ACADEMIC PAPER

GENDERED PATHWAYS TO RADICALIZATION AND DESISTANCE FROM VIOLENT EXTREMISM

LESSONS FROM EARLY-INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

APRIL 2019
FRANZISKA PRAXL-TABUCHI,
GLOBAL CENTER ON COOPERATIVE SECURITY

GLOBAL CENTER ON COOPERATIVE SECURITY

UN WOMEN

Manufactured in New York, NY

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of UN Women, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations. This research was generously funded by the government of the United Arab Emirates.

Produced by the Peace and Security Section of UN Women
Text: Franziska Praxl-Tabuchi
Production Coordination: Natasha Lamoreux
Design: Melanie Doherty Design

ACADEMIC PAPER

GENDERED PATHWAYS TO RADICALIZATION AND DESISTANCE FROM VIOLENT EXTREMISM

LESSONS FROM EARLY-INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

FRANZISKA PRAXL-TABUCHI,
GLOBAL CENTER ON COOPERATIVE SECURITY

PEACE AND SECURITY SECTION
UN WOMEN
New York, April 2019

GLOBAL CENTER ON COOPERATIVE SECURITY

UN WOMEN

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Women and girls, although relatively less represented in the ranks of terrorist fighters, have long played key roles as ideologues, facilitators, fund-raisers, and recruiters for violent extremist groups and have inspired others to join these groups. History offers plenty of examples of female involvement in political violence, but a certain fascination and disbelief continue to surround female violent extremists because women are often still viewed as homemakers and mothers, surprising society by the number of young girls and women joining the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

"[S]ociety, through its body of rules and its numerous institutions, has conventionally dictated [women's] roles within the boundaries of militancy."[1] Yet, the modalities of female participation in ISIL are unprecedented. The central role of family and the territorial ambitions of ISIL, creating a state with an independent infrastructure, recruiting not only fighters but individuals for a multiplicity of roles, including medics, police, mothers, and wives, allow for an intensified focus on female participation in violent extremism. Indeed, recent reports suggest that women are up to 20 percent of the contingent in ISIL-held territory.[2]

This brief explores the drivers of radicalization to and engagement in violent extremism and the factors of disengagement and desistance among women and girls by examining data generated through the United Kingdom's Channel program.[3] Channel cases were chosen for this analysis because it is one of the longest running (since 2007) and most documented early-intervention programs[4] developed specifically to prevent individuals from being drawn into terrorism and violent extremism.[5] Limitations of the Channel program include the threshold for referrals, racial and religious bias in the referral process, the intent and content of interventions, and qualifications of intervention providers, as well as a lack of robust evaluation of its outcomes.[6] Furthermore, most of the girls and women who have gone through the Channel program were inspired by Islamist groups such as ISIL, limiting the analysis in this brief to only one form of violent extremism. Similar limitations apply to the level of extrapolation of results outside of the United Kingdom.

This brief is based on in-depth interviews with Hadiya Masieh, who has worked with the Channel program as an intervention provider (IP) since 2010, in which she reflected on her assessments of 50 women and girls between the ages of 13 and 30 whom she mentored between 2013 and 2016.[7] Two additional IPs were surveyed for this research, but preferred to remain anonymous. Consultations with these IPs followed a structured and semistructured format. The questionnaire focused on radicalization and desistance processes aimed at identifying specific trends and indicators of gendered pathways of engagement in and disengagement from violent extremism. This analysis was conducted to determine if there are gendered pathways or factors that distinguish women's engagement in and disengagement from ISIL and how intervention programs could be made more effective by accounting for these distinctions. The brief is structured and framed around four main areas of inquiry.

- What were the circumstances under which a young woman became involved with ISIL and ISIL-linked violent extremist groups or became inclined toward violent ideologies, and what were the modes and means by which a young woman came into contact or engaged with ISIL and ISIL-linked violent extremist groups or ideologies?
- What were the circumstances under which a young woman began questioning her beliefs or rethinking her support for ISIL and ISIL-linked violent extremist groups and ideologies?
- How did her attitude change over the duration of the intervention, and what factors have aided or obstructed successful outcomes?

- What were the postintervention measures adopted to provide continuity of support?

In November 2017, the UK Home Office estimated that, from April 2015 to March 2016, 21 percent of its referrals were female, 20 percent of the discussed cases were women, and 15 percent of these women received Channel support.[8] According to the estimates, a large portion of referred women and girls were predominately from areas of London, Luton, the West Midlands, and Lancashire; and they varied in ethnicity, economic status, and age, although most were under the age of 20.

The diverse roles women play in terrorism, violent extremism, and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts is increasingly recognized by security sector policymakers and counterterrorism practitioners around the world. There remain underlying assumptions, however, about female engagement in ISIL as being mostly passive, despite growing evidence of women's active roles, for example, receiving sniper training, becoming suicide bombers, and recruiting other women.[9] These assumptions often stem from insufficient focus on this issue and the historical lack of major roles, with some exceptions, for women in the formal structure or leadership of violent extremist groups.

GENDERED PATHWAYS TO RADICALIZATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Gender norms and gender relations have a significant influence on issues related to isolation, self-esteem, and social, economic, and political opportunities.

For example, factors contributing to young women raised in Western countries joining ISIL can include "rejection of Western feminism; online contact with recruiters who offer marriage and adventure; peer or family influence; adherence to the ideology and politics of Daesh; naivety and romantic optimism; and the chance to be part of something new, exciting and illicit."[10] Although men and women share factors, the mechanisms and their personal manifestation differ. Given that radicalization is often the culmination of economic, social, and political factors and all of these processes are gendered, so is the pathway of radicalization to and disengagement from violent extremism.

Normative expectations of women help explain why women seeking to join ISIL are more likely to travel with their families or in all-female groups.[11] This is particularly applicable in the case of ISIL, which places central importance on broad, culturally understood notions of traditional family values and started at a later point specifically targeting women in its recruitment strategy.[12] Intervention programs should account for gender expectations and not fall into the trap of stereotyping women as only being groomed or brainwashed or as predominantly passive in their radicalization. Masieh noted, "In more cases than not, the quest for female empowerment contributed to the women's decision to support or join ISIL."[13]

The following trends were identified predominantly through Masieh's interactions with girls and women referred to her through the Channel program from 2013 to 2016. These trends include isolation due to restrictions in public spaces, alienation, inequality, and marginalization; imposed identity expectations; longing for adventurism; and changing modes of engagement that support the surpassing of these circumstances.

Isolation Due to Restrictions in Public Spaces, Alienation, Inequality, and Marginalization

Foreign and Domestic Policy

The young women referred to Masieh through the Channel program were predominantly high achieving and secondary-school students.[14] As such, they were relatively well educated, politically aware, and often frustrated with foreign and national policies. Injustices that they, their community, and society as a whole are seemingly powerless to change add to their frustrations and feelings of helplessness. Many of Masieh's clients ultimately subscribed to the utopian version of ISIL, which they believed would take care of those suffering, defend against Western powers that massacre Muslim civilians, and provide a form of Islamic lifestyle that cannot be lived in Western countries.

Sense of Belonging

Masieh observed that recruiters seem to specifically target young women who have no family ties, tapping into the gendered expectations and culturally understood importance of the traditional family and filling this void by promising them a substitute family in ISIL. Many referrals were young women who lived in social care.[15] Similarly, the promise of friendships and family-like ties was utilized by ISIL and used

in the early stages of the recruitment process. The strategic use of specific, culturally appropriate, and mutually understood words and terms can be used to facilitate relationship building and can influence social behavior.[16] Masieh noted that once recruiters gain their targets' trust and are perceived as credible voices, these individuals become easy to influence and manipulate. They offer an escape route and sell them the idea of a utopian dream: a place where they can practice their religion freely and not be subjected to marginalization or Islamophobia. For those clients who were less versed in religion, particularly young and impressionable people, recruiters sometimes served as their only point of religious reference.

Social Behavioral and Mental Health Concerns

Another trend detected among the young women mentored by Masieh was recruiters' deftness at exploiting the behavioral and mental health of those targeted for recruitment. Recruiters tailored their approach to an individual's personal and emotional problems. For example, recruiters would take advantage of a target suffering from depression by pitching uplifting messages and holding out the promise of a better life. Masieh found that recruiters actively looked for signs and were quick to notice and exploit a target's perceived mental health. Recruiters tried to "counsel" such individuals and offer them the alternative of life in ISIL territory where, they were told, they would be happier and "free from sadness" with a newfound purpose in life.[17]

Imposed Identity Expectations and Gendered Practices of Religious Identity

Converts can equally, if not more extensively, be the target of marginalization and discrimination, being asked or forced to explain and justify their choice to convert to Islam. In combination with gendered practices, including the wear of religious garments, women become the target of marginalization. Muslim converts who were directly contacted by ISIL indicated that they followed a similar path. Masieh's clients indicated that they would first research the faith online as they often were not confident enough to enter their local mosques alone and felt it was more convenient to learn from the comfort of their homes. The majority of Masieh's clients between the ages of 18 and 25 who converted to Islam described an active attempt by recruiters to contact them to offer them the "true and only way" to practice their faith. Through these interactions, these women were able to feel like they were pursuing their learning. Masieh noted that her clients grew to trust and rely on the sources and materials provided to them by recruiters to the exclusion of others.

Longing for Empowerment and Adventurism

Masieh's clients described a strong desire for empowerment and adventure, particularly influenced by the quest to improve their participation in public discourse and gain control over their own lives. They expressed the feeling of being trapped between seemingly equalizing opportunities, such as higher education and the obvious gender inequalities in other parts of their lives, including structural gender inequalities, on family, community, and national levels. Contradicting mainstream notions and "echoing the arguments of feminist scholar Nancy Frazer ..., there is implicit in the narrative of these women to call to more beyond