



INSTITUTE *for*
STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

‘Till
Martyrdom
Do Us Part’
Gender and the ISIS
Phenomenon

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About this paper

This report represents the second publication in ISD's Women and Extremism (WaE) programme, launched in January 2015 to fill a large blind spot in the evolution of the global extremist threat. This report also builds upon ICSR's research into the foreign fighter phenomenon^{xviii}. Questions are now being posed as to how and why females are being recruited, what role they play within violent extremist organizations, and what tools will best work to counter this new threat. Yet very little work has been done to not only answer these questions but to build sustainable preventative measures. WaE serves to pioneer new research, develop global networks, seed local initiatives, and influence social media, in-line with work already being piloted by the ISD.

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Cover photo

The cover photo was uploaded to Twitter by one of the women within our dataset; contact the authors for additional information.

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Author's note

This report hopes to contribute to the body of research within the ever-evolving fields of counter-extremism and counterterrorism. Our aim is to provide a resource for policymakers and practitioners as well as academics and researchers concerned with countering the spread of violent extremism. This report hopes to also be of use to the general public, wanting to gain a better understanding as to why females are being radicalized into violent extremist networks and understand the strong role women may play in preventing these processes. The research hopes to differentiate itself by giving depth and understanding to the shifting nature of the threat of violent extremism, with its increasingly tech-savvy and popular appeal, with the awareness that counterterrorism and counter-extremism strategies will have to evolve with these shifts.

We would like to thank Audrey Alexander and Riam Kim-Mcleod whose contributions as researchers for this report were invaluable. We also thank all at ICSR for allowing ISD to collaborate on the female wing of its Foreign Terrorist Fighter (FTF) database, considered to be the largest database tracking Western FTF and female migrants joining ISIS. Lastly, we give gratitude and thanks to the interviews given to us by UK Mentors who are working on female cases within the space of prevention as well as de-radicalisation. Although you remain anonymous, sharing your insights, stories and experiences were invaluable to our research and understanding.

1. Introduction

Although often assumed to be passive agents, women have played significant roles in a number of contemporary terrorist organizations. Violent extremist groups across the political and ideological spectrum have utilised female forces for a range of activities including logistics, recruitment, political safeguarding, operations, suicide bombing and combat.¹ However, the recent unprecedented surge in female recruits to the terrorist organization Islamic State (ISIS) has brought this phenomenon into sharp focus. For many there remain misperceptions and misunderstandings concerning the role women play within these violent networks, often paired with engendered responses to the radicalisation of women.² By analysing how terrorist organisations choose to utilise women, we are able to better understand the decision-making processes of terrorists and the inner-workings of the organization itself.³

The number of Western foreign fighters and migrants to ISIS is estimated to be up to 4,000, with over 550 women within this figure.⁴ This unprecedented number of Western male foreign terrorist fighters is paralleled by an equally unprecedented number of women traveling to support ISIS. Questions are now being posed as to how and why females are being recruited en masse, what role they play for ISIS, and what tools will best work to counter this new threat. Yet very little work has been done to not only answer these questions but to build sustainable preventative measures. This report attempts to shed light on these questions as the second publication within

ISD's Women and Extremism (WaE) programme. The first WaE report, *Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS*, addressed some of the reasons for Western females traveling to ISIS-territory and exposed key elements of the reality for females upon arrival ISIS-controlled territory.

This report aims to expand upon previous research by giving depth to understanding *who* is being radicalized, *why* these women decide to depart for Syria and *how* we can better stop these processes. There are three primary sections to this report. The first maps the primary push and pull factors which prime women and lead them down a path of violent radicalisation to the point at which they decide they must make *hijra* (migrate) to join ISIS. These factors disprove the one-dimensional label for these women, who are often referred to simply as 'jihadi brides'. The second section of this report gives in-depth profiles of 7 English-speaking females who have successfully journeyed to join ISIS and are now resident in the so-called Islamic State. These profiles show the diversity among female recruits and expose everything from their driving motivations, worldviews and subsequent roles under ISIS control. The final section of this report looks at counter-extremism work in the space of prevention and de-radicalisation, showing how various Western governments are operating within this space and analysing where better infrastructure is needed to address the topic of gender within processes of radicalisation.

1.1 Key findings of this report:

- There is a significant amount of diversity within the profiles of women becoming radicalised and migrating to ISIS territory. It is not possible to create a broad profile of females at risk of radicalisation based on age, location, ethnicity, family relations or religious background.
- The assumption that females join ISIS primarily to become 'jihadi brides' is reductionist and above all, incorrect. Reasons for females travelling are multi-causal and include a broad range push and pull factors, different in their influential weight for each case.
- The responsibility of Western women under ISIS-controlled territory is first and foremost to be a good wife to the jihadist husband they are betrothed to and to become a mother to the next generation of jihadism. However, these women are also playing crucial roles in

propaganda dissemination and recruitment of other women through online platforms, both directly and indirectly.

- Data retrieved through social media accounts of FTF and Western female migrants primarily serves as propaganda. However, there are also insights into the complaints of daily life for females, often domestically isolated in severe conditions, and the realities of living within a war zone in a terrorist-led territory. These realities make powerful counter-narratives to the original extremist propaganda.

1.2 Key Recommendations

- There is a great need for counter-narratives and counter-extremism messaging that is targeted at females. Currently there are very few initiatives that consider the gender dynamics within the CVE and counterterrorism sectors. Targeted messaging to counter the appeal of violent extremist propaganda needs to be up-scaled.
- Increasing critical consumption skills among young people is necessary in order to create youth awareness about extremist propaganda to allow for the development of a more natural resilience towards this type of content. This needs to address both offline and online content and should be incorporated within existing Western education programmes.
- There is a need for better infrastructure and capacity building within de-radicalisation programmes that handle returnees from Syria and Iraq. There is a particular lack of infrastructure and understanding around gender dynamics within de-radicalisation that would benefit from careful analysis and development.
- This issue of adequate representation of women within the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) sectors is rapidly growing in importance, and with this, the role of these women is diversifying. This significant role must be better publicized and infrastructure developed in accordance with the involvement of women in this sector.

1.3 Methodology

The research data used for this analysis comes largely from an extensive

female migrant database run between the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR). This database has been expanding in breadth and depth since May 2014 and is considered the largest database on Western females joining ISIS. The database tracks and archives social media material on over 100 female profiles across online platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Ask.fm, Kik and blog accounts. These profiles are all deemed to be Western female migrants disseminating messages, giving a unique lens into the daily lives of foreign women living in the so-called Islamic State.

In order to grow and retain this sample of females within the database, researchers used a 'snowball' technique, where female ISIS migrants are identified among the networks of other known ISIS members. The women have been designated as ISIS migrants if they self-identify as such and appear to reside in ISIS-controlled territory. The ISD-ICSR database has also grown using evidence from photographs, online interactions with other ISIS accounts, and reports to help determine the probability that the person is geographically in Syria or Iraq. Women within this database are identified as coming from fifteen different countries, operating online primarily in English to disseminate propaganda.

Research for this report also included interviews with two former Islamist extremists now working as mentors to women convicted of extremist and/or terrorist related offences. These individuals will remain anonymous due to the sensitive nature of their work with young individuals in sensitive positions, often convicted and/or flagged by authorities for violent extremist and/or terrorist beliefs.

A note on our terminology; we refer to the Western females traveling to join ISIS as 'migrants' rather than other common terms such as 'foreign terrorist fighter', 'female foreign fighter' or 'jihadi bride'. This is because these women, once in ISIS territory, are not being used in combat and are currently prohibited from combative activities by the strict interpretations of Shariah Law.⁵ Additionally, they give a diverse range of reasons for travel that go far beyond the reductionist role of 'bride'. These women self-identify as *migrants* in ISIS-controlled territory, often referring to themselves online as *muhajirat* (female migrants) on their social media accounts.

2. Push and Pull Factors

There are a number of factors and processes that lead both men and women through a process of radicalisation with distinct patterns.⁶ Understanding these pathways is fundamental in efforts to adequately challenge the threat of violent extremism; both in targeting front-end prevention of radicalisation as well as developing infrastructures for de-radicalisation. This section analyses the overarching push factors that prime certain women to be more vulnerable to extremist propaganda. This section also looks at the primary pull factors indoctrinating these women into subscribing to ISIS' jihadist ideology, to the point that they are willing to leave their homes and make *hijra* (pilgrimage) to join the so-called Caliphate.

A mapping of push and pull factors is developed here through the analysis of hundreds of pages archived from females within the ISD-ICSR database on Western female migrants to ISIS territory. Factors have been identified based on how these women have expressed their own reasons for leaving and also expressed in their online social interactions aimed at recruiting further female migrants.⁷ Data and analysis also comes from interviews with UK mentors working within government Channel and Prevent programmes. These mentors work with females that have been arrested by security authorities and consequently been charged with violent extremist and/or terrorist-related offences. Mentors also work

with individuals ‘flagged’ by local authorities for showing signs of violent extremist beliefs.

There are a handful of government-documented cases where entire families have travelled to join ISIS. Wives and children have been documented accompanying their husbands and fathers in this journey, exemplified within the profiled cases of Tara Nettleton and Zaynab Sharrouf from Australia.⁸ While some women have travelled with families or male companions in this manner, the majority of our research focuses on women that have travelled alone or within small groups of friends.

2.1 Push Factors

The major **push factors** we have tracked that prime Western females to migrate to ISIS-controlled territory are often similar, if not the same, as their male counterparts. These include:

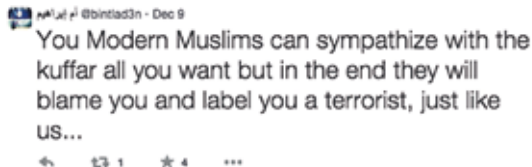
- 1 Feeling isolated socially and/or culturally, including questioning one’s identity and uncertainty of belonging within a Western culture
- 2 Feeling that the international Muslim community as a whole is being violently persecuted⁹
- 3 An anger, sadness and/or frustration over a perceived lack of international action in response to this persecution

Push Factor 1: Feeling Isolated within Western Culture

For any young individuals coming to terms with adulthood, there is an important developmental period of identity building; of defining oneself within wider society.¹⁰ However, especially for those that are second or third generation ethnic minorities living within Western society, there is an additional layer inherent within this questioning of identity, particularly during one’s teens and early twenties. Defining oneself is dependent both on questioning where a person feels they belong as well as questioning where a person feels they do not belong. Unfortunately, it remains the case that most individuals identifying as an ethnic minority group within Western society are likely to have experienced some form of verbal, if not physical, abuse on the basis of their ethnic identity.¹¹

This is also the case for Muslim females living in Western societies, and particularly the case for females who choose to wear the *hijab* or *niqab*. Women who wear a headscarf or veil have been shown to experience discriminatory comments in public more frequently than Muslim men due to their appearance, which serves as an identity marker for being Muslim.¹² While the experience of persecution alone does not turn someone into a jihadist or a supporter of violent extremism, it does serve to fuel feelings of isolation within a larger community and a sense of distance from the culture or society one lives in. This is, in essence, a form of societal priming, leaving an individual more vulnerable to extremist narratives, which use propaganda to cultivate a sense of belonging. This concept is developed further under pull factors, looking at the propaganda around 'sisterhood'.

Another socialising agent that has primed Muslim populations to feel further isolated or culturally secluded from Western societies has been the media. Media plays a critical role in shaping discourse around topics like terrorism and influences how individuals understand the issue of extremism. Similarly, media has a significant role to play in influencing the popular image of minorities and how they are viewed within a country as well as how minority members view themselves.¹³ Derogatory depictions and inaccurate, sensationalised headlines attributed to a minority group inherently lead to increased prejudices towards that group and can lead to further confusion and isolation of that minority group.¹⁴ Particularly in a post 9/11 context, wording within media connecting the idea of 'terrorism' with 'Muslims' and 'Islam' has been exacerbated. As highlighted by the following tweet from a Canadian female migrant to ISIS territory, this conflation appears to have had a significant impact on perceptions of persecution and feelings of cultural isolation for large swathes of the Muslim communities within Western countries. She leverages these sentiments to encourage 'Modern Muslims' to give up on Western society:¹⁵



Push Factor 2: Feeling the Muslim Community is Persecuted Worldwide

Like the male foreign fighters leaving for ISIS territory, female migrants talk at length about the oppression of Muslims internationally. They point to a range of international conflicts that have become perceived attacks on the ummah.¹⁶ Violent imagery and documentation online serves to reinforce these claims. These images and videos are then shared and re-shared on social media, often showing violence towards women and children or the deadly aftermath of bombings. These images are distributed with captions or subtext identifying ‘the enemy’; whether it is the Assad government, Israel, International coalition forces or ‘The West’ more generally.

As explained by one mentor who had also previously been a member of an Islamist extremist organisation, throughout the process of radicalisation a cognitive behavioural pathway starts to build itself around the extremist propaganda that manifests itself as an alternative reality. The belief solidifies that Muslims, as an international community, have been persecuted violently by ‘non-believers’ throughout history. This epic and historical struggle is told through narratives of the Ottoman Empire versus the Hapsburgs, the Bosnian genocide, Israel versus Palestine, the Assad regime’s violence and a range of other historical conflicts. Consequently, a variety of complex international conflicts across the world are presented as part of a larger theorised war against Islam by ‘non-believers’.¹⁷

ISIS central media and decentralised supporters of ISIS have cultivated a large body of propaganda that contain disturbing images showing children who have been injured or killed in violent conflict, creating strong emotionally charged narratives. The women in this study talk at length about the injustices against the Muslim community and accompany these narratives by re-sharing such images. In documenting the process of radicalisation through online rhetoric, we can also observe this ‘us versus them’ worldview becoming solidified, as exemplified below. Many individuals within this process become obsessed with watching or reading news about perceived conflicts against the international Muslim community, justifying the extremist interpretation of global events and promoting social polarization as a by-product.



Push Factor 3: Anger and Frustration Over International Inaction

The jihadist propaganda that expresses violent persecution of the global community of Muslims becomes reductionist in nature. Binary language simplifies two opposing forces. The good believers become the heroic forces fighting against the evil disbelievers (*kuffar*). For those undergoing a process of radicalisation there appears a growing anger and frustration that international entities are not seen to be defending the Muslim community under attack. This form of rhetoric is not unique to ISIS. Strands of jihadism before ISIS, such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban, have all worked to cultivate and use this anger to gain dedication and subservience from recruits who feel they are fighting for a divine and worthy cause. The 'enemy' broadens until the 'us versus them' rhetoric solidifies and dehumanises the enemy, justifying violence against this seemingly evil force.

Within the Syrian case it is clear that the initial and largely accepted label of 'enemy' has been the Assad government. Much propaganda, just like these tweets from Amira Abase, one of the 'Bethnal Green trio', demonizes Assad by presenting photographs of children ostensibly starved by the regime:



This narrative was especially influential in the early stages of the conflict when many Western citizens migrated in the name of humanitarianism. However, the lack of international intervention against the Assad government is highlighted by extremist propaganda. As illuminated in the Tweet below, this serves to construct the narrative that ‘the West’ is at least complicit in, and at worst responsible for, the suffering of innocent Muslims. The empathy that women undergoing a process of radicalization feel for the Muslim victims of violence, combined with the complicity they believe Western powers are showing, ultimately perpetuating the conflict, is a highly influential factor in their decision to leave the West and seek an alternative society. The binary way in which the world is presented further reinforces and validates this decision.



2.2 Pull Factors

The primary **pull factors** we have identified through our study that are driving Western females to migrate to the so-called Caliphate have some major similarities with the reasons behind the male foreign terrorist fighter movement. However, the narratives and propaganda defining these pull factors tend to differ greatly due to the drastic differences in roles men and women play once inside ISIS-controlled territory. Unlike the push factors, these pull factors embrace positive incentives and motivational reasonings such as:

- 1 Idealistic goals of religious duty and building a utopian ‘Caliphate state’
- 2 Belonging and sisterhood
- 3 Romanticisation of the experience

Pull Factor 1: Religious Duty and Building Utopia

Females joining the ISIS movement are not only rejecting the culture and foreign policy of the West they leave behind; they are also embracing a

new worldview, cultivated by ISIS, based on building what they are told will become a utopian society. They hope to contribute to ISIS society, governed by a strict interpretation of Shariah law. The declaration of a so-called Caliphate has been crucial in attracting these women. As mentioned, women have been openly called to join within ISIS propaganda and official speeches by al-Baghdadi. They are told they have an instrumental role to play in this new society, and that this role is based on religious duty.

Women within ISIS territory perpetuate this message through their social media accounts, defending the decision they have made and calling for other 'sisters' to join. One British ISIS widow tweets: "Seriously the muslims who are living in the west [sic] better make hijra if they are able. After [sic] Allah provided us a khilafa there's just no excuse", as another Brit simply encourages "Hijra ✓ Just do it". For these women, this 'khilafa' – the region controlled by ISIS – is seen as a safe haven for those who wish to fully embrace and protect Islam. The female migrants see hope in the mission of ISIS, feeling that the region will develop into the Islamic utopia they have been promised. They celebrate every territorial victory of ISIS and will for its expansion across the Middle East and beyond.¹⁸ On a more practical level, the women are aware that they are key actors in ensuring there is a next generation to this Caliphate. As agents of state-building these women contribute to ISIS's expansion efforts as wives and mothers.

Although the majority of women will maintain limited official roles, propaganda and recruiters have also called for women to take on roles as nurses or teachers, recognising the need for females within this space. As will be illuminated in the profiling of a qualified female doctor known as 'Shams', ISIS requires a certain number of female roles to cater to female medical and educational needs, given strict laws on gender segregation. This goes some way to explaining why women are so prominent in this unprecedented trend when compared to previous foreign fighter migration patterns during conflicts in Afghanistan, the Balkans, Somalia and Iraq.

Female migrants to ISIS territory are convinced that it was their mandatory religious duty (*fard al-ayn*) to make this voyage. Official ISIS propaganda and female migrants reiterate this point at length, calling upon others to join. Through social media women declare that joining ISIS is a women's duty as much as a man's.¹⁹ Within the radicalization process, these

women, as much as men, have a strong belief in the afterlife and fulfilling this perceived religious duty is key in securing their place in heaven.

Pull Factor 2: Sisterhood and Belonging

In addition to the heavenly rewards promised for the afterlife, women also discuss the rewards one gains within this life for making *hijra* to ISIS territory.²⁰ One of the largest pull factors for some women is the sense of belonging and sisterhood. As discussed in the discussion of push factors, many Muslim women living within Western societies undergo a natural process of questioning their identities and belonging during their teens and early adulthood. The added factor of being a part of a minority ethnicity and/or religion tends to naturally embed a sense of ‘otherness’, particularly for women wearing the hijab or niqab as a symbol of their faith.

Women within our dataset consistently speak of the camaraderie and sisterhood they experience within ISIS-controlled territory. They discuss the feeling of belonging, of unity and community. Often images are posted of groups of veiled ‘sisters’ posing together, like the one below:



This is often contrasted with discussions about the false feeling or surface-level relationships they iterate they previously held in the West. This search for meaning, sisterhood, and identity is a primary driving factor for many women to travel.

Interestingly, groups of female migrants finding sisterhood within ISIS territory are often based on nationality and language. English speakers from the UK and Australia tend to find camaraderie together while there seems to be limited interaction between female migrants from diverse nationalities. This highlights the reality of migrant communities living in a foreign territory, who are often unable to speak Arabic or the other languages of fellow international recruits.

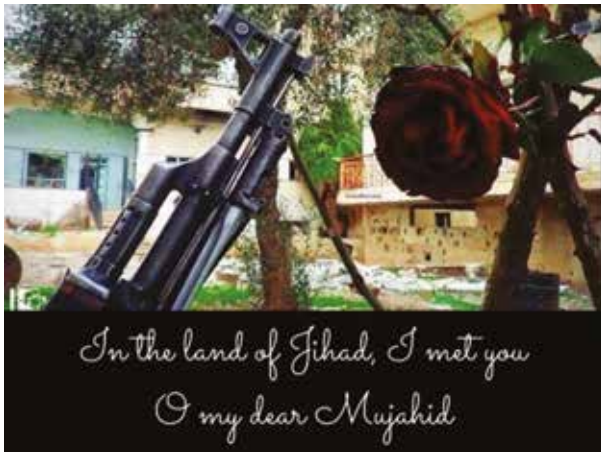
Pull Factor 3: Romanticising the Adventure of Joining ISIS

The final major pull-factor ISIS propaganda provides, attracting both male and female recruits from the West, plays heavily on romantic notions of adventure and finding romance in the form of a husband or wife. The sense of adventure in leaving home to travel to new places is influential particularly for the younger women. It is worth remembering that a large number of Western women joining ISIS are very young. The females in the ISD-ICSR database range in age but a majority are in their late teens to early twenties, with the youngest known female migrant being only 13 years old.²¹ Others equally as young have been stopped by airport security from a number of Western countries, most prevalently in the UK and France.

The other adventure is one based on the promise of meaningful romance as a prize for making the journey. Analysing the types of imagery shared on social media, such as the image below, shows the union between female migrant and jihadist to be highly glorified. Online, images of a lion and lioness are shared frequently to symbolize this union. This is symbolic of finding a brave and strong husband, but also propagandises the notion that supporting a jihadist husband and taking on the ISIS ideology is empowering role for females.

The purpose of marriage, and as such, the transition from childhood into adulthood, is judged to be a major factor in migration for the younger migrants. Unmarried women intending to travel to Syria without planning on marriage upon arrival are openly dissuaded online and encouraged to think fondly on the husbands they will have and the role they will take on.²² These women are also openly encouraged to view the death of their prospective jihadist husband as an honour and as will be demonstrated in a number of profiles, this privilege of becoming a martyr's widow is often

actively sought and hoped for. The very title of this report, which comes from the caption of an ISIS wedding photograph, posted on a particularly well-known female migrant blog, exemplifies an awareness among this cohort of the temporary nature their marriages within ISIS. Ultimately, these women believe that joining ISIS in Syria will secure their place in paradise, give them the opportunity to take part in the construction of a utopian society, while also providing those sensations of adventure, belonging and sisterhood. It is largely these three interlocking factors that provide crucial motivation for migration to Syria.



2.3 Female-specific ISIS Propaganda: Warped Feminism

These push and pull factors show the various layers of reasoning behind why females are being lured by extremist propaganda and subsequently making the decision to travel to Syria to join ISIS. These different factors highlight that this phenomenon is both complex and multi-causal. When the declaration of the so-called Caliphate was announced in 2014, ISIS developed a unique jihadist strategy that immediately recognized the importance of bringing women more actively into propaganda and recruitment efforts. Declaring a Caliphate meant that new energies had to

be given to state-building efforts.²³ A key aspect to creating statehood has been to ensure that ISIS territory, and its jihadist constituency, continues beyond this generation.

ISIS has increased its female-focused efforts, writing manifestos directly for women, directing sections of its online magazine publications *Dabiq* to the 'sisters of the Islamic State' and allowing women to have a voice within their recruitment strategy – albeit via social media.²⁴ ISIS has also strategically sent strong international messages through their actions, dictating their dedication to their female constituents. The most telling example of this was during the Jordanian hostage crisis in January 2015. In exchange for the Jordanian pilot, Moaz al-Kasasbeh, ISIS demanded for the release of an Iraqi prisoner held in Jordan, Sajida al-Rishawi. Sajida had been an al-Qaeda would-be suicide bomber who was condemned to death for her participation in deadly attack in Amman in 2005. Whereas her husband's suicide bomb had been successful, hers had failed to detonate. In broadcasting by Al-Bayan radio, transmitting to ISIS controlled territory, the group called for the release of 'our sister'.²⁵ While there are a number of other key jihadist officials that ISIS could have asked for in exchange with al-Kasasbeh, the request of a female jihadist sent a very strong message; ISIS supports and holds dear its female force.

Increasing within ISIS propaganda is this message: women are valued, not as sexual objects, but as mothers to the next generation and guardians of the ISIS ideology. However, one can observe from social media that the reality of life within ISIS controlled territory is significantly different from the utopian propaganda being offered to recruits. The pathways leading women to travel to join ISIS are varied. However, life under the so-called Caliphate is rigid and fixed, with few exceptions and severe punishments to divergence.

3. Profiles of Western Female Migrants to ISIS

The purpose of these profiles is to highlight the differentiations in backgrounds, radicalisation pathways, experiences and roles within ISIS for Western women who have migrated to join ISIS. While many of these profiled cases have been focused on through various media outlets, this research allows for a more in-depth understanding of how many seemingly normal females have become radicalised through a range of push and pull factors. Largely based on information retrieved through the ISD-ICSR database, these profiles also give an intimate lens into life inside the so-called Caliphate while also showing female activism in the form of online propaganda dissemination and recruitment both directly and indirectly.

For each profile different aspects of an individual's life are discussed in terms of their transformative processes, roles and critical junctures.

3.1 Salma and Zahra Halane: The 'Terror Twins'²⁷



Salma Halane

Zahra Halane

Background and Influences

The Halane twins, from Chorlton, Greater Manchester, were confirmed to have successfully entered Syria on the 9th of July 2014. Salma and Zahra, then 16, were reported missing from their family home on the 26th of June and are believed to have flown to Istanbul from Manchester airport and then traveled to cross the Turkey-Syria border at Akçakale.

Like many female migrants to ISIS-held territory, the identical twins had a prior 'offline' introduction to ISIS ideology. Ahmed Ibrahim Mohammed Halane, the 21-year old brother of the two twins, allegedly left the UK in 2013 to join ISIS. Ahmed had moved to the UK with his parents, of Somali descent, from Denmark when he was nine years old. Ahmed is thought to be a primary influencer in introducing the twins to ISIS' violent extremist ideology, if not at least by leading by example with his own departure.

The father of the Halane siblings is known to be a prominent reciter of the Quran within his community, running a school described by his son as 'quite intensive' in terms of Quranic studies and operating six days a week.²⁶ The community surrounding the Halane family has described them as 'very religious'. Conversely, friends of Zahra and Salma from Whalley Range High School say that the girls' conservative family background, radical Islamism and religious beliefs as a whole, were rarely mentioned in a social context. Rather, the Halane twins are described as well integrated into the school community, well liked among their peers, and highly intelligent. There has been much focus on the educational background of Zahra and Salma, with British media in particular emphasising the twins' record for academic excellence. It is reported that together they hold 28 GCSEs and that they both aspired to work in medical science.²⁷

Online

The Halane twins form a particularly vocal sub-cluster of the British female migrant contingent, indicated by their constant resilience in overcoming online censorship mechanisms by alternating usernames, changing Twitter handles and using 'shout-out' tactics to regain their follower networks quickly and efficiently.²⁸ This has allowed for their voices, like many others, to contribute persistently to the propaganda narratives perpetuated

by female migrants to IS territory, bolstered by the knowledge that their accounts have established influence. Zahra and Salma have utilised various platforms to achieve such influence, predominantly Twitter and Instagram.

Zahra Halane had established a strong presence on Twitter by September of 2014. One of the first tweets from her account exemplifies the state of her political and religious views at the beginning of her time in ISIS-territory, glorifying acts of terror. Under the *kunya* of ‘Umm Ja’far’ and the handle of ‘Jafar Britaniya’, Zahra publicly celebrates the anniversary of 9/11 just two months after her arrival in ISIS territory:²⁹



This is an early example of the hatred and contempt that Zahra actively displays towards Western society. Zahra has notoriously reveled in atrocities committed by ISIS within Syria and elsewhere. On the day of the attacks on Charlie Hebdo’s Paris offices, Zahra celebrated the event publicly by exclaiming: “Our Brothers Doing jihaad in darul kufr!!! Allahu Akbar!!!” With her employment of kinship terminology normally reserved for ISIS fighters, Zahra constructs a bond between herself and the perpetrators of the Paris attacks, thereby conflating herself as a violent extremist enraged by the actions of Charlie Hebdo and the West at large. Zahra furthers this with the declaration, “The kuffar [disbeliever] needs to understand we are the UMMAH of MOHAMMED SAW!!!!” – evoking the notion of ‘ummah consciousness’. Salma reacted similarly, taking to Twitter to exclaim, “May allah protect the mujahideen in Franceeee!!! Shooting was maad!!!”³⁰

Referenced regularly by Zahra, the concept of ‘the ummah’ or the global community of Muslims is a subtle but highly significant indication of her attitude towards the West. As discussed in the section detailing push and pull factors, this ‘ummah’ structure requires transcending traditional identity boundaries like nationality, to allow for the adoption of a meta-identity, as often proscribed by faith communities. Generally referred to

as 'the global community of Muslims', 'ummah consciousness' has been mobilised by historically influential extremist figures like Abdullah Azzam in order to rationalize and justify the call for *jihad*.³¹

In Zahra's use, the 'ummah' is strongly juxtaposed by her use of 'kuffar' – signifying the way in which she conceptualizes her 'Self' by way of distinguishing the 'Other'.³² Zahra divides her social identity on the grounds of a single condition. By pitting these two communities (Muslim and non-Muslim) against each other with such a degree of decisiveness, Zahra's language seeks to alienate and dehumanize this 'Other', justifying violence against the 'Other'. In this way, Zahra's celebration of the Paris attacks promotes an embracing of the 'ummah' ideal to create a sense of belonging and unity,

Complimenting her public vilification of the West, Zahra's online presence places emphasis on *jihad* as a religious obligation. By rejoicing in the waging of *jihad* (as defined by ISIS), Zahra also implies that those who have abstained from 'fulfilling their obligation' or those who act to prevent Western foreign fighters from making *hijra*, should be ashamed.

- Omm Bâkr #IS @AlBritaniyah** · Jan 27
Anybody who looks into the state of the Muslims today will find that their greatest misfortune is their abandonment of Jihad.....
- Omm Bâkr #IS @AlBritaniyah** · Jan 28
No difference between one who abandons jihad without excuse when it is fard `ayn, and one who eats without excuse during the day in Ramadan.
- Omm Bâkr #IS @AlBritaniyah** · Feb 2
Do you not find it disgusting how brothers back at home proper slander the mujahideens....thinking they're the righteous ones....SubhanAllah
- Omm Bâkr #IS @AlBritaniyah** · Jan 26
Jihad is the most excellent form of worship, and by means of it the Muslim can reach the highest of ranks..... Most people dont know

This narrative acts as a particularly strong recruitment tactic – evoking feelings of guilt and self-disappointment for a prospective migrant.

Marriage and Widowhood

Both of the Halane twins' online presences reveal information about their marital relationships under ISIS control. Salma in particular has been open in giving advice to prospective migrants by answering their marriage-related questions on Ask.fm. In the following example, Salma encourages getting married in ISIS territory. The reference that Salma makes to the *maqar* (female-only communal lodging for unmarried or widowed women) implies that it would be advisable to be married as quickly as possible.

Is it better to get married straight away and find someone before or stay at the maqar and then get married? What's your opinion?

Its best if you arrange someone that you want to get married ie through a muhajir sister who is married so her husband can help find you a husband hence you'll have time to know who he is etc It's better that way then staying at a maqar and waiting.

3 months ago

Both twins were married in this way, presumably within a few weeks of their arrival and they appear to have been separated at this juncture; with Salma explaining on her Ask.fm account that 'umm jafar' (Zahra) was living in Raqqah with her husband but that they managed to communicate via Kik messenger. Salma makes reference in the same answer to the Islamic principle of *sabr*, meaning 'patience' or 'endurance'. Evidently, this separation was a difficult for the twins and they are understood to have still been living in different parts of Syria when they were both widowed in December 2014. Despite the twins being married at just 16 years old, the online accounts of their relations with their husbands and their subsequent experience of 'widowhood' resonate strongly with those of the broader cohort.

Zahra Halane was married to Ali Kalantar, a nineteen year-old of Afghan descent from Coventry in the UK, who was reportedly killed in Iraq on 4 December 2014. On 6 December 2014, Zahra announced Kalantar's 'martyrdom' on her Twitter profile with much pride:



Salma expressed a very similar sentiment around a week later when her husband was killed in an airstrike (December 12th 2014).



Zahra's reference to being the 'wife of a green bird' is a common aspiration expressed by Western female migrants to IS territory. This aspiration is bound to notions of honour and a strong belief in the possibility for reunion with spouses, family members and friends in *jannah* or 'paradise'. This reference is reinforced by the twins publicly glorifying the stories of their husbands' deaths, which serves to further glamorize their status as widows. As Salma reiterates above, she feels "honoured to be chosen" – implying that is a privilege for your husband to have sacrificed his life for ISIS's gain. Much of the Halanes' discussion on social media since December has focused on the virtues of being a widow and the treatment of this cluster of women by the state.



Differences

It is reasonable to assume that the twins underwent a fairly similar radicalisation process during their final few months in the UK. However, the Halanes have demonstrated differences through their online personas. Zahra's online identity demonstrates a higher level of political engagement and a much more direct approach to recruitment strategy whereas Salma appears to be more introspective and measured. Salma's attitude is particularly well illustrated by her Ask.fm account, in which she responds to questions posed by anonymous senders. In her use of this platform, Salma appears much more personable than Zahra's detached Twitter presence, often answering enquiries into her relationship with her twin, her daily responsibilities and her experience of being married to a *jihadist* fighter.

There is reason to believe that once widowed in December, the twins were reunited geographically – with Salma moving to Raqqa from a more rural location. It is important to note that the content produced by both twins since the beginning of 2015 has become consistently and markedly more 'extreme'. Similarly, both Zahra and Salma seem to have placed more emphasis on encouraging Western women to make 'hijra' to the territory since the beginning of 2015, capitalising upon the media attention generated by their disappearance. Much of this encouragement is subtle, achieved by representing daily life in ISIS territory in a positive light and by creating a vision of a utopian society in which their values are venerated and shared.

Zahra often takes on a more direct recruitment/facilitator role – giving logistical advice to her Twitter following, for example instructing prospective migrants to delete all social media accounts prior to making the journey in order to avoid detection by security agencies, as well as giving tips like “ya akhwaat don’t pack too much” and “book the earliest tickets available”. In February of this year, Zahra published photos to Twitter purporting to show female migrants being trained in self-defence – wearing Nike Air trainers and shooting rifles at targets. Zahra describes this as a, “fun day training... with humble sisters”.

The emphasis placed upon the ‘sisters’ as a group highlights the importance of ‘sisterhood’ in luring prospective migrants towards ISIS. It is clear from their social media presences that both twins have established strong friendships with other migrants, forming communities of ISIS wives and widows, particularly in Raqqa. As discussed previously, this sisterhood concept is leveraged as a recruitment tool, communicating the notion that while a migrant may lose their family as a result of their migration, they will simultaneously gain such a support structure in Syria.



Conclusions

Throughout many months of monitoring, it is apparent that the Halane twins have taken on influential roles within the cluster of British women

who have journeyed to ISIS territory. However, Zahra and Salma occupy distinct roles within this community. While both encourage other ‘sisters’ to join them and actively revel in terrorist attacks on Western soil, Salma appears to contemplate upon the evolution of her life in Manchester to her life in the ISIS as a continuum, whereas Zahra appears to have separated these two episodes entirely – rarely making mention of personal details or referencing family. Through the (albeit murky) lens of social media, it is obvious that the Halane twins have radicalised further during their time in ISIS territory, particularly since the death of their husbands.

3.2 Tara Nettleton, Zaynab Sharrouf and Zehra Duman: The Australians



Convicted terrorist Khaled Sharrouf relocated his wife, a Muslim convert named Tara Nettleton, his daughter Zaynab (14), another daughter (believed to be 11 years old) and three young boys – to the Islamic stronghold of Raqqa from their home in South-West Sydney. In December 2013, Khaled traveled to Syria with his family via Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Khaled was well known to the Australian security authorities for drug abuse, petty theft, a history of schizophrenic behavior and radical Islamist views, as well as a prior conviction for terrorist offences in 2005. At the time of his departure from Australia, Khaled had had his

passport cancelled by the Australian government and he had been placed on multiple airport watch-lists,³³ however, he used his brother's passport to evade these extra security measures.

Khaled's wife Tara and daughter Zaynab appear to occupy a highly significant role within the sub-cluster of Australian female migrants to ISIS territory, of which there are estimated to be around 20. Many of these Australian women and girls have made the journey to Syria or Iraq with their husbands. However, there are cases in which individual females have migrated alone and unmarried, such as Zehra Duman. The Sharrouf parents reportedly became strict Muslims before marriage.³⁴ Tara gave birth to her first child at 17 and became estranged from her irreligious Australian family around this time. The eldest daughter, Zaynab, refers to her mother by her *kunya* 'Umm Zarqawi' in references on social media.³⁵

Zaynab was 13 years old when the family migrated to ISIS territory and became active online within a few months of her arrival. Her early online presence reflects the common tastes and aspirations of a teenage girl raised in the West. She speaks of 'being addicted to her iPad' and wanting a pink Lambourghini.³⁶ However, this text is interspersed with militant Islamist symbols and posts admiring the perpetrators of the September 11th attacks in New York City and Washington D.C.

Zaynab had been living with her parents and younger siblings in Raqqah for just over a year when she was reportedly married to a long-standing acquaintance of her father and a fellow fighter with ISIS named Mohammed Elomar. Mohammed Elomar is a former boxing champion, also from Sydney. Zaynab became Elomar's second wife, at just 14 years of age. Elomar's first wife, Fatima, was intercepted along with their three children in May 2014 for allegedly attempting to join her husband in Syria.³⁷ Mohammed Elomar has been remarked upon often in Australian national media, due in part to his involvement in photos uploaded to Twitter illustrating himself, Sharrouf and his sons holding decapitated heads in Raqqah.³⁸

However, Elomar is most recognized for his online discussion of what he described on Twitter as 'Yehzidi slave girls', claiming that he had 7 'for sale' at 2,500 dollars each. Elomar reportedly added, "don't worry brothers she won't disappoint you", sparking claims which were consequently validated

by four of these Yazidi women saying they were bullied, threatened, sexually abused and held captive by Elomar and the Sharrouf family. These women also describe the ‘harsh, violent existence in Raqqa’ weighing heavily on family relations and that the Sharrouf children, including Zaynab, were begging to return to Australia, a story untold on the social media accounts of the family.

Recent Twitter profiles for Zaynab highlight a significant discord with her previous ‘pink lamborghini’ aspirations. As seen below, Zaynab’s Twitter ‘bio’ once read: “Zaynab Sharrouf. From the land down under, to a Muhajirah in the land of Khilafah. Zawji [husband] Abu Hafs al australi”, indicating not only a commitment to her position as the wife of an ISIS fighter, but also a dedication to the ideological concept of ‘the Caliphate’.



Her efforts online during this period appear to be concentrated between justification of her role as a female living in ISIS territory and glorification of the ‘ISIS lifestyle’, or rather the much-publicized narrative of ‘5-star *jihad*’. Zaynab generated considerable attention with a set of photographs uploaded around 18 March 2015, which show five females, fully veiled, posing in front of a white BMW. The car has been reportedly in the possession of Khaled Sharrouf since September 2014.



Zaynab shows a distinct awareness of the atrocities committed by ISIS, particularly with reference to the capture of Yazidi Christian minorities and to her father's role in carrying out ISIS's *hudud* or punishments inflicted as a result of violating Shariah law. Zaynab has also posted photos of a young Yazidi boy who is believed to have been taken under the wing of Mohammed Elomar. Various tweets, one of which is included below, demonstrate a sense of personal gratification in a change of the ancestral religious and political affiliations of the boy pictured in order to align with ISIS ideology. However, Zaynab at times demonstrates a cognizance of how herself and her family are perceived by Western media, and perhaps a defensive attitude towards these perceptions. This is encapsulated in her publishing of a slogan that reads, "I'm not an extremist I just follow the Deen".



Whilst Zaynab was only 13 years old when her family relocated to ISIS territory from Sydney, her online presence allows rare insight into the formation and solidification of radical views in a post-migration

context. There is little tangible evidence to suggest that Zaynab held any extremist or Islamist views before her arrival in Raqqa, around December 2013, although we know she would have had exposure from her parents. However, after a year and a half in ISIS territory, Zaynab shows no signs of discontent with the decision that her parents made on her behalf. In fact, as demonstrated above, it appears that Zaynab has become heavily engaged with ISIS' violent, extreme ideology, as well as actively partaking in friendships with other ISIS wives and a marriage to an ISIS fighter.

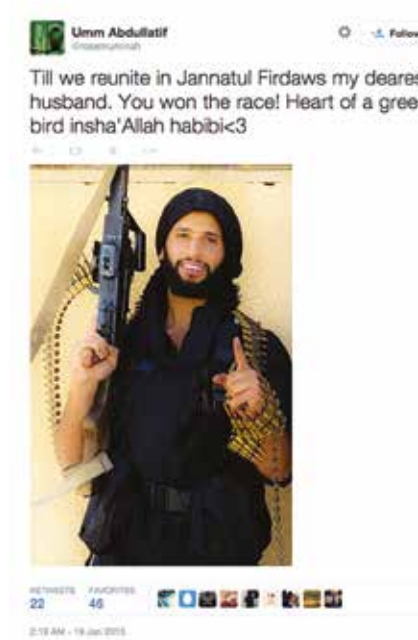
Zehra Duman

A now close friend of the Sharrouf women, Zehra Duman, is a 21 year-old woman of Turkish descent from Melbourne, Australia who announced her arrival in Syria in December 2014. She has seemingly integrated rapidly, opting for the kunyas 'Rose Muminah' and 'Umm Abdullatif'. Since establishing herself online under these monikers, Zehra has been quite open with her 'followers' about her reasons for leaving and the impact this decision has had upon her Australian family. She writes, "I have never been public with my Jihadi views" to explain the shock that her sudden departure caused her family, adding that her mother in particular "knows that she will see never me again".³⁹

The casual way in which Zehra Duman describes the relinquishing of her family and her lifestyle in the West is not uncommon amongst the community of female migrants in question. A complete dedication to the ideological notions of *jihad*, *hijra* and the obligatory nature of these concepts is most prominent when these women and girls are tackled on their decision to support a terrorist organization. As Zehra elaborates upon this point, her plans to make *hijra* were well-established and she reasons that once the *Khilafah* was declared, she could no longer wait: "I couldn't sit back 1 second. I was waiting for the day Khilafah returned". As explored during the discussion of various motivations, many of these women and girls cite the empowering narrative of helping to inaugurate the state by being a wife and a mother in explanations for their decision to migrate. Zehra Duman is no different in this respect.

A tweet originating from Mahmoud Abdullatif, a 23 year-old also from Melbourne, announced his marriage to Zehra Duman on December 11th the

same year. After just 5 weeks after their marriage he was killed. Zehra publicly acknowledged her husband's death on Twitter on January 19th with this post:



Since Mahmoud's death, much like Zahra and Salma Halane, Zehra's social media presence has focused heavily upon the subjects of marriage and widowhood in ISIS territory. Like many of the ISIS widows, she chooses to eulogize her husband through photographs, anecdotes and celebrations of his death (as shown below). Zehra also discusses Mahmoud in a more personal context on the platform Ask.fm, where anonymous users frequently pose questions like, "Do you miss your husband rahimullah [Allah have mercy upon him]?" – which is responded to in detail with, "theres not a minute I don't think of him. He was the perfect husband, alhamdulillah. Had such a beautiful heart, and character".



It is likely that Zehra, and other ISIS widows, will be expected to marry again following the traditional period of *iddah* which lasts four months and ten days. During this time a widow is instructed to avoid being in public unless entirely necessary and as Zehra counteracts on her Ask.fm page, she does not mind living alone. She explains that she is not lonely because “alhamdulillah I have my sisters whom I love for the sake of Allah always at my house”. It has also become apparent that female migrants to IS territory are acting as matchmakers for prospective migrants in the West and as Zehra writes to one anonymous sender, she would be “more than [sic] happy to” help her find a jihadist husband, then referring her to a private communication platform. Whilst this is not an example of direct recruitment, Zehra is offering her help in order to facilitate the process of an unknown individual’s *hijra*.

Zehra’s rapid embedding into this largely Australian social network of fighters and wives may account for the fervent emphasis placed her own identity as an Australian in her efforts to encourage others to make *hijra* to ‘the Caliphate’. Across multiple social media platforms, Zehra makes references to the Australian Prime Minister, to the problems Muslim women face in the West and declares that she misses “0” about her home

country For example, when asked about if she had a message for Tony Abbott, Zehra replies “let the truthful Muslims make Hijra. If you don’t, your [sic] only adding fuel to the fire. Which means, attacks on your soil”. This may be understood as one of many interactions within which Duman makes a specific connection between herself as an Australian (or the West, more broadly) and home grown, ‘lone wolf’ terrorist attacks. Much of Zehra’s negativity, expressed online, is concentrated upon an overwhelming contempt for ‘the West’. This narrative is often interspersed with references to the obligatory nature of residence within the ISIS for practicing Muslims, directly encouraging migration, as well as a strong confidence in the capabilities of ISIS as an organization.



Zehra often frames this hatred for the ‘West’ at large within the context of foreign policy, a major grievance amongst the online female migrant community. In particular, she makes reference to how being a Muslim and expressing support for countries that subscribe to efforts to combat ISIS are incompatible positions, thereby divorcing Islam from large-scale counter-terrorism efforts.



Additionally, Zehra uses her Ask.fm platform to defend and validate the atrocities committed by ISIS as a terrorist organization. One visitor

to Zehra's account suggests that the Yazidi Christian minority forced to flee their homelands in large swathes, may one day rebel to enslave the *muhajirat*. Zehra seizes this opportunity to once again reinforce her unassailable commitment to all of ISIS's policies by suggesting that one day the *muhajirat* will conversely take the user as a slave, thereby absolving ISIS of any disapproval over their treatment of the Yazidi Christians.

Her Twitter is used actively to encourage violent action against 'the West' as a community. Zehra makes specific calls for ISIS supporters living in Western countries to enact their own *jihad* by murdering civilians. These incitements are frequently specific to certain scenarios or groups of individuals, for instance, Zehra instructs her Twitter followers to, "Kill Kuffar in alleyways, stab them and poison them. Poison your teachers. Go to haram restaurants and poison the food in large quantities".

Accordingly, Zehra often speaks of her own personal desire to perform violent acts. Her mention of wishing to undertake 'istishad-operations', or suicide missions, is complimented by her apparent desire to fight on the frontlines for ISIS. In response to one user asking the permissibility of females in combat, Zehra declares, "not at the moment...but maybe one day soon, it just might happen... which I cannot wait for". Similarly, Zehra openly discusses the weapons that she supposedly possesses – "a klash, a pistol, a few knives, also a bunch of grenades", adding later in a separate answer that females only own weapons for their own "protection... obviously".

As discussed, this group of Australian female migrants is highly unique, chiefly due to the familial ties granted by the presence of the Sharroufs. This departure of Australians from a resilient radical Islamist community in Sydney form an exclusive sub-cluster of foreign terrorist fighters and wives in Raqqa. Both Zaynab and Zehra capitalize on their Australian identities to lure women to ISIS territory by using their personal experiences as a basis for comparison, by glorifying violent acts and normalizing the established marriage practices – all contributing to a highly glamorized version of the 'ISIS lifestyle'.

3.3 'Shams': The Doctor



'Stethoscope around my neck and kalash on my shoulder'

One of the most noteworthy voices to emerge from the English-speaking female migrant cohort is a woman who we refer to by her chosen username; 'Shams'. Shams has been active online since she joined ISIS in early 2014 and since this time, she has created a Facebook page, several Twitter accounts and a Tumblr account, the latter of which is predominantly used as a personal-yet-public journal to document her experiences, as well as occasionally answering questions from other users. She has more recently taken to posting her own poetry online by way of articulating her personal encounters to her followers.

Whilst there is little biographical information available from open source material about Shams', her real identity remains unknown. However, she has divulged clues that are revealing of her life before she 'made hijra'. In April 2015, Shams disclosed that she is originally from Malaysia, is 27 years old and is of both Indian and Pakistani heritage.⁴⁰ There are also various blog posts supporting the idea that she lived in the UK for an extended period. Shams appear to show a distinct awareness and sense of remorse pertaining to the implications of her decision upon her family. She wrote to one user on her Ask.fm page that she didn't speak to her parents about the matter before she made *hijra*, only informing them once she had arrived in Turkey. She explains that "as time goes by, my parents begin to understand that I will never return. They swallow the bitter-truth fact even it [sic] paralyzes their heart... may Allāh give them such heart to endure the pain that caused by me".

Shams occupies an exceptional case within this study by virtue of her occupation within ISIS as a doctor. Shams appears to have been in Syria since February 2014, after taking a flight to Turkey. In her Tumblr diary, Shams recounts her onward journey, describing crossing the border on foot with a group of strangers, including a woman in her 60s who was accompanied by her heavily pregnant daughter. She also mentions that a friend of hers made the journey before her who remained encouraging throughout her own process. This evidence of a previous, offline connection is common among the community of Western female migrants to ISIS territory.

It appears that it is during this physical journey that Shams met three women, mentioned frequently in her blog: Umm Yusuf, Umm Salah and Umm Zayd. However, Shams does not recount the conditions of her border crossing in a particularly positive manner, recalling that she was “freezing and exhausted” and “tired of walking”. She continues by explaining that having triumphantly crossed into ISIS territory and been collected by a group of fighters, she then had to spend a period of 20 days in a *makkar* (a sisters-only hostel) in Slouk, a small town in Northern Syria, before being taken to Tabqah, approximately an hour to the West of Raqqah.

Role as a Female Doctor

Shams occupies a highly unusual role for a female migrant to ISIS territory. She describes the process of taking up her role as a doctor in a lengthy blog post, beginning with her relocation to Tabqah. A female companion revealed to the local women that Shams was a qualified doctor. Upon hearing this information, the local ISIS Emir reportedly sent a female representative to offer Shams a house which could be used as a clinic, along with medical equipment. However, at this point, Shams says that she rejected this offer on the basis of limitations with her language skills, not knowing any of the local language or dialects. She explains that, “being a doctor is more than diagnosing their illness. You must tell and explain them how they got this sickness and the do and donts”.

However, Shams later accepts this offer by tailoring the deal to encompass only primary health care, which involves diagnosis and referrals to the main hospital. She writes that she was provided with basic medical equipment like broad-spectrum antibiotics, a stethoscope and a blood

pressure monitor. In this capacity, women and children visit her clinic and she undertakes medical examinations with the help of three women who help her to translate complaints from patients from Syrian Fusha into pure Arabic. She also gives check-ups to pregnant women and provides vaccinations for children.

It is important to reiterate that this case is highly unique among the community of female migrants that were monitored for this study. The vast majority occupy very traditional, domestic roles within ISIS society and are not often permitted to engage in active employment. Notwithstanding this, Shams often leverages her position as a practicing doctor within ISIS territory to reiterate Baghdadi's call for qualified people like doctors, engineers and lawyers to join, exemplified below. She also offers advice on how women can gain medical training once inside the territory; discussing the medical 'university' that has reportedly been established in Raqqah. Shams also explains how classes are taught and outlines the institution's entry requirements, even offering to teach one user, to whom she writes, "You can stay in tabqah with me. We can do homeschooling".

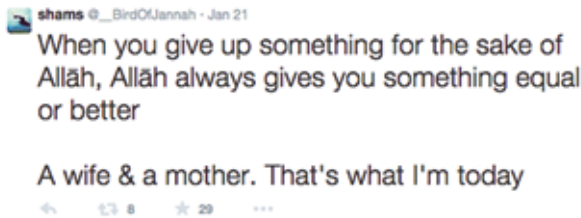


Role as a Mother

Shams has commented on her own experience with the medical care available in ISIS territory, praising the healthcare system in the context of her own pregnancy and birthing, claiming that she got "the best treatment during my ante natal, labor and post-natal...its [sic] just like any other developed country". However, in a post made less than a month after this

review, Shams admits that the conditions surrounding her son's birth were not quite as agreeable as she initially voiced. She describes feeling 'restless' while her baby was kept in natal intensive care for aspirating amniotic fluid because she was afraid that the hospital may be bombed during this time.

Shams' son was born in January 2015 and she announced his birth in a tweet that suggests she had made great sacrifices to 'make hijra' and that her son's birth absolved those difficulties. She furthers this in her poetry from April, in which she declares that being in Syria has raised her status as a woman; "from a girl I become a mother, and with that I have become stronger". Like many female migrants, Shams extols her role as the wife and mother as principally important responsibilities for both personal development and the development of the state.



Role as a Wife

Shams' blog postings give a particularly instructive case for understanding the practice and functioning of marriages in the ISIS. Shams narrates that after two months of living in Syria without a *mahram* or guardian, she eventually took the decision to be married because her life was being made too difficult by a lack of mobility. Shams suggested to her friend that she was now interested in marriage and consequently, this friend sought out an available husband through her own marital relationship, putting forth an individual for whom Shams seemed suited. Shams' friend, with the help of her husband, facilitated the meeting of these two individuals for the purpose of the traditional practice of seeing the bride's face prior to the marriage. Shams writes a short account of this event, including a description of her mixed emotions, elaborating that she "was trembling. Nervous. Scared."

This mixture of emotions seems to persist throughout this first meeting with her husband-to-be, as Shams speaks of her hesitation when posed with his request to marry that same day. She explains that during the first few days of her marriage, both her and her Moroccan husband had to download dictionary apps to be able to communicate with each other without a common language. However, Shams is adamant that this lack of communication is not important, explaining the virtues of 'interracial marriage': "when you love someone for the sake of Allāh, He will 'tie' a knot between our hearts and make the attachment strong, regardless the differences between two of you".⁴¹ Accordingly, Shams captions the below picture of a wedding "Marriage in the land of Jihad: "Till Martyrdom Do Us Part", showing a self-awareness that her marriage is likely to be cut short by premature death.



The months of Shams' diary following the wedding narrate a cycle of her husband leaving to fight in various places and returning on a period akin to military leave. In October 2014, Shams writes of one of these leave periods, describing the joy of having her husband with her for a few days and how heart breaking it is to prepare his bag once more for his departure. Shortly after, one of Shams' closest friends is widowed during the fighting in which

her own husband is involved. Shams' posts on the subject of widowhood focus heavily on her own fear of becoming a widow, though she appears to be entirely aware of the possibility, or even likelihood of this. Shortly after Abu Zubair's death, she writes,

'I know the fact that one day – my husband will be a shaheed (In sha Allāh) and I have to prepare for it. I can't ask Allāh to grant my husband a long life – for death is pre-destined. All I'm asking Him is a strong heart and mind.'

During these periods when Shams' husband is away fighting, her posts take on a very reflective tone. She discusses the emotional strain caused by the suspense of waiting to hear from her husband – normally via instant messaging through 'Whatsapp'. This sense of being left in suspense is tangible when reading the material Shams' produces for her audience, particularly in the context of friends in her proximity becoming widowed. She writes unequivocally of the panic she feels when another martyrdom is announced:

**“Nothing beats the palpitation that a
Mujahid's wife has whilst checking list
names of the Martyrs”**

– Bird Of Jannah

This anticipation becomes more prominent in Shams' posts the closer she gets to the birth of her son, while confronting the possibility that her baby may be left with no father. In November 2014, she narrates a brief conversation with her husband over Whatsapp, in which she grapples with airing these concerns. She poses many rhetorical questions during this post, for example “Should I tell him that I died a little everytime [sic] I heard the news of a shaheed? Or should I pretend to be strong?” Eventually, Shams decides to beg her husband to stay alive until the birth of their child, to which he simply responds “In sha Allāh”. This is not adequate to comfort her and she describes crying to another female migrant about his absence.

Role as a Recruiter

Unlike many other female migrants active online, Shams does not unconditionally encourage all Muslim women living in the West to make hijra to the ISIS. She is, in fact, quite particular about who should make this journey. She stresses the importance of fully evaluating one's reasons for wanting to migrate to the ISIS before making a final decision. Specifically, she urges women to consider whether they are making hijra for marriage, or because they feel it is their religious obligation. In this way, Shams essentially deconstructs the socially constructed narrative of the 'jihadi bride' and therefore poses a challenge to the assumption that prospective migrants are motivated solely by the premise of becoming married to a *jihadist* fighter. For example, Shams describes being contacted by a 'sister' who is already in contact with 'brothers in Shaam'. She reacts to this particular situation with the assertion,

“How can you get your pure intention distorted by messaging and talking about marriage to a stranger and even to marry them? Please. Do it for the sake of Allāh. Because when you come here for any other reason than Allāh, you will be disappointed in the end.”

Shams states explicitly, “don't make marrying a mujahid as your priority” and tellingly, in an advice session named '10 Reminders for anyone who wants to make Hijra', Shams begins by repeating this. She reiterates to her readers that they should undertake this decision, “Not for fame, not for nikah [marriage] and not for fun.” This warning, along with constant reminders aimed at prospective migrants to manage their expectations and have patience, may be borne from her own negative experiences. In her Tumblr blog, Shams writes of how difficult it was to force herself to stay in the territory in the month following her arrival; she writes:

“I was so ill. I had severe dehydration and the food made me sick. I was even thinking of going back, because I couldn't handle the pressure in me”.

Therefore, Shams appears to actually dissuade some prospective migrants on the grounds that they will face difficulties while living in the territory. However, like much of the negative commentary produced by

female migrants with ISIS, Shams casts these issues in a positive light. For example, in November 2014 she summarizes her first nine months in Syria in a blog post that is very revealing of her own personal development as a female migrant in Tabqah – she explains she has learnt to adapt her attitude to fit the circumstances in which she now lives, believing that she has become more tolerant, less selfish and more willing to share.

Shams continues to occupy a distinct and unique role as a woman in ISIS given her position as a practicing doctor and a resident of Tabqah. Whether as a product of this standing, or organically, Shams also represents a more moderate voice amongst this cluster. Through her online discussions of violence and the actions of ISIS, it is clear that she is more engaged theologically than politically.

3.4 Amira Abase: The Bethnal Green Girl⁴²



On Tuesday February 17th of this year, CCTV cameras at Gatwick airport captured Amira Abase, Shamima Begum and Khadiza Sultana, clearing security checks before a flight. Shortly after these photographs were taken, the three young girls (aged between 15 and 16 years old) boarded a Turkish airlines flight to Istanbul, on the first phase of their journey to join ISIS. They were similarly caught on CCTV video arriving at Bayrampasa bus station in a suburb of Istanbul, waiting to be taken to a town on the border with Syria. This collection of images of the three girls has become synonymous with the phenomenon of female migrants to ISIS territory, particularly within British consciousness.

These three girls attended the same school, Bethnal Green Academy School in Tower Hamlets, where they appear to have been hardworking students with a close-knit friendship group. A schoolmate of this trio, Sharmeena Begum is believed to have traveled to join ISIS in December 2014. There is much evidence to suggest that the nature of this friendship group allowed for rapid and collective radicalization, with the girls mutually informing and policing each other's views in a closed-community vacuum. Accordingly, five Bethnal Green girls who were reportedly close friends with the four previous migrants were banned from international travel by a judge on March 20th.

One of the trio that left in February, Amira Abase (pictured above on the left), 15 years old, was born in Ethiopia and later moved with her family to Germany, before settling in the UK and starting at Bethnal Green Academy aged 11.⁴² Amira attracted much press attention shortly following her disappearance due to the revelation that her father had been photographed at an Islamist extremist rally held in 2012, orchestrated by hate preacher Anjem Choudary, and also attended by lone wolf killer Michael Adebowale.⁴³ Abase Hussen is filmed chanting 'Allahu Akbar' [God is great] as the American flag is burnt in close proximity. This material was released in the wake of Mr Hussen's address of the Home Affairs Select Committee. His daughter is said to have been a high achiever academically, taking three GCSEs at the age of 14, but had also been "a star of the school athletics squad" and an accomplished public speaker – once debating the rights of Muslim women to take the veil.

Online

Amira has been active on various social media platforms, under the same kunya since December 2014. These accounts reveal Amira's radicalisation process prior to leaving for Syria, depicting a typically 'normal' teenage girl; frustrated with school exams, discussing London transport and besotted with Western clothing brands. Her Twitter account features photos of the crowds at Westfield shopping mall in Stratford during the annual Boxing Day sales (below).⁴⁴ A few days prior, Amira had posted photographs of Vans shoes, asking her followers for their advice on whether she should buy them and also showcased some purchases from American lingerie chain Victoria's Secret.



ummm uthman britaniya @BintAbbas · Dec 28
So this was West/End today...

Amira regularly posted about football, flaunting her love of Chelsea Football Club as seen below. Amira also spent much of her time online complaining about her schoolwork. Despite accounts of her academic excellence, she claims that “picking your A levels is the hardest thing ever” and expresses a hatred of statistics classes.



However, among this seemingly benign adolescent chatter, there is material interspersed that hints at a much more conservative side of her personality and suggests her plan to migrate to Syria. Principally, a more fundamentalist view is exemplified in her tweets concerning Islamic ruling. Amira appears to become more concerned with how certain actions are

considered by radical Islam around late December. An example can be seen below, in which Amira wonders whether nose piercing is *haram*. It is also around this time that Amira asks her followers to advise her on short Arabic courses, perhaps indicating a desire to travel to the Middle East.



In early January 2015, following a holiday period which Amira complains she spent revising for her GCSEs, she begins to express opinions on the Syrian conflict. She tweets and re-tweets images of Syrian children subjected to alarming conditions, including a photograph of a young Syrian girl reportedly crying “as she eats left over dried bread”. Following this is a similar image of a male Syrian child crying posted by Amira herself, with the caption “This always gets to me...”, accompanied by an emoticon that indicates crying. Later that same month, Amira begins to publish photographs and tweets that mention or feature Khadiza Sultana, another of the Bethnal Green trio. The pair are shown building a tower of highlighter pens during a revision lesson at school and Amira describes them as “twins”.

It is clear from Amira’s social media presence that her school friendship group was particularly tight-knit. Numerous tweets between Amira and Khadiza indicate a strong bond both on and offline. Interestingly, in mid-December Amira tweets a hadith on the subject of being in a trio of friends (seen below). This may indicate that she is cautious with regard to allowing the other two to converse in private; perhaps for fear that they might begin to question their beliefs or their collective decision.



During this period, Amira also uploads a series of photographs showing a group of female friends in a park in East London, normally accompanied by the caption “akhawaat”, meaning ‘sisters’. Approximately six days before her departure, Amira tweets asking her followers to pray for her, adding, “REALLY NEED IT. PRAY ALLAH GRANTS ME THE HIGHEST RANKS IN JANNAH”. Two days after this desperate request, Amira reposts one of these photographs, showing three girls sitting on a bench in the park with their backs to the camera – presumably her two companions in the photograph are Khadiza Sultana and Shamima Begum, those who would four days later become companions on her journey to ISIS.



3.5 Life in ISIS territory – the reality

The wealth of material archived from the social media accounts of female migrants makes it is easy to discern that the realities of life on the ground in ISIS territory do not match the romanticised propaganda espoused online. Although grievances and criticisms are rarely voiced in a direct manner,

it is obvious that some social media postings made by these women are intended to equip prospective migrants with a more realistic impression of circumstances inside the territory. The more prevalent themes of these complaints will be discussed in more depth below. These themes range from concerns over the role of females – specifically frustrations over being barred from military combat and emotional strains of becoming a widow at a young age – to physical descriptions of failing infrastructure and harsh environments.

Social media accounts depicting female migrants sharing communal home-cooked meals by candlelight, taking trips to bathe in the Euphrates River and doting over each other's newborns allows the fact that these Western migrants are now residing in an active warzone to be easily forgotten. However, there has been a shift in the equilibrium of these two divergent realities. Beginning around November 2014, there have been frequent hints of a burgeoning negative attitude from these women towards their new lifestyle.

Unlike the use of the Internet as a promotion and recruitment tool by past violent extremist organisations, ISIS have allowed for, and even relied upon, a decentralised network of messengers to carry and promote their propaganda and proliferate their world-vision. The success of this approach has introduced a fairly warped understanding of conditions on the ground in ISIS territory, which aims to further perpetuate the pull factors illuminated in the previous section. However, as a result of presumably strict policing of themselves and each other regarding the acceptability of such complaints online any self-composed evidence to suggest negativity is sharply and quickly reprimanded. As illuminated in ISD's previous report *'Becoming Mulan?'* negative connotations to tweets like '#nobodycaresaboutthewidow' or similar posts are often drowned out by overwhelmingly positive accounts and resultant propaganda.

The crucial realm in which complaints are obvious is within the context of infrastructure and the services in the immediate surroundings of these migrants. As the cohort researched and analysed for this report have all been resident in what can be broadly referred to as 'Western' countries, there are frequently comparisons drawn between the luxuries that these women will be accustomed to, and the lack of these in ISIS territory. As such, discussions

of intermittent electricity, shortages of clean or hot water, and bitter Syrian winters are common throughout these accounts. Women even describe considering climbing pine trees to gain Internet reception. Largely, these female migrants issue more general warnings such as “Don’t expect to come here and not be tested”, “Those days when everything is difficult” and the below (sabr meaning ‘patience’ or ‘endurance’):⁴⁵



Likewise, there are many instances of female migrants expressing concerns about the conditions of the services ISIS is providing. For example, one female posted that a ‘*muj*’ (fighter) had to wait for four days to receive medicine for a snake bite as it had to be sent from Istanbul. These type of complaints about healthcare often surface around the subject of pre-natal care and childbirth, particularly poignant within the case of a Western female migrant miscarrying in an ISIS hospital simply due to a lack of common language, and therefore communication, between patient and doctor.⁴⁶ These anecdotes serve to disprove the idea of the well-integrated, utopian society that is so strongly emphasised by ISIS propaganda.

It is reasonable to assume that after the initial struggle of resettlement in ISIS territory, some of the junctures at which a female migrant may reconsider their decision to make hijra would be around fundamental life milestones. Considering the perceived responsibilities and expectations of these migrants, these milestones are likely to be around the times of marriage, childbirth and being widowed. Accordingly, some women remark negatively on the support given to ISIS widows, for example one British widow comments that some ‘sisters’ are left alone in their grief, while others are bombarded with company and may feel pressured to publicly celebrate their husband’s death.

Similarly, the comments made by individuals with reference to their families and friends back in the West often surface during these times of hardship. Questions written to female migrants on Ask.fm such as, “Do u [sic] still keep in contact with your parents?” are replied to with a simple

“☺”,⁴⁷ These subtle hints are indicative of the emotional strain that living in ISIS territory puts upon an individual, especially at a young age. However, these remarks are often drowned out by positive voices, typifying the ‘decentralized but self-policed’ messaging method that ISIS has chosen.

Many women narrate accounts of experiencing coalition airstrikes. Whilst these represent concerns over the security of both themselves and their families, this material serves to further reinforce grievances that this community holds against ‘the West’. There is a distinct self-awareness attached to this topic, this can be seen in the post below, which exemplifies the conflation of security concerns with foreign policy-based grievances.⁴⁸ Another migrant describes the impact of these airstrikes by remarking, “its [sic] always heartbreaking hearing the horrified screams of children”.⁴⁹



These negative descriptions of conditions on the ground in ISIS territory serve to oppose and therefore to undermine the official narratives we see presented by ISIS, and the unofficial propaganda that transmits those messages. These concerns or complaints may also provide vital material with which to raise awareness of the realities of ISIS among ‘at risk’ or vulnerable communities.

4. Prevention and De-Radicalisation

As the profiles of Western female migrants to ISIS territory show, there is a significant amount of variation in *who* becomes susceptible to radicalisation. Foreign terrorist fighters and female migrants are coming from a great range of cultural, ethnic, familial, educational and even religious backgrounds. Due to this variation, it remains difficult, and highly controversial, to broadly label individuals or groups as being 'at risk' based on socioeconomic or ethno-religious factors before signs of radicalisation begin to show. Governments, NGOs and civil society continue to grapple with developing an infrastructure for the 'prevention' of violent extremist radicalisation.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the nature of prevention work, defining the various levels of prevention to counter radicalisation towards violent extremism. Qualifying effective prevention work, we first give an analysis of where counter-narrative work could be better developed with regards to gender, utilizing the data we have about life under ISIS rule for women. This section ends with a discussion highlighting the work certain governments are currently carrying out within this space and where prevention work could be better developed and/or facilitated.

4.1 How can we actually 'Prevent' radicalisation?

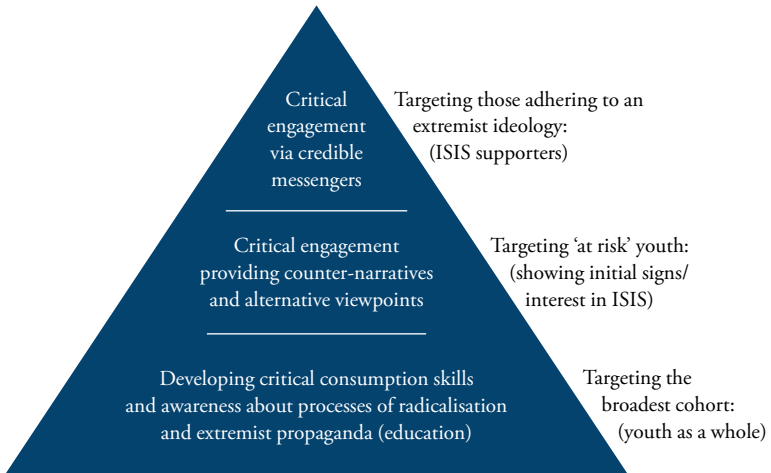
Prevention work, in its most basic sense, aims to stop processes of radicalisation that lead individuals towards violent extremism. In legal terms for most governments this concern is primarily to do with stopping individuals from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism.⁵⁰ In recent years, given the unprecedented number of foreign fighters, governments are trying to strengthen their cooperation with other sectors to better prevent radicalisation. However, the nature of prevention and countering violent extremism depends largely on how 'prevention' is viewed, how the goals of such endeavors are framed and who prevention work targets. As such, aims of prevention strategies target three different cohorts within the radicalisation process:

- 1 The broadest cohort showing no signs of being 'at risk'
- 2 Individuals showing initial signs of a violent extremist ideology
- 3 Individuals subscribing to an extremist ideology within legal limits

It should be noted that individuals showing signs of subscribing to a violent extremist ideology, breaking legal boundaries for hate speech, incitement to violence or terrorist-related offences would no longer be targeted within prevention work. Instead, they would cross the threshold out of the prevention space and be a flagged concern for de-radicalisation work, discussed in the next chapter. To better explain how the three levels of prevention work might look we have developed a pyramid diagram, highlighting who target audiences might be within each space and how prevention works differently for each.

From this diagram it is possible to see how different counter-extremism efforts can more effectively define their target audience, aims and goals. Prevention work on these three levels will also have a different set of evaluation criteria to assess whether or not the project or work stream can be considered 'successful'.

Three Levels of Prevention: Aims, Means and Target Audiences



The ultimate goal is to create a society whereby there is no appeal for violent extremist ideologies based on racial, ethnic, sexual or religious discrimination. In addressing this aim, **targeting the broadest cohort** has to be the first line of defense in prevention programs. As mentioned in interviews with a mentor who works within the UK government's Prevent strategy:

The best time to intervene is as soon as that information is in the vicinity and being looked at by a kid – I say kid because they're generally between the ages of 14 and 25 and the people that I speak with fall in that age bracket. If I had a choice as to when to intervene, it would be the day [a young person] saw something and became intrigued.

The best vehicle for reaching the youth in a uniformed, en masse and valuable way is through education. The goal of this broad spectrum prevention work is to develop *critical consumption skills* so that a young person is better equipped to assess and judge the type of content and/or information they come across, both offline and online. There already exist classroom programmes that address sensitive or controversial topics as a means of prevention. Drugs education, and sexual health education are

programmes that counter-extremism prevention programmes can learn from. We have seen how and in what way these various programmes have been deemed. Counter-extremism prevention topics have already been launched within certain Western countries. Digital Disruption and Extreme Dialogue are two such classroom-based programmes.

Digital Disruption is the name of an online counter-extremism initiative by creative agency *Bold Creative*.⁵¹ This initiative gives online resources designed to be used by educators in a classroom setting, complimented by lesson plans. Resources are designed to equip young people, typically aged 11 to 19 with the skills needed to think critically and skeptically, empowering them to tackle online extremism. Resources seek to expose a number of common propaganda techniques and teaches young people how to question sources and check facts on the Internet. Videos offer examples of political, commercial and historical instances of falsified facts and attempts to engage the user with critical thinking. Digital Disruption also attempts to educate users about the dangers of sharing certain online materials that might spread inaccurate content.

Extreme Dialogue is a new education initiative that addresses the topic of violent extremism and radicalisation more directly within a classroom setting.⁵² Launched across Canada in February 2015 and expanding into Europe (Germany, Hungary and the UK) thereafter, Extreme Dialogue has the primary aim of reducing the appeal of extremism among young people by offering a positive alternative to the increasing amounts of extremist material and propaganda online. A series of short films tell the personal stories of both former extremists and victims of extremism in order to create critical awareness of the effects of violent extremism. The programme includes interactive online educational resources, guidance for educators or youth workers and a multi-lingual website for the films and educational resources.

Beyond the broadest cohort, it is important to have an infrastructure for engagement **targeting 'at risk' individuals**, showing initial signs of and/or interest in a violent extremist ideology. It is important to recognize that individuals showing signs of initial radicalisation are most often operating within a completely legal framework. It is not illegal to hold an extremist ideology, however, there are gateways and triggers that can signal a certain

ideology justifies or glorifies violence as a means for achieving an ideological goal. Prevention work within this mid-range space requires critical engagement with strong counter-narratives and alternative viewpoints.

Counter-narratives are ‘attempts to challenge extremist and violent extremist messages, whether directly or indirectly, through a range of online and offline means’.⁵³ Counter-narratives include a broad range of activities with different aims and tactics including, but not limited to: public diplomacy, strategic communications and targeted campaigns to discredit violent extremist ideologies. Counter-narratives can also be formatted as campaigns or messaging that aims to indirectly undermine extremist messaging through offering alternative viewpoints or information. One difficulty within this mid-range prevention work has been creating a criterion for profiling who is ‘at risk’. Various local and national prevent programmes have been criticised in the past for seeming to profile audiences based on ethnic or religious backgrounds. However, with the increasing usage of social media and online platforms for communications and social interactions, practitioners have been given a new frontline for engagement.

There is great potential for strengthening and scaling up counter-narrative initiatives online. Violent extremists in their many forms have made effective use of the Internet and social media to advance their aims via online engagement, propaganda and recruitment. Despite the variance in background profiles of Western women joining ISIS, there is a common trend; online interactions and information retrieval has been elemental in facilitating their departures and in providing a platform for them to propagandize and recruit other females upon arrival. Online marketisation tools already exist for companies like Coca-Cola and Nike that allow an organization to create criteria for targeted advertising based on user preferences, cookies and interactions within certain groups and forums. The same can be done with counter-narrative initiatives online. While more data and a well-defined methodology for the scaling up of this form of critical engagement is still needed, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue is piloting research and analysis within this space. This form of engagement is also based solely on user preferences triggering signs, rather than targeted messaging based on sociopolitical or ethno-religious profiling, which is largely analogous.

Within this sphere it is important to recognize the different nature between government strategic communications, alternative narratives and counter-narratives.⁵⁴ While government has a role to play in communicating messages about what government is doing, including public awareness activities, the success of counter-narratives aimed at civil society depends heavily on three factors; 1) the messenger, 2) the message and 3) the platform the message is distributed through. These three factors need to come together in a way that conveys the right message to the right audience.

Getting these three factors right is of particular **importance targeting those adhering to an extremist ideology**. Gaining trust and building a credible message, whether through a counter-narrative or through engagement, is crucial to this process. For the more upstream engagement with those showing support for an extremist ideology or organization credible messages given by credible messengers is of the essence both offline and online. As discussed by a UK Prevent mentor working with female Islamist extremists, flagged by authorities, her own background as a former Islamist extremist has been critical in being able to engage with her cases, gain their trust and adequately deconstruct the violent extremist ideologies her cases have been radicalised into:

When I meet the girls that want to go to Syria, obsessed with joining ISIS, with a completely hateful view of the Western world – I need to say ‘I used to be like that! That was me too’. I have to try and get that street credit.

The extremist worldview and experience being offered by ISIS is highly empowering, as shown in the discussion of pull factors. This often all-encompassing narrative needs equally empowering counter-narratives. The same mentor also noted:

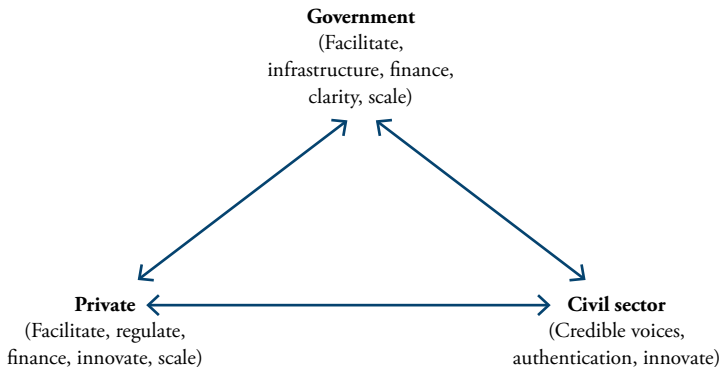
They live in this fantasy world where they think ‘we’re going take over, put a stop to American invasion of Muslim lands, stop them taking our oil, exploiting us, we’re going to stand up for ourselves, we are the army of Allah, the army of Islam. We are the best people on this earth to give people that message.

Adequately challenging that worldview often takes a detailed knowledge of the ideological and real-world factors that justified the extremist messaging in the first place.

A newer example of counter-extremism work trying to engage within the harder end of the spectrum is the ISD-led programme, **One2One**, currently in its pilot phase. The One2One initiative facilitates interventions between former extremists and young people who show extremist tendencies online, using formers to help identify those at risk of carrying out violent acts and directly reaching out to these people online; offering to engage in a constructive dialogue. Results have, thus far, been highly successful with around a 35% response rate, with no threats or aggressive responses to date.

Like most of these examples given, highlighting innovative initiatives for countering violent extremism in a preventative form, there remains an issue of scaling up. In order to scale up these efforts while maintaining authenticity, credible voices and critical engagement with the right target audience, a better infrastructure for relations between government, the private sector and civil society is needed. Each sector has a crucial role to play within these efforts, outlined in the below diagram:

Government, Private Sector and Civil Society Roles within CVE



While these roles may vary depending on the project and government infrastructure it is important to recognize where developmental growth is

possible between these working relations in order to adequately increase capacities with regards to prevention and counter-extremism work.

4.2 De-Radicalisation

The term 'de-radicalisation' has been used to imply a range of projects and agendas, often being synonymously with other terms such as 'counter-radicalisation' or disengagement. The definition adopted by the United Nations Working Group of Radicalisation and Extremism that lead to Terrorism defines de-radicalisation as 'programmes that are generally directed against individuals who have become radical with the aim of reintegrating them into society or at least dissuading them from violence.'⁵⁵ This definition allows for a comprehensive understanding of how de-radicalisation is administered; predominantly through government or civil society programmes. This also clarifies the objective of these programmes: to discourage violent extremist ideologies and to provide participants with opportunities for social inclusion.⁵⁶

There is no specific methodology for de-radicalisation work and as such, country approaches differ greatly. The broadest contention within, and between, de-radicalisation strategies is the question of whether or not the extremist ideology leading to violent extremism needs to be challenged, or if the focus should remain on social and emotional issues that serve to make an individual 'at risk'. European countries have expressed different priorities on this point. In recent years, however, some countries have adopted more holistic approaches dependent upon assessing the main push and pull factors that led individuals down a more violent extremist path. Evidence suggests that a shift away from primarily theological approaches, especially with regards to Islamist extremist radicalisation, has illuminated the importance of intervention work addressing personalised vulnerabilities.⁵⁷ Highlighted during an interview with a male intervention provider:

*"there are a number of different approaches to mentoring. Some people need the counseling more, with some it's more about the ideology. Sometimes it's just about helping someone rebuild their life."*⁵⁸

What do de-radicalisation programmes look like?

EU Case Studies

There is much to be learnt from the successes and failures of long-established far-right de-radicalisation programmes. However it is also essential to ensure that these structures are tailored to different forms of violent extremism. The intricate push and pull factors leading young women to join ISIS in combination with the terrorist organisation's highly alluring propaganda seems to require a tailored approach. As discussed at many junctures within this report, the gender-specific recruitment and appeal of ISIS is not entirely new. The existence of violent extremist organisations that target women to undertake specified roles within their structure has been occurring for decades, if not centuries.⁵⁹ However, the phenomenon of Western females taking the largely voluntary decision to migrate abroad in the name of both *jihad* and in order to build the foundations of a state is unparalleled. The newness of this issue, combined with the potential persistence for the threat this it poses to Western societies, necessitates a female-specific infrastructure within existing de-radicalisation strategy, and an accompanying literature.

European de-radicalisation strategies tend to differ from strategies outside of the West, which tend to focus more on deconstructing radical theologies leading to violent extremism. Many external factors, including funds, the philosophy of the ruling government towards extremism and country demographics contribute to shaping policy. Political efforts are consequently shaped by 'political, cultural, and legal elements unique to that country', resulting in a distinct lack of uniformity across European de-radicalisation strategy as a whole. Another reason for this variation is the prevalence country-specific strands of extremism, resulting in contrasting levels of experience with terrorist. Therefore, legislative systems between these countries often appear at odds.

Investment in, and development of, counter-terrorism strategy is often triggered by major events on the extremism spectrum. Accordingly, the largest expansion of the Prevent strategy in the UK came shortly after the bombings in central London in 2005. Further examples include the development of Denmark's and Sweden's respective national strategies in response to continued threats from home grown radical groups,

emerging from the Prophet Muhammad cartoon crisis in 2009, and the Norwegian government further developing their existing counter-terrorism infrastructure following the 2011 attacks in Utøya and Oslo.

More recently, certain European countries have been mainstreaming efforts. As highlighted by brief case studies of Germany, Denmark, Sweden and the UK, this often entails the integration of official counter-terrorism and CVE policies increases the responsibilities of public sector and 'frontline' workers – including doctors, teachers, police officers – in order to facilitate a multi-agency approach.

Germany

The first official development of Germany's prevention strategy began around 2003–2004, following the invasion of Iraq. These initial efforts were documented by a recent study from the University Sciences Politique⁶⁰ to entail mainly the distribution of informative material to education institutions and civil society groups as well as workshops and training for frontline workers on recognizing extremism. Germany later constructed a de-radicalisation policy to reflect the successes and failures of their preventative methods and to address growing concerns over homegrown Islamist extremism.

In 2010, a hotline was established for individuals that wished to exit Islamist extremist groups. However, as a result of being operated by German security services, this tool remained unsurprisingly under-used. While the development of these exit mechanisms was delegated to anti-radicalisation programmes and civil society groups, the Department of Information on Radicalization was established within the German government. The effect of the Syrian crisis on Germany has seen 500–600 individuals leave to fight in Iraq and Syria, with around 200 estimated returnees.⁶⁰ This same Department now maintains a telephone flagging system similar to the previous one, whereby the initial conversation determines path of the case, allocating cases to one of five de-radicalisation groups, spanning different geographical regions of Germany.

Two of these networks, Violent Prevention Network and Hayat, leverage their experience with de-radicalising right-wing extremists in Germany, as well as prison rehabilitation programmes, to inform their approaches to

Islamist extremism. However, lacking the credible voices of former Islamist extremists as mentors acts to undermine the credentials of the German de-radicalisation system at large.⁶⁰ To our knowledge there is also very little infrastructure around female caseworkers or mentors.

Denmark

Denmark has a long history of targeted intervention strategies. These are built around the concept of adaptability tailoring strategies on a case-by-case basis. Support from the EU in 2009 for a pilot project, spanning 3 years, allowed the Danish government to address growing concerns put forth from local authorities about nascent extremism in their communities.⁶¹ Using mentoring schemes to counsel individuals disengaging from an extremist group alongside of preventative talks to raise awareness around violent extremism allowed the Danish government to build natural resilience towards violent extremism within young people through education. Currently, mentors are selected from two of Denmark's biggest cities, Copenhagen and Aarhus, and provided with centralised training schemes in order to uniform their approaches and safety procedures.

The Danish approach has gathered much international media attention over the course of the past two years, namely by virtue of what has become known as the Aarhus model. Based around the community surrounding the Grimhojvej mosque in a suburb of Aarhus, this is a policy rooted in the concepts of social inclusion and reintegration rather than legal prosecution. Under Danish law, engaging in combat abroad is not illegal, unless fighting with an outlawed group, i.e. a terrorist organization. Similarly, the Danish government has refused to confiscate their citizen's passports on the sole basis of travel to Syria or Iraq. This flexible, and perhaps 'forgiving' approach is also applicable to returnees, who are often offered extensive support towards their efforts to reintegrate into both society and their local community, even being offered lessons on how to communicate with family and friends. Preben Bertelsen, Professor in Psychology and Behavioural Sciences at Aarhus University expressed this sentiment by explaining the programme's stance towards returnees; "we have to say: provided you have done nothing criminal, we will help you to find a way back."⁶² For

Denmark, the objective is no longer to force individuals to renounce their extremist views, but rather to encourage them to disengage from the social networks that proliferate these views and to reject the use of violence to establish their objectives.

By underpinning these issues with academic research and investigation, Danish authorities have been able to focus on sub-groups or attitudes for de-radicalisation work. For example, research on the group of young men who had left Aarhus to fight in Syria revealed that 29 of 31 were second-generation immigrants. This was illuminated as a key factor in vulnerability, buttressed by feelings of social exclusion, experiences of casual racism and experience confusion over their identities, primarily feeling torn between their inherited ethnic culture and Danish culture. These are all common push factors cited by Western foreign fighters and female migrants as motivations for travel to ISIS-controlled territory and are issues that the Aarhus model seeks to diminish, thereby safeguarding future generations against their influence.

A mentor is selected for a case on the basis of the suitability of their experience with extremism. This mentor is expected to cater for the needs of their client and particularly in the early stages of the de-radicalisation process, provide support and guidance whenever needed. A Danish mentor who has been working with the programme since 2010, says that this guidance often comes in the form of 'serious, philosophical, intellectual conversations, twice a week for two, three hours'. The Danish government requires in-depth knowledge of these violent extremist ideologies from its mentor, in order for them to effectively engage with their clients. Mentors place emphasis on making this religious and political conviction more nuanced. In theory, this encouragement of a more balanced viewpoint allows the individual to feel that their beliefs are compatible with existing as a Dane, within Danish society and with this sentiment, the process is deemed a success.

Statistically, the results of this innovative approach have been positive – with the rate of men aged 18 to 25 leaving Aarhus for Syria decreasing from 31 in 2013 to just one in 2014. However, the programme has proven unpopular with Denmark's far-right political parties, who cite its inclusive approach to individuals in the process of de-radicalising and disengaging from extremism as naïve and ultimately dangerous.

Sweden

The Swedish government has historically concentrated upon extremism in the context of external threats to Swedish domestic security. However, this changed following numerous threats made by domestic violent jihadists in response to cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed published by Swedish artist Lars Vilks.^{lx} In response to various attacks throughout 2010, the government revised their prevention and de-radicalisation approaches towards Islamist extremism. Now, Swedish security service – ‘Säpo’ – dictates that the threat posed by individuals engaging with overseas conflict, physically, mentally, or financially, is of growing concern and has been prioritized. This manifested itself in the production and funding of various initiatives that undertake extensive preventative and de-radicalisation work. Now facing the issue of a significant exodus of their citizens to ISIS territory, these organizations are attempting to strategize around how to deradicalise returnees.

One such organization, Exit Sweden, is situated within a large youth centre: Fryhuset. It was originally established to help to those who wished to ‘exit’ neo-Nazi or racist organisations and a sister programme founded in 2010 focuses on helping individuals to leave organised crime.⁶³ This organization is particularly informative for understanding the approaches of the Swedish state towards de-radicalisation. Exit was established on the premise that individuals are attracted to white supremacist groups more as a product of social and emotional conditions rather than being lured directly by the ideology. As explored in the discussions around motivations for Western females to migrate to ISIS territory, it is clear that these social conditions often provide the basis for priming an individual for potential radicalisation. A search for identity or power, looking for a sense of belonging and social exclusion are all conditions that Exit Sweden aims to tackle first, concurrently aiding the disengagement process.

The majority of Exit staff has experience with far-right extremism, giving credibility and legitimacy to their voices for the purpose of de-radicalising others. These members are complimented by a number of qualified psychotherapists, who as well as providing ‘long-term cognitive treatment’, also act to engage the families of these individuals to ensure sustainable support networks for an individual following the completion

of the Exit programme. The experiences of these staff are then relayed directly to frontline public sector workers, in order to better inform policy and practices around countering violent extremism on the ground.⁶⁴ As a consequence of this experience with de-radicalising far-right extremists, Sweden is well placed to be able to confront Islamist extremism in a similar manner, with the addition of the appropriate 'formers'.

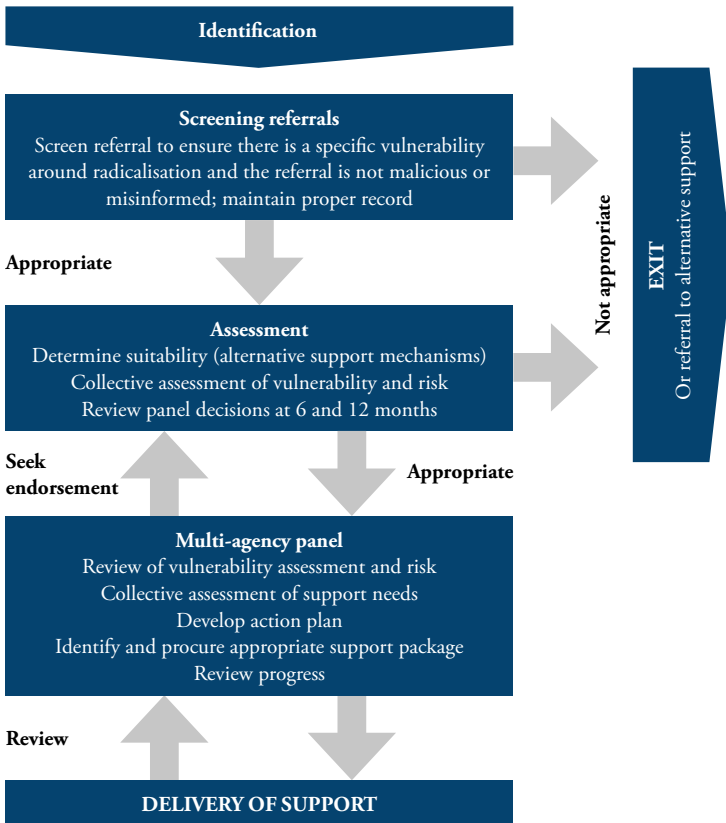
The UK

Post 9/11 attacks, the UK launched the *Contest* programme, based on the four Ps: 'prepare, pursuit, protect and prevent'. In the current context it has been estimated that 700 individuals have reportedly left the UK for Iraq and Syria in the name of fighting with ISIS with as many as 300 returnees.⁶⁴ In response to this mounting trend, the UK government elected to pass the *Counter-Terrorism and Security Bill* in February 2015, giving new life to the de-radicalisation programme known as Channel.⁶⁵

The Channel programme – seen as the sister programme to Prevent – aims to provide support to 'people who are identified as being vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism'.⁶⁶ Channel was rolled out across England and Wales in 2012 with the remit, as expressed by the government, of adopting a multi-agency approach to the identification, assessment and support stages of the de-radicalisation process. Channel intends to be adaptable across several strands of extremism and deals with individuals on a tailored-as-appropriate basis.

Below is a model of the Channel process. As seen, the process begins with the identification or referral of an individual as 'at risk' of radicalisation, to their local police. This referral can come from community members, social services, school authorities, or family members. The government outlines potential indicators of vulnerability as, 'peer pressure, influence from other people or via the internet, bullying, crime against them or their involvement in crime, anti social behaviour, family tensions, race/ hate crime, lack of self esteem or identity and personal or political grievances'.

A visual representation of the Channel process⁶⁶



A panel collectively decides the suitability of the case and, depending on the details of the case, can result in referrals to: a local authority representative, social workers, the NHS, an educational institution, youth offending services, Directors of children’s and adult’s services, Chairs of Local Safeguarding Children and Adult Boards, local authority safeguarding managers, local authority Troubles Families teams, the Home Office Immigration department, Border Force, Housing, Prisons and Probation representatives. The requirement of these panel members in reference to concrete knowledge on the issue of radicalisation is the completion of an

eLearning course, accompanied by a 1.5-hour lecture known as WRAP (Workshop to Raise Awareness of Prevent).

In order to assess the cases referred, Channel has a vulnerability framework that spans three areas: 1) engagement with a group or ideology, 2) the intent to cause harm and 3) the capability to cause harm. These areas are broken down further into indicators of violent radicalisation based on 22 cognitive behavioural factors, such as a history of violence, expressing attitudes that justify harm on the basis of an ideology and attempts to recruit others to the same mentality. One of the mentors interviewed by us provided a similarly broad description of these indicators: "Sometimes it's a personality disorder...de-humanising the 'Other', attitudes which justify violence, dangerous worldview". These are all emotional conditions that are measured by the Channel panel and used to determine the nature, length and depth of intervention. As such, Channel is shown to be adaptable to the experience of the individual as intervention is decided on a case-by-case basis.

Like many European de-radicalisation initiatives, the activities offered by Channel are highly varied, ranging from direct, one-on-one mentorship to housing support, anger management and family support. The mentorship scheme is administered by the Home Office, who are tasked with approving certain individuals as appropriate for providing ideological or theological intervention. These individuals are often former extremists and their suitability is based on their experience within a group or an ideology. Mentors are intended to leverage this knowledge, along with the experience of their own de-radicalisation process, to guide their client toward a more nuanced, and thereby less radical, perspective on social issues. This guidance is given with a view toward eventual successful reintegration.

Similar to approaches taken toward mentorship in Sweden and Denmark, the UK Channel process 'matches' cases with certain individuals who would be deemed most influential.

Despite the UK leading the way in many respects for its de-radicalisation work within the Channel programme, there remain areas for development. There remain a limited number of Home Office-approved intervention providers in the UK; around 65 in total with only 3 or 4 active female-specific de-radicalisation mentors. Both interviewees also identified a lack of consistency of workload throughout given to mentors, revealing that some

mentors take on up to 10 cases at any given time, while others are referred little to no cases due to the localized referral process based on preferences. In the context of female mentorship, this disproportion is evermore stark. Particularly in cases flagged for Islamist extremist views, it is unlikely that a female will feel as open conversing with a male who is unfamiliar to them on personal issues, particularly in Islamist extremist cases where the flagged individual might believe inter-gender conversation is forbidden under strict Shariah law. Therefore, the current female Channel intervention providers are either underused or overstretched, exemplifying the magnitude of this rapidly growing trend.

Correspondingly, there is a lack of coherence or guidelines for the process involved in becoming a mentor. As the intervention provider positions are voluntary and unpublicized, individuals must seek out Channel or be recommended by a current mentor if they wish to be involved in the programme. There remains a lack of formal recognition for what makes an individual suitable for providing intervention. According to the mentors interviewed experience of being engaged with an extremist ideology, an understanding of the consequences of this engagement on worldviews, and approachability, were seen as key to fostering the type of interpersonal relationship necessary for meaningful de-radicalisation work.⁶⁷ The absence of formal psychological training, and the lack of opportunities offered to gain such skills was also identified by mentors. They added that often intervention providers will enroll themselves on specialist training courses and self-fund this development.

4.3 Recommendations

For any mentorship programme putting practitioners in a space for dealing with 'vulnerable' or 'at risk' individuals requires centralised security procedures, in order to effectively mitigate a multitude of potential difficulties and risks. Emotional risks include the potential for conscious or subconscious transference; an individual in the process of disengaging from a consuming extremist ideology may transfer feelings of belonging, feelings of kingship and attachment onto a mentor, resulting in overreliance and an inability to become independent from the scheme. Coupled with

the potential for experiencing secondary post-traumatic stress disorder on behalf of the mentor assembles a strong case for the introduction of clinical supervision of mentors, which is a standard requirement in professions that undertake one-to-one counseling. This type of supervision is usually led by a qualified psychologist and formatted as a group session, encouraging participants to share their experience of mentoring, learn from each other and receive professional advice.

Mitigating risks involved in mentorship should also include centralized procedures around meetings with clients. These procedures must be uniformed across national strategies and clearly communicated to intervention providers to ensure the safety of all parties.

De-radicalisation programmes also require the development of infrastructure to facilitate the transition from flagged individuals, to reintegrated citizen, to potential mentor. In particular, the female mentor we interviewed identified that her clients, once deemed to have been successful in deradicalising and disengaging from an extremist ideology, are often denied the platform to speak out about their experiences. This can leave individuals feeling quieted and frustrated and even vulnerable to 'backsliding'. Creating a platform and voice for those turning away from violent extremist networks simultaneously presents a resolution to the issue of lacking credible voices creating counter-narratives. Reflecting upon her own 'exiting' experience the female mentor noted: "when I came out I had no one there to speak to and no one to guide me...I wanted to speak out and I wanted to say it's against Islam and this is not what we stand for".⁶⁸ Unfortunately, most Western prevention and de-radicalisation programmes remain particularly ill-equipped to deal with the unprecedented appeal of ISIS for female audiences.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

As this report has hoped to show, Western female recruits to ISIS are breaking previous stereotypes about who is 'at risk' of radicalization into jihadism and violent extremist networks. Female recruits are increasingly younger, some coming from socio-economically comfortable backgrounds and often having adequate, if not notably above-average, educational results and qualifications. While some females had strong familial influences, others had families that were completely astonished to learn that their daughters held extremist beliefs.

From our research and data we have come to four primary conclusions with four accompanying key recommendations for policy-makers, practitioners and non-governmental organisations.

5.1 Key Conclusions

5.1.1 There is significant diversity within the profiles of women radicalised and migrating to ISIS territory. Profiles show a high level of nuance and complexity, making it impossible to create a broad profile of females at risk of radicalisation based on age, location, ethnicity, family relations or religious background.

5.1.2 Viewing Western female migrants to ISIS primarily as jihadi brides is incorrect and obstructive. Reasons for females traveling are

multi-causal including a range push and pull factors, different in their influential weight for each case.

5.1.3 Despite the many reasons for joining, the primary role of Western women under ISIS-controlled territory is to be the wife of the jihadist husband they are betrothed to and to become a mother to the next generation of jihadism. However, these women are also playing crucial roles in propaganda dissemination and recruitment of more women online, both directly and indirectly.

5.1.4 The reality of life under ISIS for Western women is a power counter-narrative that needs to be highlighted in order to deter further females from joining. Data retrieved through social media accounts of FTF and Western female migrants primarily serves as propaganda. However, we also find insights into the complaints of daily life for females, often domestically isolated in severe conditions, and hints of the reality of living within a war zone in a terrorist-led territory. These realities make powerful counter-narratives to the extremist propaganda.

5.2 Key Recommendations

5.2.1 There is a great need for developing counter-narratives that are aimed at females and cater to gender nuances. Currently there are very few initiatives that consider the gender dynamics in CVE and counterterrorism sectors. Targeted messaging to counter the appeal of violent extremist propaganda needs to be up-scaled.

5.2.2 Increasing critical consumption skills among young people is necessary in order to develop a more natural resilience towards violent extremist content. It is crucial to develop youth awareness about extremist propaganda both offline and online. Educational content addressing this should be incorporated within Western education programmes. While we are seeing programmes in pilot stages certain countries, efforts need to be scaled up, and need to include metrics for evaluation and guidance for teachers and practitioners.

5.2.3 There is a need for better infrastructure and capacity building within de-radicalisation programmes handling returnees from Syria and Iraq. There is a particular lack of infrastructure and understanding around gender dynamics within de-radicalisation that would benefit from further development. There are very few female mentors within prevention and de-radicalisation programmes, resulting in a lack of credible female voices to reach young women in a meaningful and directed way.

5.2.4 As a conclusion from our research we have found that the role of women within the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) sectors is of increasing importance. Women play crucial roles in countering the extremist narrative, reaching a wider audience of those ‘at risk’ of radicalization and bringing much-needed innovation into the CVE sector.

Partnerships between government, private sectors and civil society will be of the utmost importance in adequately challenging the threat posed by violent extremist ideologies, such as ISIS’. Only within these partnerships will the voice of the majority be able to effectively challenge the voice of the extremist minority that has monopolized certain discourses. With regards to the gender question, one of the main problems has been that women continue to be viewed as victims of terrorism and extremism, therefore remaining constrained by stereotypes. As such, success in countering violent extremism will be greatly facilitated by women becoming empowered as actors in roles they define and by terms they set.

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