

# Gender and Countering Islamic State Radicalisation

Written by Katherine E. Brown

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KATHERINE E. BROWN, FEB 18 2016

In the past few years it has come to the attention of both media and policy makers that women are also involved in political violence. This revelation, not so startling to those who have studied terrorism over the decades, maybe accounted for by two key trends. First is the determination of the Islamic State group (ISIS) to explicitly recruit women from Western Europe, Australia and North America. Islamic State group identify women as essential to the long term survival of their *Caliphate*, and construct a utopian vision where women align their domestic (predominately wifely) duties in the private sphere, with the religio-political aspirations of the group that are carved out of male violence in the public sphere. This post does not link to ISIS material as I don't want to be responsible for their reproduction and inadvertently promote the group. Second, the recent reframing of terrorism to 'radicalisation' and the accompanying fear of 'extreme ideas' – as much as 'extreme behaviour' – raises the profile of women in terrorist organisations as the violent 'front line' is no longer the sole concern of counter-terrorism officials and lawmakers. It is of no surprise therefore to see significantly more women arrested and convicted of terrorism related offenses as the range of behaviours criminalised moves further from actual terrorist violence. This is not to say women have not engaged in violent behaviour on behalf of terrorist organisations, or that they won't again, but policy and media understanding of women's participation in terrorism in the contemporary period is shaped by these two trends.

In light of these two trends, it is not unreasonable to expect a shift in counter-terrorism policies generally, and counter-radicalisation programmes specifically, so that women's recruitment and the role of gender ideologies can be addressed. In the UK as early as 2005 there were some signs that women's roles might be considered, as the then Home Secretary held a conference addressing this very issue, declaring 'women the missing link' in counter-terrorism. Counter-radicalisation programmes under PREVENT also seemed to address issues of women's empowerment and women's awareness of radicalisation at the community level. Even in Saudi Arabia programmes were set up that targeted women (and were staffed by women), including a telephone helpline, and an Islamic scholarship training initiative. The NGO sector also addresses women's radicalisation; for example, Mothers Against Extremism run training sessions in places as diverse as Indonesia and Germany (for a discussion of these approaches: Brown 2012). Following on in this manner, in early January 2016 the Metropolitan Police released a video explicitly aimed at dissuading women from travelling to join ISIS which featured interviews with female Syrian refugees about their experiences. Later, the Prime Minister announced that English language acquisition for Muslim women would be a priority (or they risked deportation) and raised the idea that Muslim women's 'traditionally submissive' characteristics not only made them vulnerable to radicalisation, but also prevented them from countering radicalisation in their families and communities.

Despite, or perhaps because of, these developments, counter-terrorism in practice and in policy remains stalwartly male and reinforces gender hierarchies – the programmes rely on particular notions of masculinity and femininity. There is a 'maternal logic' at work that depends upon the construction of women as 'moderate' and 'peaceful'. Women who break this mould are still understood as 'Mothers, Monsters, [or] Whores' – they are vulnerable and at risk and most certainly in need of saving. This idea stems from the notion that women's engagement in world politics and the public sphere is heavily mediated by their roles as mothers. The consequence of this gender essentialism is that at best, there is a missed opportunity to holistically understand the role of gender in radicalisation, and at worst, these policies not only fail to prevent terrorism but further reinforce the insecurities of women.

In this piece I will focus on this new video used by the Metropolitan Police to dissuade women from travelling, an aim

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which I broadly welcome, but here I highlight some of the limitations when viewed from a gender perspective. Second I will briefly discuss Prime Minister Cameron's statements about Muslim women's characteristics, and the various responses to his claims.

The video begins with an introduction by Helen Bell of the London Metropolitan Police Force. She is in uniform, and her words and tone convey how seriously the Met are taking the risks to young women from the Islamic State group. In the video she constantly stresses "the tragedy" that is their decision to travel to Syria, and how unaware of the risks and dangers the women who travel to Iraq and Syria are. By framing the young women as ignorant, and their decision as a tragedy which leaves behind devastated families, young women are taken out of the 'security frame'. They are not considered as 'security threats'. The advantage of this approach is that it enables the possibility of rehabilitation, and frames the women as victims rather than as terrorists. In doing so they are subtly de-criminalised. There is no discussion of the criminal penalties facing women should they re-enter the UK – in part because UK prosecuting decisions have been *ad hoc*. However, women travelling to Syria are not ignorant of the risks *per se* facing them; they are aware of the challenges as they embark upon the '*hijra*' (migration as ISIS refer to it) and of the war zone. Some supporters talk about wanting to make a difference to the war-torn country, support those who are fighting, and begin a 'new', exciting life under the Caliphate. Combatting the narrative of ISIS is vital, but so too is giving young people the skills to deconstruct that narrative, rather than simply saying that they're ignorant.

To counter the sense of excitement and adventure presented by ISIS, the video highlights the hardships of living in Syria or Iraq. The stories are a direct challenge to the ways in which ISIS have tried to present life under them. Islamic State group videos include images of fun fairs, playgrounds, schools and hospitals, their twitter feeds discuss having takeaways, and blame the West for any suffering. (For a consideration of their online propaganda, The YouTube Jihadists: A Social Network Analysis of Al-Muhajiroun's Propaganda Campaign also The Strategic Success of ISIS Propaganda). In contrast the three refugee women talk about how life became intolerable, that they couldn't get medication, and education was interrupted. The women in the Met video stress how women in the UK have security, and ask, 'why surrender this?' In contrast ISIS highlight the suffering and struggles Muslim women face in the West, noting a rise in hate crimes against women, discrimination, and restrictions on their ability to worship. Tapping into questions of identity and citizenship, they stress how Muslims are suffering in an existential manner in the West, rather than a material one, and this suffering is a suffering of the soul, not of the body. Additionally, when suffering occurs in their territories, ISIS mobilizes narratives of martyrdom and suffering for a higher Godly purpose. Those who struggle in God's service are seen as gaining higher rewards in the afterlife. Emphasising the hardships of the body living in a war zone (as the video does) cannot fully counter that.

The three Syrian women in the video predominantly talk about their experiences as mothers, the lack of security, and the poor quality of medical and educational services for children. By constantly referring to their children, they are emphasising the role of motherhood, and making an appeal to women's 'world making' and maternal instincts. They are trying to make a common bond between themselves and those who might wish to live in Syria. This is a sensible approach given ISIS propaganda – they see women's primary role as nurturing the next generation of the *Caliphate*, and emphasise the roles and lives of female supporters to distinguish themselves from other violent groups, by suggesting they are not 'really' a terrorist organisation but a 'proto-state'. However, as the discussion on martyrdom highlights, motherhood is not the only understanding of the situation or identity women have as they travel to IS controlled territory. Women are not only mothers. By challenging ISIS on grounds of 'good mothers' vs 'bad mothers', the video replicates gender assumptions and further emphasises how women are only subjects of policy and of the state through their relations with men and their ability to reproduce. The refugee women's stories and appeal to motherhood are also undermined, because they are considered 'traitors', and by some, 'apostates' who are destroying the souls of their children by taking them away from the 'land of Sharia'. Despite their status as 'Muslim' (made known to the audience by their hijabs), in November 2015 ISIS issued a *fatwa* (legal ruling) where they stated that anyone seeking to leave the Caliphate is trying to reverse their '*hijra*' (Holy migration) and abandoning the 'true faith'. As a result, these women are not seen as trustworthy or indeed worthy of living by those supporting ISIS. Therefore, while this appeal may have a significant impact on those who have only just considered supporting the group, it will have little impact on those who have already adopted the ISIS world view.

In addition to the video, David Cameron has made a series of interventions targeting women that aim to address

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'radicalisation'. In an authoritative voice Cameron said "We will now say if you do not improve your fluency, that could affect your ability to stay in the UK". The irony was aptly put by @kojothelibsoc who tweeted "David Cameron wants Muslim women to stop living in a patriarchal society so he'll threaten to deport them if they don't obey his new laws" (8.23 – 18th Jan 2016). Others have been quick to point out that as it was David Cameron's government that cut public funding for English language lessons, his complaints are seen as hypocritical. This measure targets migrant women, especially those on a 'spousal visa'. Furthermore, Cameron told Today on BBC Radio Four: "If you're not able to speak English, not able to integrate, you may find therefore you have challenges understanding what your identity is and therefore you could be more susceptible to the extremist message coming from Daesh [ISIS]". This argument flies in the face of the evidence available about the young women who have travelled to ISIS territories – all of whom had fluent English. Indeed, the 2011 Census reports that only 6% significantly struggled with English. Furthermore, as Frank Monaghan of the Open University notes in *The Conversation*: "If the government is seriously considering it acceptable to break up families because a mother has failed to make sufficient progress' in her English, then we should all start to worry about who exactly are the extremists and just where the real threats to our civil society and its values lie."

The Prime Minister further claimed it was the 'traditional submissiveness of Muslim women' that was also a cause of men's radicalisation. Here, there is an assumption that Muslim women and Muslim cultures are patriarchal whereas as 'his' community is not. This obscures the double bind facing Muslim women: prejudice *qua* women and *qua* Muslim in UK society. It assumes the 'liberal' goods of living in the West, packaged as feminism, are made available to Muslim women, ignoring the ways in which economic, political and social inequalities place them at a structural disadvantage. Government sources said "the problems of young people being attracted by extremism will not be tackled without an element of cultural change," placing extra responsibility on communities without looking at wider society's responsibility. It assumes that 'feminism' has been successful, that there is equality in the West, whilst neglecting pay gaps, violence against women, and other inequalities that all women face. There is also a paradox in demanding Muslim women become 'independent' while still holding them accountable for the radicalisation of men in their communities. At the SOAS conference in November 2015 I spoke about the 'radical' Muslim women who actively challenge the passive stereotypes of counter-terrorism programmes, a point willfully misinterpreted by the chair of the panel. The PM's statements are entirely consistent with existing programmes in the UK which pigeon hole Muslim women, and patronise them. Fortunately, Muslim women in the UK, with humour, demonstrated how mistaken the PM is in his analysis, in the ironic use of the hashtag #traditionalllysubmissive examples of which were picked by national and international media outlets.

Notwithstanding the welcome move into taking women's participation seriously, the consequences of replicating gendered narratives in counter-terrorism also need to be thought through. First, such a policy stresses that women are predominantly functioning in the policy sphere as 'mothers' and not as 'citizens'. If this were the only incident of the 'mothering' narrative we could argue its addition to a wider framing, but a broader investigation of counter-terrorism politics and policies reveals that this is the *dominant* narrative. Understanding women as mothers legitimises ideas of women being naturally peaceful and moderate, and therefore failure to uphold this image is unnatural and must be explained away. Consequently, women are framed as particularly vulnerable because they are ignorant – in contrast to young men – and their decisions are not really 'theirs'. In this move the women targeted by counter-terrorism polices are denied politics, their agency is reduced to a lack of knowledge, or language, and they are assumed to be rational but 'misguided'; this risks patronising the women to a significant degree. The concern with these approaches is that they reinforce the idea that women don't know the 'real world' and therefore need protecting in a chivalrous fashion, for their 'own good'. By suggesting that women's radicalisation occurs because they are ignorant or 'brainwashed' masks cultural and material considerations in their literal and intellectual journey to Islamic State group. Women talk about 'not belonging' in the West, feeling that their lives don't matter, and that their futures are curtailed through a combination of economic and political constraints. By focusing on their ignorance, it diverts attention and resources away from enhancing critical skills, and engagement with powerful narratives, and combating the problems of youth unemployment, Islamophobia, the authority gap in political participation, and gender barriers.

## References

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