

But Where Are All the Women? Examining the Often Overlooked Role of Women in and against Islamist Extremism

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Introduction

Over the past several decades, Islamist extremism has become an omnipresent topic in discussions of global politics, national security, and international relations. However, women have been conspicuously absent from such discourse. Although women play a unique and profound role in both the perpetuation and opposition of Islamist extremist movements, female voices are consistently overlooked and neglected in both the mainstream media and academic scholarship. This dearth of women's perspectives is particularly appalling considering that women are often the population segment most intensely affected when religious extremism takes hold in a society. When women are excluded from the conversation and denied a seat at the table, an important component of the discourse is lost. Because women often serve as the backbone of the family and, by extension, society, they are likely to be a key factor in countering Islamic extremism and must, therefore, be an integral part of the conversation in order to find a solution.

Although political theorists at one time believed that religion was on the decline as a global political force, the consensus amongst contemporary scholars is quite the contrary—rather than fading into obscurity, religion has emerged as a powerful influence in the wake of increasing modernization and globalization¹. Islam, as the world's second largest religion², is no exception to this trend. An Islamic resurgence began with intellectuals in the first half of the

¹ Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, Timothy Samuel Shaw, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: W.V. Norton, 2011), Chapter 1.

² "Muslim Details," Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, Accessed April 26, 2015, <http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/religions/muslims>.

20th century and by the 1970s had become politically influential globally. This revival of Islam in the public sphere led to Muslims the world over demanding regimes that favored Islamic law and morality³. Regrettably, this reemergence of religion in public life and international politics has given rise to an increase in religious extremist groups and movements, which include many Islamist and radical Muslim campaigns. Women play a variety of roles in extremist organizations including that of the victim, supporter, dissident, or active participant⁴. This study will attempt to examine the role of women in modern Islamist extremist movements. I will analyze the contributions of women in the formation and maintenance of such movements and the motivations of women who support or join. Additionally, I will investigate current efforts and tactics to hinder Islamist extremism, and the ways in which feminism and women's empowerment can be mobilized to counter Islamist extremism.

The Utility of Women for Islamist Organizations

Though rarely seen at the forefront of radical Muslim organizations, women are, nonetheless, vital to the quotidian operations of extremist movements. Women participate in Islamist movements as both supporters and active participants, and their contributions to the organizations vary based upon the goals of the movements and whether or not the Islamist group has chosen to work within the legal political processes of a country or outside of it⁵. According to a 2007 report produced by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, women have recently begun to occupy a more important place in the Islamist political movements of the Middle East and are becoming more influential in shaping the

³ Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, Timothy Samuel Shaw, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: W.V. Norton, 2011), Chapter 1.

⁴ Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Rafia Barakat and Liat Shetret, "The Roles of Women in Terrorism, Conflict, and Violent Extremism: Lessons for the United Nations and International Actors," Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, April 2013.

⁵ Omayma Abdellatif, and Marina Ottaway, "Women in Islamist Movements: Toward an Islamist Model of Women's Activism," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 1, 2007, Accessed April 26, 2015.

politics of these movements⁶. The authors of the study, Omayma Abdellatif and Marina Ottaway, argue that women within Islamist extremist groups have “made important inroads in Islamist movements by creating strong women’s branches and pushing for broader political participation and representation”⁷. Therefore, although women are rarely the focus of media attention as members of Islamist organizations, they play an important role in the politics and operation of such movements.

Just as female political participation within Islamist organizations has increased in recent years, female terrorism is also on the rise⁸ as part of the Islamist extremist movement. Women’s role in terrorism and jihad has increased in large part due to the tactical and strategic advantage of women as perpetrators of violence⁹. Because men are viewed as the standard depiction of terrorists, women are able to gain much greater access to targets and are, therefore, tactically advantageous for Islamist terrorist groups. Because of the rarity and unexpected nature of such acts, the perpetration of terrorist acts by women, is also strategically advantageous for Islamist terrorist groups because it often garners more media attention and awareness for the organization’s cause than terrorism perpetrated by men.

The reason for Islamist groups’ recruitment of women is simple: the inclusion of women makes for a stronger organization. Carnegie scholars Omayma Abdellatif, and Marina Ottaway detail the way in which women contribute to the strength of Islamist organizations:

The key role women play in Islamist organizations is understandable, however, if one considers the enormous attention paid by Islamist movements to building strong organizations, getting their

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Karla J. Cunningham, “Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 26, no. 3 (2010): 171-95.

⁹ Brigitte L Nacos, “The Portrayal Of Female Terrorists In The Media: Similar Framing Patterns In The News Coverage Of Women In Politics And In Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005): 435-51.

message out to large segments of the population, and providing financial support and health and educational services to those in need through their networks of charitable organizations.¹⁰

Women are an invaluable resource for Islamist groups that wish to gain large-scale support throughout the Muslim world, as they are often influential in converting their family members to the cause of Islamism. Because women within Muslim society have typically been ascribed the traditional roles of wife, mother, and nurturer, they are often charged with being the guardians of religious, cultural, and social values¹¹. Through marriage, women are often able to convert their husbands and in-laws to Islamism, as they can introduce radical contacts into the lives of men¹². Additionally, women can be useful in the financing of a movement, as well as in the implementation of outreach efforts of the organization.

Furthermore, as an intrinsic element of society, women must also be an intrinsic element of any movement that hopes to revolutionize society, making their inclusion necessary for the success of Islamist organizations. Nowhere is this more visible than in the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), a largely Sunni jihadist group which seeks the establishment of a new caliphate - a unified Islamic state that would span much of the Middle East¹³. This goal would be impossible without the inclusion of women. The recruitment of women into ISIL is, therefore, not merely a means of expanding the organization but "is the essential building block of a

¹⁰ Omayma Abdellatif, and Marina Ottaway, "Women in Islamist Movements: Toward an Islamist Model of Women's Activism," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 1, 2007, Accessed April 26, 2015.

¹¹ Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Rafia Barakat and Liat Shetret, "The Roles of Women in Terrorism, Conflict, and Violent Extremism: Lessons for the United Nations and International Actors," Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, April 2013.

¹² Jessica Davis, "Women and Radical Islamic Terrorism: Planners, Perpetrators, Patrons?" Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, May 2006, Accessed April 27, 2015.

¹³ Zachary Laub, and Jonathan Masters, "Background Briefing: What Is ISIL?" PBS, June 24, 2014, Accessed April 27, 2015.

future society."¹⁴ It is to this end that the Islamic State has established all-female branches of the organization, such as the al-Khansaa Brigade,¹⁵ and produced propaganda operations aimed specifically at women, such as the al-Zawra campaign.¹⁶

In countries with election-based political systems and universal suffrage, Islamist political organizations and parties must seek to win the support and votes of women as well as men. Because Muslim women are more likely to be persuaded to support Islamist political organizations when other women approach them, Islamist groups need both male and female activists. Among Islamist movements that participate in the legal political processes of their countries (including the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Party for Justice and Development in Morocco, Hizbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Palestine) the potential role of women in advancing political goals has been of considerable focus since the conception of such organizations.

Strengthening the organizational structures of women's branches as well as engaging women in crucial political tasks such as election campaigning and voting on election day have been at the heart of the movements' strategic efforts to capitalize on the presence of women in their ranks.¹⁷

Moreover, some Islamist parties have even fielded female candidates in an effort to win the votes and support of women¹⁸.

¹⁴ Vivienne Walt, "Marriage and Martyrdom: How ISIS Is Winning Women," *Time*, November 18, 2014, Accessed April 27, 2015.

¹⁵ Kathy Gilsinan, "The ISIS Crackdown on Women, by Women," *The Atlantic*. July 25, 2014, Accessed April 27, 2015.

¹⁶ Robert Windrem, "ISIS Slips On Family-Friendly Guise to Lure Women, Children, FBI Director Says," NBC News, November 4, 2014, Accessed April 27, 2015.

¹⁷ Omayma Abdellatif, and Marina Ottaway, "Women in Islamist Movements: Toward an Islamist Model of Women's Activism," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 1, 2007, Accessed April 26, 2015.

¹⁸ Omayma Abdellatif, and Marina Ottaway, "Women in Islamist Movements: Toward an Islamist Model of Women's Activism," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 1, 2007, Accessed April 26, 2015.

The Motivations of Islamist Women

Despite the ostensible incompatibility of Islamist extremism and women's interests, women are joining Islamist organizations in increasing numbers. Their motivations for doing so are highly varied and dependent upon personal and cultural background. Motivations for joining with Islamist movements differ greatly between Muslim women living in the societies where extremism is rampant and Muslim women living in Western liberal democracies. In societies inundated with extremism, women often join with Islamist movements out of more primal motives of safety and security, out of a sense of desperation to make their political views heard, or out of sectarian and tribal loyalties. Western women, on the other hand, typically join with Islamist movements out of more psychologically based motives, including religious ideology, feelings of alienation from western culture and politics, lack of purpose or fulfillment in their lives, and romantic visions of Islamism buoyed by extremist propaganda campaigns.

In portions of the Middle East and Africa where Islamist terror groups have seized significant power, many Muslim women are persuaded to join with Islamist groups out of fear for their safety and security as well as that of their children and families. In war zones, women commonly bear a disproportionate amount of fallout from the conflict. They are often subject to material deprivation in times of scarcity, harassment in militarized areas, and vulnerability to rape or assault¹⁹. In areas where radical Islamist organizations have seized power or are attempting to seize power through violence, women may feel that membership within an Islamist organization will offer them protection. In Iraq, for example, there have been reports of Iraqi women who have taken up arms as members of the Islamic State in the wake of militarized conflict, as a way to combat danger and insecurity²⁰.

Islamist groups may also appeal to the political interests of women, which are similar in many ways to their male counterparts.

¹⁹ Nimmi Gowrinathan, "The Women of ISIS," The Council on Foreign Relations, August 21, 2014, Accessed April 26, 2015.

²⁰ Ibid.

Women in the Middle East/North Africa region often hold political views that reject Westernization and seek to reclaim their culture from outside influence. This phenomenon can be observed in Akbar Ahmed's work, *Islam Under Siege*, in which he argues that it is the dissipation of traditional Muslim concepts of social cohesion, such as *asabiyya*, at the hands of Western interference in the Islamic world that have led to feelings of defensiveness and the sense among many Muslims that their society and way of life is under siege. The consequential result of this increasing globalization is a form of hyper-*asabiyya*, or the sort of extreme group loyalty resulting in radicalism and chaos, and a distorted sense of honor among many Muslims. Ahmed contends that it is these two factors that explain the rise of Islamist violence and radicalism, and the movement away from principles of Islam that promote peace and toleration²¹.

Although this phenomenon is rooted in religious sentiment and focuses on a desire to rid Islam from corrupting Western influence, it also has much to do with the sectarian and tribal divisions that characterize the traditionally Islamic world. In the Islamic State struggle, sectarian divisions play an enormous role. "The conflict in Iraq is also rooted in identity: at its base, the fight is a sectarian struggle between Sunni and Shiite Muslims."²² The Islamic State is composed primarily of Sunni Muslims, a sect that has been oppressed under the Shiite regime since it seized power following the 2003 war and the deposition of Saddam Hussein²³. Islamist movements often capitalize on politics of identity for recruitment of women, targeting women who feel oppressed because of their sectarian or tribal loyalties. One example is the all-

²¹ Akbar Ahmed, *Islam Under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-honor World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003)

²² Nimmi Gowrinathan, "The Women of ISIS," The Council on Foreign Relations, August 21, 2014, Accessed April 26, 2015.

²² Ibid.

²³ Kulsoom Rizvi, "Shia and Sunni Muslims – do you know the difference?" Your Middle East, September 23, 2014, Accessed April 26, 2014.

female *al Khansaa* Brigade of the Islamic State, which actively recruits women who feel oppressed as Sunni Muslims²⁴.

Finally, Islamist movements offer women a means of political expression when there are few alternatives. When women are marginalized and given little political agency, violence and extremism become a form of political power. Thus, the past four years have seen increasing numbers of women actively engaging in terrorism, including suicide bombings, fueled by the Syrian war²⁵ and a desire to have their political opinions heard. This is true of the Chechen "Black Widows", a group of female suicide bombers, who have killed hundreds of civilians in Russia since the first attack in 2000. The Chechen people are an ethnic minority living primarily in Russia's North Caucasus region. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Chechen separatists began an organized independence movement, resulting in two wars and an ongoing insurgency²⁶. The "Black Widows" are a group of jihadist women, believed to act out of a sense of revenge and hatred for their Russian occupiers coupled with a desire to become martyrs²⁷. Because the Chechen people desire independence but have little political recourse in Russia, acts of extremism and terrorism have become one way in which women can make their views known.

While women in traditionally Islamic and war-torn societies are typically motivated to join Islamist movements by intrinsic needs and a lack of political choice, it is more difficult to understand the factors that motivate Western women living in liberal democracies to join Islamist movements. According to current estimates around 200 women, 10% of Western recruits, have left Europe for Iraq or Syria over the past two years in order to join radical Islamist

²⁴ Nimmi Gowrinathan, "The Women of ISIS," The Council on Foreign Relations, August 21, 2014, Accessed April 26, 2015.

²⁵ Peter Bergen and Emily Schneider, "Rise of the female jihadists," CNN, January 10, 2015, Accessed April 27, 2015.

²⁶ Preeti Bhattacharji, "Chechen Terrorism (Russia, Chechnya, Separatist)." Council on Foreign Relations, April 8, 2010, Accessed March 28, 2016.

²⁷ Bryan Glyn Williams, "The Brides of Allah: The Terror Threat of Black-Widow Suicide Bombers to the Winter Olympics," Huffington Post, February 12, 2014, Accessed April 27, 2015.

movements²⁸. The typical profile of a Western female recruit is that of a young woman with some post-secondary education from a first generation immigrant family that is typically a visible minority from a Muslim country²⁹.

Religion is usually a primary motivator for Western women who join Islamist extremist organizations. The women may consider Western legal systems as contradictory to the teachings of Islam and may seek out a life under Sharia³⁰. However, because many of radicalized Western women have grown up at a distance from Islam, they are more likely to accept radical teaching of Islamist recruiters without skepticism. Many of the female Islamist recruits speak little to no Arabic and are therefore unable to read the Quran or Hadith for themselves. They are, instead, forced to rely on interpretations of others that often neglect important elements of Islamic theology in favor of a more radical, political Islam³¹.

In addition to religious motivations, Western women are often drawn to Islamist organizations out of a search for purpose in their lives. These women are often taught that they can help to restore Islam to past greatness and fulfill their divine purpose by aiding in the establishment of a new Caliphate³². Political motives also come into play, as many women are drawn in to Islamist movements through the propaganda of a utopian political system that will be established by Islamist activities³³. Because most Islamic women feel a sense of alienation and marginalization in their Western home countries, the appeal of a utopic society in which they are welcomed and appreciated is evident.

However, perhaps the most influential motive for Western Muslim women to join Islamist extremist movements is the

²⁸ Steven Erlanger, "In West, ISIS Finds Women Eager to Enlist," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2014, Accessed April 27, 2015.

²⁹ Siamak Nooraei, "Jihadi Motives: Why Do Western Women Join the Islamic State?" *Foreign Policy Journal*, January 16, 2015, Accessed April, 27, 2015.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Steven Erlanger, "In West, ISIS Finds Women Eager to Enlist," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2014, Accessed April 27, 2015.

³² Siamak Nooraei, "Jihadi Motives: Why Do Western Women Join the Islamic State?" *Foreign Policy Journal*, January 16, 2015, Accessed April 27, 2015.

³³ Erin Marie Saltman, "Why are British women leaving the UK to join Isis in Iraq and Syria?" *The Independent*, September 10, 2014, Accessed April 27, 2015.

sophisticated social media based propaganda campaigns that are targeted towards young, Western, Muslim women. These propaganda campaigns present a romanticized version of life in a Caliphate. "For some women, becoming the wife of a jihadist also plays into romanticized notions of serving a 'real man' who is fighting for the ultimate cause: the 'caliphate.'"³⁴ The Islamic State has been particularly adept at using propaganda to recruit Western women to their cause:

ISIS insurgents have been masterful manipulators of social media. Aside from creating YouTube videos trumpeting their crimes from the battlefield in high definition, they have also established outlets such as the Zora Foundation, specifically aimed at drawing women to their cause by offering tips, travel advice and even recipes for battle snacks.³⁵

A recent manifesto on the role of women in the Islamic State movement clarifies the true position of women in the Islamic state. The document, entitled "Women in the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study", was uploaded to the Internet by the al Khansaa Brigade, a women's branch of the Islamist State. Though it was widely circulated among Arabic-speaking members, Western analysts largely overlooked the document until it was translated by the anti-terrorist think tank, Quilliam Foundation. "Its [the manifesto's] objective is clear. This is a piece of propaganda aimed at busting myths and recruiting supporters."³⁶ These types of propaganda are important for understanding the motives of women who enter into Islamist organizations.

³⁴ Erin Marie Saltman, "Why are British women leaving the UK to join Isis in Iraq and Syria?" *The Independent*, September 10, 2014, Accessed April 27, 2015.

³⁵ Shiv Malik, "Lured by Isis: how the young girls who revel in brutality are offered cause," *The Guardian*, February 21, 2015, Accessed April 27, 2015.

³⁶ Charlie Winter, "Women of the Islamic State: A manifesto on women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade," *The Quilliam Foundation*, February 2015, Accessed April 27, 2015.

Women-led Initiatives to Counter Islamist Extremism

While the roles and motivation women play in perpetrating Islamist Extremism are complex and will require further research to fully understand, women can undoubtedly play a critical role in countering Islamist radicalization. Many of the traits that make women valuable to Islamist extremist movements also make them valuable to counter-extremist movements. The role of women as transmitters of cultural, religious and social values within Muslim society has been used as a crucial tool of extremist groups in recruitment³⁷; however, it can also be used to counter extremist recruitment. According to the United States Institute of Peace, women play a critical role in countering and preventing extremism and radicalization:

Not only do women's participation in a community – formally or informally – strengthen its fabric, women themselves are among the most powerful voices of prevention in their homes, schools, and communities. Women as mothers, caretakers, partners, teachers, and faith leaders – can, uniquely, help build the social cohesion, sense of belonging, and self-esteem that youth might need to resist the appeal of a violent group. Community engagement in [countering violent extremism] requires the participation of women to be successful.³⁸

If women can be mobilized and empowered to oppose extremism the effects on extremist organizations could be substantial.

While intergovernmental organizations like the United Nations have made some efforts to engage women in peace

³⁷ Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Rafia Barakat and Liat Shetret, "The Roles of Women in Terrorism, Conflict, and Violent Extremism: Lessons for the United Nations and International Actors," Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, April 2013.

³⁸ Georgia Holmer, "Resilience for Women Countering Violent Extremism," United States Institute of Peace, March 6, 2015, Accessed April 26, 2015.

building and conflict resolution, they have paid little attention to the actual and potential contributions of women in efforts to counter Islamism both in Western and Muslim-majority countries. The UN has adopted several resolutions attempting to advance the status and ensure the rights and freedoms of women. These measures include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women³⁹, which acts as a bill of rights for women; the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action⁴⁰, which enshrines the commitments of governments to enhance women's rights; UN Security Council Resolution 1325⁴¹, which confirmed the need to include women in conflict prevention and resolution decisions; and the Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals⁴², which set goals of promoting gender equality (among other development objectives).

There are currently several important grassroots counter-extremism movements led by women, many of which focus on the force of women and girls' education, Islamic feminism, and empowering Muslim women as activists as ways to check Islamist extremism. Some of the most influential of these groups include the Malala Fund, which works to guarantee education for women; Inspire, which empowers women to directly confront extremism and create a counter-narrative; and the Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) Initiative, which utilizes women's traditional roles to counter and prevent terrorism. In addition to these organizations, there are a number of female Muslim scholars who argue in favor of Islamic feminism as a way to counter Islamist extremism.

³⁹ General Assembly resolution 34/180, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, A/RES/34/180 (18 December 1979), available from http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/34/180&Lang=E.

⁴⁰ UN Fourth World Conference on Women "Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action" (1995), available from http://www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/pfa_e_final_web.pdf

⁴¹ Security Council resolution 1325, S/RES/1325 (2000), available from http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1325%282000%29

⁴² General Assembly resolution 55/2, *United Nations Millennium Declaration*, A/RES/55/2 (2000), available from <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>

Education of women is one of the most powerful forces in transforming society and countering violent extremism, and it has inspired fear in many radical Islamist groups that attempt to limit women and girls' access to education. Boko Haram militants in Nigeria have repeatedly targeted girls attempting to attend school and receive an education⁴³. Likewise, in Afghanistan, girls going to school face acid attacks at the hands of the Taliban⁴⁴. Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani advocate for women's education, was also the target of an attack and was shot by the Taliban for her activist efforts in 2012⁴⁵. She has since continued to advocate for girls' education and started the Malala Fund, which "empowers girls through quality secondary education."⁴⁶ At an address to the UN General Assembly, Yousafzai stated her belief that the education of women can counter extremism:

The extremists are afraid of books and pens. The power of education frightens them. They are afraid of women. The power of the voice of women frightens them. This is why they killed 14 innocent students in the recent attack in Quetta. And that is why they kill female teachers. That is why they are blasting schools every day because they were and they are afraid of change and equality that we will bring to our society.⁴⁷

⁴³ Emily Gustafsson-Wright and Katie Smith, "Abducted Schoolgirls in Nigeria: Improving Education and Preventing Future Boko Haram Attacks," Brookings Institution, April 17, 2014, Accessed April 27, 2015.

⁴⁴ Allie Torgan, "Acid attacks, poison: What Afghan girls risk by going to school," CNN, August 2, 2012, Accessed April 27, 2015.

⁴⁵ "Malala's Story," Malala Fund, <http://www.malala.org/#main/malalas-story/>, Accessed April 27, 2015.

⁴⁶ "What We Do," Malala Fund, <http://www.malala.org/#main/what-we-do/>, Accessed April 27, 2015.

⁴⁷ "The full text: Malala Yousafzai delivers defiant riposte to Taliban militants with speech to the UN General Assembly," The Independent, July 12, 2013. Accessed April 27, 2015.

Because women's education is so powerful in combatting extremist ideology, it must be a continual focus in anti-extremism efforts, making organizations like the Malala Fund critically important.

Groups like Inspire take a more direct approach to empowering Muslim women to combat extremism. Inspire is a UK-based NGO working to "empower women to support human rights and to challenge extremism and gender discrimination."⁴⁸ The group's "Making a Stand" campaign involves British Muslim women rejecting terror and violence practiced in the name of Islam by extremist groups. Sarah Khan, the director of Inspire, has stated that the campaign encompasses empowering Muslim women to: "challenge hatred and extremism wherever we find it; exert influence in our Mosques and communities; create local support networks and partner with statutory agencies; equip our communities with counter-narratives and help families identify the signs of radicalisation."⁴⁹ Inspire and groups like it are important in their encouragement of Muslim women to speak out against false representations of Islam by extremist groups.

The Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) Initiative, an Austrian research-based NGO, takes a different approach to countering extremism. SAVE capitalizes on Muslim women's traditional societal role as mothers to prevent youth radicalization. The organization heads projects such as "Mothers Schools", which "provides [mothers with] know-how and skills training to recognize and respond to early warning signs of potential radicalization in their children."⁵⁰ These types of projects utilize the same attributes of women that are often co-opted by Islamist groups to transmit extremism (connectedness with family and ability to transmit values).

Finally, Islamic feminism, which seeks to reconcile women's empowerment and Islam through the feminist interpretation of Islamic texts, can also be used to counter extremism. Islamic

⁴⁸ "About Us" Inspire, <http://www.wewillinspire.com/about-us/>, Accessed April 27, 2015.

⁴⁹ "Making a Stand," Inspire, <http://www.wewillinspire.com/making-a-stand/>, Accessed April 27, 2015.

⁵⁰ "Projects Underway," Women Without Borders, <http://www.women-without-borders.org/projects/underway/42/>, Accessed April 27, 2015.

feminism seeks to undermine the traditional patriarchy posited by religious authorities through arguing that Islam, if understood and interpreted correctly, does not support the subordination of women. Nayereh Tohidi, Director of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at California State University, Northridge summarizes the position of reformist feminist scholars:

As a theological as well as political response, these reformers maintain that the norms of society and the norms of God are at odds. An egalitarian revision, therefore, is not only possible but also necessary. In reclaiming the 'egalitarian past,' reformist feminist scholars note that before these religions became closely associated with state power ... women did hold positions of leadership.⁵¹

Islamic feminist scholars such as Leila Ahmed, Riffat Hassan, Fatima Mernissi, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini "see modern liberal and gender egalitarian reformation of Islam as a requirement for the success of a broader societal and political reform toward democracy, pluralism and civil rights, including women's rights."⁵² Ziba Mir-Hosseini, an Islamic feminist scholar has done extensive work on the issue of how Islamic feminism is both, in some sense, a product of and a solution to Islamist extremism.

One neglected and paradoxical consequence of the rise of political Islam is that it has helped to create a space, an arena, within which Muslim women can reconcile their faith and identity with their struggle for gender equality. [Islamists'] very project – 'return to the Shari'a' – and their attempt to translate the patriarchal notions inherent in orthodox interpretations of Islamic law into policy,

⁵¹ Nayereh Tohidi, "'Islamic Feminism': Perils And Promises," in *Middle Eastern Women On The Move*, The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003.

⁵² Ibid

provoked increasing criticism of these notions among many women, and become a spur to greater activism.⁵³

If Muslim women are empowered to see themselves as equal to men through a feminist interpretation of Islamic texts, they can serve as powerful activists against extremism and radical Islamist ideologies.

Conclusion

Women, though rarely seen as influential in discussions of Islamist extremism, have an important role to play as both promoters and challengers of extremist movements. Within Islamic organizations, women play an essential role in day-to-day operations, recruitment and outreach operations, and sometimes acts of violence and terrorism. Although motivations for supporting such groups vary according to personal and political experience, there are some generalities that can be seen across the broad groups of Muslim women living in Muslim-majority countries and Muslim women living in Western countries. Women in Muslim-majority countries tend to support Islamist extremist groups for reasons of personal safety and security, sectarian/tribal conflict, and from a lack of ways to express political views. However, women living in Western countries tend to support Islamist extremist groups because of radicalized religious ideals, a search for purpose in their lives, and feelings of alienation and marginalization in Western political systems. All of these factors leave women vulnerable to the propaganda of Islamism.

However, women can also serve an important role in countering extremism. This can be done by empowering women through education, direct activism, and the co-optation of traditional women's roles within the home and family. Islamic feminism may also serve an important purpose as it reconciles

⁵³ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "The Quest for Gender Justice: Emerging Feminist Voices in Islam," *Islam* 21 1, no. 36 (2004).

Muslim identities of women with gender-equality and empowerment. Because of the powerful role that women can have in combatting Islamist extremism, it is absolutely essential that they be included in anti-extremism efforts. In both mainstream academia and the media there is often a lack of input from women. Allowing more female voices to be heard can significantly improve the quality of such discourse.

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