Women and Extremism:
A Feminist Analysis of European Female ISIS Recruits

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Abstract

This study investigates the active participation of European women, particularly British citizens, in ISIS's operations and propaganda, which challenges traditional gender norms and perceptions of Muslim women in Western societies. The research used postmodern feminist theory to delve into the multifaceted motivations driving these women—from feelings of alienation and promises of empowerment to ideological aspirations—and examines their roles as recruiters, propagandists, and enforcers within the al-Khansaa Brigade. Specific cases, such as Aqsa Mahmood, illustrate the strategic use of social media to romanticize life in the caliphate while simultaneously exploiting women through constructs like "sexual jihad." The phenomenon reflects a paradox where agency is wielded within deeply patriarchal structures, perpetuating both empowerment and subjugation. Additionally, the paper explores the societal factors fueling radicalization, including Islamophobia and systemic discrimination, and highlights the challenges of reintegration for women returning to their home countries. By addressing the gendered dynamics of terrorism, this study underscores the importance of inclusive counterterrorism strategies that dismantle extremist narratives and foster integration.

Keywords: Islamophobia, ISIS, European female jihadists, sexual jihad

Introduction

In recent years, global attention has increasingly focused on the pervasive threat of terrorism, which continues to destabilize societies across the world. Among the most significant threats are terrorist organizations based in Iraq and Syria, particularly ISIS, whose reach extends far beyond their immediate regions of operation. The devastating bombing attack orchestrated by ISIS in Paris vividly underscored the transnational nature of this menace, highlighting Europe's vulnerability to extremist violence (Martini, 2018).

The threat posed by ISIS to the international community, mainly Europe and the United Kingdom, extends beyond direct acts of terror. An alarming number of European citizens have voluntarily joined the ranks of this radical group, raising concerns about domestic security and the spread of extremist ideology within Western societies. Among these recruits, the participation of British women as ISIS jihadists stands out, challenging conventional gender norms and Western perceptions of Muslim women (Spencer, 2016).

This paper seeks to delve into the roles played by British women in ISIS's so-called "jihad" efforts, exploring their contributions to the organization's operations and propaganda. Women in ISIS have taken on diverse roles, including supporting combatants, serving as online recruiters, and

even participating in combat, reflecting their active involvement in jihad (Khelghat-Doost, 2021). These activities highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of women's agency in extremist movements.

Furthermore, the motivations behind these women's participation in ISIS are complex and multifaceted. Social, psychological, and ideological factors converge to draw women into radical networks, as highlighted by the theory of "Jihad Feminism," which examines how women navigate patriarchal structures while engaging in extremist ideologies (Makanda, 2019).

The analysis presented here is grounded in postmodern feminist theory, which challenges traditional binaries and highlights the active agency of women in roles historically attributed to men. This theoretical framework allows for a deeper understanding of how British women redefine their identities within the context of ISIS's radical agenda (Anzalone, 2016).

This paper examines the active roles of European women, particularly from the UK, in ISIS's operations and propaganda, analyzing their motivations and participation through the lens of postmodern feminist theory to uncover how these women navigate traditional patriarchal norms while contributing to extremist ideologies, and exploring the implications for counterterrorism strategies and societal integration.

Background of ISIS and Its Dynamics

ISIS, or the Islamic State, traces its origins back to 1999 when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi established it as a militant group opposing Western influence in the Middle East. By 2004, it aligned with Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network, forming Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). However, tensions between Zarqawi and Al-Qaeda's central leadership arose due to Zarqawi's ruthless tactics, which often alienated local Sunni populations (Shayan, 2017).

Zarqawi's death in a U.S. airstrike in 2006 marked a leadership transition to Abu Ayyub al-Masri, under whom AQI rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). This period saw the group begin to consolidate power in a war-torn Iraq, exploiting the vacuum left by destabilized governance and sectarian conflict (Beniamino, 2014).

In 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a scholar with roots in Samarra, assumed leadership of ISI. Under Baghdadi's guidance, the organization underwent a dramatic transformation, capitalizing on the chaos of the Syrian Civil War to expand its territory and resources. On July 5, 2014, Baghdadi delivered a sermon at the Al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul, declaring himself the Caliph of the Muslim ummah and rebranding ISI as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This declaration marked the group's ambitious intent to establish a global caliphate (AlMomani & Hazimeh, 2019).

ISIS's rapid ascent was facilitated by its adept use of modern technology for propaganda and recruitment. Unlike its predecessor, Al-Qaeda, ISIS integrated former Ba'athist military officials into its leadership, creating a more structured and effective operational model (Shayan, 2017). This structure allowed it to wage sophisticated insurgencies, manage vast territories, and sustain operations even after significant setbacks.

The ideological roots of ISIS lie deeply entrenched in Salafism and the dream of restoring the ancient Islamic caliphate. It portrays itself as a puritanical force aiming to cleanse Islamic lands of non-Islamic influences while imposing a harsh interpretation of Sharia law (Beniamino, 2014).

Islamophobia and Radicalization in Europe

The historical relationship between Islam and Europe is long-standing and complex. During the golden age of Islam, parts of Europe, such as Andalusia (modern-day Spain), were under Islamic rule. The conquest of Tariq ibn Ziyad began in 711 AD and lasted until 1492 AD, when Islamic rule in Granada ended (Tavkhelidze, 2021).

In the 20th century, the relationship between Islam and Europe evolved further. Since the 1950s, immigration from predominantly Muslim countries such as Turkey, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia has steadily increased the Muslim population in Europe. Post-colonial migration has significantly impacted nations like France, the Netherlands, and Britain, and today, many European Muslims are not immigrants but native converts to Islam (Allen, 2004).

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, marked a profound turning point, reshaping the perception of Islam in the West. George W. Bush's declaration of the 'War on Terror' solidified terrorism as a dominant global issue and reinforced the association of Islam with terrorism, triggering widespread Islamophobia that manifests as discrimination, intimidation, and violence against Muslim communities in Europe and America (Kallis, 2019).

While Islamophobia undermines the well-being of Muslims in the West, it also contributes to the rise of radicalization. In Europe, radical Islamic movements have grown, partly as a reaction to Western societies' treatment of Muslims. Events like the attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris underscore the intersection of perceived blasphemy and retaliatory violence, highlighting how disenfranchisement can lead to extremism (Putri & Subarkah, 2015).

The United Kingdom, home to a large and diverse Muslim population, has not escaped the challenges of Islamophobia. Despite being the second-largest religion in the UK, Islam is met with hostility in many areas. Islamophobic incidents, particularly in London, have risen sharply, with 816 incidents reported in a single year. Veiled Muslim women are primarily targeted, with over 60% of victims identifying visible Islamic attire, such as hijabs, as a factor in their victimization (Kedikli & Akça, 2018).

At the same time, the UK faces significant challenges from radicalization. Former Prime Minister David Cameron emphasized the need for Muslim communities to integrate with broader society to prevent isolation that might foster extremism. Efforts to address radicalization have been complicated by the interplay between perceived foreign policy grievances and domestic discontent among British Muslims (Abbas, 2004).

Islamophobia and radicalization are interlinked phenomena in Europe and the UK. Addressing these issues requires a nuanced understanding of historical context, societal dynamics, and the impact of global conflicts on local communities (O'Duffy, 2008).

Gender, Terrorism, and Women in ISIS

Terrorism, a phenomenon historically dominated by men, has long been associated with violence and warfare—attributes often tied to masculinity. The overwhelming majority of suicide bombers and perpetrators of global terror attacks are men, reinforcing traditional gender norms that label men as "war-oriented" and women as "peace-oriented" (Spencer, 2016). However, evidence reveals that women are increasingly playing active roles in terrorism, particularly within ISIS, where they assume diverse positions that challenge conventional gender narratives.

Women's participation in ISIS highlights the complex interplay between agency and subjugation. While ISIS has traditionally been seen as a male-dominated organization, its strategic use of women has grown significantly. From serving as recruiters and enforcers in the al-Khansaa Brigade to playing ideological roles as "jihad brides," women are not only participants but also enablers of ISIS's operations (Makanda, 2019). Paradoxically, many women join ISIS seeking empowerment, yet they often find themselves subjected to extreme forms of patriarchal control. The concept of "sexual jihad" has reduced women to sex slaves or "baby factories," tasked with producing future jihadists to sustain ISIS's vision of an Islamic State.

From a feminist perspective, the analysis of terrorism necessitates a critical examination of gender constructs. Traditional international relations theories often marginalize women, focusing instead on masculine domains such as security, warfare, and politics. Feminist theory posits that

gender is a socially constructed concept, challenging binary views of masculinity and femininity. Within ISIS, this construct is manipulated to create spaces for women's participation under the guise of empowerment while reinforcing patriarchal dominance (Makanda, 2019).

The motivations behind women's involvement in ISIS are multifaceted and require a nuanced understanding. Many women view ISIS as an opportunity to escape societal restrictions and achieve significance. For some, joining ISIS represents a path to leadership and importance, roles they feel are unattainable in their previous societies (Rohali & Yumitro, 2022). Disillusionment with societal norms and systemic gender discrimination has driven some women to perceive ISIS as a space offering autonomy and a sense of purpose grounded in divine principles. For these women, joining ISIS represents a rejection of perceived injustices in their home societies, offering an alternative identity framed through the lens of religious piety and community belonging (Makanda, 2019). Simultaneously, ISIS strategically manipulates gender identity by blending domesticity with violence. The al-Khansaa Brigade, an all-female morality police force, is a striking example of this manipulation. Within the brigade, women are given empowering roles, such as enforcing strict Islamic laws on other women. However, these roles are deeply embedded in the organization's patriarchal structure, where their contributions reinforce control rather than foster true liberation. This calculated approach provides a façade of agency while solidifying systemic oppression under the guise of religious duty and societal reform.

Despite their agency, women within ISIS often face victimization. The phenomenon of "sexual jihad" underscores the exploitation of women as tools for reproduction and gratification, a stark contradiction to their pursuit of empowerment (Kurnia & Sukabdi, 2021). Their roles as recruiters, ideological enforcers, and participants in violence further complicate traditional perceptions of women in terrorism. These dynamics challenge the binaries of masculinity and femininity, revealing the complexities of gender within extremist organizations.

Understanding the roles and motivations of women in ISIS is essential for developing effective counterterrorism strategies. Traditional approaches often overlook women's agency, focusing exclusively on male operatives. By incorporating feminist analyses, counterterrorism efforts can address the unique dynamics of gender in terrorism, improving prevention and rehabilitation efforts (Sutten, 2009). Women's involvement in ISIS ultimately demands a reevaluation of gendered assumptions in international relations, emphasizing the need for inclusive and nuanced frameworks to tackle terrorism in all its dimensions.

Motivations of Women Joining ISIS

The phenomenon of women joining ISIS is deeply complex, involving sociocultural, ideological, and personal dimensions. Over 550 women from Western countries, including Europe, have joined ISIS, marking an unprecedented trend in global jihadi movements. Researchers have highlighted the group's ability to craft compelling propaganda, offering these women not only a sense of belonging but also a role in building a utopian Islamic state. For many, the promises of empowerment, purpose, and an escape from perceived marginalization in Western societies proved alluring. Studies reveal that women often viewed their journey as a means of fulfilling ideological or spiritual aspirations, driven by dissatisfaction with their sociopolitical realities (Perešin, 2018).

Motivations for joining ISIS varied significantly, shaped by personal experiences and societal conditions. While many women were influenced by a desire to support the ummah or the broader Muslim community, others sought refuge from alienation or stigmatization in their home countries. The role of social media in this radicalization cannot be overstated, as it served as a key tool for recruitment, facilitating communication and fostering a sense of community among recruits. The narratives pushed by ISIS emphasized women's active contribution to the caliphate, often portraying them as central to the Islamic State's state-building project, taking roles in

administration, teaching, and even combat (Gan et al., 2019; Shorer, 2018).

The gendered dimension of ISIS propaganda further complicates the picture. Media narratives often label these women as "jihadi brides," reducing their agency and overlooking the multifaceted roles they play within the group. While some women adhered to traditional gender roles as caregivers or mothers, others took on more active positions, such as recruiters or even suicide bombers. This diversity in roles highlights a strategic approach by ISIS to include women in ways that serve its organizational goals while perpetuating patriarchal ideologies. These dynamics reveal how traditional gender norms and radicalization intersect, with women often becoming symbols of domestic stability and ideological commitment (Martini, 2018; Termeer & Duyvesteyn, 2022).

This phenomenon raises significant concerns about security and reintegration. As some women attempt to return to their home countries, governments face challenges in addressing their roles within ISIS, which often differ from those of male fighters. While some were victims of coercion, others voluntarily embraced the group's ideology. Understanding these nuances is critical for developing effective strategies to prevent radicalization and support deradicalization efforts. Comprehensive research into their motivations and experiences offers crucial insights into the intersection of gender, ideology, and terrorism (Perešin, 2015; Saltman & Smith, 2015).

Central to this recruitment drive is ISIS's adept use of social media. Through platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram, ISIS propagates an idealized vision of life in the caliphate, portraying it as a place of community, purpose, and religious fulfilment. This messaging often appeals to women disillusioned by the discrimination and alienation they face in Western societies. Zahra and Salma Halane, twin sisters from Manchester, became emblematic of this process. Radicalized through online platforms, they travelled to Syria to marry ISIS fighters and later used their social media accounts to glorify life under the caliphate and encourage others to follow suit (Smith, 2015). Similarly, Aqsa Mahmood, another UK recruit, used her Tumblr account to share ISIS propaganda, offering logistical advice to women planning to join and justifying the group's violent actions (Windsor, 2020).

For many women, their decision to join ISIS is rooted in feelings of alienation and marginalization. They often report experiencing Islamophobia, cultural dissonance, and a lack of belonging in their home countries. ISIS preys on these vulnerabilities, offering what appears to be a solution: a sense of identity, belonging, and spiritual fulfilment. For many recruits, life in the caliphate is presented as an opportunity to escape life's challenges in the West while adhering to their faith in a community of like-minded individuals (Loken & Zelenz, 2018). However, the realities of life under ISIS often fall far short of these promises, revealing a harsh and oppressive environment that systematically exploits women.

One of the most harrowing aspects of women's involvement in ISIS is their exploitation under the guise of religious justification. Practices such as "sexual jihad" (*nikah ul-jihad*) enable men to engage in temporary marriages solely to legitimize sexual relations. This systematic abuse reduces women to instruments of gratification under the pretence of religious duty, reflecting ISIS's calculated manipulation of Islamic doctrines to further its ideological and operational goals. Women subjected to this exploitation often endure profound psychological and physical trauma. Upon returning home, they face stigmatization, health complications, and, in many cases, pregnancies resulting from these coerced arrangements. These practices exemplify the organization's ability to weaponize religious narratives to sustain its operations, simultaneously perpetuating systemic gendered violence. This analysis aligns with insights presented by Ali (2015), whose work in *ISIS and Propaganda: How ISIS Exploits Women* highlights the intersection of religious manipulation and the exploitation of women as key aspects of ISIS's propaganda and operational strategy. This critical examination underscores the need for nuanced counter-extremism strategies that address the underlying systemic and ideological mechanisms enabling such practices.

The roles of women in ISIS have also evolved. While traditionally cast as homemakers and caregivers, women now play more active roles as recruiters, members of the Al-Khansaa Brigade, and even combatants in some cases. This strategic shift highlights ISIS's recognition of the value women bring to its operations, not just as symbols of state-building but as functional assets in recruitment and enforcement. Women like Aqsa Mahmood, who actively recruited others while enforcing strict Islamic rules through ISIS's all-female police unit, illustrate this transformation (Gan et al., 2019).

Ultimately, the motivations of women joining ISIS are multifaceted, shaped by personal grievances, sociocultural pressures, and ideological manipulation. Social media has played an indispensable role in amplifying ISIS's reach, while systemic exploitation and evolving roles within the organization reveal the darker realities of women's involvement. Understanding these drivers is crucial for developing effective counter-radicalization strategies that address the root causes of alienation and provide alternatives to extremist narratives. The journey of these women into ISIS is not just a story of manipulation but also a reflection of the broader societal dynamics that make radicalization possible.

Conclusion

When analyzing ISIS as an international terrorist organization, it is crucial to move beyond its acts of violence and the overwhelming male dominance within its ranks. Women also play active and significant roles, challenging traditional perceptions of gender and radicalism. Masculine traits such as war and radicalism, often stereotypically associated with men, are also exhibited by women in ISIS. For instance, many British women have joined the group, assuming roles such as members of the all-female Al-Khansaa Brigade, a unit tasked with enforcing strict Islamic codes on women. Aqsa Mahmood, a British recruit, exemplifies this phenomenon, having actively participated in spreading ISIS propaganda and reinforcing the group's ideology (Martini, 2018)

The rise of Islamophobia in Europe, particularly in countries like the UK, has fueled increased discrimination against Muslims. Muslim women, in particular, face restrictions on wearing hijabs, niqabs, and other religious attire, exacerbating their alienation. This environment of hostility and exclusion creates fertile ground for ISIS recruitment. The group's promises of freedom and the establishment of a so-called "Islamic State" offer an alluring vision of belonging and empowerment for these women (Kedikli & Akça, 2018).

However, the lived reality within ISIS is far from the ideal it portrays. The organization's treatment of women is exploitative, mainly through fatwas endorsing "sexual jihad." Under these edicts, women are reduced to "sexual servants" for ISIS fighters, coerced into temporary marriages justified as religious duties. This practice not only dehumanizes women but perpetuates systemic abuse under the guise of piety. Women, lured by promises of agency and empowerment, often find themselves trapped in cycles of exploitation and oppression.

Beyond the harm inflicted on women themselves, the increasing number of European women joining ISIS poses a significant security threat to Europe. These women are not merely passive participants but active disseminators of radical ideologies, leveraging social media to spread propaganda and recruit others. This dual role as victims and agents of extremism underscores the complexity of women's involvement in ISIS. It highlights the urgent need for nuanced counterterrorism strategies that address gender-specific factors (Spencer, 2016).

To effectively address the challenges posed by women's involvement in ISIS, counterterrorism strategies must incorporate gender-specific measures. Prevention programs should target the unique vulnerabilities and motivations of women, such as feelings of alienation, promises of empowerment, or manipulation through romanticized propaganda. Social media platforms must be monitored and regulated to dismantle gender-specific recruitment campaigns while amplifying

survivor testimonies and counter-narratives. Rehabilitation and reintegration programs for returning women must provide trauma-informed counselling, vocational training, and support to address their specific needs. Furthermore, community policing efforts and public education campaigns should foster inclusion and combat systemic issues like Islamophobia, which drive many to seek belonging in extremist groups. By implementing these measures, policymakers can mitigate this phenomenon's security and human costs, ensuring a holistic approach that addresses the root causes of radicalization and supports women in finding meaningful societal roles.

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