

Western Female Jihad: How Can Understanding the Motivations and Roles of Western Muslim Women Joining ISIS Influence the UK's Response?

By Daniel Scott

BA (Hons) Criminology (1st class dissertation) Sheffield Hallam University

Abstract

This report addresses the phenomenon of Western female Muslims migrating to join the so-called Islamic State. The report utilises the existing literature on the subject to first of all critically discuss the pathways that lead young women and girls away from their lives in the UK and into the arms of a terrorist organisation. The second part of the report will look at the main roles carried out by these women when they get to ISIS-controlled territory and the implications for future threats to security. Finally, the third part of the report will critically analyse the UK government's PREVENT strategy in terms of its effectiveness at dealing with the issue.

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Glossary

Caliph – Leader of the caliphate

Daesh – Another term for ISIS (al Dawlah al-Islameyah fi Iraq wal-Sham)

Fard al-ayn - Individual duty

Hijra - Migration

ISIS – Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham

IS – Islamic State

Muhajirat - emigration

Niqab – Full face veil

Sharia Law – Strict Islamic Law

Ummah – Muslim Community

Introduction

In 2012, reports started emerging of ‘foreign fighters’ leaving their home countries, to take up arms on the battlefields of Syria firstly, then later Iraq also (Ginkel and Entenmann, 2016). A poll carried out by YouGov (Dahlgreen, 2014) found that people in the UK viewed ISIS as the greatest threat to world peace. Estimates indicate that potentially more than 550 western women have travelled to ISIS-controlled territory. (Saltman and smith 2015). Including some 50 British recruits (Sherwood et al, 2014). These number have shocked many, and have made security services take notice (Hoyle et al., 2015). Bakker and De Leede (2015) state that the involvement of females on this scale is unprecedented, and highlight the need for further research in this field in order to answer the questions of how? why? And how do we stop it?

What is apparent from looking at the literature available, is that even though female recruits make up over 10 per cent of those travelling from the West (Saltman and Smith, 2015), the amount of research focussed specifically on this issue is very slight compared to that around male recruits.

Saltman (2016, p.174) “Women have long been a blind spot for security, academic and think tank sectors in relation to the growing threat of global terrorism”. This report aims to address that issue. Just as important as knowing why they go, is knowing what they do whilst there, how involved they are with terrorist activities – knowing what they have done should help apply appropriate responses. As the researcher was coming to the end of this project and making the final adjustments to the report, the importance of this topic was highlighted when a female terror suspect was shot by police in North London (Mare, 2017) and then just a few days later three more female suspects were arrested in anti-terror raids (Batchelor, 2017).

The aim of this research is to explore the rise in the number of Western female Muslims being radicalised and recruited by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and al-

Sham to join their widespread campaign of terror; and to address whether the UK response through PREVENT is adequate.

Objectives

To identify key factors that lead to the radicalisation of Muslim females from the West;

To highlight the roles of those females engaged in jihad, their importance to ISIS and the implications for extremism/ terrorism in the UK;

To assess the UK Government's responses to this phenomenon through the PREVENT strategy and where possible use the findings from the previous objectives to inform best practice relating to prevention and de-radicalisation/ rehabilitation.

Methodology

Due to the nature of this topic and those involved, a number of practical constraints and ethical issues arise. First and foremost, researchers do not have direct access to those that have travelled to ISIS-controlled territory due to the potential for harm to the researcher and also possibly to those that would participate, if captured by the group. As an inexperienced researcher, I would also find it difficult to gain access to those that have returned to the UK. As counter-terrorism is an extremely politically sensitive topic (Aaron, 1979; Gunaratna, 2007).

It has also been highlighted that the time needed to obtain familiarity of different cultures, histories and possible credible interviewees is unreasonable for most academics (Bryman, 2012; Berg 2004). Therefore primary research was not suitable.

A critical literature review was necessary. A literature review is described as “a critical examination of existing research relating to the phenomena of interest and of relevant theoretical ideas” (Bryman, 2012, p.14). My original literature searching utilised SHU library gateway and google scholar due to familiarity and ease of use. The use of Boolean operators ensured that literature searches were concise and targeted.

Saltman and Smith (2015, p.17) “this phenomenon is...complex” and therefore required a varied approach to develop a full story in this report. First of all, a systematic review of the literature was carried out, to get a good grasp of the topic and understand what research had been carried out already. A systematic literature review is a replicable, unbiased and inclusive account of the literature (Tranfield et al, 2003). Through the course of a systematic literature review, the researcher discovered that there was a low number of studies carried out on this topic already. Therefore it was decided that a critical discourse analysis would be more appropriate, utilising journalistic writing as well as academic. This added an extra layer to the research as one of the concepts in the first chapter involved discussion on media discourse.

For part one and two, the critical discourse analysis was implemented. This “Emphasizes the role of language as a power resource that is related to ideology and socio-cultural change. It draws in particular on the theories and approaches of Foucault (1977)” (Bryman, 2012, p.536).

Phillips and Hardy (2002, p.3) define discourse as ‘an interrelated set of texts, and practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being...in other words, social reality is produced and made real through discourses, and social interactions cannot be fully understood without reference to the discourses that give them meaning”.

Analysts seek to understand a particular phenomenon by exploring how discourses draw on and influence other discourses; how the discourse is constructed through texts (such as academic or journalistic writing; and how particular actors draw on the discourse to legitimate their positions (Bryman, 2012, p.537).

Qualitative content analysis was carried out on the PREVENT strategy. Qualitative content analysis emphasizes the role of the investigator in the construction of the meaning of and in texts (Bryman, 2012, p.714). Perspectives and concepts addressed in the critical discourse analysis will allow for an all-encompassing evaluation of the Prevent strategy.

During the course of reading, sensitizing concepts were highlighted (Blumer, 1954) and information was broken down into codes, recurring codes were then used to link concepts into groups. The researcher was then able to bring together overarching themes and was able to conduct thematic analysis.

Part One: Pathways

“There are many different views about what makes a young person vulnerable to radicalization, but most would agree that there is no single path”

(Briggs, 2010, p.973)

Crisis

This overarching theme encompasses issues relating to a person crisis that can make an individual vulnerable to radicalisation, as well as the sense of a global crisis or humanitarian crisis which can act as a ‘pull’ for individuals to travel to the region in question.

A common issue raised in the literature is the notion of isolation (Joffe, 2016); that Western female Muslims (and their male counterparts) are especially susceptible to radicalisation and recruitment in to extremist organisations when they are, or feel as though they are, isolated from others, and excluded from society as a whole. This has been something that the so-called Islamic State have been quick and eager to capitalise on, declaring that women are more oppressed in Western countries (Rafiq and Malik, 2015). They support statements like these by using examples such as the

restrictions imposed on female Muslim dress codes in France (Peresin, 2015) where women are not allowed to wear the *niqab* in public places. It is because of laws and policies like this that Zakaria (2015) suggests that it is no coincidence that the highest number of Western females performing *hijra* are from France.

This is not just an issue in France, female migrants from the British Isles have also highlighted that they felt there was widespread anti-Islamic sentiment in the UK. David Malet (2014) suggests that individuals with a weak affiliation to their home country and no sense of national identity are often persuadable. This is supported by Helmus (2009, p.85) that states “perceived social, economic and political discrimination can play a critical role in the radicalization process”.

These feelings of isolation and marginalisation are perpetuated by seemingly common-place Islamophobia. That is a “shorthand way of referring to dread and hatred of Islam and therefore, to fear and dislike of all or most Muslims” (Runnymede Trust, 1997). Saltman and Smith (2015) highlighted isolation as a key ‘push factor’ in pursuing *hijra*, and stated that the media has a huge role to play in the shaping of individuals views. This is supported by claims by The European Muslim Research Centre (2010) which stated that media personalities and even mainstream politicians were creating widespread Islamophobia in Europe. The use of sensationalised, inaccurate and extremely derogatory headlines used by mainstream media outlets – including many in the United Kingdom – leads to higher levels of prejudice towards Muslims (European Policy Centre, 2011). The media has even been accused of constructing the image of Muslims as terrorists (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008; Norris, Kern and Just, 2013).

There are two strong implications stemming from this; the first is that for the female Muslims that see this, they will naturally feel marginalised and isolated within their home country. What is more worrying though, is that non-Muslim members of society that see this on the media can get a sense that Islamophobia or somehow acceptable and this can lead to increased cases of anti-Muslim hate crime. This is especially worrying for female Muslims, as they are most susceptible to hate crime due to their clothing (Awan and Zampi, 2015). This has even led to muslimgirl.net posting a

‘crisis safety manual for Muslim women’, suggesting ways of covering their veils, including the use of hoods.

Levels of hate crime towards Muslims appear to be on the rise; in June 2016, the monitoring group Tell Mama released their annual report for 2015 which claimed that anti-Muslim abuse had risen 326% from the previous year (Tell Mama, 2016). Although these figures include incidents involving male Muslims, it is important to highlight that hate crimes are intended to send a clear message to the wider community, not just the individuals involved (Perry, 2001), therefore this is an important factor when discussing the issue of isolation.

Isolation and marginalisation are key issues in terms of pathways to radicalisation, as many of commentators have suggested that isolated young women and girls are easily tricked and deceived into joining the group. There are some politicians and researchers that believe that the recruitment of Western Muslim females to the so-called Islamic State is almost entirely the result of deception. Warah (2015) put forward the view that these women were not terrorists, but ‘confused, hormonal teenagers’. Royce (2015) suggested that for every female ‘brainwashed’, IS gained a new poster child for its jihadi ‘girl-power propaganda’. In terms of the language used in this discourse, it could be used to suggest that the individuals involved are somehow not the norm, creating a sense that there isn’t a bigger issue at play, which is both unproductive and potentially dangerous. There is a clear issue within UK society and in the West in general, around marginalisation and the issue needs to be addressed, otherwise we will continue to see a rise in radicalisation.

There is evidence that seems to support the claims that the girls are deceived, in that we know that there are clear differences in the propaganda used to recruit males and females; with magazines and videos used for males being kept away from females due to the graphic images and instead images of ‘empowered’ women with weapons and beautiful landscapes used (Huey, 2015). It is claimed that the propaganda used portrays IS-controlled territories as an ‘Islamic Disneyland’ (Vice News, 2015). Bloom and Winter (2015) have suggested that these women are ‘seduced’ by the promise of a good and exciting life, but then are forced to perform mundane domestic tasks.

There is evidence that highlights that many women that perform *hijra* are actually from affluent middle-class families (Bradford, 2015) and are well educated (Ganor, 2015). So it is therefore hard to imagine them being easily led, and in fact there are a number of studies that refute these claims. Zakaria (2015, p.119) asks “is it possible that ISIS appeals to some Muslim women, not because they are fooled by it, but because its political vision seems to offer solutions to some of their problems?”. Navest, Koning and Moors (2016) state that the common message put out by members of the media that women are deceived just doesn’t tally with how the *muhijirat* talk about their decisions to perform *hijra*. What is significant about this research is that, as opposed to most studies that formulated conclusions based on open social media posts (which it could be argued are controlled by IS), this study gained direct access to women and communicated by private message. Studies that have utilised public posts have no way of knowing whether that individual posted on her own free will or whether ISIS in fact controls the accounts and posts under the name of individual women.

Another issue that comes under the theme of crisis, is the feeling that there is a global crisis or humanitarian crisis whereby the *ummah* is seen to be under attack or oppressed (Hoyle et al, 2015; Peresin, 2015), and needs help; this can act as a ‘pull factor’, drawing individuals to the region. This has been highlighted as a pathway to IS-controlled territories by a number of studies. For example, Saltman and Smith (2015), who point out that at the beginning of the civil war in Syria, many Western women travelled to the region simply to assist in humanitarian causes. In terms of the women that this applies to, that are still in the region, it implies that their motives may have changed and they have chosen to stay under IS rule.

This may have been caused by mass propaganda whilst in-country, which is not only designed to lure women to the territory, but also to keep them there. IS distribute a large amount of propaganda containing images of injured or killed children, in order to create ‘emotionally charged narratives’ (Saltman and Smith, 2015, p.11).

Bjørgum (2016) highlights the paradoxical nature of this motivation for women, as the organisation they are now living under are in fact human rights abusers, that

promote physical and sexual violence on women and children. This is supported by Van Den Berg (2016) that points to the on-going genocide of religious and ethnic minorities in the region. The group that has been affected most are the Yazidi people (Human Rights Watch, 2015). It has been reported that over three thousand Yazidi women and girls have been taken prisoner by the so-called Islamic State (Human Rights Council, 2015) and that these captives are even given to fighters as ‘spoils of war’ (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Opportunity

The opportunity to gain empowerment or emancipation is a commonly reported pathway to IS territory. This is an area that IS work hard to promote in their propaganda and recruitment. Specifically targeting aforementioned individuals that have been ‘pushed’ from mainstream society in their home countries, IS recruiters work hard to ‘pull’ them into the organisation by claiming emancipation in the so-called Islamic state will reverse the woes faced at home (Rafiq and Malik, 2015). “Female recruits are not excluded in the same way they have tended to be from other jihadist organisations” (Rafiq and Malik, 2015, p.19).

One of the most common concepts in the literature surrounding this topic is the concept of marriage. Sherwood et al. (2014) points out that in most cases, women and girls have migrated in order to get married and support their ‘brother fighters’. Many Western female migrants to IS held territory believe that marriage will provide an opportunity to feel empowered and to give meaning to their otherwise restricted lives (Ali, 2015). Saltman and Smith (2015) have highlighted the significant trend of using images of a lioness and lion in IS propaganda to symbolise not only the importance of marriage, but also the importance of the role played by empowered women supporting their ‘brave’ husbands; a point that was also raised by Hoyle et al (2015).

This has led some commentators, especially in Western media, to suggest that Western Muslim women perform hijra as an opportunity to satisfy their sexual urges; what is known as erotomania. A New York Times article suggested that female Muslims were involved in a kind of girlhood rebellion and found observant Muslim men attractive; the author suggests that for these females, 'beards are sexy' (Benhold, 2015). This is supported by Warah (2015) that Western female migrants to the so-called Islamic State are motivated by a youthful attraction to 'bad boys' rather than the sense of belonging. This use of language could be seen as a sly way of undermining IS recruitment by suggesting that the organisation has no credibility if it consists of young girls with weak ideological standpoints.

It was suggested that intelligence officials had accused women of performing a 'sexual jihad', moving to the region to perform sexual favours for Daesh fighters (Sridharan, 2014). Naroditskaya (2015) believes that the women are driven by a romantic rebellion against the establishment and Katherine Brown – an Islamic studies scholar – reported that the women were enticed by 'jihotties' through social media (CNN, 2016).

Theories surrounding ideas of erotomania ensure that women are not taken seriously as political actors and highlights how little interest the West appears to have in understanding the true causes of the phenomenon. As stated earlier, the media has a big role to play in influencing public and political opinion, down-playing the role of women joining ISIS could be damaging as it could limit resources afforded to research and policy; when in fact these resources should be increased due to the significant role these women actually play (which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter). It also serves to cover up a potentially serious issue; that although IS propaganda reports that women are happily married to fighters out of choice, many are not, in fact, Stern and Berger (2015) report that many women are subject to sexual violence as they are married off to fighters against their will.

Another important motivation cited by many is the opportunity to contribute to ISIS' state building, whether that is as mothers, nurses or teachers (Hoyle et al., 2015). It is important to remember that ISIS are not just a terrorist organisation, they are also an organisation driven by a programme of building a 'utopia' (Rafiq and Malik, 2015).

This has been highlighted as an important factor in the previously unprecedented number of women joining the jihad. “Female migrants are not just rejecting the culture and foreign policy of the West; they are also embracing a new vision for society” (Hoyle et al, 2015, p.12).

This is an issue that highlights just how important women are to ISIS, “a key aspect to creating statehood has been to ensure that ISIS territory, and its jihadist constituency, continues beyond this generation” (Saltman and Smith, 2015, p.18). On a regular basis calls go out – even from the leader of IS himself, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – requesting non-military recruits, especially women (Rafiq and Malik, 2015). Female migrants themselves have stated that this opportunity for adventure in foreign lands, creating a new state under shari’ah law (Hoyle et al, 2015) is one of the biggest ‘pull factors’, particularly for younger women and girls (Saltman and Smith, 2015).

Religious Ideology

The next theme that was apparent throughout the literature was that of religious ideology, and a commitment to the ideals espoused by the so-called Islamic state. These female migrants truly believe in the mission of ISIS, and hope to live in a flourishing Islamic utopia (Hoyle et al, 2015). Propagandists seek to make those living in secular states believe that they risk falling in kufr (disbelief) (Rafiq and Malik, 2015) and the only solution is hijra. ISIS promotes the idea of a fight between good and evil (Basit, 2014), it can create a ‘them vs us’ idea, which of course would seem like an easy decision to an individual that is feeling isolated and marginalised. These women travelling to the region are assured that their sacrifices will be justified and worthy in the eyes of God (Rafiq and Malik, 2015).

Some women suggest that they simply want to live ‘honourably’ under shari’ah law (Hoyle et al, 2015). Living in the West, their beliefs and way of life are becoming increasingly scrutinised and restricted, as opposed to this, living in IS-controlled territory, Muslim women are celebrated for dressing modestly (Zakaria, 2015). So in the eyes of these women, migrating simply means relocating to a ‘safe-haven’ where they can follow Islam in its entirety (Hoyle et al, 2015).

While it may seem unusual to some observers that Muslim women would leave the 'liberal' West, where there is a growing push for female rights, it must be highlighted that this form of feminism is much different to that of 'Islamic feminism'. This interprets women's roles as 'complimentary' to men's, not equal to. Therefore being required to perform the same roles as men in the West goes directly against their beliefs.

The role played by charismatic religious leaders has been highlighted in the literature in terms of persuading women to perform hijra (Lindekilde et al, 2016; Wiktorowicz, 2005). It has been suggested that vulnerable individuals that have rejected Western values and authority 'buy' into the narratives offered by jihadist leaders (Sinai, 2016). This relates to what Hardin (2002, p.6) describes as 'knowledge by authority', he states that "because of the high costs of acquiring all knowledge on our own, we typically rely on authority for most of the knowledge we actually have". Going back to the influence of the media, by projecting a sense of fear or distrust in Muslims, all they are doing is undermining the government's authority, and causes Muslims to turn their back on it. Once this happens, isolated individuals become easier to influence and radicalise.

The leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, can be described as one of those charismatic leaders that has garner a lot of trust and respect from followers ever since he declared himself caliph and announced that migration to the 'house of Islam' was a duty (Roberts, 2015, p.1). These women therefore believe that by migrating, they are securing their place in heaven, as fulfilling their religious duty (fard al-ayn) will bring them closer to God (Hoyle et al, 2015, p.14)

Social Networks

Social networks are crucial to understanding the processes of radicalisation and recruitment of Western females by the so-called Islamic State. Individuals that are isolated and lonely are extremely susceptible to being 'befriended' online by IS recruiters. If they are already feeling hatred towards the mainstream society in their home country, they can find common ground with Islamists and are made to "feel

they are not alone, and be moved along the pathway from thought to action” (Post, 2007, p.251).

Females are mostly targeted online by other females, already in the region, who promote a sense of belonging and community. One of the biggest ‘pull factors’ described in the study by Saltman and Smith (2015, p.15) was that of ‘sisterhood’, they stated “women within our dataset consistently speak of the camaraderie and sisterhood they experience within ISIS-controlled territory”.

Peresin (2015) suggests that marginalisation leads ISIS to promote a sisterhood where everyone is tight-knit. However, Saltman and Smith (2015) observe that actually, female migrants tend not to mix with those from other nationalities, suggesting that English speakers tend to find camaraderie together. Further down the line this could have positive implications for rehabilitation, as will be highlighted in this chapter, social networks can play a big part in radicalisation and therefore could play a big part in the reverse.

On the other hand, females that already know people that have been radicalised or recruited become prime targets, something known as ‘recruitment by friendship’ (Rafiq and Malik, 2015). Pre-existing social ties are important as it has been observed that often, recruitment by extremist groups can come before any ideological engagement (Busher, 2015). This is supported by Helmus (2009, p.74) who states “social groups play a critical role in the radicalization process” as peer pressure can lead to involvement with extremist groups.

Therefore taking into account the family and friends is important in this topic. Many women either travel to Syria with family member or friends, or they are following in their footsteps. Prime examples of this in terms of those from the United Kingdom are the so-called ‘terror twins’, Salma and Zara Halane who travelled together, following their brother who had already joined as a fighter (Saltman and Smith, 2015).

“Association with, or marriage to a male ISIS supporter or fighter remains a strong reason for women to travel to ISIS-held territory” (Hoyle et al, 2015). The research carried out by Navest, Koning and Moors (2016) found that over two-thirds of those

that had migrated were married in Syria, with a significant number either married before they left, or knew their new husband from home.

Roles

This chapter will discuss the main roles carried out by Western female Muslims when they successfully make their way to IS-controlled territory. It is important to understand what these women do whilst in the region so as to adopt appropriate responses to the risk they pose, should they return. It is important to highlight that the Terrorism Act 2000 (s1) defines terrorism as “the use or threat of action designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public or a section of the public for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause”. Each role will be discussed in relation to this definition. Spencer (2016) found that the main two roles occupied by women in IS-controlled territory were wife and recruiter. Another significant role is the all-female police unit known as the Al-Khansaa brigade.

‘Jihadi bride’

The most common role for Western female migrants going to ISIS-controlled territory is that of ‘jihadi bride’. It has been suggested that other than birthing the next generation of jihadis, most women are there primarily to look after their husbands and support them during the time of war. (Winter, 2015b) states that the fundamental roles of these women are mother and wife. This is supported by Chatterjee (2016, p213) that highlights “women’s public appearance has been strictly curtailed and women have been used in most cases as the sex object for these militants and their role is strictly limited to nurturing the future militants and satisfying the present ones”.

In terms of a threat posed by these women returning to the United Kingdom, it could be suggested that it is low. They are kept inside mostly, and apart from when their husband would return home, they would have little to no interaction with combat/

terror operations. Therefore, it may be hard (and pointless) to pursue charges, as their actions don't fall into the definition of terrorism (Terrorism Act 2000).

On the other hand, Jacoby (2015) suggests that there are different types of jihadi bride. One of which is a 'victim', it is suggested that IS employs tactics similar to paedophiles and other sexual predators when recruiting females online. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there are issues that have been raised about deception and trickery being used in the recruitment of women, and for most life under IS won't be what they expected. Binetti (2015) therefore raises an important issue around legal action being taking, but not in terms of charging the women, in terms of protecting them. Instead of viewing them as members of a terrorist organisation, they could be viewed as victims of human trafficking.

The researcher has condensed the definition of human trafficking stated by the United Nations (2000) highlighting only the most relevant parts:

“The recruitment, transportation...of persons, by means of...forms of coercion, of deception...of a position of vulnerability...to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum...forms of sexual exploitation...servitude”.

Importantly, it goes on to state that the consent of the victim is irrelevant if any of the aforementioned deceptive techniques are used (United Nations, 2000). This could have huge implications in terms of responses to the rehabilitation or punishment or returnees (as discussed in the next chapter).

The other type of jihadi bride referred to by Jacoby (2015) is the 'warrior', although most women in the so-called Islamic State are kept well away from combat roles, many have highlighted their desire to take up arms in the future (Saltman and Smith, 2105). Also, Hoyle et al (2015) suggested that many women in their study celebrated the violence carried out by the *Daesh* fighters 'unequivocally'.

In contradiction to both types of jihadi bride posited by Jacoby (2015), Navest, Koning and Moors (2016, p24) found that the majority of women in their study were

just seeking to live under IS rule and practice Islam, therefore “considering them as either victim or as militant activists does not tally with how they talk about their lives”. What is important to note however, regardless of whether they pose a threat to security, is the fact that all of these women are living in an active warzone. Hoyle et al (2015) points out that the women in his study regularly talk of bombing raids, and many experience the loss of husbands. This should be taken into account when considering rehabilitation of returnees and their needs.

The fact that ‘jihadi bride’ is the most common role for Western female Muslims under ISIS, could suggest why women are mostly overlooked by academics and security services. In terms of the discourse analysis and use of language, the way the media portrays these women could cause politicians and security services to not take the issue seriously. However, the next two roles are much more serious and should not be underestimated.

Recruiter

Arguably the most important and dangerous role performed by Western women of ISIS is that of recruiter. The objectives of the female recruiters are straightforward; get other women and girls to perform *hijra* (Peresin, 2015). The recruitment of women is of the utmost importance to ISIS, as it has been suggested that the more women that join, the more men will follow (Ferran and Kreider, 2015). ISIS has therefore increased its female focussed efforts and at the forefront of this push are female migrants themselves (Saltman and Smith, 2015). It’s been said that Muslim converts are of particular interest to the recruiters, as blonde females are seen as most sexually desirable (Ferran and Kreider, 2015).

ISIS’ propaganda machine takes on two strategic forms, the first ‘*Mu’assissat al-furqan*’ is used for the dissemination of threats and violent videos. The second (and one that is of particular interest to this study) is ‘*Al-Hayat Media*’ which focusses on recruitment and is tailored towards young foreign audiences (Saltman, 2016).

Hussain and Saltman (2014) posit that while the internet can't be considered a sole cause, it has no doubt facilitated extremist recruitment and been a catalyst for radicalisation. Providing a global sense of community online, whereby radical narratives can be proliferated (Saltman and Winter, 2014). Technological advances and the huge and growing popularity of social media, and the way ISIS take advantage of that, makes them stand out from other terror organisations. Utilising foreign migrants to disseminate messages in many languages (Saltman, 2016).

Social media has provided a platform for ISIS to deliver propaganda to a global audience without it being filtered by western media, and as most people in contemporary society use social media, their message can be seen by a huge audience. Huey and Witmer (2016) talk of 'fan girls', these are individuals that are not directly involved in the organisation, but play a significant role by 'retweeting' or sharing propaganda material, this enables the material to be spread rapidly. When you consider that central ISIS media operations produce an average of three videos and four image-based reports daily (Winter, 2015), constantly being shared and 'retweeted' all around the world, the potential for new recruits being indoctrinated is just unprecedented. It has been suggested that the war in Vietnam was the first televised war; the gulf war was the first 24-hour news war; and that the continuing crisis in Syria and Iraq is the first social media war (Jones, 2014; O'Neil, 2013) and it's plain to see why.

The radicalisation process has been described as continuous and consistent, with teams speaking to women around the clock, making the process extremely quick, as short as 1-2 weeks (Vice News, 2015). During the process of radicalisation, "a cognitive behavioural pathway starts to build itself around the extremist propaganda that manifests itself as an alternative reality" (Saltman and Smith, 2015, p.11), that is why it's important to keep the propaganda flowing constantly.

The researcher believes that the women in this role offer the biggest threat to national security within the United Kingdom right now and therefore can no longer be overlooked by security services, politicians or the media. Their ability to recruit female cells and encourage attacks in the UK, has huge implications for those at home taking up the fight (Hoyle et al 2015).

This is an important role for women that want to play an active part in the organisation, “the women have been given an open outlet for active service through their online activism. Each female profile gives a personal voice to the caliphate and its cause” (Saltman, 2016, p.189) A well-known blogger Umm Layth (believed to be Aqsa Mahmood from Glasgow) is a popular source of propaganda in recruiting young girls, it is believed that her blog posts were the motivation behind three British school girls – Shamima Begum, Kadiza Sultana and Amira Abase – travelling to the so-called Islamic State (Franz and Shubert (2015).

Police and security services are trying to fight back, and in various countries have arrested and/or charged women with ties to IS for recruiting others, directly and through the internet (Wright 2014; Clancy 2015). In terms of the definition of terrorism (Terrorism Act, 2000) these women are certainly performing duties that fall within this. Furthermore, as previously discussed, there are potential issues around human trafficking offences, which these female recruiters could be liable to also.

Al-Khansaa Brigade

The Al-Khansaa Brigade is an all-female police religious police force, established in 2014, said to consist of many British women, including Aqsa Mahmood (Culzac, 2014). It is believed that the unit was formed in order to carry out searches at checkpoints following a series of assassinations against IS commanders by men wearing female religious clothing (Bloom and Winter, 2015).

Hoyle et al (2015, p.9) suggested that “foreign fighter is commonly used to describe men who migrate to Syria and Iraq to participate in the conflict there, it is not an accurate description of the women who travel to this region”. The Al-Khansaa Brigade may be an exception to this statement. The women receive training in weaponry and police tactics, then patrol the city as a militia, ensuring that *shari'ah law* is maintained (Smith, 2015). They have even been reported as fighting in battle (Peresin, 2015)

Europol (2016) warning that returnees have an increased capability to carry out terror attacks due to their training and experience, they go on to highlight the fact that most of the perpetrators in the attacks in France in 2015, which included a woman, were returnees from conflict zones. What is most significant about this is the fact that women are falling under the radar of researchers and security services (as highlighted previously) therefore potentially dangerous women could be amongst those already returned. Hoyle et al (2015, p.37) “women within our sample noted that there are women that have returned home following the death of a husband”.

Even though the Al-Khansaa Brigade are the only example of women in military style roles at the moment, it is important to highlight the issue of defensive jihad, where females would be permitted to fight. It is “understood that under extraordinary circumstances of defensive warfare...an emergency condition during which all Muslims go out to fight” (Lahoud, 2014, p.794). This poses a potential risk for the future, as ISIS begin to lose grip of its territory, we could see more women in combat roles, as is their wish (Hoyle et al, 2015).

Response

PREVENT

In 2015, the UK government updated their PREVENT programme in response to developments in the terrorist threat (HM Government, 2016, p.15), a major focus was “reducing the risk from people travelling to, and returning from, the conflict in Syria and Iraq”.

The objectives of the Prevent strategy are “to respond to the ideology of extremism and the threats we face from those who promote it”, “preventing people from being drawn into terrorism and ensure that they are given appropriate advice and support” and lastly to “work with specific sectors where there are risks of radicalisation which we need to address” (HM Government, 2016, p.15).

In terms of the first objective, the strategy is two-fold, first of all the aim is to restrict the access and availability of the terrorist material. The government have put a huge amount of effort into this. The Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit have been working closely with social media providers to delete illegal terrorist material from online sites – over 55,000 pieces of material have been deleted in 2015, compared with 46,000 in 2014 (Government, 2016, p.15).

The researcher would question the effectiveness of this approach and the use of resources. It was highlighted in the previous chapter that central ISIS media operations publish three videos and four image-based reports on a daily basis (Winter, 2014); that is seven pieces of illegal terrorist material published a day, there are at least 550 Western female women that have travelled to IS-controlled territory, so for arguments sake if they were the only people to share/ retweet that material, that would make 3,850 items published a day – 1,405,250 items per year. In terms of effectiveness it is just a drop in the ocean.

Leong (2015) suggested that shutting down social media accounts would reduce the exposure of the recruiters, however this could cause displacement in terms of location, possibly driving recruiters into the dark web or closed forums, or displacement in terms of changing tactics, which would mean the security services constantly playing catch up. Saltman (2016) suggests that government measures of trying to rid the internet of terrorist material are ineffective, as it's just too easy to open a new account. It is also important to note that social media accounts are vital for research and intelligence in this area, as they provide one of the only sources of information – most studies cited in this research were compiled using information from social media accounts. Huey and Witmer (2016, p.2) state that “social media has permitted us a greater glimpse of the types of activities women engage in within pro-Jihadist networks”.

The second approach in challenging extremist ideology is referred to as ‘communications capacity building with civil society groups’, the aim is to produce counter-narrative material that surpasses that of the terrorist organisations. In 2015 it received 15 million views, compared with only 3 million in 2014 (HM Government,

2016, p.15). The use of local society groups is the key to this approach being successful, as counter messaging from the state would be ineffective as many will feel antagonistic and distrustful of authorities (Leong, 2015). McCabe (2015) agreed that challenging the ISIS narrative has to be a priority in order reduce the numbers of those travelling.

Governments are trying to strengthen their cooperation with other sectors to better prevent radicalisation. In 2015, 400,000 frontline staff received training in radicalisation, an increase of more than double from the year before (HM Government, 2016) is this a practical move? This could be seen as further demonising the Muslim community as it can lead to them being treated differently to other people (with suspicion). Although they received a brief training program, they will be far from experts on the subject – Importantly, Heath-Kelly (2012, p.14) points out that radicalisation is a contested concept, and neither scholars nor policy makers can explain at what point an individual goes from being ‘at risk’ to ‘risky’, so if they can’t, why do we expect teachers and NHS staff to be able to identify this after a limited amount of training?

In 2014 there was a total of 1281 referrals to Channel, only 20% of all referrals were assessed as vulnerable to being attracted to terrorism (National Police Chiefs’ Council, 2017); as of 2015 the Home Office took over statistics and information has been shrouded in secrecy. However a freedom of information release states that in 2015 the number of referrals was 3955 (National Police Chiefs’ Council, 2016); there are no statistics for how many were assessed as vulnerable. This could suggest an improvement in identifying risk factors, or conversely it could suggest that more individuals are being identified unnecessarily by frontline staff reacting to the added pressure of their new responsibility.

Using communities to police themselves in terms of spotting radicalisation could be seen as a move towards responsabilisation (Garland, 2001); the police couldn’t possibly be expected to prevent all cases, but the community adds that extra level of surveillance. “Communities may be able to act as an early warning system for the police and intelligence services should they come across information or have concerns about particular individuals or groups” (Briggs, 2010, p.972). On the other hand, it

could be seen as a way of shifting the burden, or passing the blame onto an already suspect community (Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009).

Omand (2010, p.101) highlighted how the original PREVENT campaign focused upon targeted diplomacy and military intervention overseas but by time it was published, the focus had changed to community-based approaches. Even though they removed it from their policy, the UK government are still actively involved in military operations in Syria. An issue that was highlighted in the first chapter as a pathway to radicalisation.

The importance of prevent is to stop individuals turning to extremism/terrorism in the first place (Gearson and Rosemont 2015, p1048). It is the researcher's opinion that the Prevent strategy is doomed to fail, as like most counterterrorism policy, it fails to address the root causes of the problem. We know from the pathways chapter that the women most at risk of radicalisation are those that are isolated and marginalised. The response is to police 'at risk' communities; 'at risk' communities being viewed as 'at risk' is marginalising in itself, especially when black and ethnic minorities are severely underrepresented in the police force, only making up 5.9% of police officers in England and Wales (Hargreaves et al, 2016). This leads to a sense of securitisation of the state's engagement with Muslims (O'Toole et al, 2015; Martin, 2014).

There is a need to start examining society and political contexts of terrorism, rather than cultural and psychological predispositions ((Wiktorowicz, 2005; Sageman, 2008). Channel program states the need in 'Protecting vulnerable people from being drawn into terrorism', surely the emphasis should be on protecting people from being vulnerable in the first place; by reducing isolation and marginalisation; increasing inclusivity, diversity and equality. We know that social networks are important in the radicalisation and recruitment of individuals, but they could also be important in keeping women from leaving. There needs to be cohesion between communities, the media need to stop spreading hate and instead spread positive messages of unity. Radicalised individuals are not just a problem for the community they are from, they are a threat to us all, and so it should be the responsibility of all to prevent it in the first place. That being said, the media needs to be held accountable for their actions in stoking up the flames.

Thinking about Deradicalisation – implications for returnees

The Prevent strategy also highlighted that “We will also be introducing a new deradicalisation scheme, which will be mandatory where the law allows, for those who are further down the path to radicalisation and who need a particularly intensive type of support” (HM Government, 2016, p16). There is no information about what this scheme will look like, but as this research has suggested, there needs to be an effective program in place for returning female migrants. Essentially, if ISIS are defeated, these women will have to go somewhere, and if they’re not accepted back into their country of origin, they could move to another, possibly even worse, terror organisation to join (Lindekilde et al, 2016).

Security experts have suggested that there are three types of returnee, ‘the disillusioned’ who found that the experience didn’t live up to expectations, possibly those women that are considered ‘trafficked’ (Binetti, 2015); ‘the disengaged but not disillusioned’; and ‘the operational’, those that are still active members of the group and remain a serious threat (Clarke, 2017). The government needs to be prepared for all three. The first step in the process would need to be understanding why they left (Ramalingam and Tuch, 2014), however this is not straight forward, when considering some of them will still be active.

Hegghammer (2013) suggests that foreign fighters can be socialised in such a way that they decide to become domestic terrorists on their return home. This can also be applied to female migrants. Hoyle et al (2015, p.37) highlights that “women within our sample noted that there are women that have returned home following the death of a husband. Even these women, outside the conflict zone, have the capacity to be affected by the escalating violence within ISIS-controlled territory”. These women need to be a priority in the de-radicalisation process, to prevent them continuing recruitment activities from home.

The best way to rehabilitate and prevent future radicalisation is through the use of returnees, individuals that have been there and seen it for what it is, they can pass on their experiences and deter others.

Conclusion

This research has provided a critical view of the phenomenon that is Western female jihad. The report was split into three main chapters. The first chapter highlighted the main pathways associated with young women and girls that become radicalised and recruited by the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham. The pathways were organised according to emergent themes over the course of a review of the existing literature. The first pathway involved the sense of crisis, be it personal or international. The main concepts raised here were isolation and marginalisation which make these females susceptible to radicalisation and are therefore specifically targeted by IS recruiters. The next pathway highlighted was opportunity, this stated that Western Muslim females could reverse their woes in the West and gain sense of empowerment through marriage or state-building. Next was religious ideology, the most straight forward to recognise and explain, provided the chance for devout Muslim women to live under sharia law. The final pathway posited was that of social networks; highlighting that friends/ family and befrienders online can have a big impact on the recruitment and radicalisation of young girls and women.

Part two of the report focussed on the roles that the women undertake when in IS-controlled territory. The most common role, which most migrants have, is that of wife to a jihadi fighter. The next role, and arguably the most important and influential, is recruiter. These women are crucial to the success of IS as they maintain recruitment levels through continuous befriending/ radicalisation of vulnerable girls online. Enticing them in with a sense of community and sisterhood. The final role put forward was the all-female police unit, the Al-Khansaa Brigade, regarded as a strict enforcer of religious law and said to contain many British migrants. Although women are not yet allowed to join the fighting, reports suggest that the Al-Khansaa Brigade is the only exception to that rule.

The third part of the report looked at the UK response to this phenomenon, through the application of a revamped Prevent strategy. The strategy aims at countering radicalisation by stemming the flow of terror-related materials online, and producing counter-narratives through community groups. As well as working with front line staff such as teachers and doctors in order to spot signs of 'risk' at the early stages. What the strategy fails to address is the root causes of radicalisation, such as those highlighted in chapter one.

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