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THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN DAESH

DISCUSSION PAPER

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1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

During the 30th Plenary Meeting of the CODEXTER, a debate was held with the Gender Equality Rapporteur, Ms Tanja KIKEREKOVA (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), on the roles of women in Daesh, in which it was decided to prepare a background document for the 31st Plenary Meeting of the CODEXTER on 16-17 November 2016.

The present discussion paper constitutes a preliminary study on the topic and could form the basis for future research. The members of the CODEXTER are invited to examine this paper and decide on what follow-up should be given by the Committee.

2. INTRODUCTION

Since the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (hereinafter "Daesh") declared itself an "Islamic caliphate" on 29 June 2014 and emerged as a real threat to the international community, the organisation's oppressing and degrading treatment of women has been amply reported on.

Daesh's distorted and biased interpretation of the Islamic law (*Sharia*) has brought about harsh restrictions on women's dress, movement, public life and rights. Besides, the enslavement, systematic rape and the extensive sex trade of Yazidi women¹ has hit the news in several occasions and has drawn international condemnation.

Despite the abuse of women's human rights, Daesh has had an unexampled success in recruiting both local and foreign women. Back in December 2015, it was estimated that 600 Western women had left reasonably gender-equitable states to join Daesh, and the number of non-Western women is believed to be much higher (some 700 women from Tunisia alone have reportedly travelled to Syria to join jihadist groups).² Women compose approximately 12% of all Western recruits.³ Figures concerning French women are especially worrying: as many as 220 have left to join the caliphate, accounting for 35% of the French jihadists in Daesh.⁴

The most recent data available shows that women are represented in Daesh in unprecedented numbers in comparison to other similar terrorist groups: 1 in 7 Western militants in Syria and Iraq are women, with an average age of 22. Around 7% of Western female militants have been killed.⁵

In this context, it is deemed necessary to identify and analyse the roles of women in Daesh (in all their forms) as well as to determine the different motivations for women to join Daesh. By better understanding both key and underlying factors of women's engagement in Daesh, the international community may be able to challenge its persistent appeal.

3. A DISCUSSION OVERLY GENDERED

The idea that young women, who have grown up in comparatively progressive and gender-equitable societies, decide to pursue paths and praise virtues which keep women subjugated in a domestic and secondary role, is certainly puzzling. The reasons why a young woman who lives in a

democratic country would commit herself to a life of childbearing for a Daesh fighter, whom she has not previously known, seem to be unfathomable. However, taking ideological and religious issues into account, and when understood from within the jihadist values and principles, it makes sense. To the ideologically-driven Daesh supporter (either women or men), this lifestyle actually represents a manifestation of personal empowerment, worship and participation.

It appears that many policymakers and researchers consider those women who travel to Daesh-controlled territory to be naïve, irrational, deluded, love-struck and confused. Western commentators often use the term “jihadi brides”, which emphasises sexual motivations and, perhaps unwittingly, plays down the role of female recruits to that of sex objects for male members of Daesh. Further, some counterterrorism experts regard (almost exclusively) women’s participation as the result of deception by online recruiters making use of female-targeted propaganda. This assumption treats women as peripheral actors and reinforces the idea that those women joining or, in their own words, “making *hijra* (migration) to” Daesh are not fully aware of what they are doing. Nevertheless, social media data, testimonies and evidence gathered by various intelligence agencies suggest otherwise.

In fact, the discussion on the radicalisation of women is overly gendered and often predicated on misconceptions, with a few exceptions.⁶ Evidence shows that, when it comes to joining Daesh and other violent religious-driven extremist groups, Western female recruits are drawn by the same factors as men: alienation, inequality, marriage, adventure, and belief in the cause.⁷ In this case, the motivations for radicalism are exclusively gendered because women view their participation in Daesh as activists in gender-specific and conservative roles.

4. THE APPEAL OF DAESH TO WOMEN: PUSH AND PULL FACTORS

It is of fundamental importance to understand the pathways that lead Western Muslims (both women and men) through a process of radicalisation in order to effectively challenge the threat of violent extremism to our democracies. It is for this reason that this section will provide a summary of the major push and pull factors⁸ indoctrinating women into Daesh’s jihadist ideology.⁹

Data from social media accounts of Western women evinces that *muhajirat* (female migrants¹⁰) travel to join Daesh for mostly the same reasons as male recruits, as said above.¹¹ Besides, not only do women comprehend and agree on Daesh’s deeply conservative and gendered regulation and brutal violence, but they also embrace and publicise them and take a prominent role in online recruiting and propaganda. Western women joining Daesh are mainly pulled by an ideological commitment and pushed by perceived violence, anti-Muslim discrimination and isolation in their home countries, which they all state as the primary motivating factors in Western women’s *hijra*.

Hence, the *muhajirat* cannot be reduced to “jihadi brides” seeking relationships with male members of Daesh for sexual motivations or reward: they are truly committed actors accomplishing a goal they view as fundamental to their faith. Strict religious beliefs, coupled with a perceived anti-Muslim discrimination and feelings of isolation¹², may spur radicalisation of Western Muslim women feeling disenfranchised. In this context of alienation, they are more prone to take refuge in online communities with other disillusioned and like-minded people, creating a breeding ground for radicalisation through mutual acceptance on Daesh platforms.¹³

4.1. PUSH FACTORS

There is a wide range of overarching push factors that causes certain women to be more vulnerable to extremist propaganda. These factors are often similar, if not the same, as their male counterparts. These include:

1. Feeling lonely and isolated, including confusion over one's identity and uncertainty of belonging within Western culture;
2. Believing that the Muslim community as a whole is being violently persecuted globally;
3. Anger at the failure to address the perceived grievances and persecution of Muslims, as well as frustration over a perceived lack of international action in response to this persecution.

A number of Muslim women living in Western societies, and particularly those who choose to wear the *hijab* or *niqab*, have experienced some form of verbal and physical abuse in public due to the more visible marker of their Muslim identity.¹⁴ Indeed, having experienced discrimination and anti-Muslim hatred does not turn a woman into a jihadist or a violent extremist, but such negative experiences definitely can fuel feelings of isolation within a larger Western community and leave an individual more vulnerable to extremist Islamist narratives which emphasise and cultivate the sense of belonging within a Muslim community.

Women who have joined Daesh (or those who are willing to do so) often refer to the alleged oppression of Muslims throughout the world as a reason. Using propaganda as a powerful tool to spread the idea that there are deliberate attempts to degrade and destroy the *Ummah*¹⁵, Daesh makes use of violent imagery on social media to reinforce the perception of violent persecution, often portraying disturbing images of violence towards women and children along with emotionally charged narratives. Consequently, several international conflicts across the world are misrepresented by Daesh and other terrorist groups with a similar ideological basis as a war against Islam by the *kuffar* (non-believers).¹⁶

The perceived lack of international intervention against the Syrian government has been constantly stressed and highlighted by extremist Islamist propaganda as evidence that international actors are not defending the Muslim community. Women undergoing a process of radicalisation often empathise with Muslim victims of violence and this, coupled with a perceived complicity of Western powers in perpetuating conflicts against the *Ummah*, constitute key factors in their decision to leave the West and seek an alternative society.

4.2. PULL FACTORS

The primary pull factors indoctrinating Western women into subscribing to Daesh's jihadist ideology and make *hijra* have some overlap with their male counterparts. Nevertheless, unlike the push factors, the narratives around the pull factors tend to differ to a greater extent due to the marked differences in the roles men and women play once inside Daesh-held territory. The major pull factors are:

1. Utopian ideals of building the caliphate state and fulfilling religious duty;
2. Becoming part of a community and a sisterhood;

3. Romanticised portrayal of the experience (both in travelling to Syria and in forming a union with a husband who is a member of Daesh);
4. Daesh as a solution to the perceived grievances that women suffer in Western countries.¹⁷

Daesh propaganda directly targets women, who are told they have an instrumental role to play in this new (utopian) society established by the so-called “caliphate”.¹⁸ Women are aware that they are the key to ensuring there is a next generation to this “caliphate”, contributing to Daesh’s state-building as mothers, nurses/doctors or teachers. Beyond the desire to be part of this idealised caliphate, the *muhajirat* are also convinced that it is their mandatory religious duty (*fard al-‘ayn*) to make this voyage and join the “caliphate”, which will secure their place in heaven.

Women are not only enticed by the heavenly rewards promised, but also by the rewards within this life, one of them being the sense of belonging and sisterhood. Women in Daesh repeatedly write on the social media about the camaraderie and sisterhood within Daesh-controlled territory. Besides, they often contrast it with the shallow relationships they perceive that they held in Western societies. As indicated above, this search for a Muslim community, sisterhood and identity is a primary driving factor for many women to join Daesh.

Another pull factor that Daesh cleverly highlights in its propaganda is the sense of adventure and the romanticised notion of finding a spouse. It definitely attracts both Western male and female recruits. Certainly, the sense of adventure in leaving home to go to the new “caliphate” as well as the promise of a meaningful romance as a prize for making the *hijra* encourage some young women to join Daesh.¹⁹

In short, these women believe that this migration will help secure their place in heaven and take part in building a utopian society for this generation and the next, while also giving them a sense of belonging and sisterhood on Earth.²⁰ These three interlocking factors, along with the fact that these women view their migration and religious duty as empowering, provide crucial motivation for making *hijra* to Daesh-controlled territory.

These push and pull factors explained above are not exhaustive. There are multiple factors (both complex and often multi-casual) that contribute to an individual’s radicalisation, of which propaganda can play an important part. Thus, further in-depth research into key narratives used by Daesh can shine an important light on the motivations behind a woman or man that decides to make *hijra*, join Daesh and engage in jihad.

5. THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN DAESH

Since the establishment of its self-proclaimed “caliphate” in Iraq and Syria back in 2014, Daesh has followed a unique and novel strategy by recognising the importance of women in state-building matters and bringing them more actively into propaganda and recruitment efforts.

Daesh’s strong propaganda apparatus along with the extensive and decentralised use of social media by its supporters have provided an unprecedented insight into the daily lives of those living within Daesh-controlled territory, including women. Despite Daesh’s strict enforcement of Sharia law and being subjected to a greatly gendered social structure, women are playing crucial roles.

The roles of women in Daesh can be divided into three main categories: necessary agents of state-building, recruiters and potential militant women.

5.1. NECESSARY AGENTS OF STATE-BUILDING

First and foremost, women's task in Daesh is to give birth to as many children as possible as quickly as possible. Some also work as teachers, doctors or nurses, and others perform logistical tasks for Daesh. The roles of women within this category make an active contribution to keeping the terrorist organisation running.²¹

5.1.1. ROLE AS A WIFE AND MOTHER

Life within Daesh-controlled territory for women is predominantly domestic. Women are constantly told that they can directly contribute to Daesh through motherhood and spousal support. Daesh propaganda portrays women as empowered managers of their households, whose efforts are rewarded by the respect and the affection paid to them by their husbands.²² Most women fill their day with domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of children, if there is offspring.

Moreover, this domestic role is repeatedly glorified and seen as a spiritually righteous role. As declared in the *Manifesto on Muslim Women*, written by the Al-Khansaa Brigade (a female morality policing unit in Daesh):

«[W]oman was created to populate the Earth just as man was. But, as God wanted it to be, she was made from Adam and for Adam. Beyond this, her creator ruled that there was no responsibility greater for her than that of being a wife to her husband. [...] The greatness of her position, the purpose of her existence is the Divine duty of motherhood.»²³

In addition, these women are openly encouraged to view the death of their prospective Daesh husband as an honour; the privilege of becoming a martyr's widow is often actively sought and hoped for.²⁴

Daesh expects women to obey their husbands, cater for children and educate them in line with its ideology. Women must raise their sons as Daesh fighters, while daughters are expected to marry Daesh fighters and to follow in their mother's footsteps in having a large family for the very same purpose.

However, given these inherent roles for women in Daesh, life for unmarried women can be too difficult because of the lack of mobility without a husband or a *mahram* (a male escort).²⁵ Unmarried women and widows, and any children they have, are required to live in a *maqqaar* (women's house)²⁶ and they can only leave the house once a week. Many single women and widows marry (or remarry) a Daesh member as quickly as possible so as to avoid ending up in a *maqqaar*.²⁷

5.1.2. ROLE AS TEACHERS, DOCTORS AND NURSES

The cases of women falling under this category are not frequent among the community of *muhajirat*.²⁸ As previously stated, the vast majority occupy very traditional and domestic roles and are not often permitted to engage in active employment. Nevertheless, given the fact that life in

Daesh is conducted under strict interpretation of Sharia law, some roles can only be performed by women to other women. Thus, for instance, women can only be treated by female doctors and nurses.

5.1.3. THE ALL-FEMALE BRIGADES

The most active role a woman can play in Daesh is as a member of the Al-Khansaa or the Umm al-Rayan brigades, the all-female religious police or enforcement units formed in early 2014 to enforce *hisbah* (that is, to ensure that Sharia law is followed) among other women as well as to guard checkpoints and search for men who attempt to sneak past by disguising themselves as women. Daesh has set standards and preconditions for Sunni females to be eligible for membership, such as being unmarried and aged between 18 and 25 years old.

The Al-Khansaa Brigade, dubbed Daesh's "morality police", is tasked with cracking down on women who fail to abide by strict brand of Sharia law implemented by Daesh, including that women be fully covered in public and be chaperoned by a *mahram*. As they are also expected to admonish the local population, those women wishing to join this force are required to speak Arabic. If a woman is arrested by the brigade and subsequently convicted, it is another woman who inflicts her punishment. Western women are known to have flogged women found guilty of breaching the strict moral code of Daesh.

The Umm al-Rayan Brigade was created with the purpose of exposing males who disguise in women's clothing to avoid detention when stopping at Daesh checkpoints.²⁹ The women of Umm al-Rayan can stop anyone dressed in *hijab*, *niqab* or *burqa* (according to Islamic custom, men cannot physically touch women on the street).

5.2. RECRUITERS

A second crucial role for a woman in Daesh-held territory is that of recruiting other women (often relatives or friends) to come and join her in Syria. In this regard, producing and disseminating Daesh propaganda is a core task for many women.

Women who decide to engage online tend to represent the extremist side of Daesh and often celebrate the violence imposed by the self-proclaimed "caliphate".³⁰ These women send out threats to the *kuffar* (disbelievers) and enemies, and call for supporters to carry out violent attacks abroad if they are unable to make *hijra* and join Daesh abroad.

While women show in the social media a strong desire and willingness to fight, they nevertheless remain limited by the interpretation of Sharia law they support. Hence, beyond the primary domestic role, their secondary activity is to spread Daesh propaganda and guide new female recruits to Syria and Iraq, providing information, support and encouragement to make the journey.

The actual and great risk to international peace and security which these women pose is their potential to inspire many more women and men to join Daesh. Blogs and forums give practical advice on how to overcome the objections posed by family, what clothes to bring, where to attempt a crossing into Daesh-held territory and what to expect on arrival.

Daesh's propaganda is of particular concern with respect to young girls. Some consider the risk that Daesh's online recruitment tactics poses to young Western girls as a form of *grooming*.³¹

Nevertheless, Daesh's decentralised propaganda apparatus, as well as the large quantity of posts and materials shared by the *muhajirat* on the social media, have evinced that the realities of life on the ground in Daesh-held territory do not match the romanticised online propaganda. Although criticisms are rarely voiced in a direct manner, it is worth noting that some social media postings are intended to equip prospective migrants with a more realistic impression of life in Daesh.³² These themes range from concerns over the role of women (mostly frustrations over being barred from military combat) to physical descriptions of failing infrastructure and harsh environments.

5.3. POTENTIAL MILITANT ROLE

For the time being, *muhajirat* are not allowed to participate as foreign terrorist fighters, although they are trained in the use of weapons. As set out in the Al-Khansaa Brigade's manifesto, women may not fight unless it has been ruled by a *fatwa* that they must fight and engage in jihad because the situation of the *Ummah* has become desperate, «as the women of Iraq and Chechnya did, with great sadness».³³ This is reiterated in a document released by the Zura Foundation (a Daesh media outlet created in 2014), which does not yet allow for women to carry out martyrdom operations.³⁴

Despite not being involved in fighting, women have an active role in encouraging terrorist attacks in Western countries. In fact, some *muhajirat* are directly inciting such attacks through their social media accounts. Women are contributing significantly to spreading Daesh's ideology and encouraging Western Muslim men and women to perpetrate acts of violence in their home countries.³⁵

However, recent events suggest an emerging engagement of women in terrorist attacks. These are the cases of the all-female Daesh terror cell behind a failed terrorist attack near Paris's Notre Dame Cathedral,³⁶ the women being trained for combat³⁷ and suicide bombing attacks in Libya³⁸ and the suicide attacks in Nigeria's border areas orchestrated by Boko Haram.³⁹

Historically, jihadist wives and widows have mobilised and taken arms when their male counterparts have diminished in force (e.g. the Chechen female suicide bombers, known as "black widows"). Hence, it is possible to suggest that, as the conflict drags on, the death of male fighters could be a potential trigger which will propel the women in Daesh into changing roles. In that case, they may either wish to strike at the near enemies (notably in Syria and Iraq) or return home to strike at States in the West.

Additionally, the threat posed by "sleeping agents" among the returnees must be thoroughly assessed.⁴⁰ It is still uncertain exactly how serious a terrorist threat returning women may pose, once unimpeded by Sharia law, which prohibits their violent engagement whilst in Daesh-controlled territory.

6. LOCAL WOMEN'S LIFE UNDER DAESH RULE

The stringent rule imposed on the civilian population under Daesh's control has dramatically increased disparity levels between men and women to hitherto unimaginable levels. Daesh is

undertaking a systematic and flagrant attempt to abolish the very notion of women's rights. As a result, women living under Daesh-held territories are forced to adhere to strict rules about conduct, dress and relationships, and could be subject to torture if they don't keep to the rules.

Furthermore, like other Sunni jihadist groups, Daesh considers the Shia Muslim sect heretical and has made its followers the main target of its attacks in Syria and Iraq. Additionally, the Yazidis and other ethnic minority communities have been subject to terrible atrocities at the hands of male Daesh members.

6.1. LOCAL WOMEN

In comparison with data on Western female recruits or Yazidi women and girls, significantly less information has been gathered about local women who were already living in the now Daesh-controlled territories in Syria and Iraq. Probably, it could be due to the fact that pundits and researchers are primarily focused on understanding why Western women are lured by Daesh's ideology and on denouncing the atrocities committed by Daesh on the Yazidi.

For Syrian and Iraqi women, Daesh imposes harsh restrictions on their rights, freedom of movement and dress code, in line with Daesh's severe and particular interpretation of Sharia law, which is upheld through the Al-Khansaa Brigade. Surveillance, coercion, fear and punishment are used to inhibit any dissent. Besides, discrimination on the basis of gender is used to implement rigid social norms.

Local women under Daesh-controlled territories don't have other choice but to comply with the new rules imposed. Jail time, floggings, stonings, torture, executions and/or fines are among the punishments for transgressions of Daesh dictates. Women are confined to their houses, excised from public life. They rarely venture out for fear of being reprimanded by Daesh religious police (either by the Al-Khansaa Brigade or male *hisbah* enforcers), even for the slightest transgression, such as carrying a brightly coloured handbag.⁴¹

As regards the dress code, all women are forced to completely cover their bodies from head to toe. Daesh has imposed cruel punishments on those who don't adhere to their idea of Islamic dress code. All clothing has to be black, without decoration and loose. Women's faces have to be covered with a veil and their hands encased in gloves.⁴² Even when working as nurses, women are forced to have their eyes veiled.⁴³

Women are not allowed to move outside their houses unless accompanied by a male guardian or *mahram*, as previously stated. Daesh regulations also dictate with whom they may socialise: women and girls are not permitted to be in the company of men outside of their immediate family.⁴⁴ Some women have reported that, after Daesh arrived to their cities, they would only leave their houses once a month, or in some cases less frequently.⁴⁵

Moreover, women and girls face restrictions on health care and education because of restraints imposed by Daesh. For instance, several women have been forced to give birth at home for lack of female nurses to tend to them, since male doctors are not allowed to treat women.⁴⁶ In addition, it has been reported that Daesh has forced girls out of schools in certain areas of its controlled territory.⁴⁷

Hundreds of Muslim women and girls have been coerced into marrying Daesh fighters under the pretence that such marriages represent a reward, rather than a punishment. As a result, early marriage among the local population is increasing, as families elect to marry their daughters early in order to avoid a marriage into Daesh.⁴⁸

Fear under Daesh rule is pervasive and causes stress, fear and anxiety to the population,⁴⁹ especially women, who rejoice and reclaim their lives once the territory they are living in is liberated from Daesh control.⁵⁰ For non-Muslim women, Daesh rule means persecution and no legal protection at best.⁵¹ For Yazidi women, it means enslavement and mass rape. Ultimately, for all women under Daesh rule, sexual violence is a major risk.⁵²

6.2. SEX SLAVES

In addition to their legitimate wives, male Daesh members are allowed to own *sabiyya* (female slaves), with whom they can (under Daesh's interpretation Sharia law) have sexual relations.⁵³ Aware of the fact that this might be an obstacle for the recruitment of women, Daesh describes this practice as the ultimate humiliation of non-Muslims and essentially a good deed, as it provides the slaves with the possibility to become Muslims. With this rationale, Daesh seeks to give female recruits a feeling of superiority.

Special mention should be made of the thousands of Yazidi women and girls abducted since mid-2014, who are victims of a systematic rape.⁵⁴ Many women described being forcibly converted to Islam, kept in sexual slavery, bought and sold as chattels in slave markets, and passed among Daesh members. In cities liberated from Daesh, locals reported that no Yazidi women and girls were left behind, since they are very valuable for Daesh (sometimes earning thousands of dollars each when sold off to other men or released back to their families for steep ransom payments).⁵⁵ Kurdish Regional Government officials estimate that Daesh members in Syria and Iraq continue to hold about 1,800 abducted Yazidi women and girls.⁵⁶

However, contrary to Daesh's interpretation of Sharia law and its expressed opinions on female sexual slaves, defectors' testimonies indicate that it is not only Yazidi women who are preyed upon and subjected to sexual slavery (or other forms of sexual exploitation and abuse), but also the Sunni and Shia wives of defeated enemy soldiers from the Iraqi army, the Free Syrian Army and from the Syrian regime forces.⁵⁷

Daesh itself has confirmed that sexual slavery was acceptable regarding female captives, to whom Daesh refers as "slaves", "spoils of war" or "that which your right hand possesses".⁵⁸ Furthermore, a document released in October 2014 establishes prices for the sale of captive women and children (between €40 and €230) and stipulates that only foreign fighters from Turkey, Syria and the Gulf states are permitted to buy more than three slaves.⁵⁹ However, as per a United Nations report, some Yazidi women and girls were sold for between \$200 and \$1,500 depending on their marital status, age, number of children, and beauty.⁶⁰

Sex slavery, though, does not only occur within Daesh-controlled territories in Syria and Iraq: as Daesh militias expand in Libya, they are rewarding their members by letting them exploit the current exodus of African migrants bound for Europe. There is evidence that Daesh fighters have abducted hundreds of refugees and migrants as well as enslaved, raped, sold or exchanged captive women. Apparently, Daesh turns refugee and migrant women into sex slaves using them as human currency to attract and reward fighters in Libya.⁶¹

6.3. CHILDREN

Since the proclamation of the “caliphate”, many families with children have made *hijra* to the area that Daesh controls. Besides, most women travelling abroad to join Daesh have become pregnant once they have arrived in Syria or Iraq. For children growing up in Daesh-held territories, death and destruction become part of everyday life, along with the indoctrination into Daesh ideology.⁶²

Specific gender-based roles are instilled in children from an early age. Boys as young as six are recruited into *Ashbal al-Khilafah* (the “Cubs of Lions of the Caliphate”), often lured in with bribes of money and weapons, and are shipped off to camps where they get ideological and military training.⁶³

On the other hand, young girls are given a domestic education and are taught how best to support their future husband, bringing up their children with Daesh ideology, maintaining their houses and providing for the needs of their families. Like for adult women, Daesh has very specific rules for girls: they have to be fully veiled in public from the age of nine, remain hidden, and never leave the house (except in exceptional circumstances and accompanied by a *mahram*). It is considered legitimate for a girl to be married at the age of nine, or at the latest by 16 or 17.

Finally, it is worth noting that children are playing an increasingly prominent role in Daesh’s propaganda. Several videos and pictures released and shared online show young boys executing prisoners by shooting or beheading them. This form of propaganda, in the end, is part of a Daesh’s strategy to gain attention through shocking images which has been widely reported in mainstream media.

7. GENDER-BASED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Daesh is carrying out mass victimisation against civilians on the basis of gender, religion and ethnicity. As previously pointed out, sexual violence continues to be used as a tactic of terrorism to increase the power, revenue and recruitment base of Daesh, as well as to tear the social fabric of targeted communities. The offer of wives and sex slaves has been a strategic pull factor for the recruitment of men, inducing both local youths and foreign terrorist fighters to join Daesh.

For Daesh, the capture and enslavement of *kafirah* (female unbelievers) are seen as an inevitable consequence of its conquest of new territory, as conveyed in the ninth issue of Daesh’s online magazine *Dabiq*.⁶⁴ Moreover, Daesh released a pamphlet in late 2014 with 27 tips for Daesh members on taking, punishing and trading in female captives and slaves. The terrorist group clarifies its position on this topic by stating that «*it is permissible to have sexual intercourse with a female captive*» even if the captive «*hasn’t reached puberty*» (which constitutes child sexual abuse); also, «*it is permissible to beat*» as well as «*to buy, sell, or give as a gift female captives and slaves*».⁶⁵

Daesh has instituted a pattern of sexual violence, slavery, abduction and human trafficking targeted at women and girls belonging to religious and ethnic minorities. Among these crimes, the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation is a key financial flow to Daesh. Apart from

public auctions, it has been reported that Daesh is using communication platforms (i.e. private messaging applications such as Telegram) to secretly communicate by encrypted messaging and sell women and girls through an online bidding process.⁶⁶

Those women who oppose and reject being enslaved for sexual abuse are inflicted severe punishment. Some local activists and eyewitnesses have given detailed accounts of heinous public executions of Yazidi women that refused to have sex with Daesh members, such as the 19 Yazidi girls placed in iron cages and burned to death last summer in Mosul (Iraq).⁶⁷

Many Yazidi women and girls have reported that they were forced to take birth control, in the form of pills and injections, by their owners.⁶⁸ Under Daesh's own interpretation of Sharia law, a man must ensure that the woman he enslaves is free of child before having intercourse with her (and, in the same vein, the owner can't sell her if she is pregnant); therefore, to keep the sex trade running, Daesh members have aggressively pushed birth control on their victims so that they can continue the abuse unabated while the women are passed among them. The methodical use of birth control by Daesh explains the low percentages of pregnancy among enslaved rape victims.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, Daesh rape victims who became pregnant during their captivity and have managed to escape (or have been rescued) lack access to safe and legal abortion in Iraq, Syria and neighbouring countries, and are forced to either give birth to the children of their slavers or undergo life-threatening illegal abortions.⁷⁰

It has also been reported that Daesh members have forcibly married women living in Daesh-controlled territories. Syrian and Iraqi families avoid marrying their daughters with Daesh members by arranging early marriages among the local population, as said before. However, distressing testimonies from victims as well as relatives and activists have detailed that Daesh male members demand women and girls in marriage in circumstances where it would be dangerous for the woman or her family to refuse.⁷¹ Those who refuse risk being killed: in March 2015, at least nine Shia women belonging to the Turkmen minority were executed for refusing to marry Daesh members who had killed their husbands.⁷²

Finally, it should also be noted the brutal executions and attacks by Daesh members against LGBTI persons. On 15 December 2014, Daesh released a penal code detailing the punishment for various illegal acts, including homosexuality: «*Sodomy: Death for the person committing the act, as well as for the one receiving it*». ⁷³ To glorify and promote its systemic persecution of gays, ISIS has released numerous videos, photos, and other propaganda showcasing public executions. One of the most common punishments is to throw individuals off buildings; if a victim does not die after being hurled off, the townspeople (including children) stone him to death.⁷⁴

8. CONCLUSIONS

The act of *hijra* and the religious, ideological and political motivations for Western recruits suggest that women and men are pushed and pulled similarly by isolationism, violence and a religious obligation of physically migrating to Daesh-held territories. Thus, treating women making *hijra* to Daesh as irrational, sex-driven, tricked and naïve is an obvious misunderstanding of the radicalisation, recruitment and mobilisation process and at the same time leads to an

underestimation of jihadi women as potential terrorist threats domestically in Europe and/or abroad.

There is a significant diversity within the profiles of women radicalised and migrating to Daesh-controlled territory. That said, most of the women joining Daesh fully understand the group's objectives and methods, and positively embrace them. Viewing Western women joining Daesh as "jihadi brides" is therefore incorrect, simplistic and essentially obstructive to preventing their radicalisation. Gendered misconceptions must be left behind: male and female recruits are drawn by overlapping factors and, moreover, women's motivations for radicalisation are uniquely gendered because the *muhajirat* view their roles in Daesh as militants in gender-specific and conservative ways.

Despite the several causes and drivers for radicalisation and the wide range of push and pull factors that lead women to make *hijra* to Daesh, the primary role of Western women is to be the wife of a member of Daesh and become the mother of the next generation of Daesh fighters. At the same time, it must be stressed that many of these women are also playing crucial roles in propaganda dissemination and recruitment on behalf of Daesh.

Women and girls joining, or wishing to join, Daesh must be taken seriously as social and political actors. In general, they have a deep understanding of Daesh and its ideology, they are willing to take extreme action to support this cause, and they are motivated, at least in part, by narratives of perceived hate, abuse, and rejection of Muslims by the West. Taking all these factors into account when developing counter-narratives aimed at women and girls will constitute an important step forward in stemming the flow of female recruits to Daesh.

On the other hand, local women and girls who were already living in the now Daesh-held territories in Syria and Iraq, deprived of rights, have no other choice but to comply (willingly or not) with Daesh's strict, slanted and restrictive interpretation of Sharia law. Moreover, sexual violence against local women and girls is being used as a tactic of terrorism by Daesh, especially targeting non-Muslim minorities such as the Yazidi.

In this last regard, and on a broader scale, it is worth noting as a final remark that Daesh is inflicting terror on the local civilian population through a systematic imposition of restrictions on basic rights and freedoms and through the widespread commission of international humanitarian law violations and war crimes, including sentencing and executions without due process, killing, rape, sexual violence, forced pregnancy, torture, mutilation, cruel treatment, the use and recruitment of children, and outrages upon personal dignity.

Endnotes

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- ² HUCKERBY, J.: "Why Women Join ISIS", *Time*, 7 December 2015. Available at <http://time.com/4138377/women-in-isis/>
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- ⁵ BERGEN, P. et STERMAN, D. et SIMS, A. et FORD, A.: *ISIS in the West: The Western Militant Flow to Syria and Iraq*, New America, March 2016, pages 3-5.
- ⁶ As a matter of example, see RAFIQ, H. et MALIK, N.: *Caliphettes: Women and the Appeal of Islamic State*, Quilliam Foundation, November 2015. Available at <https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/caliphettes-women-and-the-appeal-of-is.pdf>
- ⁷ HUCKERBY, J.: "Why Women Join ISIS", *Time*, 7 December 2015.
- ⁸ "Push factors" are circumstances or experiences that make individuals to be at risk of radicalisation, while "pull factors" are propaganda, relations or experiences that lead individuals to join Daesh.
- ⁹ For a detailed explanation of the major push and pull factors, refer to: SALTMAN, E. M. et SMITH, M.: *Till Martyrdom Do Us Part – Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, May 2015, pages 8-17.
- ¹⁰ Sing. *muhajira* / *muhajirah* (female migrant); pl. *muhajirat* (female migrants).
- ¹¹ LOKEN, M. et ZELENZ, A.: "Explaining Extremism: Western Women in Daesh" (Working paper), The University of Washington, April 2016. Available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2769604>
- ¹² The political implication of anti-Islamic rhetoric and policies may contribute to feelings of isolation among Muslim people. For instance, countries like France, which enforced anti-veiling bans that target Muslim women and illegalise their displays of religious devotion, makes Western Muslim women feel isolated, unsafe and discriminated against.
- ¹³ LOKEN, M. et ZELENZ, A.: "Explaining Extremism: Western Women in Daesh", op. cit., page 9.
- ¹⁴ As a matter of example, see <http://tellmamauk.org/>
- ¹⁵ *Ummah* is short for *ummat al-Islamiyah*, that is, the Islamic Community. It is commonly used to mean the collective community of Islamic peoples.
- ¹⁶ Extremist narratives are reductionist in nature and posit the existence of two opposed groups: the good believers and the disbelievers (*kuffar*).
- ¹⁷ These key pull factors have also been identified as the Daesh's four promises (piety, participation, empowerment and deliverance, respectively). For a detailed explanation, refer to: RAFIQ, H. et MALIK, N.: *Caliphettes: Women and the Appeal of Islamic State*, op. cit.
- ¹⁸ Women within Daesh perpetuate this message through their social media accounts, reasserting their decision and commitment as well as calling for other "sisters" to join.
- ¹⁹ It is worth noting that Western women joining Daesh are often very young, ranging primarily from late teens to early twenties. The youngest known *muhajira* was only 13 years old. See: "Schoolgirl jihadis: the female Islamists leaving home to join Isis fighters", *The Guardian*, 29 September 2014. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/schoolgirl-jihadis-female-islamists-leaving-home-join-isis-iraq-syria>
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- ²⁴ SALTMAN, E. M. et SMITH, M.: *Till Martyrdom Do Us Part – Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon*, op. cit., pages 16-17.
- ²⁵ SALTMAN, E. M. et SMITH, M.: *Till Martyrdom Do Us Part – Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon*, op. cit., page 39.
- ²⁶ Conditions in *maqkar* are particularly bad: they are cramped and dirty, and often there is not enough to eat.
- ²⁷ General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), "Life with ISIS: the Myth Unravelling", op. cit., page 10.
- ²⁸ SALTMAN, E. M. et SMITH, M.: *Till Martyrdom Do Us Part – Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon*, op. cit., pages 37-38.
- ²⁹ Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium, "Umm al-Rayan", TRAC Report Summary, 2014. Available at <http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/umm-al-ryan>
- ³⁰ Several Twitter, Tumblr and other social media accounts run by women in Daesh have repeatedly shared violent and explicit videos (such as beheadings and stoning of adulterers) and glorified these acts.
- ³¹ "This is a form of Grooming: Jihadi brides heading to Syria" (video), Sara Khan on the UK's Channel 4 News. Available at <http://www.wewillinspire.com/this-is-a-form-of-grooming-jihadi-brides-heading-to-syria/>
- ³² As a matter of example, see SALTMAN, E. M. et SMITH, M.: *Till Martyrdom Do Us Part – Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon*, op. cit., pages 36-43.
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