Why do women join IS? A critique of gendered assumptions about women's motivations

by Jennifer Philippa Eggert

Women who join the so-called 'Islamic State' (IS) in Syria have garnered considerable public interest in Europe since the summer of 2014, when first reports about women leaving Europe for IS-controlled territory emerged. In this blog post, Jennifer Philippa Eggert contrasts commonly held assumptions about women's motivations to join IS with what recent research tells us about their actual reasons. She then looks at what the dichotomy between the two says about our perceptions of women in general and Muslim women in particular.

Image credit: John Alcorn

Since the emergence of 'Islamic State' (IS) in the early summer of 2014, hundreds of women from Europe have left their home countries and families to join IS in Syria, including several dozen from the UK. The vast majority of media reports on female members of IS offer highly simplifying explanations of why women from Europe join IS. In most cases, the women and girls joining IS are described as naïve individuals who are incapable of making their own decision and were lured into becoming members of IS.

No major gender-specific differences in individuals' motivations to join IS

The women from Europe who have joined IS in recent years come from a range of different backgrounds. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to come up with a profile of the 'typical' female IS member. However, recent research has shown that overall, men and women who join IS share the same motivations, with only minimal gender-specific differences. As far as push factors, i.e. factors which push an individual into the arms of a terrorist group (IS in this case), are concerned, these include feelings of isolation in the West, the perception that the imagined community of Muslims worldwide is being attacked, and frustration over a perceived lack of

international action in Syria, Iraq and other hotspots of the Muslim-majority world. Pull factors on the other hand, or positive incentives which draw an individual towards IS, include the desire to help build a supposedly 'Islamic' state, ideals of belonging, identity and community, as well as romanticisation of life under IS. Individual experiences and perceptions may be gendered, for example Muslim women might feel particularly marginalised because of negative perceptions of women wearing the hijab prevailing in most European non-Muslim communities, but overall there are no major differences in the reasons for which men and women decide to join IS.

Female members of IS – naïve and delusional?

As a matter of fact, these collective assumptions we make about women joining IS say more about us and the image we have both of women in general and Muslim women in particular than they do about the women leaving Europe for IS-controlled territory. Too often, we perceive these women through patterns of interpretation which are shaped by deeply entrenched notions of what it means to be a woman, and a Muslim woman at that. One example is the portrayal of women joining IS as naïve and delusional. Of course, a certain degree of naivety and delusion is required in order to decide to move to a war zone and join a terrorist organisation thinking that you will find noble 'warriors of Islam' rather than a bunch of criminals and half-wits whose priority clearly is not the establishment of a state that upholds the values of the religion of Islam as agreed upon by the vast majority of both Muslim scholars and laypersons.

Highly problematic generalisations and assumptions

However, it is telling that we evoke these narratives of naivety and delusion only when speaking about the women, as if many of the men joining IS from abroad did not have distorted and highly unrealistic ideas about what life in IS territory and their roles in the organisation look like in reality. Recent research on IS members' reasons for leaving the organisation and return to their home countries testifies to that. Conversely, rather than portraying female members of IS as naïve and unable to make their own decisions, it would equally be possible to highlight their determination. After all, many of the women joining IS from abroad put considerable effort into researching IS, planning their journeys, deceiving family and friends which there is no doubt about requires determination and the ability to pursue a set goal. The point here is not to prove that women are naïve (or not), but to illustrate how random and highly problematic the generalising assumptions we make about them are.

'Jihadi brides' – and 'grooms'?

Another example illustrating how problematic our perceptions and portrayals of female IS members tend to be is the focus on their role as 'jihadi brides', a term that makes me cringe every time I hear it. Again, this terms shows that we see women joining IS as essentially different from men (have you ever heard anyone speak about 'jihadi grooms'?). By focusing on marriage and women's roles as wives we deny their agency and reduce the reasons for which they chose to join IS to marriage and define them vis-à-vis men only. Surely, many women joining IS dream of being married to a fighter; however, accounts of women who have moved to IS-controlled territory show that this is only one motivational factor amongst numerous others, such as supporting IS, fighting perceived injustices and living in a utopian 'Islamic' state. These perceptions of Muslim women are situated in a centuries-old Western tradition of objectifying Muslim women and eroticizing them and their life experiences.

"How could she?!"

Lastly, media reports of women who joined IS are often contrasted with stories and pictures of the 'nice girl from next door'. Shocked and surprised at the dichotomy between the picture of this nice-looking girl and the evilness of the group she has joined, we keep on asking 'how could she?' (a question rarely heard when speaking about young men leaving to join a terrorist group). Our surprise at how someone would trade a seemingly happy, safe and comfortable life in the UK for a future in a war zone under the regime of a terrorist organisation shows the degree to which we are

oblivious of the effect perceived marginalization and a highly Islamophobic public discourse can have, and how tempting simplifying narratives of good and bad, as offered by IS, can be, especially to young people.

A clear, level-headed analysis is needed

It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to effectively and efficiently counter a phenomenon without fully understanding it. If we want to dissuade women (and men) from joining terrorist organisations such as IS, we need to understand their motivations for choosing the movements' narratives of the romanticised jihad of an idealised community over the stories of human rights, democracy and rule of law we offer them in return. We need to understand why women (and men) choose to join IS. Simplifying, biased and plain wrong assumptions of what it is that moves these people are unhelpful and can even be dangerous, as they can play into the hands of the terrorists. Numerous groups resorting to terrorist means who exploit stereotypes of women in terrorism for their own gains, e.g. in order to plan even more lethal attacks or to legitimise their cause, illustrate that. For example, some of these groups use women to smuggle weapons or carry out attacks as, due to the gendered assumptions held about them, as women they tend to be less likely to be stopped and searched. Another example would include the use of women in front rows of public events or in publications of the organisation, which are aimed at presenting the organisation as non-threatening. Calling for a clear, level-headed analysis of female participation in terrorism and political violence is not simply a new fad of terrorism theorists and gender scholars. It could literally save lives – both those of the women who join IS and the victims of the organisations they have chosen to join.

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