent about such injustices, '*Scholars condemn the killing of Kuffar 'children' in Pakistan; Whilst not a word of the genocide against ACTUAL Muslim children.;# BaraaFail*' and '*OMG I wanna rip my eyes out!; Our Ummah was massacred yesterday; And Muslims are mourning the death of an Arab actress Sabah somethingorother!*' Sometimes she singled out Australia, tweeting that '*Australia is one of the most discriminatory nations who join illegitimate war campaigns*', and '*Ive never hated Australia or Sheikhs residing there; As much as I do now; Not all; But many; Are hypocrites!!; May Allah (swt) expose you!*' Unlike many of the pull-based tweets, there was nothing notably gender-specific in these expressions of grievance.

CALL TO ACTION: SMA1, SMA2, SMA3

All three of these users made some calls for action to be taken by supporters abroad, and insisted that IS would be victorious. Sometimes these were calls for people to make *hijrah*, with SMA1 tweeting, '*O Muslims, migrate to the land of Khilafah. Surely you will be amongst the ones who are successful*' and SMA2 declaring, '*I live n the Lions Den..; Its not as terrifying as ur led 2 blieve!; Come join us; b part of the State which shook the world off its feet!*' Other times they issued calls to violence, with SMA1 retweeting SMAUS1, saying, '*Veterans, Patriot, Memorial etc Day parades..go on drive bys + spill all of their blood or rent a big truck n drive all o…*' and SMA3 tweeting that '*#PRT its ok Muslims, you can just go on Craigslist and get a gun on the dl*' and '*You guys do know obamas daily schedule is on the white house website*'.

GENDERED FRAMEWORKS OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE

This suggests that all three saw exerting forms of social influencing on potential supporters outside of IS territory as part of their role. Such tweets were directed at both women and men. For example, SMA2 tweeted that there many ways women could support the jihad: '*So much; U can encourage, financially equip a Mujahid, look after his family, refute the liars etc; make genuine effort 4 Hijrah*'.

In a different emotional register, one of SMA2's tweets attempted to shame men for not joining IS: '*U call urself a man cos u stay n Darul-Kufr 2 provide 4ur family; Allah (swt) is ar-Razzāq!; Jihad is Fard-Ayn!; Stop ur excuses.; U fool urself*'. The range of rhetoric here shows the ways in which the use of emotion – whether through positive appeals and idealisations (directed largely at other women) or negative modes such as shaming and taunting (directed largely at men) – can be mobilised in powerful and condensed forms by social influencers. Such rhetorical strategies simultaneously construct and target their audiences based on gendered understandings of both masculine and feminine roles and identities.

Indeed, SMA2's last tweet, '*U call urself a man*', highlights the issue of the gendered contexts by which social influence is framed; we see this raised also in several of SMA2's other tweets and, to a lesser extent, in SMA1's. Both women sometimes tweeted about the value they saw in clearly-delineated gender roles, the pride they had in their husbands as warriors, and about the men of IS being real men. This is partly consistent with Simon Cottee's (2016) point that many IS women 'support Islamic State not despite, but *because of*, its aggressively patriarchal worldview'.

However, we would qualify Cottee's statement somewhat because there are contested understandings of patriarchy. The appeal of IS's rigid gender roles does not necessarily locate that appeal within patriarchy itself. For example, one core component of common understandings of patriarchy is the dominance of fathers over their sons, and Brynjar Lia points out that part of jihadist groups' appeal is that they contest that component of patriarchy by routinely showing young men in leadership roles. This provides some appeal to young men who perceiving themselves as lacking the opportunity for important roles at home (Lia 2016). Similarly, the fact that IS offers a fairly wide range of non-combat yet socially powerful roles for women, as we have seen above, may also be empowering for some in ways that elude conventional notions of patriarchal oppression or dismissal.

LIBERATION THROUGH, NOT FROM, GENDERED SOCIAL IDENTITIES

While IS maintains strict gender boundaries in the roles they offer, this does not mean the women who join would see these roles as subordinate. Indeed, the Twitter usage of these Australian IS women did not emphasise subordinacy at all: instead, they sometimes tweeted arguments that joining IS was liberating. This was most evident with SMA2. For example, SMA2 tweeted several times that there was no stigma against divorce within IS, '*Especially those who divorced their spouses Fe Sabilillah; In order to make Hijrah!*' She also stated, '*Many sisters of various ages divorced their husbands cos thy refused hijrah & jihad or procrastinating; Even within Sham*'.

It is unclear whether this is true; the real experiences of women within IS may be quite different, but it is a message SMA2 endeavours to communicate. She also argues that traditional patriarchal obligations, as a wife and mother, could be disregarded if they got in the way of the more important obligation of joining IS, warning, '*let not matters of ur children derail u frm fulfilling ur obligations; Our families are some? of our biggest fitnah!*'.

These performances of empowerment were not framed in liberalist (or liberationist) terms of gender-based equality or free choice. For example, both SMA2 and SMA3 tweeted about how proper Muslim women should conduct themselves. However, this was not a major theme and when present it often involved arguments that such proper conduct strengthened women's position; for example, SMA2 tweeted that the hijab was empowering for women who want their voices to be heard: '*The hijab is amazing as it obligates man to listen rather than to look*'.

RENEGOTIATING GENDER BOUNDARIES

Therefore, SMA2's tweets in some ways expressed a renegotiation of gender expectations. In contrast to liberal norms, there are strict gender boundaries within IS, with woman excluded from certain roles (such as combat) and facing explicit and rigorously monitored obligations on their conduct and dress. These tweets make mention of these gender boundaries, but not in a way that implies subordination (other than to God). Instead, they portray the situation as empowering, and contend that by choosing the path of *hijrah* women can be freed from the familial and societal restrictions placed on them by those who have not seen the true path.

REGISTERS OF EXPRESSION AND INFLUENCE: NORMAL TWEETS VERSUS RETWEETS

Numerous examples of common rhetorical modes of communication for all three women included:

- **Challenge** (to join, to act, to make *hijrah*, to 'be a man')

- **Invitation** (to embrace the caliphate and the movement)

- **Witnessing and testimony** (of injustices, deaths, victories)

- **Transcendence of boundaries** (through uniting with God and loved ones in the hereafter)

- **Warnings** (about behaviour, disbelief, supporting the kufr)

- **Elegies and lamentations** (performing proper sentiment and behaviour for Muslimiyah)

- **Violent threats and calls for action** (against both ordinary and high profile non-believers in Western countries)

These registers should be considered in contemporaneous context, expressing dimensions of ideas or emotions that reflect the person's experience, feelings or intentions at the time of communication. However, one intriguing distinction occurs in this regard between retweets, or meta-voicing, and 'normal' or self-generated tweets using the original voice and words of the user.

For instance, analysis of SMA1's retweets shows a tendency when meta-voicing toward more poetic, plangent and lyrical idealisations – what one might call 'positive' messaging appeals extolling the values and virtues of the caliphate and of Islamic State more generally. This is messaging that recirculates iteratively via social media to create an immersive bubble of heightened sentiment, rightness of purpose and injunctions to resilience, and is a widely used strategy of social influence amplification, as many of SMA1's retweets illustrate: '*This land has a lot of stories. Shall I tell you about men who came with tears of joy & left this land with a smile on; or stories of strong women who bear all sort of pain due the separation of their loved ones let it be father, brother…*'

She reserves her own voice, however, for communications that express more negative sentiments such as threats and taunting: '*Our kids put your men to shame/ Lion of Islam ~ the spilling of our blood; only waters the soil of Jihad; Your daughters will one day become our sabayah* [female captive of war]. *Aussie sabayahs, imagine that.; Kill Kuffar in alleyways, stab them and poison them. Poison your teachers. Go to haram restaurants and poison the food in large quantities; May allah make us amongst the Shuhada, flying under the arsh of Allah, in the hearts of green birds*'.

The picture for SMA1 which emerges when we distinguish between retweets and normal tweets shows that she relies largely (although not exclusively) on meta-voicing of what *others* have expressed when conveying more positive ideas and sentiments, but reverts to her own voice to articulate content with more negative or aggressive resonance. This can become relevant when trying to assess state of mind and intention through a social media user's personal voice, as opposed to practices that do not distinguish between a user's own voice and the meta-voicing of material generated by others.

This in-depth analysis of a cluster of tweets produced by three Australian women in IS territory during a peak period of Islamic State's efforts to expand and consolidate its influence and reach shows the complexity of how social influence both draws on but also revises and reframes gendered expectations and strategies in social media settings. All three of the women whose tweets are examined here participate in and extend key themes identified elsewhere in relation to relevant push, pull and influence factors for women who radicalise to violence.

They conduct highly ritualised and highly personalised modes of communication aimed at both other women and at men using a wide range of emotional and rhetorical registers, thereby demonstrating considerable sophistication in how they understand the multiple audiences with which they are engaging, within and also across gender boundaries. Moreover, the analysis shows how a thematic social media 'thumbprint' can emerge in relation to where the emphasis falls for individual women in how they deploy the mode, register and thematic content of their social media accounts, whether related to push or pull factors, expressive or influential intent, broadcast or targeted engagement, meta- voicing or own voicing, or (as we have found here) various combinations of these elements.

CHAPTER FIVE

ROLES OF WOMEN IN OPPOSING
VIOLENT EXTREMISM

We turn now to women who oppose violent extremism, rather than supporting it. Women who oppose violent extremism are a vital, yet little-studied group of people in CVE contexts and in terrorism studies more generally. While there has been some research into the important roles they play (particularly around mothers), very little is known about the motivations, roles and contexts of women who work not only to fight violent extremism, but to prevent others from becoming vulnerable to its appeal. A systematic approach to considering the motivations and roles that women play in taking a stand against violent extremism, and comparing this to those of women who support violent extremism, has not to our knowledge been undertaken elsewhere. Beginning to explore these comparisons thus allows for a richer understanding of the motivations and roles of each group, which in turn can enable more targeted and effective support for women in both camps, facilitating the strengthening of women who oppose violent extremism and providing new understanding of opportunities to redirect and rehabilitate women who radicalise to violence. Below we present findings in relation to push factors, pull factors, the contextual settings of family and community environments, issues relating to public versus private activism for women, and the role of social media for women who work against violent extremism.

PUSH FACTORS

Participants from both communities and government offered a range of perceptions as to why women, in their experience, would oppose violent extremism within their families and communities. Often (though not always) these reasons had a specifically gendered component, such as a connection to motherhood or the gendered nature of Islamophobic abuse.

At face value, there appeared to be very little overlap with the identified motivations for women who support violent extremism. In fact, other than the area of religious conviction, which in some instances participants thought motivated both those who oppose and those who support violent extremism, there initially seemed to be little intersection. While participants tended to frame negatively the push factors for women who supported violent extremism, for example in terms of absence or deficits (lack of knowledge or skills; struggles with identity; lack of empowerment or freedoms), by contrast, the push factors for why a woman would oppose violent extremism were generally articulated as positive drivers (the innate desire to 'do good', the desire to create change, to defend against Islamophobic attacks, etc.):

> They want to do good in their lives. There is an innate desire to do right or good – same motivation for both groups, but [opposing VE] is more proactive. [Community member, female]

> Not denialism but aversion, and the hope/belief they are doing something important. [Government stakeholder, male]

It is understandable that the motivations of people who support violent extremism would be framed negatively in terms of destructive impacts, while those who oppose violent extremism would be framed positively for the opposite reason. However, such framing may obscure greater motivational similarities than first suspected. Upon closer analysis, there were areas of overlap linking push factors for female opposers and supporters of violent extremism. Certainly not every category within the push/pull framework identified for female supporters of violent extremism had a corresponding category for those who oppose it; for example, push factors such as a desire for rebellion, the seeking of excitement or adventure, or lack of belonging for supporters did not have an analogous element amongst opposers.

Intriguingly, however, we did find push and pull factors that straddled both groups, for example in areas such as religious conviction, grievances (in the case of opposers, grievances against those who seek to harm Australia and those who damage Islam through tarnishing it by association with terrorism), the desire to create social change and 'do good', and sense of empowerment. Similarly, responding to the rise in both verbal and physical Islamophobic attacks also characterised both women who support and women who oppose violent extremism, with supporters responding through the lens of victimisation and the elimination of perceived threats, and opposers responding through the lens of social change through advocacy and education against ignorance and prejudice. In addition, social influence, both online and offline, for both supporters and opposers is a chief mechanism through which they express and deploy their activism. To some extent, the issue becomes one not of content or influences alone, but how that content or influence is interpreted, contextualised and re-contextualised, and why.

Therefore, while similarities in underlying motivations across women supporters and opposers should not be overemphasised, it is important to identify those that do exist, and to consider at what point or for what reasons the paths may fork for each group in terms of intention and action. As one government stakeholder suggested, even a single event or moment in time can turn people in very different directions depending on perspective and context:

A turning point for a couple of people on social media was a 2013 video of a Syrian rebel fighter eating a dead person's heart. This was really a turning point. And when that video came out it shocked a lot of people into seeing that what they are doing and going to do is not a good thing and not going to be a good thing. But now people are becoming desensitised, and that can work either for or against violent extremism – depends on who you are and where your views sit. [Government stakeholder, male]

RELIGIOUS CONVICTION AND DEFENDING THE FAITH

For participants, especially community stakeholders, sincere religious belief featured as a strong motivator for women who oppose violent extremism. Some participants identified this as a common impulse for both female supporters and opposers of violent extremism. For example, a female community member said of women who support radicalised violence: '*They see it as a religious duty…From my conversation with a couple of people, it definitely stems from religious doctrine and they will cite religious doctrine*', but thought this equally applied to what motivates women to oppose violent extremism:

Because it's an ideological understanding and understanding of religion that motivates women that would deter others from it and explain to the wider community this is not us. It's about wanting to create a compassionate world and justice and humanity as equal and not us and them, there's no inferior. It's the way people view the world, the way those women view the 'other'. They don't see a line between Muslims and non-Muslims, they see humanity. [Community member, female]

In fact, the desire to defend Islam and ensure that violent extremists do not dictate the terms on which the general community understands Islam was a critical element for a number of women who spoke of why women oppose violent extremism. As observed above, this can cut both ways: the perceived negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam in the media, for example, can propel different women to take radically different stances, either seeing this as an alienating factor that reinforces the veracity of IS's 'us and them' propaganda, or else viewing it as a call to actively refute media biases against Muslims, and particularly Muslim women:

For me, it's about clearing the name of my religion, clearing the name of women in Islam – definitely. And just trying to reduce the negative impact that [violent extremism] is going to have. [Community member, female]

It's out of love for Islam and my faith that I feel [violent extremism] needs to be addressed and violent extremism in the name of Islam is to be stopped. [Community member, female]

In particular, correcting the public record in terms of media and other public representations was identified as a motivating force for women who oppose violent extremism, often with a particularly gendered focus. One female community member who publicly opposes violent extremism does so because of '*feminism and Islam. If you think Islam is squashing feminism, it's about me reasserting my identity in terms of my own parameters*'. Others commented:

So if we go public with TV, radio or media, I think they know – especially when they call us 'oppressed' [simply by virtue of being Muslim women], when the oppressed in their eyes stand up and say we are doing this, I think we get heard better. [Government stakeholder, female]

I am very tired of seeing women represented in a particular fashion. It's about reclaiming my status as a woman in Islam. It's about rectifying what I think are very twisted cultural versions of Islam which advocate bizarre things that don't align with Islamic values in my opinion, again very personal. [Focus group, Melbourne]

GENERATING POSITIVE CHANGE

As noted above, the issue of grievances, often linked to sense of injustice and the desire to achieve transformational change or reversal, was identified by participants as a major push factor for women who support violent extremism. Correspondingly, participants similarly identified a motivation to change negative features of society and achieve good as a driver for why women would actively oppose violent extremism. For some community members, this commitment to try to change society for the better and remove injustice was often linked to their own personal sense of religious impetus:

> [It's a] a personal battle. I just want to see Islam rectified, the version of Islam that I see. So I will actually actively try to work with likeminded people who have set up forums about misconceptions about Islam. [Community member, female]

> Faith is a responsibility. This is my responsibility to make a change, whether small or big in terms of societal level. I have to contribute something, whether saying something to someone or on a larger scale. I've been put here as a carer of the Earth. This can take a lot of facets, but in this position, I will do this to the best of my ability. [Community member, female]

Another woman actively involved in opposing violent extremism within the community said, '*I am very open in opposing it because of the effects that it's having on the Muslim community – the worldwide Muslim community. So it's not just about Australia, but all over*'. This rationale echoes strongly the motivations of those women who support violent extremism through their sense of obligation to the global Muslim *ummah* and their distress over collective injustices and problems.

As counterintuitive as it may seem, therefore, a core motivator for women in both the opposing and supporting violent extremism was a desire to generate what they saw as positive change. While the outcomes were polar opposites, the catalysts were strikingly similar.

However, in the context of opposing violent extremism, a number of community participants said they increasingly felt they had little choice but to confront something that was now so 'in your face' as a part of public discourse:

> There are a lot more women now being opposed to violent extremism because we've been forced to, because it's so big in your face. Before, we didn't feel so compelled. We are now talking about it. The rise of Islamic State has driven this opposition. … There is no point sitting silently when you know everyone is talking about it – when you have the fifth terrorist attack in a week, you can't pretend everyone's not talking about it. [Focus group, Sydney]

Government stakeholders concurred, noting: '*The Syria conflict has been a complete game-changer. The involvement of women is now on the horizon in a different way. [Women's] tack is changing, they are more willing to engage with government, more willing to have the conversation, but also more despairing. … The burden of representation comes back on them constantly, but it also means they become champions of CVE, which can be good because they are listened to, able to command an audience*' [Government stakeholder, female].

DEFENDING AGAINST ISLAMOPHOBIC ATTACKS

The driver of lack of belonging, social connection and positive identity identified above for women who support violent extremism can in some instances correlate to the activism of women who oppose violent extremism based on feeling socially vulnerable, both as visible Muslims and as women who may be seen as 'soft targets'. The common root they share is predicated on the fact that Muslim women are more likely to experience personal Islamophobic abuse or attacks on the street because they are more easily identifiable, in greater numbers, than Muslim men by virtue of their clothing.

This gendered experience encourages responses from some women that can be directed to either supporting or opposing violent extremism, whereas the choice of direction will clearly depend on a range of other intersecting or converging factors. In the case of supporters of violent extremism, such abuse facilitates sense of social exclusion, rejection or vulnerability, and the experience of alienation can work in tandem with pull factors to strengthen the appeal of IS's promise of an apparently bias-free religious utopia. In the case of women opposing violent extremism, participants felt that a key driver was trying to prevent Islamist-associated terrorism because of its capacity to feed an Islamophobia of which they are more frequently victims in the social 'battleground' this creates in comparison to men:

The [women] who are visibly Muslim live with this potential of prejudice motivated attacks on a daily basis. So they are trying to oppose violence or be preventative by keeping a low profile on a daily basis. [Community member, female]

Muslim women more easily identified so they are bearing the brunt of this. This is internally as well – they may feel they can't talk about these things publicly which would make things worse. The movement to ban hijab globally or elsewhere impacts how women experience their status and visibility. Opposing IS becomes one way of addressing this – because we are going to cop it regardless. Women are the battleground for these issues. [Government stakeholder, female]

SENSE OF EMPOWERMENT AND ASSERTIVENESS

A lack of, or a desire for, empowerment was repeatedly identified above as a push factor for women who support violent extremism. Conversely, empowerment was also seen by participants to derive from women's involvement in opposing violent extremism, particularly in terms of having or developing greater confidence and assertiveness:

People who oppose it tend to be more self-confident – you are exposed to a lot of negativity, so you need that confidence. [Focus group, Sydney]

They start having confidence – it's lack of confidence and trauma in their lives that are the biggest barriers. [Community member, female]

In some cases, the gendered nature of this empowerment registered for community participants as a visible change within their community:

Boys have always made their voices heard, but the girls are now catching up, primarily through education. I think the girls feel they have more power and courage now – they are feeling increasingly empowered. [Focus group, Sydney]

When Muslim women experience comments [regarding wearing the] hijab or feel persecuted… the level of harassment hasn't increased, but now women feel better able to vocalise about it. I used to feel, 'It happens, ok, I'll just take it and carry on'. Today, more women are willing to call it out. More Muslim women are speaking up about a lot of things. [Focus group, Sydney]

This aligns very closely with the emphasis in the data above on women supporting violent extremism related to finding and keeping a voice that gets heard in the public sphere. It suggests that initiatives, policies and programs targeting empowerment in various facets of women's lives could serve to strengthen protective factors against supporting violent extremism by creating new opportunities for sense of empowerment and efficacy, thereby limiting the likelihood of women and girls looking for voice, confidence and sense of control in ways that harm themselves and others.

PROTECTING PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES FROM HARM

A number of both community and government participants spoke of the protective impulses of women as a factor in why some women choose to either oppose or (less frequently) support violent extremism. As we saw above, some participants felt that women who support violent extremism came to this position through exposure to gruesome pictures and videos online of children impacted by war, motivating them to want to protect and save vulnerable children through creating a new state where these children would be safe and impervious to attack and massacre by their own state, for example in Syria.

The same protective impulse was used to explain women's motivation to oppose violent extremism, particularly if women had watched their own children join groups like IS and wanted to spare other mothers similar pain. One female government stakeholder suggested, '*Women are more likely to see it as about general protective and resilience factors and challenges, of which this is one symptom or facet*'. Another spoke of two mothers he knew whose sons had joined IS and never returned to Australia: '*They say, "We never recognised the signs. If only I had known, but it's too late now. But I want to know the signs now, because I want to share that with other women." … They have seen the tragedies that have occurred out of all this*' [Government stakeholder, male].

Other community-based and government participants had similar observations, linking this both to the decrease in age of young people radicalising to violence and the surge in efforts to travel overseas:

We definitely don't want to see innocent people, young people — in particular our children — go into this. That would stem from our motherly compassion. [Community member, female]

A lot of women say we want to protect our kids from being taken down dangerous paths – all kids, not just the [Muslim] communities. [Government stakeholder, male] … *Mothers have been stepping up more than before, and this is related to the changes around foreign travel. Not so much coming forward re young women or girls – there's more fear than activity.* [Government stakeholder, female]

There is always the case that women were more likely to try to stop their sons from doing something stupid. That is still often the case. The change is not just in Australia but around the world. We used to be talking about men in their mid to late 20s, now [we're talking about] men and women in their mid to late teens. [Government stakeholder, female]

Participants thus identified several key areas of overlap relating to push factors that can characterise both women who oppose and women who support violent extremism. Some of these are not exclusive to women in gender terms, and they include **religious conviction; desire for social and political change or transformation**, and negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam in the media and at community level leading to **sense of social alienation, humiliation or threat**.

Push factors for women seen as more nuanced in terms of gender include **gendered Islamophobic discrimination or abuse; sense of empowerment** within gendered hierarchies of power and access to the public sphere; and **protective impulses**.

Once again, we do not wish to overstate these commonalities. However, given some of the overlaps that have emerged, further research would be warranted to see how such common features can be used, on the one hand, to better support women opposing violent extremism, and on the other hand, harnessed to help redirect vulnerable women's underlying experiences and responses toward more steadily constructive and prosocial outcomes.

PULL FACTORS

We noted in relation to women supporting violent extremism that push factor and pull factors are often intimately related, and that distinguishing between them can be analytically nebulous or challenging at times. In the case of women who oppose violent extremism, the pull factors were not as tangible as they were for women who support violent extremism. For example, female supporters of Islamic State have both an ideological and social space (online and offline) as well as the lure of a physical place (the caliphate) with its accompanying messages and appeals that seemingly provide the antidote to various push factors, draw them in and then keep them preoccupied and engaged within the violent extremist space, whereas for women who opposed violent extremism, the pull element seems more conceptual.

However, one of the common attractors that women who oppose and women who support violent extremism share is a vision of a better social future in which their contributions will make a meaningful difference. Whereas women supporting violent extremism have a vision of a flourishing, cohesive society in which they and their families have an assured place via the caliphate, women who oppose violent extremism also have a similar vision of a flourishing, cohesive Australian society that will embrace and support them and their families, even if it also has imperfections and challenges.

STRENGTHENING SENSE OF BELONGING TO AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

Women who oppose violent extremism repeatedly identified the desire to reassert or strengthen their own and their family's sense of belonging to the Australian community:

Community is so important. If the child feels they belong to a community, they will never go against that community. If we tell them they are different, you are opening the door. You need to fill in those gaps in terms of belonging and acceptance in the Australian community. Here we don't have war in our land and territory, so our sense of belonging and unity should be very strong. [Community member, female]

While this community participant identified 'difference' as a potential negative, another saw difference as unproblematic, as long as everyone was equally supported and embraced: '*My boys do stand out as being the Middle Eastern kids, which is fine. We are in a lovely [school] community that supports and embraces us, makes sure we're comfortable and that we are heard. That's why we feel so strong and happy and proud of being part of the community*' [Focus group, Sydney].

Community members also dwelt on the shielding or protective aspects that belonging to cohesive societies creates as a buffer against violent extremism, because it encourages people, through feeling '*strong and happy and proud*' [Community member, female] about who and where they are to maintain these social standards and expectations.

UPHOLDING RELIGIOUS OBLIGATIONS

Religion again featured in community participant responses to what pull factors motivated women to oppose violent extremism, both as an obligation for women to create what they believe their Islamic faith requires a society to manifest, and also as vanguards against the damage they felt was being inflicted on their faith by violent extremism that legitimates itself in the name of Islam:

> *So the biggest drive to oppose would be religion – my religion promotes peace, coexistence, social cohesion, so I'm going to stand up for the truth of my religion and not let those voices be louder.* [Focus group, Sydney]

> *I feel violent extremism is doing a lot of damage to Islam as a religion and as a result [damage to] Muslims and young people trying to understand their faith, so I actively work to address it in the hope that I can correct the record on what Islam stands for, and provide young Muslims with a more cohesive sense of identity between their religion, identity, faith and citizenship … I have a very real concern that if we don't address it, we'll see more violent extremism but also see almost the 'death of Islam' – this idea that we'll lose the whole meaning of it if we don't speak out about it.* [Community member, female]

Male community members and government stakeholders who know and interact with Muslim women who oppose violent extremism shared the view that religion can be a powerful motivating and protective force in the fight against violent extremism and should not be ignored. Rather than the well-intentioned effort to talk about violent extremism and terrorism as operating outside of religion in order to avoid besmirching an entire faith community, these participants felt instead that religion needs to be harnessed as a powerful prophylactic force:

> *A lot of people are shocked when we say that [we want young Muslim people in the mosques] because they think that we're out there to pick on the mosques and Islam and that we're condemning the mosques. It's the complete opposite. We want young people in the mosques, we want to help the mosques do youth workshops, we want young people in the mosques connected to the ummah, connected to the older generation who have wisdom and understand war and understand hardship … So a healthy community is one where you've got young people coming to mosques, but particularly teenagers.* [Government stakeholder, male]

GENDER BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM

However, for this to occur, a wide range of government stakeholders thought that various gender-based barriers to women's participation in CVE initiatives and leadership still need to be addressed. There were numerous comments from government stakeholders actively involved with community groups working to oppose violent extremism on the obstacles faced by women. Some of these issues were raised in relation to formal institutional settings that continue to be dominated by men:

> *Having engaged with a wide range of community groups, I've noticed there is not the same number of women in the room when you engage with official community organisations; few women in leadership roles; mosques are male dominated. Most of the formal group structures we deal with are male dominated. There are significant barriers in that way, and that makes it particularly hard. A substantial number of projects and bids for funding, and most of them come from men, the unsolicited ones.* [Government stakeholder, female]

[In Australia] they don't necessarily have an institutional voice. If they're [working to oppose violent extremism at community level] they are often doing so entirely off their own bat as individuals. They may form an organisation and build a support base but they're not imams, they're not office bearers in community organisations, and so on. [Government stakeholder,male] … *If we're talking about Islamist extremism, I think the lack of institutional role that women have is a clear disadvantage.* [Government stakeholder, male]

Other government stakeholders saw this more pragmatically in terms of 'comfort zones' for women relative to scale, lack of confidence and alignment with gendered horizons and expectations, especially in offline settings:

It is also about the intimate scale of women's activities, which is generally more one to one than the men. Women will not claim expertise [in disengagement from violent extremism] [as the men do]. [Government stakeholder, female] … *Women will often request a meeting without the men in the room so they can have a frank discussion with us.* [Government stakeholder, female]

Yes, it's gendered. That is what we've grown up with, that a woman shouldn't tackle these tough issues. If my brother was working in this space, he wouldn't get the warning [from the family], be careful what you tweet. [Government stakeholder, female]

And as a corollary, there was an emphasis on exploring ways to empower women's activism against violent extremism through social media, which was felt to provide precisely the same freedom and control over how they can be heard and control responses to their interventions that we saw earlier in relation to women who radicalise to violence:

Younger women are less constrained and more willing to speak out in these [face to face] groups, but they pay the price – I've seen it myself: a young woman puts herself forward in a group of old men, and she is treated appallingly, talked over, not given the time of day by the men. And then these young women give up on getting their message and voice out there. Social media gives them, by contrast, more freedom and more control to have a voice and to negotiate the negative reactions of others. [Government stakeholder, female]

In relation to pull factors, we thus also see some overlaps in relation to both women who oppose and women who support violent extremism. These include commonalities in envisioning a better social future (a cohesive Australia vs. Islamic State); the religious obligation to actively pursue a 'correct' version of Islam (one that is peaceful and inclusive vs. brutal and separatist), and implementing that vision of Islamic values and behaviours (contributing to a stable, multi-faith Western society vs. IS's fundamentalist version of *shariah*).

This once again suggests there are similar key areas of concern and motivation for women who either support or oppose violent extremism that can be harnessed to better support women who operate in the countering violent extremism space. Women in both groups may in some cases be trying to achieve comparable outcomes via very different pathways. If these desired outcomes can be recognised and reinforced, agencies may be better able to facilitate the excellent work being done by women who oppose violent extremism, while better understanding and redirecting women who radicalise to violence, or are in the process of doing so, to more constructive channels. While this technique may not work or even be appropriate in all contexts for women who support violent extremism, it nevertheless provides further food for thought as a potential tool for counter- terrorism initiatives.
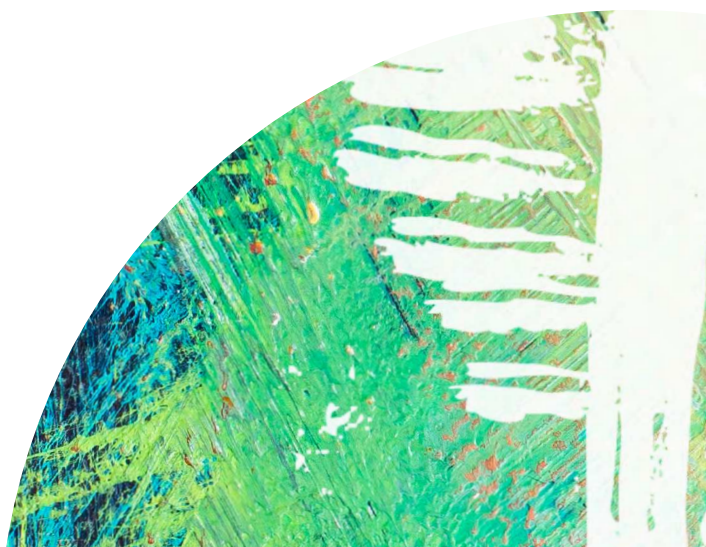
CONTEXTUAL FACTORS: PUBLIC, PRIVATE, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Women who oppose violent extremism work in a variety of individual, family, social and community contexts, often simultaneously. Participants often spoke of the important role that mothers play inopposing violent extremism, either at the very early stages of reinforcing within their children a strong sense of identity, confidence, belonging and resilience, or at later stages as the first people most likely to notice when their children were demonstrating early signs of radicalisation to violence: '*The man will say don't worry, it will fix itself, or as long as he's doing his homework. The women are more sensitive to changes in their children*' [Government stakeholder, female].

This work was not done without cost, however; participants spoke about the confronting abuse women who oppose violent extremism may receive online – '*We're aware of cases where people doing CVE work have had death threats; so there is some fear within the community. This was earlier on, whether that is still the case or is reducing…*' [Government stakeholder, female] – or of the emotional and practical difficulties of dealing with struggling children, particularly as the age range of youth radicalising to violence continues to drop:

> *Women have become more vocal in terms of expressing concern about their kids radicalising, especially those in the process of going to travel – many are desperately concerned and more willing than before to contact government agencies. The kids taking more action have spurred more involvement by women.* [Government stakeholder, female]

These issues were particularly plangent in relation to issues and debates around the public versus private sphere of operation for women who oppose violent extremism.

OPERATING ENVIRONMENTS: PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE

Women opposing violent extremism were described by participants as operating in both public and private spheres. Some female participants ran their own women's organisations where social cohesion and an open anti-violent extremist message were taught and shared, as well as speaking to media on occasion about these issues.

However, both community and government participants were adamant that much of the critically important but under-recognised work by women opposing violent extremism is being done behind the scenes beyond the public gaze. Sometimes this was perceived to be due to cultural expectations about the role of women, in other cases a matter of individual styles and preferences of women who did not favour the spotlight:

> *More is being done privately. Some women don't see themselves as having a public role, they don't want to disrupt their domestic circles and they do more in that setting.* [Community member, female]

> *We also push the boundaries [as women], but in a different way. Men call me privately and say thank you for saying what you said in your post, that's really helped me. But I will not broadcast this on social media because it defeats the purpose.* [Community member, female]

> *They achieve by just having that quiet conversation with whoever may be radicalising. That's how they achieve it and get on with their business. It is still effective. You don't have to have bells and whistles and beat your chest. You can still achieve the same outcome.* [Government stakeholder, male]

Still others thought it reflected the organic nature of gender-based social networks at community level:

> *I think it's probably mostly done in the private space, rather than in public. In terms of why behind the scenes activity: while there is a public profile there and I suspect this is growing, I think the networking aspect and the personal networking is quite strong amongst women and in countering extremism it is no different.* [Government stakeholder, male]

And some women were seen to operate privately rather than publicly in order to protect their families or community from stigma and shame:

> *The more you speak up in the Muslim community publicly, the more criticism you can attract from the community that is seen to harm the community. We avoid media because we don't want the Muslim community to see this as just a performance or attention seeking.* [Community member, female]

And there's a lot of community shame – my son's in jail, I can't talk about it. He's away, he's working overseas, anything but. [Community member, male]

They want to be protective of Islam, and feel that media and IS are both anti-Muslim, and therefore if they speak they might hurt their own religion, and they are protective of this. [Community member, female]

However, a key issue raised by both community and government participants involved women's fear of criticism, backlash and feeling unsafe about being more overt in their activism against violent extremism:

A lot of people choose peaceful activism within their own sphere, their own little sphere at work, their family, their non-Muslim friends, but they won't put themselves out on social media for fear of being attacked. [Focus group, Sydney]

You have to be safe to be public. There are women who might share my views but don't feel safe saying it. And also of their own private safety, who don't want to generate attack, criticism, public backlash. [Community member, female]

The social disapproval of public CVE work is an issue for men as well as women, but perhaps for some different reasons. We are now seeing Salafist imams in the West challenging IS narratives who are being named by IS and targeted for execution. So there is the social stigma but also the physical risk being posed by the reaction of IS to this – [the opposition] must be pushing the right button. It makes the role of supporting CVE and community partnerships that much harder. [Government stakeholder, male]

This fear of being attacked may go some way to explaining why more women do not actively and publicly oppose violent extremism. An important policy and program element to consider is how this fear can be ameliorated to make women feel safer and more comfortable in this space – the number one issue for participants when thinking about prevention strategies, as we discuss in the next section of the report.

Another factor that may account for more women not engaging in publicly opposing violent extremism is a lack of structural support. A number of participants said Muslim women are not given the operational support they require to have the necessary impact. *'Give Muslim women who wear hijab a public space'* and *'more saturation of Muslim women [should be] normalised across society in everyday visible ways'* were representative of comments on this theme from female community participants. Another female community leader offered a powerful statement on this issue:

Give more profile to those women who are very peaceful … give them a PR person. We are missing the machinery to get those voices out there. We have the quality, the tools, and the information, but neither the time nor the expertise to market the peaceful voices. We can do face-to-face but on social media we don't do justice to what these women are capable of. If they are supported they can match and overpower those other women's voices encouraging violent extremism. The strategy is about giving others access to their influence without them having to do the hard work. [Community member, female]

Whilst we deal with the challenges of opposing violent extremism online below, providing women who oppose violent extremism with structural help in offline contexts is quite achievable, and has the potential to make a significant difference.

WOMEN OPPOSING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: FAMILY CONTEXTS

Virtually all participants felt that family plays an important, if not crucial, role in a young person's attitude towards violent extremism. While it is of course possible for young people to push back against parents, as we saw above when looking at women who support violent extremism, the impact that families can have on how young people negotiate these issues was identified as paramount.

Female community-based participants spoke of the frequently unrecognised daily work they do within families, particularly as mothers, to oppose violent extremism. Often this involves not explicitly condemning terrorism so much as reinforcing to their children their important place in Australian society by counteracting the negative things their children were hearing about Muslims at school and in the media to reinforce their sense of belonging. The following anecdote illustrates this well:

One day my son told me, 'Mum, I don't like Muslims.' I thought, OK. I said, 'You just stood up for Muslim prayer.' He said, 'I don't like Muslims because they're terrorists because of their faith.' I stopped the car and we had the conversation right there and then. And I got quite emotional and thought, 'Now we need to have the conversation – I can't protect you from these influences.' I said, 'I have brought you up to be proud of who you are, but after that I can only go so far – the rest is up to you.' The way we get to this is through heartfelt sense of belonging, feeling supported by others in my community. A lot of people don't have that so I am one of the lucky ones. [Focus group, Sydney]

A number of other participants spoke of their struggles as mothers when they felt teachers or other figures in the general community were making their children see their Islamic faith as shameful, and their hard and persistent work to maintain a sense of confidence and happiness in their children despite difficult external influences or challenges.

This constant and indirect work to oppose violent extremism within the family by mothers should not be underestimated. As these data from participants suggest, a strong sense of identity, belonging, and self-esteem are powerful antidotes to the pull of violent extremism, and it is groundwork that needs to be laid and nurtured over a long stretch of time. Many participants said mothers were '*crucial*' or '*the bedrock of the family*' in this regard, and a great many participants spoke of the need to proactively support mothers in these areas when we asked what programs they would like to see implemented in this space, as we detail further below.

However, we would also strike a note of caution here on the role and influence of families, and especially of mothers. While for most young people, positive, well-functioning families are undoubtedly a protective factor against violent extremism, with mothers playing specific roles in fostering their children's wellbeing, the category of 'the mother' cannot be assumed to be always and everywhere a positive or enabling influence in helping build or sustain resilience to violent extremism.

Idealising or romanticising women at any level or in any role, whether as mothers or in other contexts, dismisses and trivialises the individual and social complexities that we need to grasp more fully in order to pinpoint how best to support and provide resources for women who are working, or wish to work, to counter violent extremism within families and communities. Not every mother is engaged positively with her children, and not every family can offer a proactive and supportive environment in which their children can thrive. Nor are women who are mothers ever just 'mothers' – they are women who are embedded and also engendered in a myriad of complex, mutually interacting and multi-level social, cultural, economic and institutional systems and networks. Supporting women who are *struggling*, disengaged or lack support on a range of indicators, for example, may be just as important as supporting those who are already achieving strong outcomes for themselves and their families in abating the risks of violent extremism.

When it comes the role of mothers, in other words, amongst the first things to be avoided are 'motherhood statements' that engender oversimplified or one-dimensional assumptions about female parenting roles and shed little light on some of the pressures, challenges and obstacles that women within families and communities may face in this context.

WOMEN OPPOSING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: COMMUNITY CONTEXTS

A number of community participants raised the importance of female-only community organisations that provided support to women and young people in the area of opposing violent extremism as a helpful resource for women in community settings:

> *Women coming together amongst themselves and discussing [these issues] – that's what we are doing in our organisation. For example, through the mother's group. We have a youth group for girls, not aimed at countering violent extremism, but these issues come up from time to time. Being proactive – weekly Islamic lessons for women, coming back to the core of the faith which is peace. We do a lot of that, and that's about physically being together, the physical connections you form.* [Community member, female]

In fact, community settings where women can discuss issues that may be seen as politically controversial (such as the legitimacy of IS) or embarrassing and shameful (if a mother fears their child has been radicalised) were raised over and over again by participants as crucial for the work of women opposing violent extremism. Some participants noted, however, that advances had been made in both access to and quality of such dialogues amongst women at community level, and they were keen to see this keep developing:

> *Ten years ago, it was just anger that used to drive the conversation. I think now involvement in schooling and university and branching into the wider community, there is a realisation that no, they don't hate us, they're scared. It's no longer a black and white thing. It's we need to sit down and talk about this from a faith point of view, social point of view, rather than us against them, or them against us.* [Focus group, Sydney]

You can have five women in a circle, all different religious groups, and we'll have five different views, but we can still walk away being friends. Whereas previously, if you had a different kind of view you were then [considered] a non-Muslim or a person not rightly guided. Now there is room for open discussion about how to respond to different views – more tolerance. [Focus group, Sydney]

Also reiterated was the need for safe spaces within communities for difficult conversations to be had around violent extremism. The fear and secrecy that swirl around this topic was seen as preventing women from speaking about it openly. In turn, some community participants worried that this could inadvertently exacerbate support for violent extremism because the beliefs are going unchallenged with no place to turn:

I feel a lot of the time young people might feel frustrated and just want to speak to somebody, but they don't know who to go to. Sometimes they end up going to the wrong people. [Community member, female]

This was identified as a particular issue for those girls and women who may have even fewer opportunities to raise potentially controversial issues than men:

You [need to] create a safe space to say 'I have had this radical view'. So that safe space for women too; they don't get as many opportunities as men to discuss this because conservative women don't go out as much as men. These boys would go out and express this opinion with us. Where are the women going? Who are they talking to? [Community member, female]

Beyond just working within the Muslim community, participants identified the need for women to work in a broader setting to oppose violent extremism with other likeminded women, while still continuing vital work within their own homes:

We as Muslims alone discussing things is not going to make much difference to the narrative outside. I think we need to connect with women all over the country … I know it's a big idea but nothing comes close to a conversation that is one on one or in a small group. [Focus group, Sydney]

The community-centred influence of women who oppose violent extremism was also identified as concentrating on inclusivity not only in the wider Australian community but within Muslim communities themselves. A number of participants felt judgmental attitudes within some sectors

of Muslim communities were adversely impacting on the level of influence that could be exercised by women who oppose violent extremism; excluding them from the community fold left them isolated and vulnerable:

I think the first thing we need to work on is being more accepting. I think judgment is a big issue with women in general and specifically with the Muslim community. I think that a lot of women get outcast because they're not physically presenting in the way that's accepted by the [Muslim] community, and so there's a lot of girls, young women, older women, women with children, single women who feel that they're not part of a community. So I think … we need to be inclusive. We can't just say we're inclusive, we have to practice it. [Community member, female]

A more open and understanding community, where potential 'outsiders' are welcome, where hard questions can be asked without censure, and difficult family problems shared without shame, would all be welcome additions to the toolkit of women who oppose violent extremism, and while requiring sustained community effort and good-will, would potentially reap significant rewards.

WOMEN OPPOSING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: SOCIAL MEDIA CONTEXTS

Just as social media is being used pervasively and in sophisticated ways by women to influence others to embrace violent extremism, it is also being used by women opposing violent extremism to sway others to their way of thinking. This digital battleground was seen by participants to rely heavily on emotion, oscillating between narrative and counter-narrative in a war of ideas fought with words, pictures, videos, news articles and commentary.

ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE, ELIMINATE THE NEGATIVE

A recurrent theme raised by participants was the importance of Muslim female role models who share upbeat and inspiring stories on their social media as a counter-narrative strategy. By doing this, participants argued, these women were countering the constant barrage of violence, discord, negativity and lack of welcome for Muslim women in Australian society. As one community member remarked, the bombardment of distressing media stories has a cumulative detrimental effect on the psyche of Australian Muslim women and their sense of place, and this could be countered by:

Showing them light, lovely examples of goodness, as opposed to constant negativity and horror, showing people out there who are doing good things. When consumed with negativity over a long period of time, intermittent but consistent, you get depressed and bogged down…it's not all bleak or bad. [Community member, female]

Other women who actively oppose violent extremism at community level used social media in similar fashion, calling for online social activism that reduces women's sense of victimisation and instead inspires or even goads people into less negative thinking through subversive humour:

I have joined Instagram because I want to influence a certain group of women – I use good news stories to help them with their depression and get them out of their victim mentality. I use Instagram specifically to get good news stories out there. I want to balance the negative stories they get out there every day, 'Did you see what they said, did you see what happened to that boy, did you see, did you see?' I try to counter that. I come back and say, 'I don't appreciate this, it's ugly. Don't put up children [in war] on Instagram'. It leads to anger and frustration and depression, so I try to do something different. [Community member, female]

We need happiness trolls, trolling all the angry people on social media! An underground taskforce. Annoy them with goodness! [Focus group, Sydney]

And another woman who energetically combats violent extremism took a similar approach on social media, carefully inserting positive examples from her own life as an Australian Muslim woman as an example to other young Muslim women who may be doubtful about their place in society, as the following extended vignette demonstrates:

I use Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat. On Snapchat, for example, I connect with all the young girls that when I go to the schools, I tell the girls add me on Snapchat and then what I try to do is to promote how I live every day to show them what it's like to walk in my shoes. If there's an issue around belonging and identity and feeling like they know how to be as Australian Muslims from whatever cultural background, I'm like how can I share what I do? All the people I interact with. All the places I go. How do I show them? How do I tell them stories where people are not treating me like I'm a terrorist?

The other day, I shared a story on Facebook. It was just a coffee queue conversation I had with some bloke who's Jewish and he said, 'I just want you to know I don't look at you and think that all Muslims are terrorists. I'm a devout Jew.' When I shared that story on Facebook, I thought, 'Yeah, 50 'likes' is common,' but it's on a hundred and something

'likes' now and I can't believe that people really were interested in something so ordinary. … If we can just normalise what life can look like, then perhaps we don't need to directly say, 'You need to reject political violence', but instead political violence is no longer a factor in their minds. [Community member, female]

Flooding the internet with positivity by Australian Muslim women can be a hard sell, given the earlier focus from participants on the inherent attractiveness and attention-grabbing nature of more negatively oriented events, conflicts and commentary. However, the combination of humour and positive storying done in sophisticated and community-savvy ways, with an acute understanding of audience, is a potentially under-explored avenue, and one that could be developed far more systematically beyond the very useful but ad hoc individual initiatives described above.

PROFESSIONALISING THE APPROACH

As well as these examples of women who are already using social media as a way to counter dominant narratives around lack of belonging, negativity or constant conflict, other participants stressed the need for more social media activity explicitly focused on opposing violent extremism. They emphasised the need for professional, coordinated and high impact campaigns:

We need more campaigns highlighting achievements of Muslim Australians, how being Muslim contributes to their identity, what we admire about Muslims … by having social media video clips that say the Muslim Australian I admire the most blah blah blah – this could be helpful. Things that can go viral that would give Muslims a sense of pride and achievement and a sense of goals or purpose that they can have here, that they don't want to sacrifice to go there. [Focus group, Sydney]

Others spoke of wanting to see more community-driven projects that focus on cohesion using humour in short videos to tackle Islamophobia. Resonating with the issue of empowerment raised above, one participant said using counter-narratives on social media would '*give [young people] influence to be empowered themselves through the right messages*' [Community member, female].

Unsurprisingly, social media was seen as a critically important theatre of influence for trying to change the negative, divisive and often violent narratives to which young people especially were exposed. Participants saw this as an area needing greater investment, particularly in reaching young people immersed in social media as part of everyday life. While some participants spoke compellingly about the influence of offline interactions, social media came up far more often as the space where the 'wedge' of positive engagement should be staged for maximum impact.

CHAPTER SIX

WOMEN AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM:
PREVENTION STRATEGIES

In this chapter we review participant proposals for a range of strategies and solutions that can help improve women's capacity to resist the appeals of violent extremism on the one hand, and more effectively support women's efforts to reduce extremism within families and communities on the other.

SAFE SPACES WITHIN FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Overwhelmingly, the top priority for both community and government stakeholders was the need to create safe spaces for women to come together in sharing knowledge, concerns and sourcing information about how to address radicalisation to violence – whether in relation to their own family or friends, or in broader community, social and political contexts.

Some participants felt that this was essential in terms of '*breaking women's isolation*' [Community member, female], reducing fear of a taboo topic and promoting stronger social networks for women to engage in conversations that can risk shame and stigmatisation. As previous research on community reporting thresholds has demonstrated (Grossman, 2015b), the sense of fear, shame and isolation that many people can feel in situations where they need social support relating to intimates involved in violent extremism can be profound. One participant movingly recounted the experience of women with radicalised family members in her local community in precisely this position:

And these women felt so isolated and so lost, yet the community couldn't reach out because they were scared. So everybody has a very heightened sense of fear. What will happen if I reach out to them, will I be seen to be in support of them? Will I now get my family involved? While that seems to be very much a selfish reason, it is very real and people just honestly don't know how to navigate this. How do you support the family without being seen to support the boys [who have radicalised]? Honestly, I don't think we actually know how we can do both, how we can support the family that is absolutely devastated by what's happening and not be seen as 'supporting political violence'. [Community member, female]

Community participants thought that initiatives such as trusted and confidential local individuals or possibly support groups would make a positive difference:

I think a support group or someone they can speak to who has an expert understanding of this and can support you as a parent, not religious at all, just supporting them as a parent and understanding of what their child might be going through and why they might be attracted to this, for the parent to understand. It would have to be trusted community groups… not bringing outsiders in, though. [Community member, female]

The fears and anxieties referred to here can be contagious, blocking possibilities for dialogue in the exact environments where it may be most effective at an early stage. In this context, other participants emphasised the need to create safe spaces *within* families so that young people who may be grappling with social and political issues and conflicts can feel confident about airing their views without immediately being closed down or sanctioned. For these participants, the important thing was to provide safe spaces in which young people can express themselves but also be guided away from negative or harmful influences and thinking in a supportive family setting:

I would see family and local community as being the primary place in which conversations can happen. For me, one of my big concerns is that given how sensitive this space is and how highly politically charged it's become, people are fearful about talking about issues and concerns that they might have. Parents are shutting kids down and they're just not wanting to go there. Really, the family is that crucible where those things should be able to be talked about. [Government stakeholder, male]

However, families were not the only avenues for safe spaces; some participants argued that peer networks for young women were just as necessary to help create multi-channel opportunities for dialogue and exploration of difficult or sensitive territory:

As much as there is debate about being a male Muslim, women are seeking identity as female Muslims as well. I think that connecting with other young people around that … there isn't a lot of space for young people to explore these issues [such as identity as a Muslim], and the families get worried [when this kind of talk occurs]. If there is personal benefit, it is to discuss [these issues] with other young people, there is a reward down the path. [Government stakeholder, female]

And some participants saw safe spaces simply in order to process or debrief from constant exposure to confronting or dark events such as war, racism and conflict, which in turn can weaken resilience to violent extremism:

I think it's also important for adults to talk in a safe space about how they're feeling. You can't just pretend it doesn't affect you to see constant negativity around you – you need a safe space to talk about it. One person might be feeling isolated by comments at work, and you can help give another perspective. The family is really important here. [Focus group, Sydney]

The problem with CVE today is that it's so toxic even to talk about it. Two to three years ago, if you talked about the illegality of the Iraq invasion, you were seen as on the road to radicalisation and teachers thought you caught the bug. You need the space to talk, otherwise the space left to talk about this stuff is only with the extremists. [Community member, female]

Community members were adamant that these safe spaces for dialogue and exchange need to be offline, and not just routed through social media channels. While *social influence* could effectively be waged online for CVE purposes because that is the dominant space in which violent extremists are intervening, *social support* was seen as requiring embodied social contact. These participants felt that face to face interaction was still the best way in which to help women connect with each other and develop sustainable relationships and support systems, both within but also beyond their local religious or cultural groups:

We as Muslims alone discussing things is not going to make much difference to the narrative outside. I think we need to connect with women all over the country, and maybe where we have exchange students – I know it's a big idea, but nothing comes close to a conversation that is one-on-one or in a small group. If we had a collective voice that way, women from all communities, backgrounds … there's a lot of women who want to help us out, but they just don't know how to get into us as a community. If we get women talking to women – lonely, overburdened, high in poverty – we say the war is outside your front door, but now the war is inside your front door. [Focus group, Sydney]

Bring back face to face interaction – group meetings with a purpose. Everyone has issues to talk about and wants to share. In the olden days (laughing) women used to get together for a coffee for informal support and a chat, maybe just talk about today. Whilst social media is interactive, it is not collective – you can block this one and that one but you can't block someone right in front of you. There are more constraints if you are face to face that actually improve conditions for dialogue. [Community member, female]

However, safe spaces on social media platforms were also supported by government participants familiar with current initiatives aimed toward at-risk young women and men:

I know that some women we are familiar with are using social media in closed groups to make a safer environment to discuss these issues – for example, the Y Factor group in Sydney. Young people were trying to do something to foster debate and dialogue. It was intended to create a space for those who might be heading down the violent extremist path to moderate their views. You had to join the group online to get in. Women were actively involved. [Government stakeholder, female]

The [cultural group] podcast was a good example: it promoted dialogue about topics including [terrorist organisation], young people pushing back against others on issues within a safe space. It was the organic voice coming back up – very grassroots. It was a closed Facebook group; friends had to invite friends, but were unable to control the dialogue, of course. It grew quickly. The conversations were allowed to continue, and that created space for the organic dialogue. [Government stakeholder, male]

INCREASING KNOWLEDGE AND INTERVENTION TOOLS FOR MOTHERS

As we saw above, mothers have come in for particular attention as part of broader efforts to counter violent extremism within families and communities. As we also saw, a number of people commented that in the Australian context mothers' involvement in this space was now increasing, commensurate with their heightened concerns about children since the emergence of Islamic State:

> I never used to hear a woman calling me saying I'm worried about my son; men used to do that after the fact not before the fact. Now we're getting the woman wants a practice approach because they know the repercussions, they know the passport will be cancelled or whatever. I think they're pushed to do that because they think the men are not doing a good job in their own eyes. [Government stakeholder, female]

However, participants felt more needed to be done to offset the reluctance, loneliness and confusion that some mothers may experience in coping with issues around violent extremism and locating resources to help support them:

> The majority of mothers I know are very confused about how to raise their children in relation to radicalisation. There is fear about what they can do to support their children and understand what's going on in their child's mind to help them navigate life's challenges. We are right now trying to work out what the issues are for them and how to help them. [Community member, female]

> You have to wonder about how lonely women and mothers must feel in their space when they see their kids going down this path. It's about providing understanding that parents and especially mothers are isolated in this space, and that they need a mechanism by which they can comfortably and confidently bring these issues out from behind closed doors to find help for their kids outside of attention of police. Most would not entertain the option of involving law enforcement, and otherwise they are left on their own. Some government activities are looking to plug this gap. [Government stakeholder, male]

This relates closely to the theme above focusing on the importance of safe spaces for women, and particularly mothers, in which to share their concerns and engage with resources and support in a confidential, non-judgmental environment.

Also picking up on a theme identified in the literature was the need to address lack of knowledge, resources and confidence about intervening with children by providing enhanced internet and social media training for mothers who may not understand aspects of their children's online lives and use of the social media and the internet.

> There is also a certain desperation driven by the internet, with people feeling they don't know what's going on or how to control it. There is a program training Muslim women how to use the internet so they know what their kids are doing, and the willingness to take up this training is growing. [Government stakeholder, female]

This included awareness of how social media is increasingly blurring the line between 'public' and 'private' in home environments in relation to violent extremism:

> Not everyone acts on the violence [advocated through social media], but we are seeing a big increase in depression, alienation and isolation. Who is picking up all of this? It's the mothers in the families. This is a way of taking political violence inside your home. It's no longer outside. It's being brought in through the computer screen. Sometimes it's an unspoken thing with young people who mention something, and if you don't have the tools as a parent to ask the right question, then… [Community member, female]
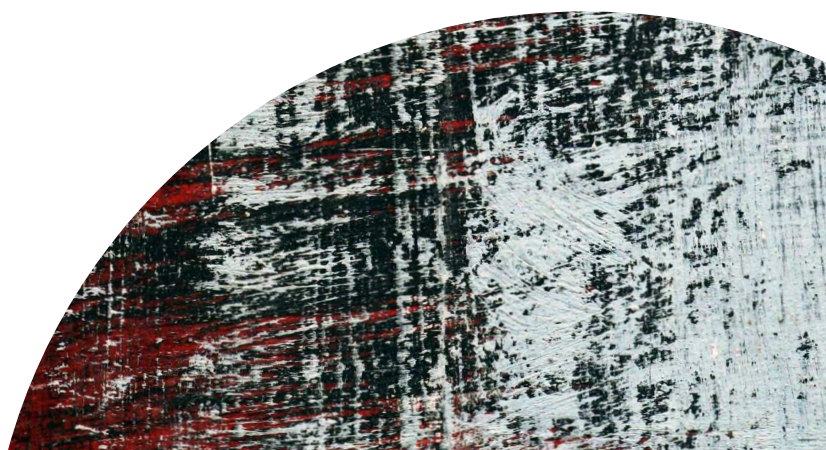
SUPPORTING FAMILIES

Recognising that families can often (though not always) function as '*protective networks*' [Government stakeholder, male] for those who may be vulnerable to violent extremism, helping families to offer early support and intervention was another key theme for participants. This included strengthening general family wellbeing by addressing issues related to domestic violence; the stresses caused by family breakdown; stronger engagement between parents and children, and helping families develop strong skills and knowledge bases in keeping young people on track in relation to identity, education and employment with positive reinforcement of their goals, achievements and sense of belonging. This also involves increased social tolerance and understanding of what constitutes a 'family' to begin with. As one community member put it:

> It's about … recognising that families come in different sizes, forms and shapes, and encouraging and recognising the importance of families at a national leadership level. At the moment it's all 'I, I, I'. … Right now we are seeing that families are being destroyed because there's no respect, no acknowledgement, no recognition of the role that different family members play. Not every family is a safe haven, but many are and can be more so. [Community member, female]

There was also emphasis on helping families reduce attitudes and behaviours that can lead to the rejection of or attack on a family member who may be radicalising to violence. This was seen as a risk in terms of shutting the vulnerable person down and driving her further towards harmful networks and influences:

> I think approaching family and working with identifying what her motivating factors are, but you don't highlight her and put the spotlight on her; it's not about naming and shaming, even if that might be the initial impulse. Her message needs to be addressed in a neutral way by showing her the holes in the narrative. Challenge the narrative, not the person. The more you target her, the more you drum up her need for support. And the more you try to shut her down, the more people think you're trying to shut down the 'truth'. [Community member, female]

SUPPORTING EVERYDAY WOMEN'S PRESENCE AND ACTIVISM

As we saw earlier, many community participants placed heavy emphasis on the importance of better profiling of strong Muslim women in the community, and on providing them with greater support to intervene publicly in terms of alternative narratives to violence. An important element of this involves de-mystifying violent extremism as the province of religious scholars or secular experts alone, and helping ordinary women and men feel they can play a role in everyday senses:

> It's not all about being a religious scholar. If people are not scared to go out into their communities and be normal citizens…it is participation that is key. We have to be out there, owning our country and being good citizens – not 'I am a good citizen AND I am a Muslim'. We can just be doing secular things as well, it's not all religion. [Focus group, Sydney]

In the same vein, they also called for better '*public saturation of Muslim women*' as a means of 'normalising [Muslim women] across society in everyday visible ways' to counteract narratives of difference and lack of acceptance in the broader community.

Government stakeholders were also enthusiastic about this approach, noting that '*women have been at the forefront of a lot of these issues, whether violent extremism or others; they can mobilise a bit better than men*' [Government stakeholder, female]. They suggested '*getting presenters who are practicing Muslim women across a spectrum*' [Government stakeholder, female] and '*challenging the expectation from outside the Muslim community that the people you would talk to [about countering violent extremism] would be men. Journos looking for quotes head for the men, not the women. So there is the gendered reproduction of the public sphere by agents of the public sphere, such as media*' [Government stakeholder, male].

Similarly, another government stakeholder recalled the way in which, despite men occupying the '*centre*' of social as well as physical spaces, women are able to make their impact felt in positive and constructive ways:

> I remember after [some] arrests, I went to a community meeting. There were a lot of people there, men and women. The men didn't have a clue what to do. The women were around the edge of the room, the men at the table in the middle. The men knew they had to say something, and the dynamic was interesting – the women were able to take charge of saying, well, we can't actually do nothing, we have to make some statements. There are some circumstances where women come from the edges but exert strong influence. [Government stakeholder, male]

ENHANCING STRUCTURAL, PROGRAM AND FUNDING AVENUES FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Finally, when thinking about women and prevention, community and government participants stressed the need for practical approaches, both inside and outside local communities, which can help enhance women's opportunity to contribute to CVE approaches and programs.

REDUCING WOMEN'S MARGINALISATION IN COMMUNITY SETTINGS

Some of this discussion involved candid assessments by community and government participants of the need for Muslim communities and organisations to tackle the issue of female exclusion or marginalisation head on:

> We know there is a problem with women and power in structural settings in Muslim communities. They have to be treated equally. I haven't seen [many Muslim community organisations] give women a fair chance to do something. We need more Muslim leaders … who can give women a chance to do something about this issue. [Community member, female]

> I think the capacity building and resilience building does require programs to drive them … that enable women to have the roles and power within a society to do this type of work, so they have a respectful role, not living in a context where they don't have the power to influence others. That's work that should be done specifically through social cohesion programs around gender equity, etc. [Government stakeholder, female]

EMPOWERING WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN CVE THROUGH PROGRAM AND FUNDING MODELS

Beyond this, participants called for changes in how Australia approaches its CVE funding and program models in relation to women's roles and participation. Some highlighted what they saw as a marked imbalance in favour of government funding devoted to security and surveillance, saying this disempowered women in particular who continued to lack critical funding support as key drivers of community based activism and responses to violent extremism at the local level. Others highlighted the need for broader discussion about *'what it is to be an Australian Muslim woman and girl. Not that there's one model to promote, but it would be helpful [to explore different*

ideas], I think. … Women absolutely need to be part of CVE' [Government stakeholder, female].

And they wanted to see support and expansion of existing programs and models already demonstrating successful results in deterring radicalisation to violence to take explicit account of women's capacity both to radicalise to violence and also to work against this:

> We have community resilience programs that offer easy guides for parents, teachers, mentors – anyone in the community, not just Muslims, to identify perhaps triggers or pathways that may lead people down an extremist path. That applies to women as well. [Community member, male]

> At the prevention end, we need to make sure young women who perhaps may be vulnerable or on the brink can [access] diversion and support. Community organisations [should also be] focusing on women and need to be given the necessary support, training, resources, etc. [Government stakeholder, male]

INCREASING PEER TO PEER INFLUENCE OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

Nor should women be exempted from peer to peer program models that have proved successful in other contexts. A number of participants supported the notion of utilising peers to prevent radicalisation and rehabilitate those who already have been radicalised. However, they noted this has not been a well-trialled approach when it comes to women who radicalise to violence:

> There seems to be a strong push on [CVE-focused] peer programs for boys, but a focus only on mothers/elders when it comes to [women] – no girls' peer to peer programs. [Government stakeholder, female]

Some community participants cited their knowledge of peer group settings where girls and women have been actively involved in promoting positive, prosocial engagement in their social networks, sharing knowledge and resources and encouraging people to find out more and get engaged. Peers were also felt to better understand and support each other as an alternative in situations

where family support may be insufficient or unavailable, with greater capacity to empathise and to engage as equals. Participants also suggested that female peer networks can play a valuable role in both validating the prosocial and challenging the anti-social ideas and actions of young women, just as women do in reverse for each other when they have already radicalised to violence.

The use of 'formers' (people who were violent extremists but have disengaged and disavowed their previous commitment to violence) was cited in particular as likely to have greater credibility in peer to peer terms for women who may be radicalising to violence. Other women who have found reasons and ways to turn their back on violent extremism can speak with a first-hand authority about their experiences of witnessing and disavowal that can be very powerful, especially for those who may wanting to disengage themselves:

On the one hand they're saying, 'Come and fight, be a warrior,' you know, equality and all the rest of it. 'Defend Islam,' and then the next minute you're [hearing about] these women being strung up because they weren't being supported by their husbands. So, how does that work? I think even someone at the lowest level has got to understand that's not what it's all about. Those sorts of messages in the community have worked. [Government stakeholder, male]

Those who have gone to join IS and then come back disenchanted, they can be powerful. The girl who went [and then came back and] came out saying it was a big mistake –[on this basis], a part of me says yes, we should let them back in and let the … court process take place. [Government stakeholder, male]

CHALLENGING VIOLENT EXTREMIST AUTHORITY, CREDIBILITY AND LOGIC

A number of government participants focused on the need to challenge the influence of those advocating religious justification of violent extremist views and actions. Some of these comments called for an acceleration of efforts by religious leaders to help create doubt and identify gaps in the logic or authority of narratives legitimising violence based on religious doctrine. However, they emphasised that this is currently not an easy space in which women can intervene, recalling earlier comments above by female community participants about the gap in women's religious leadership and influence:

A lot of the work on prison intervention depends on the ability … to come in and create doubt. The … doubt creation business has been critical to our ability [to operate in the intervention space]. But I'm not aware of any woman in [state] who [currently] has the authority to deliver that message. [Government stakeholder, male]

Whereas a lot of the community work [in CVE] happens in the female domain, when it comes to religious leaders they are men, and government tends to make a beeline to the imams for mentoring, intervention, advice. [Government stakeholder, female]

Government stakeholders were generally ambivalent about the merits of merely trying to deny space to extremist narratives, but felt that exploiting dissatisfaction and doubts about credibility were key elements of any prevention strategy focused on female recruitment to violent extremist causes: '*Where you can find and increase the say-do gap for Islamic State, disputing and discrediting their claims, we need to be doing that. It may be incremental but it does have an impact*' [Government stakeholder, female].

STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND WOMEN IN COMMUNITIES

Finally, both community participants and government stakeholders reflected on the importance of strengthening engagement between government and women in communities when it comes to countering violent extremism. Many of these comments focused on the importance of creating conditions in which women feel they can participate in dialogues on the challenges posed by violent extremism and strategies to address this without being spoken for, or over, by men:

It's problematic because as an Australian Muslim woman, none of those imams represent me. They don't focus on my section of the community, they don't address issues I feel passionate about and so on. There is a space for them, but Islamic leadership in Australia is not clear cut. We don't have a head organisation that everyone turns to for answers. It's divided into different groups, which is not a bad thing [but they are not necessarily] leaders for us. [Community member, female]

There is the question, when we are talking with communities, of how women feel they are able to contribute to the debate and discussion. It can take some time for us as outsiders to work through the gatekeepers and elders. There are voices that it's difficult to get to as government stakeholders because in some communities, older men stop some of the discussion. [Government stakeholder, female]

This is seen as a sensitive and damaging topic for the community, [and discussion with government occurs in] places where women are not offered lots of opportunity to speak publicly on other issues. I've been in forums where it's me and thirteen men and they say they also speak for the women. [Government stakeholder, male] … *I've thought it would be great if we could have more mothers and women. 'That's ok, we speak for the sisters too', [male community leaders] say. That makes me think it's hard for women in the community to be heard on their own terms.* [Government stakeholder, male]

In the view of some government stakeholders, the patchy nature of government engagement specifically with women in CVE contexts has created equally patchy knowledge about how we might best tackle issues specifically related to female radicalisation to violence:

The power of influence and kinship ties and influence can be very important. We see it mostly with men and boys, but that might be a manifestation of our focus rather than what's actually happening. It's fair to say that around the world there has been a primary focus on men as that's where the problem has been seen to exist. The result is that it may have skewed our perception of reality and what we know in this space and this has created some significant knowledge gaps [in relation to women and violent extremism]. [Government stakeholder, male]

Efforts to think through and develop effective prevention strategies that involve women, in other words, must first come to terms with developing meaningful understandings around gender and violent extremism that acknowledge the gaps in what we know, who we know it from and how we might best apply this knowledge. As participants have emphasised over and over again, women, like men, have a core role to play in countering violent extremism, and working to eliminate barriers and strengthen the accessibility and participation of women in communities in CVE initiatives – in ways that reflect the significant diversity of women's social capital, and in terms and contexts that they are directly involved in co-designing – is essential in yielding positive outcomes.

CHAPTER 7: WHEN DOES GENDER MATTER?

As even a cursory search on the internet suggests, the phrase 'gender and terrorism' tends to pull up a wealth of material relating specifically to the role or involvement of *women* in terrorist action or influence. This reflects in part the Western modern tradition of using 'gender' to proxy for 'female' in broader social discourse, for example in employment equity or policy settings. But it also speaks to emerging concerns about the heightened visibility of women and girls involved in violent extremist conflict – as suicide bombers (Africa, the Middle East), enforcers (Al Khaansa Brigade) and social influencers and recruiters to violent extremism in both social media and face to face settings (Huckerby 2015; Berger 2015; Nacos 2015; Saltman & Smith 2015; Laster & Erez 2015). The phrase 'gender and terrorism' thus almost always signals in both popular and academic discourse that we are going to be thinking and talking about the role of *women* in relation to terrorism, whether as actors, influencers and supporters, or victims of terrorist ideologies and actions.

However, while we have explicitly focused here on issues relating to women and violent extremism that are relevant for the Australian context, it would be a mistake to create the impression that 'gender' as an analytical category is of concern or interest only as it relates to women. If women form roughly half the world's population, it is surely not the case that the other half should be seen as 'ungendered' or universal, although patriarchal thinking has long held this to be so. Of course men – terrorist or otherwise – are no less socially constructed in terms of gender norms and codes than women, and it is critical in the broader context of understanding violent extremism that we maintain visibility of the complexities of how male as well as female identities are shaped and negotiated in terrorist contexts.

Most important is developing a stronger understanding of how the *relational* dimensions of gender influence the contemporary dynamics of terrorism – that is, the way in which specific, contextualised socio-cultural structures, frameworks, meanings and values surrounding what it means to be a 'woman' or a 'man' can overlap, converge, reinforce or challenge each other within violent extremist ideologies, networks and messaging.

One of the key findings from the data and analysis presented above is the need to understand the roles of women in violent extremism in terms of the relationship between *gender relations* and *social action*. If, as much social science scholarship now argues, gender is something we 'make' (and is made for us) through social processes, rather than merely something we are born with biologically, then gender itself is something that human beings 'do' by performing, reinforcing or renegotiating gender identities according to various social codes and norms, rather than something that we 'are' in any innate natural or biological sense. As history shows us, what it means to 'be a woman' or 'a man' has varied widely across different times, places and settings in different periods and societies. Key questions and challenges have thus been raised in the course of this study about the specific ways in which women 'do' terrorism as part of their gendered identities, and also about the ways in which women 'do' gender as part of their terrorist activities and social influence.

FUTURE STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

In considering the implications for policy and programming synthesised in Chapter 6 above that focus on prevention strategies, there are a number of gendered elements that can be significant in understanding aspects of push, pull and influence factors when looking at processes and outcomes of radicalisation to violence for women. Specific suggestions for future strategic directions in research, policy and programming below are highlighted in **bold**. All of these, *from the beginning*, should be established as part of a co-design initiative between government and women at community level, along with other relevant stakeholders, to guarantee the best chances for success and sustainability of outcomes.

When it comes to push factors — those things that motivate women to take up violent extremism as either supporters, direct actors or violent actors — the consensus that emerges both in the literature and from our own research data suggests that in most cases, the chief drivers for women differ very little, if at all, from those of men. Grievances relating to conflict, sense of victimisation and sense of injustice; lack of connection or sense of belonging at community level, especially for those from minority or marginalised backgrounds, and various forms of social vulnerability, including lack of knowledge and/or skills, social isolation, struggles with employment and education and lack of confidence are the primary push elements for both women and men.

However, at least in the Australian context, the primary pathway for women who radicalise to violence appears to be a relational pathway that is more influenced by women's relationships with significant men in their lives, rather than by other women at early stages of the process. This contrasts with the relational pathways of men, which are significantly influenced by either peer-based or authority- and influence-led relationships with other men. And despite the very significant social influence of radicalised women on other women once they too have radicalised, often but not exclusively through social media, it still appears to be the case that the influence of other women is not the key feature in the early uptake of violent extremism in the histories of the Australian women we have considered or the perceptions of community and government study participants more generally. However, we should emphasise here that while this may hold true at the general level in terms of trends or patterns, of course there will always be individual cases that prove the exception to the rule.

Despite this, gender does become an important element to take into consideration when we are looking at the gendered nature of women's *experiences* in terms of both push and pull factors. While discrimination or grievances may be common to both men and women, women's experiences of discrimination – for example, as more visibly Muslim in a given community context – will create gender-specific experiences that need to be understood and redressed with this aspect in mind. **Co-designed programs with women in communities** that grapple with the best way to **promote resilience and constructive responses** to such experiences – while working more broadly to reduce the incidence of factors that lead to those experiences to begin with – are an essential ingredient going forward. These programs can be delivered on a multi-channel basis, including through social media, community centres, social service organisations, and other civil society organisations including cultural and religious centres.

In relation to pull factors, gendered frameworks for women come into focus slightly differently than they do in relation to push. Women were found to share many pull factors in common with men (including those constituted as remedies or antidotes to push factors), amongst them sense of belonging, solidarity and acceptance; renewed sense of purpose, identity and meaning; the pursuit of social change and activism, and the rewards of validation, prestige and authority.

However, women tended to access both sense of belonging, solidarity and acceptance, and also validation, prestige and authority, much more through online interactions and influence than through offline, embodied forms of social interaction in violent extremist settings. What emerged as especially crucial for women was the freedom to explore, to experiment and to subvert their 'everyday' gendered identities, in many cases marked by socio-cultural constraints and limitations that apply specifically or exclusively to women, through creating and activating voices and identities that provided them with freedom from these restrictions. Sense of empowerment for women through online activity was thus largely identified as a gender-specific endeavour, and correlated directly to the capacity to gain more control over one's voice and identity. It also correlated to the ability to reinvent, renegotiate or simply ignore one's 'real' gender identity through the anonymity and performativity afforded by online environments, whether this involved meta-voicing, networked associations or generative role-taking as an influencer. In addition, it reflected the ways in which women who may have more limited physical and social mobility than men for a wide variety of reasons can find new 'freedom of movement' on many levels within virtual environments.

A practical response to these issues would involve working to maximise opportunities for women – and especially young women – to find ways of **articulating challenges linked to gender-based constraints and limitations**, increasing women's **opportunities for social mobility and exchange, and encouraging safe spaces for women to develop and share strategies with each other** for how to address challenges and opportunities in terms of gender identity.

The study also shows how shrewdly Islamic State, in particular, has capitalised on these twin impulses of both 'freedom *from*' and 'freedom *to*' for women. Islamic State has proved remarkably successful in mobilising women's participation through roles as supporters, influencers, facilitators and enablers precisely because it has marketed an expanded repertoire of roles and functions for women in relation to its narrative of pioneering state-building. Yet it has done this in ways that do not test or exacerbate the conflicts and tensions that some women – particularly those who find themselves torn between conformity and resistance to traditional, culturally sanctioned codes of

gender behaviour for women – may be seeking to quell. In this sense, women are offered the opportunity by Islamic State to both conform to *and* revise the gendered tensions and limitations they may have previously encountered through being invited to live a paradox, in which the rigid boundaries and strictures drawn around women's roles and spheres of activities become re-coded as lived or felt sources of increased empowerment and action – that is to say, the experience of liberation *through*, not *from*, clearly defined and distinguished gender roles for women and men.

However, these boundaries and strictures are never quite as rigid as they may at first seem; the variability in women's combat roles across different terrorist organisations and movements (and sometimes even within the same movement in different locations) shows how fluid such codes can be under changing circumstances of need and perspective.

When it comes to the roles of women, we believe the findings show fairly conclusively that women are largely playing roles as *direct actors* but rarely as *violent actors*, at least in the current Australian context. Women as influencers, as supporters, and as both ideological and relational facilitators and enablers are active agents of violent extremism, promoting its causes, encouraging others to act, creating and disseminating narratives of influence and contributing to its material as well as ideological successes through roles including the facilitation of financing, information exchange, travel and the social reproduction of new generations of violent extremists in classrooms and in homes. Far from being 'jihadi brides' or 'IS fangirls', as media outlets so often characterise them, young women are finding or enhancing their agency and effectiveness as social actors in ways that reflect profound anxieties or dissatisfactions that must be understood if they are to be addressed.

In this regard, women share exactly the same motivations as do men in relation to seeking agency, empowerment, status and sense of achievement. The key issue is how women can be supported to realise these goals in ways that invite exploration of constructive and peaceful possibilities, rather than risky encounters with the wrong outcomes. Given that our study has identified a number of similar motivations amongst women who both support and oppose violent extremism, there is an opportunity to **reroute these common factors toward countering rather than facilitating violent extremism by appealing to women's desire for agency, action and impact.**

The question of why women are not yet presenting in significant numbers as violent actors in Australia remains an open question. Certainly, in other terrorist and insurgency settings elsewhere in the world, women have engaged directly and sometimes enthusiastically in physical combat, assassinations, mass murders and suicide missions. We have recently seen women directly involved in violent terrorist attacks linked to IS and similar jihadist movements in France, the UK and the United States. The usual response – that IS does not sanction women's involvement in violence based on gender biases, and that this has limited the involvement of women as violent actors to date – may be true to some degree, but it is almost certainly not the whole story. The question of **why more Australian women have not taken up actively violent roles in domestic attacks requires new research** to focus specifically on what individual, social, environmental and network factors relevant to the Australian context might help explain this trend.

In turning to what motivates women to oppose violent extremism, and their experience of and barriers to being active in countering violent extremism at community level, we find that gender makes a difference in new ways again. One is the belief of many participants that women's genuine religious convictions can cut both ways, sending women either down violent extremist pathways or else toward renewed dedication to fighting against terrorism at local levels. Each is motivated by the desire to protect, defend and wrest back symbolic control over the faith they love and to which they have committed themselves. This is an astute insight from participants, and one that can productively **guide new approaches to how women of faith can be mobilised – and collectively mobilise each other – so that their religion is seen as a source of strength in combatting violent extremism rather than as the source of the problem.**

Another key finding from this study is the **caution that needs to be exercised when making assumptions about the role of mothers (and indeed of families more generally) in countering violent extremism**. It is as important to move beyond the stereotype of the all-nurturing, all-influential and all-powerful mother as it is to move beyond that of the jihadi bride or fan girl. All these stereotypes, regardless of which end of the social spectrum they fall on, dismiss or downplay the complexity of women's influence and experience by either trivialising or romanticising their status and their impacts.

In fact, what our study shows is that while many Australian mothers are becoming more concerned, even more desperate, about the potential radicalisation of children and youth since the emergence of IS and the precipitous drop in the age of those participating both online and through foreign travel, they are still comparatively isolated, uninformed and lacking the social or technical resources with which to intervene with confidence and knowledge. There is urgent work to be done to **skill up and better resource women in communities to be able to engage, in safe and meaningful ways, with the complex challenges and issues they face around countering violent extremism in families and in communities.** And just as important is to **investigate what role young women's peers may play in these processes**, as well as those of adults and family members in their lives.

However, there is also an urgent need to **recognise the important work that is already being done by many women, in many communities, around the country in the CVE space**. Much of this work, as our data suggest, is being done in private, whether through fear of community backlash, resistance to negativity or based on personal or cultural styles. Many study participants felt that a key task in prevention terms is strengthening awareness and the voices of such women in ways that allow them to continue their efforts while minimising existing or potential sense of embattlement. However, the tensions between public and private action in CVE contexts remains a vexed area for women, as does **the issue of women's marginalisation by men and by government within some community settings. More can be done to explore, in close consultation with women community members and activists on the ground, how some of these tensions and barriers might be resolved.**

Much research to date on women and terrorism has focused on the identities, roles and motivations of women who support or engage with violent extremism. **Future research in relation to women *opposing* violent extremism remains underdeveloped and could profitably explore, through a broader sample, a more nuanced breakdown of the roles played by women who counter terrorism in varying contexts**. Understanding how a woman working to counter violent extremism may work as an influencer in contrast to how she works as an enabler, for example, in the same way that we have detailed above for women who support violent extremism, can provide a much richer and more nuanced understanding not only of the actual work these women do, but also of the s**upports, opportunities and constraints that define when and how women countering violent extremism are able to operate**. In doing so, it will be possible to provide stronger, better informed and more targeted support of the many women already working hard both nationally and in local communities to protect and support Australian individuals, families and communities by combatting violent extremism.

A consolidated list of future directions thus includes considering policies, models and practices that lead to:

1. Creating **safe spaces within families and communities** in order to break down women's isolation on issues concerning violent extremism and allow for 'debriefing' of each other on exposure to dark or negative events such as war, racism and conflict.

2. Ensuring that **peer groups for young women** are part of the model when creating safe spaces for dialogue and exploration.

3. Remembering that **face to face interaction** allows for more intimate and sustained relationship building than online channels, and supporting women's opportunities for face to face interactions on CVE issues accordingly.

4. Increasing **knowledge and intervention tools for mothers**, including ways to combat the reluctance, loneliness and confusion that some mothers can experience when coping with family members radicalising to violence and locating resources to support them.

5. Enhancing **opportunities for women to skill up in relation to internet and social media literacy.**

6. **Supporting families to cope effectively with challenges**, including some of the underlying factors that can lead to heightened vulnerability for young people to violent extremist networks such as family breakdown and dysfunction, domestic violence and intergenerational conflict.

7. **Improving sense of inclusivity and social tolerance for diversity within communities**, and not just between different communities.

8. **Supporting women's everyday presence and activism in their communities**, including their ability to demystify violent extremism without needing to feel like 'experts' or 'scholars'.

9. **Reducing women's marginalisation in community settings** by promoting the engagement of women more actively and directly in CVE initiatives, including women-only CVE initiatives as required.

10. **Empowering women's involvement in CVE through accelerated program and funding models.**

11. Identifying and harnessing women's capacity to **challenge violent extremist authority, credibility and logic.**

12. **Strengthening relationships between government and women** in communities.

13. Considering new approaches to **mobilising women of faith so that religion is seen as a source of strength** in combatting violent extremism rather than as the source of the problem.

14. **Avoiding simplistic assumptions about the role of mothers**, and of families, in countering violent extremism.

15. **Mapping the private, less visible work already being done by many women in families and communities** that contributes to efforts to mitigate and reduce violent extremism through promoting resilience for children, young people and families more generally.

16. Researching a **more nuanced breakdown of the roles played by women who counter terrorism** in various contexts, and examining in greater detail the **supports, opportunities and constraints** that define when and how women countering violent extremism are able to operate in specific contexts.

TOWARD AN ANALYTICAL MODEL FOR WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM

What have we learned from the literature, the data and the analysis above that can help develop an analytical model for understanding the drivers, attractors and influences that lead women toward engagement with violent extremism? Below, we offer a preliminary analytical model that can help identify key areas of focus and concern for efforts to disrupt and divert the thinking, feelings and behaviour of women who may be at risk of, or on the road to, radicalising to violence. Our analysis suggests that it is pull factors which are more specifically marked by gendered considerations for women, compared to push factors, which largely overlap with those for men. For this reason, we have focused on developing a conceptual framework for understanding the drivers and attractors that pull women towards violent extremist ideology and pathways, building on and extending some of the previous models discussed above in Chapter 1. While the drivers for women who radicalise to violence significantly overlap with those motivating men, there are nevertheless gendered differences in relation to *pathways* and *experiences* during the radicalisation process. When we turn to pull factors, five different categories emerge that are meaningful for women radicalising to violence: **social influence, 'freedom to', 'freedom from', affirmation** and **legitimation**.

Figure 6 below represents an analytical model for understanding how women may move toward involvement in violent extremism, noting once again a number of very significant overlaps with men's trajectories toward radicalised violence:

Figure 6: Analytical model for women's radicalisation to violence

Drivers (push)

Grievance (sense of personal, social and/or political victimisation, loss of dignity, sense of injustice)

Lack of social connection/ belonging (within family, community, broader society)

Perceived threat (to identity, culture, belief systems)

Vulnerability (lack of knowledge and/or skills; social isolation; lack of confidence)

Idealism and conviction (positive social change; defending beliefs; protecting or helping others)

Attractors (pull)

Social influence by and of others (empowerment, status, agency)

Freedom to gain control, explore identities, challenge boundaries, drive change and transformation

Freedom from uncertainty, values- and gender-based conflicts, constraints or demands

Affirmation through exclusivist modes of belonging and sense of sisterhood/ solidarity/collectivism

Legitimation of nexus between 'feeling' and 'doing' - transforming emotions into purposive action

Pathways

Relational: Primarily but not exclusively significant male influence *plus* drivers/attractors

Ideological: Political, religious, social convictions about world events and social change

Environmental: Primarily but not exclusively social media influence *plus* drivers/attractors
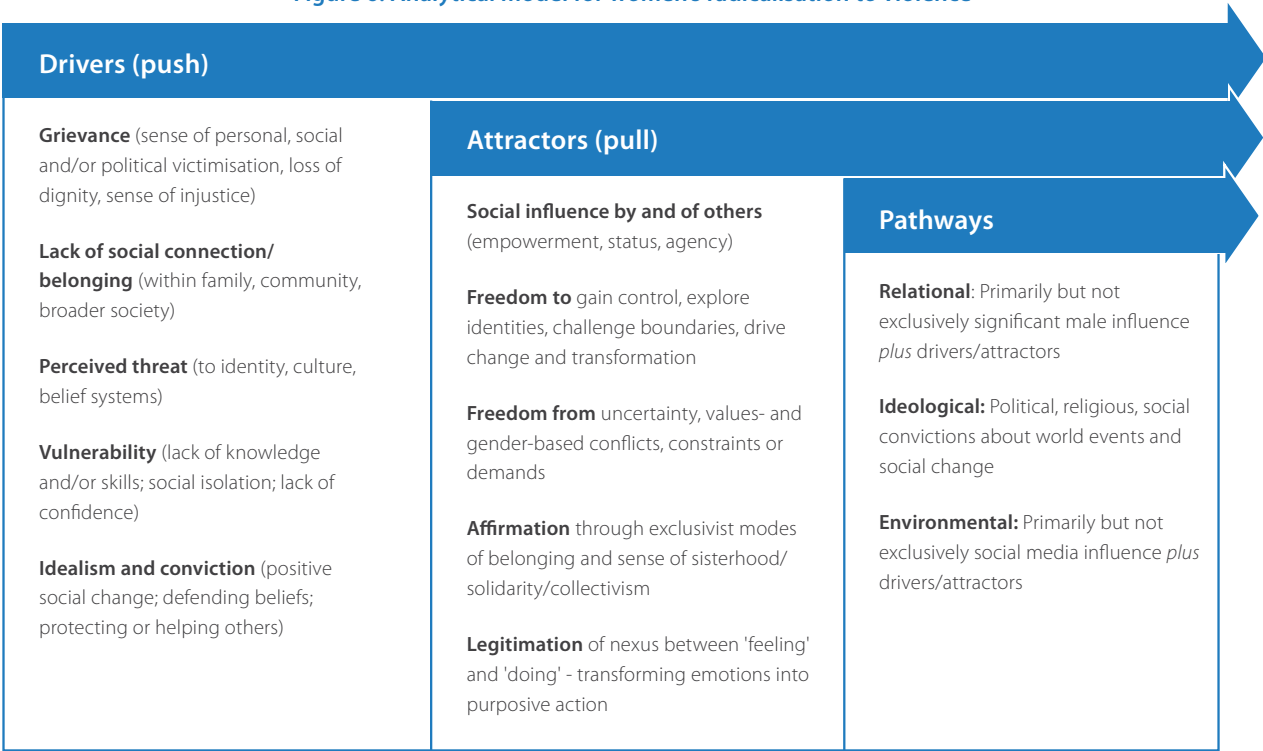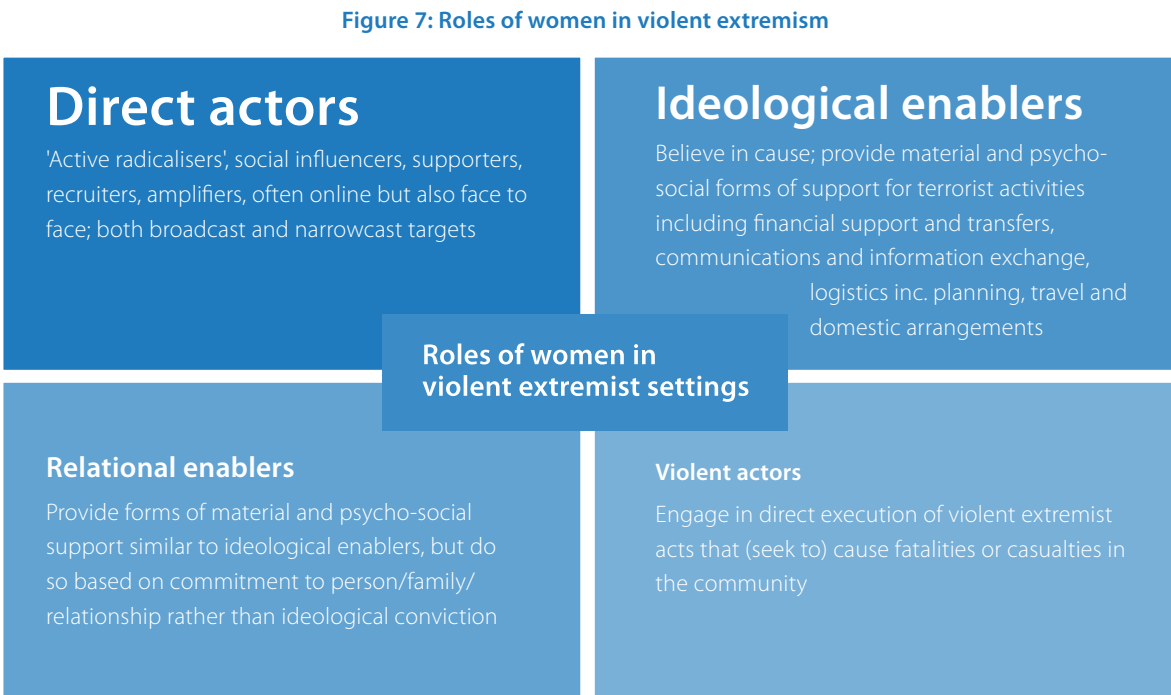
Figure 7 below shows how the roles of women radicalised to violence are distributed based on the data gathered by the project. The differences in font size and colour intensity reflect the proportion of women likely to be involved across the range of roles identified.

Figure 7: Roles of women in violent extremism

Direct actors

'Active radicalisers', social influencers, supporters, recruiters, amplifiers, often online but also face to face; both broadcast and narrowcast targets

Ideological enablers

Believe in cause; provide material and psycho-social forms of support for terrorist activities including financial support and transfers, communications and information exchange, logistics inc. planning, travel and domestic arrangements

Roles of women in violent extremist settings

Relational enablers

Provide forms of material and psycho-social support similar to ideological enablers, but do so based on commitment to person/family/ relationship rather than ideological conviction

Violent actors

Engage in direct execution of violent extremist acts that (seek to) cause fatalities or casualties in the community

These two analytical models need to be tested against empirical data in order to further refine and validate their utility and applications, particularly in prevention, intervention and disengagement contexts. In their current form, they represent a distillation of what we see as the key elements identified through analysing and triangulating the data collected by the study, and can form the basis for further discussion and development by analysts, policy makers and service providers working in field-based contexts at community level.

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