



# Special Issue Introduction for Terrorism, Gender and Women: Toward an Integrated Research Agenda

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INTRODUCTION



## Special Issue Introduction for Terrorism, Gender and Women: Toward an Integrated Research Agenda

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### ABSTRACT

This special issue encourages a greater integration of gender-sensitive approaches to studies of violent extremism and terrorism. It seeks to create and inspire a dialogue by suggesting the necessity of incorporating gender analysis to fill gaps within, and further enhance, our understanding of political violence. In this introductory essay, I argue that there have traditionally been four approaches to understanding the interplay between gender and terrorism—positivist or “gender-as-a-variable”, instrumentalist, gendered motivations, and gender-based analysis and/or feminist methodology. *Terrorism, Gender and Women: Toward an Integrated Research Agenda* intends to advance a discussion of new ways in understanding how women and men can be affected by terrorism and violent extremism differently, and how involvement can often be influenced by highly gendered experiences and considerations.

Recent scholarship is increasingly becoming attentive to gendered dynamics in violent extremism and terrorism, including how these dimensions can affect the participation of both women and men differently. Despite the evolving and diverse roles of both women and men, often gender stereotypes continue to shape (and, in some cases, prevent) our understanding of how motivations, radicalization, and participation in terrorist activities can diverge. There is no denying the fact that both women and men can participate in terrorism, but the degree of their involvement can often differ based on gendered experiences. While studies on terrorism and political violence generally have accounted for the multitude of political, socioeconomic, ideological, cultural and religious factors that can shape an individual's radicalization and participation in terrorism, it is surprising that there has been an under-utilization of gender analysis to better explain and understand men and women's involvement and how it may differ. This purpose of this special issue, entitled *Terrorism, Gender and Women: Toward an Integrated Research Agenda*, is to encourage greater integration of gender-sensitive approaches to studies of violent extremism and terrorism. The issue seeks to create and inspire a dialogue among scholars of conflict, terrorism and gender by suggesting the necessity of incorporating gender analysis to fill gaps within, and further enhance, our understanding of political violence. The articles featured in the issue interrogate how recent developments in the field—such as the proliferation of propaganda and online messaging, the “decline” or shifting presence of ISIS, the continued

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“rise” of far-right extremism, and the changing roles of women in political violence – necessitate a gendered understanding of radicalization, participation, and of strategies to counter and prevent both violent extremism and terrorism. Taken together, they encourage a discussion of new ways in understanding how women and men can be affected by terrorism and violent extremism differently, and how involvement can often be influenced by highly gendered experiences and considerations.

This is not to say that the relationship between women, gender and terrorism has been altogether ignored in the field of terrorism studies. Rather, the benefits of gender-sensitive frameworks have not been fully utilized to account for nuances that can enhance our understandings of motivation, participation and experience amongst women and men in terrorism. Approaching terrorism and political violence through a gender analysis has multiple benefits. A gender analysis often refers to the methods used to understand the relationships between women and men, and the inequalities in those relationships.<sup>1</sup> It also identifies that women and men’s life experiences, needs and priorities are often different, which can be compounded by different social, cultural and economic roles and expectations. Sjöberg and Gentry<sup>2</sup> highlight the emerging literature that examines women’s participation in terrorism through a gender-sensitive lens. This includes not only understanding that women terrorists live in a gender-unequal world, but also that “understanding that individuals’ personal and *political* choices are complicated and contingent”.<sup>3</sup> An example of this complexity can be seen in the case of women’s recruitment into ISIS, where questions surrounding active agency and coercion can shape both choices.

The attention surrounding women’s support for, and participation in, ISIS influenced the United Nations Security Council’s adoption of key resolutions encouraging Member States to consider women’s roles in terrorism. At the same time, the UN Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate called for states to integrate a gender perspective into the analysis of the drivers of radicalization and to risk assessment tools. It further called for the necessity in devising gender-sensitive counter-terrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) responses, and to take into account both the empowerment of women in CVE and the impact of CVE measures on women’s human rights.<sup>4</sup> Often such counter-strategies reinforce gender stereotypes, with women involved in CVE programs being “praised for their personal involvement rather than their political agency, for being mothers rather than leaders, thereby confirming prevailing gender norms”.<sup>5</sup>

However, although increasing emphasis has been placed on women’s roles and participation in political violence, recent scholarship on the interplay of gender and terrorism has also addressed how “masculinities” can further enhance understandings of men’s radicalization and participation, particularly given the dominance of males amongst terrorists. Understanding masculinities is not just about understanding men, but rather acknowledging power structures and gendered practices that subordinate both women and men. Violent extremists can often draw on concepts of violent masculinities as an outlet for disempowerment, resentment and marginalisation.<sup>6</sup> For example, based on fieldwork with Indonesian former foreign fighters, Durie-Smith and Ismail suggest that there needs to be a more conscious consideration of the “multiple, simultaneous, and often contradictory gender hierarchies that are at play within contemporary conflict”,<sup>7</sup> and how militarized masculinities structure armed conflict – including within jihadi networks. By utilizing the concepts of *gender performativity* and *multiple masculinities*, moreover, Aslam

demonstrates how gender constructs and practices can play a key role in influencing and propelling men toward militant-jihadist Islamism and terrorism.<sup>8</sup> Interrogating how masculinities and notions of “manhood” can drive, facilitate and sustain involvement— including feelings of entitlement, supremacy, respect and emasculation— continues to not only nuance understanding of diverse radicalization pathways, but also to reveal how recruitment strategies may be effectively tailored to men and women differently.

## Four Approaches to Understanding Gender and Terrorism

Fair and Hamza argue that gender has been both under-theorised and under-studied as an explanatory factor, stating that “if scholars include gender in their empirical studies [of terrorism] at all, they do so as the control variable” rather than as a major factor to be studied in its own right.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on a necessarily truncated review of existing literature, this introductory essay identifies four main approaches to addressing the relationship between gender and terrorism, though it is important to note that these are general and not mutually exclusive. The first approach is broadly positivist and deals with “gender-as-a-variable”. In this respect, emphasis is often placed on differences in composition rather than motivation. This approach to gender and terrorism addresses how some organizations have higher numbers of male than female combatants, that some organizations use men more frequently in certain operations than women, and that some organizations may have higher numbers of women suicide bombers than others. This approach can also deal with differences and similarities in demographics, and intersectionality dealing with differences between women and men’s experiences due to age, class, race and socio-economic background. For example, a report by Cook and Vale<sup>10</sup> established the first global dataset focusing on women and minors with ISIS by surveying 80 countries whose citizens traveled to Iraq and Syria. It paints a global picture of affiliates who traveled in support of ISIS, including geographical data, age demographics and gender profile. Amongst other findings, the report indicated that “women and minors accounted for up to 25% of all recorded foreign ISIS affiliates in theatre and up to 21% of returnees”.<sup>11</sup> Examining how female and male suicide bombers are portrayed by media, Soule found that the information on female suicide bombers tends to conform the gender stereotypes, relative to their male counterparts.<sup>12</sup> While there is not consistent evidence to suggest that age, educational status, occupation, religion, country of birth are more or less likely to be known about female or male suicide bombers, there is robust data to suggest that the marital status of female suicide bombers is more likely to be known than their male counterparts.<sup>13</sup> Scholarship adopting such an approach often focuses on how both the presence of gender dynamics, and/or the presence of women and men in terrorist organizations. It also can interrogate how such presence displays similarities or differences and to what degree these are influential variables.

The second and third approaches are related but take different empirical form. The second approach is broadly instrumentalist and deals with women and men’s roles within terrorist organizations. It can deal with orthodox or critical observations on the interplay between gender stereotypes and traditional roles of women and men in terrorist organizations, such as men as fighters and combatants, and women as auxiliaries or in support roles. This stream of research also examines how traditional gender norms frame the roles

of men and women in the organizations, acting as both enabling and constraining factors. For instance, De Leede outlines the complexities pertaining to the position of women in militant jihad, identifying that women have historically played multiple roles such as mothers, wives, propagandists, recruiters, facilitators, enablers, planners, plotters and attackers.<sup>14</sup> An article by Huey et al. challenges the highly-gendered assumption that women tend to play supportive roles within ISIS, identifying that women in fact hold multiple roles in online and real-time social networks. This includes the role of “fan-girls”, *Baqiya* members, propagandists, recruiters, *mujirat*, widows, terrorists and leavers.<sup>15</sup> This approach also critically examines how role adoption within such organizations can challenge these traditional norms, such as why it is the case that in some organizations women take more active roles and leadership positions than in other groups.

The third approach deals with gendered motivations, and how reasons for engagement in terrorism and violent extremism amongst men and women may differ. These accounts explain differing ideological, cultural, economic and social factors that can account for or explain how and why women and men join such organizations, and also sustain their involvement. However, this approach can also deal with how organizations are influenced by the different motivations of women and men, and to what degree they affect the internal and external strategy of the movement (including policy and recruitment). To illustrate, Davis identified that whilst women and men are mostly radicalized and motivated to engage in terrorism for similar reasons, two key differences tend to stand out. The first is that women are more likely to join terrorist organizations where there is a personal connection, which is particularly the case where there are entry barriers.<sup>16</sup> The second is that women are less likely to engage in terrorism by themselves without a group structure.<sup>17</sup> Despite this, by examining multiple terrorist organizations she finds that groups employ women for tactical operatives differently and for distinct purposes. Loken and Zelenz found by examining a sample of Western women in ISIS that while women are not unique in their motivations to join and share similarities with male fighters and women in other Islamist organizations, women are primarily driven by religious ideology that adopts a gendered frame.<sup>18</sup> However, the scholars found that they do uniquely reference gendered violence in their home countries that could act as motivational enablers toward extremism, and often “reject sexualised expectations and enthusiastically accept more conservative roles that they believe are unattainable in the West”.<sup>19</sup> Yet given that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon in different societies and during different historical periods, we can indeed expect to see variation in how gender can affect motivations, radicalization and recruitment.

Researching female Indonesian pro-ISIS sympathizers, Nuraniyah<sup>20</sup> challenges assumptions pertaining to the radicalization of women and demonstrates that self-agency was in fact exercised. The study found that factors that drove women to the group were less ideational and more emotional, such as feelings of acceptance, empowerment and the development of interpersonal bonds. However, “once inside, some women do challenge jihadi gender norms, such as the prohibition of women to work and commit violent jihad. But they generally prefer to work within those rules rather than openly resist them”.<sup>21</sup> By examining Ukraine, Colombia and the Kurdish regions, Trisko Darden, Henshaw and Szekely<sup>22</sup> found that women willingly participate in nonstate armed groups even when such organizations are hostile to women or victimize women. Their

comparison also revealed that the degree to which nonstate armed groups explicitly appeal to women can actually be an outgrowth of women's participation in the organization itself, which is particularly the case when it comes to recruitment.<sup>23</sup> This approach often deals with accounts of women in terrorist organizations seeing participation as a form of empowerment, redemption or moral duty, and deals with different recruitment strategies directed toward women and men, including forced recruitment. It also deals with common questions pertaining to coercion or agency in explaining women's motivations to join terrorist organizations and other violent extremist groups, and the degree to which women were "duped" or actual political agents.

Finally, the fourth approach uses "feminist curiosity" to examine how femininities and masculinities can serve as dynamics influencing both individual and collective radicalization processes. This approach tends to ask feminist questions and investigates silences in our data and our knowledge of motivations and group dynamics. As examples, Hudson and Hodgson<sup>24</sup> argue that there are structural factors within certain societies that underlie the choice of terror, and the societal character of male/female relations is one such factor. In their study, they found a strong relationship between attitudes that women should be subordinate to men and hostile attitudes toward out-groups, along with a willingness to engage in political violence. Their results demonstrated further that "disempowerment of women at the household level creates sex-linked training in terror for males, sex-linked grievances for males, and sex-linked absence of voice for females that all facilitate, and may even catalyze, the choice to use terror by both non-state and state actors".<sup>25</sup> Based on gender analysis and survey research in four countries (Indonesia, Bangladesh, the Philippines and Libya) during 2018-2019, Johnston and True<sup>26</sup> found that hostile attitudes toward women and support for violence against women were the factors in their study most strongly associated with support for violent extremism. The study also revealed that misogyny, political identity and political economy was integral to the violent extremist groups they studied.<sup>27</sup>

Gentry argues that "mainstream terrorism studies has been resistant to the inclusion of violence against women as a form of terrorism" but agitates that we are increasingly seeing the intrinsic connection between domestic violence and mass shootings.<sup>28</sup> Outlining the examples of attacks perpetrated by Elliot Rodgers, Dylann Roof and Anders Breivik, she argues that "misogynistic terrorism" is equally a form of political violence. Misogynistic violence is "perpetrated by individuals who are invested in a larger patriarchal system, which is complicit as well as *dependent* upon the violence to maintain power structures".<sup>29</sup> Coercing the target's behavior to comply with patriarchy<sup>30</sup> becomes a key goal of misogynistic terrorism, and the perpetrator's actions and attitudes "toward feminized subjects are physical representations of an ontology and epistemology that power belongs to the dominant".<sup>31</sup> While these serve as examples, this approach can deal with an array of gendered considerations such as gendered online messaging, "women-only" social media platforms, entrenched misogyny, toxic masculinities, reactions to patriarchy, and dichotomies such as stereotypes of "weak women" and "strong men". By employing gender-based analysis and feminist methodology, this approach can also be used to interrogate how gender dynamics can act as ideological enablers or constraints within extremist groups. It also focusses, and questions, structures of patriarchy and the socially-constructed nature of gendered identities.

## Special Issue

The purpose of this special issue is to set forth a new agenda on gender and terrorism, and for greater integration of gender analysis, in studies of terrorism and political violence. It also highlights how the involvement of women and men in terrorism and political violence can be experienced differently amongst Salafi-jihadist, far-right, far-left and ethno-nationalist ideological tendencies. However, as articles within this issue identify, there is also an important organizational dimension to the relationship between gender and terrorism, where extremist groups and networks can strategically utilize gender in order to mobilize, recruit, and enhance perceptions of organizational legitimacy. The articles in this special issue are organized around the theme of gender, women and terrorism, and are reflective of the four general approaches of enquiry highlighted in this introductory essay. Each of the eight articles serve as examples showcasing how gender analysis can be used to inform, nuance and enhance existing explanations of radicalization, recruitment, operations and overall tactical strategy.

The first article by Victor Asal, Nazli Avdan, and Nourah Shuaibi explores the gender ideologies of ethnopolitical organizations. Specifically, the article critically examines organizational characteristics can play a key role in the gender platforms of ethnopolitical organizations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Although previous literature has studied gender ideology as an independent variable, the paper studies organizational ideologies as a dependent variable and provides a key contribution to literature on gender norms within organizations. By analyzing a sample from the Minorities at Risk Organizational Behavior (MAROB) database, it demonstrates that parallel mechanisms incubate gender inclusivity in violent and nonviolent ethnopolitical organizations and provides important findings for both academic and policy communities.

In the second article, Hilary Matfess provides a comparison of al Shabaab and Boko Haram's violence targeting both women and civilians in order to contribute a more holistic understanding of the unique violence that women face during conflict. She outlines both groups' respective patterns of political violence targeting women, as well as comparing each group's pattern of political violence targeting civilians. The study reveals that despite shared characteristics between al Shabaab and Boko Haram, the nature of both group's violence targeting women differs considerably. Moreover, the comparison suggests that violence targeting women can be considered as a distinct form of violence targeting civilians. Matfess' comparison of al Shabaab and Boko Haram calls into question instrumentalist arguments that violence targeting civilians is a "weapon of the weak".

Women's involvement in ISIS and far-right extremist groups have re-ignited a debate surrounding the roles that women play in terrorist organizations, including the degree to which these are consistent with, or depart from, traditional gender stereotypes. The third article by Mia Bloom and Ayse Lokmanoglu addresses levels of agency in terrorism by paying particular attention to the roles of women in al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (the PKK). They argue that even in organizations that espouse highly patriarchal ideologies, women are entering and carving their roles with either active agency, or the "appearance" of agency. Bloom and Lokmanoglu posit that not only is the role of women in terrorism changing, but that terrorist organizations have in many ways succeeded in using traditional gender stereotypes to their advantage in propaganda, recruitment and targeting strategy.



In the fourth article by Mehr Latif, Kathleen Blee, Matthew DeMichele and Pete Simi, the scholars expand our understanding of organized racial terrorism by critically examining the experiences of female members in white supremacist groups. The article explores women's participation in white supremacism based on twenty-one long interviews with former female members of white supremacy groups and weighs their accounts of participation in racist groups against the archetypal roles of women as Mother, Whore and Fighter. It offers a theoretical contribution by using the lenses of emotionality and embodiment to understand how women accept and resist group-level gender expectations in violent extremist movements. Empirically, the article paints a rich depiction of the public and private lives of white supremacist women involved in such movements.

The fifth article by Ora Szekely demonstrates how women's liberation is a core part of the political platform that is advocated by the PKK and its political allies, that has influenced women's motivations and participation in the movement. However, she argues that what is unusual in the case of the PKK is that this commitment is reflected in both the group's outward-facing ideology and its internal policy, and that the commitment to gender equality distinguishes the PKK not only from other Kurdish political organizations, but from other leftist groups in the Middle East. Szekely masterfully marries two sets of analyses on female combatants that are often treated separately– the motivations of individual fighters, and the decisions of terrorist organizations to recruit women. She demonstrates that as larger numbers of women were motivated to join the PKK, women's issues came to occupy a core component of the group's ideological platform. This “change from within” was specifically driven by women within the organization.

By examining dynamics within the Colombian civil war, the sixth article by Alexis Henshaw interrogates the factors that determine whether armed non-state actors adopt progressive stances on women's issues. Drawing on primary source material from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the 19<sup>th</sup> April Movement (M-19), Henshaw applies the conceptual framework of terrorist “outbidding” to gender issues. Specifically, she examines gendered outbidding in two separate but inter-related periods in the Colombian conflict, which included competing leftist groups, active recruitment (including women) and leadership that played a pivotal role in defining and communicating the organizations' agendas. Henshaw demonstrates that although FARC, the ELN and M-19 all valued women, this intensified in the latter years of the conflict where recruitment became more difficult. Each group found ways to package women's rights within a larger rights-based framework, creating common cause and emphasizing the potential for mutual gains.

The seventh article by Melissa Johnston, Muhammed Iqbal, and Jacqui True applies gender-sensitive content analysis to examine Islamist extremist websites in Indonesia. Based on their investigation of why women join violent extremist groups in Indonesia, they identify that the content, ideology and aims of extremist messaging is highly gender-specific, in that tailored promotional messages are deliberately used to lure women into such extremist causes. The scholars find that such groups use gendered messaging– targeted toward women and men differently – not only to reach out to women in order to bolster their membership but also to promote patriarchal relations that offer an “alternative vision of god-ordained gender complementarity” preserving male dominance.



By utilizing gender analysis also, the final article by Elizabeth Pearson provides an in-depth examination of how gender produces group members' activism in both a network linked to the U.K.'s banned Islamist group al-Muhajiroun; and activists for the English Defense League, Britain First and other anti-Islam(ist) groups. Critically examining masculinities and femininities in both movements, the article challenges assertions regarding straightforward gender parity and outlines the ways in which gender produces tensions and fragmentations; the diversity of masculinities evident in both movements; and the ways in which feminisms are co-opted and women's roles and rights celebrated in both. Pearson argues that as a result, the complementarity of gendered roles in these movements cannot be assumed and neither should counter-extremism responses.

Women and men experience terrorism differently, and gender analysis is crucial to addressing many under-explored questions regarding divergences in radicalization to violence, terrorist motivations, roles, and factors that can sustain involvement. Furthermore, it can inform why terrorist organizations and violent extremist networks appeal to gender in messaging and recruitment or, in some cases, internally implement formal gender policies that can espouse distinct, gender ideology. The four approaches highlighted in this essay are not mutually exclusive: they provide scholars of terrorism and political violence studies with a number of pathways for exploring new areas of enquiry and marrying them with these gender-sensitive analytical approaches. Although research into the interplay of gender, women and terrorism is not entirely new, this issue demonstrates that there have been key shifts and developments within the field more broadly enabling a far greater interrogation of the relationship between gender and political violence than previously. All eight articles within this special issue demonstrate how gender analysis and, in some cases, feminist methodology, both contribute to and potentially transform our understanding of recent trends in terrorism and current threats. The issue seeks to spark vital discussion and debate and inform both academic and policy communities seeking to respond to current trans-national security challenges. It suggests that given the distinct experiences of women and men, it is essential that an agenda be set for greater gender-sensitive and gender-responsive policy and programming, particularly in terms of successful CT and CVE strategies.

## Notes

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31. Ibid, 179

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