Briefing
April 2016

European Parliament

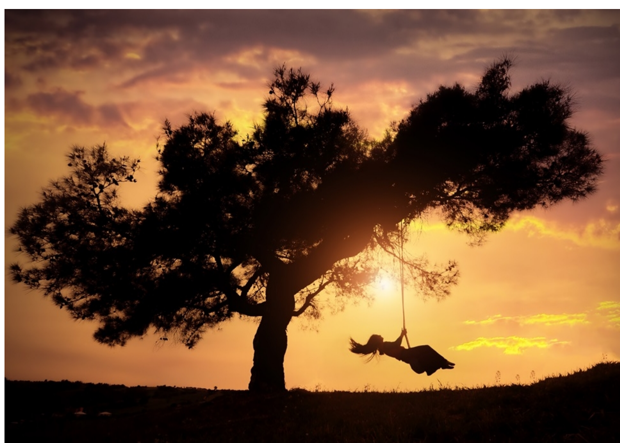
Radicalisation and counter-radicalisation: A gender perspective

SUMMARY

Terrorism resulting from radicalisation and violent extremism is a serious threat to European security. Part of the complexity of these phenomena lies in the fact that there is neither a single pathway to radicalisation nor a single terrorist profile.

From a gender perspective, women's radicalisation and involvement in violent extremist groups remains relatively under-estimated as there is still a general view that terrorism almost exclusively concerns men. However, recent studies indicate that around 550 Western women have travelled to ISIL/Da'esh-occupied territory, whilst a new report on European foreign fighters suggests that 17% of them are women.

The role of women in counter-radicalisation is more widely acknowledged, although the focus tends to be confined to women as concerned family members. While the influence of mothers is highlighted by many practitioners, women's role in prevention goes beyond close family circles, extending to other capacities such as policy shapers, educators, community members and activists. Women's empowerment, be it through legal, financial or cultural means, thus becomes essential for tackling the root causes of extremism and defeating radicalisation. Although a gender aspect has not been systematically applied in security strategies, several experts advise the adoption of a gendered approach to counter-radicalisation policies.



In this briefing:

- Context
- Gender aspects of radicalisation
- Gendered approaches to countering radicalisation
- Main references

EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service
Authors: Anita Orav, Rosamund Shreeves & Anja Radjenovic with Sofía López
Members' Research Service
PE 581.955

EN

Context

The recent tragic terrorist attacks in Europe and elsewhere have brought to the fore the complex processes of religious fundamentalism, radicalisation and violent extremism. The phenomenon of 'foreign fighters' travelling to battlefields in countries such as Syria and Iraq and the associated risk that some may return to Europe to commit terrorist attacks, is an increasing concern. According to the International Centre for Counter Terrorism (ICCT), as of October 2015, the estimated number of foreign fighters from EU Member States stood at between 3 922 and 4 294.

The ICCT has noted that one specific factor not yet reflected in targeted policies is the number of women in this cohort, which it puts at 17% of the total. A study issued by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) in 2016 also finds that there are now around 550 Western women in ISIL/Da'esh-occupied territory. Both organisations highlight the need for better understanding of the specific characteristics of women's radicalisation and extremism in order to help shape effective, gender-sensitive policies and actions. On the one hand, the potential threat resulting from radicalised women needs to be acknowledged. On the other, more attention also needs to be paid to the gender dimension of counter-radicalisation strategies and the specific contribution that women can make in this area.

Gender aspects of radicalisation

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) notes that the potential for women's radicalisation and involvement in violent extremist groups continues to be relatively under-estimated, as there is still a misconception that violent extremism and terrorism almost exclusively concern men. However, research demonstrates that, historically, women have been active in politically violent organisations in different regions around the world, not only in auxiliary and support capacities, but also as leaders in organisation, recruitment and fund-raising and in direct operational roles. It has also been argued that increasing use of the internet is levelling the playing field for women to join radical organisations that are now accessible virtually and anonymously.

Women as radicals – is there a typical profile of radicalised women?

According to the OSCE, there is, in general, no single pathway to radicalisation and no single terrorist profile. In the present context, the ISD argues that there is significant diversity in the profiles of women becoming radicalised and travelling to ISIL/Da'esh territory and that it is not possible to create a broad profile of women and girls at risk of radicalisation based on age, location, ethnicity, family relations or religious background. Regarding residence, however, the ICCT's 2016 research paper notes that 90-100% of European foreign fighters (men and women) come from urban or built-up areas. In some cases, Western fighters are bringing entire families with them to ISIL/Da'esh-controlled territory, including wives and young children, but women and girls are also travelling independently. Further ICCT research on European female jihadists in Syria suggests that most of the girls joining ISIL/Da'esh are young, but there are also mothers with young children amongst those who make the trip. Some have had difficulties at school, but there are also women who are highly educated. Although many experienced a troubled childhood, some come from families with no known problems with the authorities. Most of the female recruits come from religiously moderate Muslim families, while some converted to Islam at a later age.

Why do women become radicalised?

Experts suggest that women join terrorist movements for many of the same individual clusters of psychological, personal, social, economic and political reasons that men do. These may include: rebelliousness and a desire for action; a drive for power and the promise of adventure; an attraction to politics; and commitment to a particular cause, ideology or understanding of religion. The Centre on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation (CGCC) adds a number of additional push-factors for both sexes, including grievances about socio-political conditions, grief following the death of a loved one, the intention to derive economic benefits or a desire to create radical societal change. However, both in general and in relation to the current focus on ISIL/Da'esh, there is also a significant gender dimension to radicalisation, both because women and men may be susceptible to specific drivers, and because terrorist organisations may target, recruit and utilise them in different ways.

At general level, as the OSCE has highlighted, factors such as gender-based inequality and discrimination, violence against women and lack of educational and economic opportunities, may act as specific drivers in women's radicalisation. On the one hand, women's support for terrorism may result from their personal convictions and experiences as women. It has been suggested that the experience of living within a society that denies them full civil rights and economic opportunities may lead some women to perceive participating in terrorism as a way of acquiring liberty, emancipation, respect and equality. On the other hand, violations of women's human rights may also deepen the feelings of alienation, isolation and exclusion that may make individuals more susceptible to radicalisation. In this context, some research has suggested that personal trauma may be one of the fundamental motivations for woman's involvement in violent extremism.[1] Here, particular attention has been drawn to the experience of rape as a driver in motivating women to become suicide bombers. In communities where 'honour' codes mean that women are held responsible for sexual propriety and are blamed for bringing shame on their families by being raped, becoming a suicide bomber may be seen as a way of removing the shame of rape and replacing it with the pride associated with being a 'martyr for the cause'. Traditional gender roles may shape women's radicalisation in other ways. For example, it has been noted that kinship and romantic relationship may play an important role in drawing women into extremist and terrorist organisations.

Many of these factors are relevant in the current context, and terrorist organisations such as ISIL/Da'esh have also proved to be adept at utilising them to target and recruit women. Accounts and analysis of its recruitment methods show that the organisation has targeted specific messages at women. As highlighted in the push and pull factors listed below, its propaganda contrasts negative narratives of Muslim women's experience in Western societies with positive narratives about their contribution to the new 'state'. Online radicalisation of often vulnerable girls and women has also been described as a kind of 'grooming' process.

The reasons why women have recently been travelling to join ISIL/Da'esh are diverse, and include a broad range of push and pull factors. It has been suggested that, in the Muslim majority countries from which most ISIL/Da'esh recruits come, women may see it as offering a certain kind of freedom from patriarchal traditions and an escape from restrictive cultural norms. Others argue that the radicalisation of women in these countries is often a response to the lack of social, religious, economic and political opportunities afforded to them. On the other hand, ISIL/Da'esh has also been reported

to use rape or sexual abuse of women as a recruitment tactic, as this stigmatises the women and makes them easier to manipulate and exploit.[2]

Regarding the Western women and girls joining ISIL/Da'esh, it is suggested that push factors may include: feeling socially and/or culturally isolated and uncertain about their place within Western culture; a perception that the international Muslim community as a whole is being violently persecuted; and feeling anger, sadness and/or frustration over a perceived lack of international action in response to this persecution.[3] The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) lists other push factors, such as feelings of inequality, lack of religious freedom, racism, xenophobia or negative attitudes towards Muslim immigrants in the West. As regards factors that pull women to join ISIL/Da'esh, the ISD lists the following: idealistic goals of religious duty and building a utopian 'Caliphate state', which have been found to be particularly salient for women; belonging and sisterhood; and a romanticised image of jihad, including a sensation of adventure and belief that it will secure their place in paradise. Some stakeholders mention that the motivation of some of the girls to go to Syria reflects acts of rebellion and revolt against their families, and especially their parents. Concerns have also been raised about an emerging 'soft radicalisation' of women in Europe, which encourages an intolerant interpretation of religion and restrictive gender roles. Whilst it may not actively promote violence, this indoctrination may be passed on to children and other family members, and may lead to support for more extreme views.

Women's roles in terrorist organisations

Women may play multiple roles in terrorist organisations. It has been noted that organisations are increasingly exploiting gender stereotypes, using women operatives to get past security personnel and avoid detection, boost media attention and 'shame' men into action. It has also been shown that women are increasingly taking on active roles in terrorist operations, particularly suicide bombings. Experts suggest that female bombers committed over 257 suicide attacks between 1985 and 2010 (representing about a quarter of the total) on behalf of many different terrorist organisations. Where women are not in such positions, they may be terrorist sympathisers, supporters of radical ideologies and mobilisers. Women's traditional roles as wives, mothers and nurturers, which empower them to become protectors of cultural, social and religious values and to transmit them to the next generation, may be turned to encouraging family members and children to aspire to martyrdom, and keep terrorist organisations viable through their propaganda, recruitment, fundraising and other support activities.

This is evident with ISIL/Da'esh, where women are playing crucial roles in spreading the organisation's ideology of militant Islam and recruiting other women through online platforms. Although women may be portrayed on these platforms holding weapons, they are currently not being used in combat, as under strict interpretations of Sharia Law they are prohibited from fighting.[4] Rather, the responsibility of women is portrayed, first and foremost, as being a good wife (*jihadi bride*) to the jihadist husband, and becoming a mother to the next generation of jihadism. The ICCT also mentions women's role in mediating marriages and collecting money for the fighters.

As mentioned in the ISD report, women's glorification of ISIL/Da'esh violence on their social media channels contributes to the terrorist organisation's propaganda, and has the potential to inspire men and women to carry out attacks or to travel to Syria and Iraq. Conversely, research also shows that women can counter violent extremism and radicalisation that lead to terrorism in a broad range of capacities.

Gendered approaches to countering radicalisation

Until recently, counter-terrorism initiatives overlooked gender perspectives, partly because they tended to lean toward the 'hard power' dimensions. However, front-line experts cooperating within RAN have concluded that, because gender roles are strongly determined by cultural and social milieu, family and biographical situations, these factors should be taken into account in the methodology of prevention initiatives. Practitioners have also pointed to empirical indications that extremism is in most cases connected to sexism, homophobia and gender-role rigidity, but this has often been overlooked in academic research on radicalisation, which tends to focus more on ideological and cognitive factors. Yet, it is hinted that almost all violent extremists, terrorists or hate-crime offenders also hold sexist attitudes.[5]

The eyes of scholars and decision-makers are increasingly turning to women, and an ever-growing body of literature studying the role women play in the prevention of terrorism and in countering radicalisation both within and beyond Europe is emerging. Recent research on countering violent extremism (CVE) argues that women are essential in preventing radicalisation and extremism, advises that government and private sector redouble their efforts to comprehend the necessity of a 'gendered approach to CVE programming', and provides examples of good practice.

In general, research points to the valuable role women play in countering radicalisation, although some authors demand that care be exercised when relying on the idea that women are 'inherently peaceful' or on the notion of 'women as mothers and victims' who, because of that 'condition', can be assets in counter radicalisation/terrorism. These scholars argue that reliance on stereotypes is 'inimical to the rights of women and sexual minorities' and that it could 'perpetuate' those stereotypes. It is also stressed that women's role in prevention is not limited to that of close family members such as mothers, sisters and wives, but extends to other capacities such as policy shapers, educators, community members and activists.

Women's roles in prevention

According to the OSCE, women's involvement is 'essential to address the conditions conducive to terrorism and effectively prevent terrorism', whereas the UNDP considers the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment vital in preventing violent extremism. The Women's Rights Committee of the Union for the Mediterranean follows the same line, stating that women represent 'the first line of protection' in the prevention of extremism. Some of its parliamentarians have suggested that motherhood and the role of women as educators may confer on them a special power in the fight against terrorism and extremism.

Mothers – front line of prevention

As radicalisation often takes place at home, close family members may be the first to notice changes in a young person's behaviour. There is evidence to suggest that families, particularly mothers, also have a strong influence in terms of dissuading prospective recruits from further radicalisation. However, a 2015 research paper 'Mothers against Terror' argues that research on countering violent extremism (CVE) has left out this important group. The authors argue that mothers are crucial actors because of their capacity to both pre-empt and detect radicalisation: they are the ones that can help build resilience in their children's early years of development and also the ones to notice worrying signs such as anger, anxiety and withdrawal. Mothers are also in a prime position to help identify reasons other than economic, political and socio-

economic factors that make young people vulnerable to radical ideologies. Mothers' potential in counter-terrorism was also examined in a study 'Can Mothers Challenge Extremism' carried out in regions affected by violent extremism: Nigeria, Pakistan, Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine. The study indicated that mothers trust themselves and other mothers first in protecting their children against extremism, whereas the current security approach tends to focus on the role of national and local authorities. To diversify the approach to terrorism, mothers' expertise and strategic position should be consolidated and their role supported within civil society. Education, developing media literacy and teaching the use of critical judgement are all considered important counter-radicalisation tools on which families can have a significant impact alongside schools and teachers.

The idea of highlighting the 'motherly element' when claiming that women play a key role – if not *the* key – in the prevention of terrorism and in counter-terrorism initiatives seems to be privileged by actors such as think-tank Quilliam and the UK National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). In a recent survey conducted by the latter among people aged 11-25, 86% of respondents said they preferred to approach their mother for 'information about a serious, sensitive or political subject'. Bearing in mind this datum, the NPCC issued a set of recommendations, one of which emphasises the need to 'prioritise bespoke engagement with mothers'. In this light, initiatives such as the Syrian Mothers' Open Letters were launched.

Empowering women within families and communities

Empowering women within the family, giving them authority and credibility, is considered crucial for preventing radicalisation.[6] Renowned documentary-film director, Deeyah Khan, observes that educated, skilled women with their own sources of income are more resilient to the pressures of a patriarchal family and as such, can express their opinions and interact more freely within their communities. Women's empowerment, be it through legal, financial or cultural means, tends to increase their participation in activism. Khan gives the example of Morocco, where women's economic and legal power tends to be relatively high. Moreover, a social strategy was developed after the 2003 Casablanca terrorist attacks to train and certify female preachers (*mourchidares*) to work in communities, mosques and prisons. They act similarly to social workers, helping to solve everyday problems while guarding their communities against extremist ideologies.

Women as 'gatekeepers'

Women's ties within families and communities could also provide crucial information and influence that would feed into 'soft' preventive and non-violent interventions. OSCE experts suggest that women could give early warning when they see certain counter-terrorism policies and practices having a counter-productive impact on their communities. For instance, even when included in counter-terrorism measures and deemed necessary for security, violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms – such as rights to life and physical integrity, right to liberty and security, freedom of expression, freedom of association and the right of peaceful assembly, freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, and the right to the protection of private and family life – can deepen alienation and isolation. These violations are actively exploited by terrorist groups to build a victimisation discourse and recruit new followers. To counter-act this type of recruitment, an early warning from a community member could help to indicate when policies and practices of the authorities are harmful. However, this approach should not mean using women as instruments to spy on their

communities. Moreover, the links of trust between women's groups and their local communities might be hindered if the programming of such groups is thought to be serving the security interests of external actors.

Women's roles in de-radicalisation

Exit support forms part of the processes of 'de-radicalisation' (moving away from radical ideology), 'disengagement' (leaving a radical environment and violent behaviour) and 're-socialisation' (moving towards mainstream society). Exit workers help overcome a violent mind-set, but they also provide practical help with education and housing. WomEx, a two-year project in Germany with the objective of defining the impact of gender aspects in methodologies for action on de-radicalisation and hate crime rehabilitation, observes that the gender dimension has not been systematically and conceptually considered in the exit-support procedure. Nevertheless, practitioners might have intuitively applied it in certain situations, such as in team composition. Exit workers mostly act as role models, offering alternative narratives to previously held ideas. It can prove helpful to work with a person of the same gender, but in cases where this is difficult for personal reasons or causes conflicts, working with a counsellor of the opposite gender is recommended. Both men and women, therefore, are needed as exit workers. In addition, gender-role expectations and gender-related emotional processing could be included in exit support. WomEx points out that cooperation with RAN revealed many parallels between right-wing extremism in Germany and gang crime in the UK, both exposing archaic gender-role expectations. This aspect could be reflected in developing gender-sensitive exit support procedures.

Women's activism

In Europe, the first women's anti-terrorism platform, Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) was launched in 2008. The platform, which is located at the Women without Borders offices in Vienna, provides women with the tools to challenge extremist views through critical debate and to offer alternative ways to combat terrorism. Projects carried out in Indonesia and Pakistan also illustrate ways in which women are the driving forces behind the prevention of radicalisation, as well as how they are tackling the root causes and consequences of extremism.

International and EU-level strategies

The importance of working in tandem with civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to prevent and counter radicalisation has been accentuated both at international level and in EU documents over recent years.

At international level, the UN Global Counter-Terrorism strategy (last reviewed in 2014) and the annexed Plan of Action introduced a set of measures to prevent and combat terrorism and underlines the importance of working hand in hand with civil society. In its Ankara Memorandum on Good Practices for a Multi-Sectoral Approach to CVE, the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF), which supports the implementation of the UN Strategy, encourages governments to work closely with and empower civil society, making specific reference to the 'critical' role of women in local CVE efforts.

OSCE-ODIHR experts have issued a set of recommendations for governments seeking more effective ways of engaging women in these tasks within their communities. One of the suggestions is that authorities interact more with 'small women's organisations at grassroots level rather than partner with often self-proclaimed community leaders or large, well-established organisations', since, up to a certain point, grassroots movements 'have better access to vulnerable individuals'.

At EU level, one of the main documents is the revised EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism, which approaches CVE in a wide-ranging manner. In this paper, the Council of the EU resolves to 'promote equal opportunities for all' and to 'support individuals and civil society to build resilience'.

Speaking at a UN High-Level Conference on preventing violent extremism on 8 April 2016, the European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, Dimitris Avramopoulos, stressed that 'terrorism cannot be defeated with security measures alone', and highlighted the need to 'counter radicalisation and recruitment to terrorism holistically, by involving all relevant policy areas and actors of society'. Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) practitioners emphasise the role of families, including women in preventing radicalisation and offering not only support, but also valuable guidance for developing de-radicalisation strategies.

The European Parliament's November 2015 resolution on 'Prevention of radicalisation and recruitment of European citizens by terrorist organisation' acknowledges the essential role that women play in preventing radicalisation.

Main references

Edwin Bakker and Seran de Leede, 'European Female Jihadists in Syria: Exploring an Under-Researched Topic', ICCT, April 2016

OSCE Secretariat – OSCE ODIHR Expert Roundtables, 'Women and Terrorist Radicalization. Final Report', OSCE, February 2013

Krista Couture, 'A Gendered Approach To Countering Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned From Women In Peacebuilding And Conflict Prevention Applied Successfully In Bangladesh And Morocco', Brookings, July 2014

Endnotes

[1] Mia Bloom, Female suicide bombers: a global trend, *Dedalus*, vol. 136 (2007), pp. 94-102.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, 'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part' - Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon, 2015.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Harald Weilnböck, Why should deradicalisation and prevention interventions be attentive to gender issues? RAN-Derad workshop in December 2013, Berlin.

[6] Deeyah Khan, Women Are Part of the Solution to Extremism, Huffington Post, 6 October 2015.

Disclaimer and Copyright

The content of this document is the sole responsibility of the author and any opinions expressed therein do not necessarily represent the official position of the European Parliament. It is addressed to the Members and staff of the EP for their parliamentary work. Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2016.

The authors acknowledge the contribution of Sofía Lopez Piqueres to this briefing.

Photo credits: © Sondem / Fotolia.

eprs@ep.europa.eu
http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)
http://epthinktank.eu (blog)