



Why Do Western Women Join Daesh?

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13 July 2016

Research from social media accounts suggests that Western women who travel to join Daesh do so for largely the same reasons as male recruits – the ideological pull of extremist Islam. But this radicalization does not happen in a vacuum.

Since Daesh (ISIS) emerged in 2014 as a meaningful threat, policymakers have lambasted the organization's treatment of women. The group's dogmatic enforcement of its interpretation of 'Islamic' law has created harsh restrictions on women's dress, movement, and public life, and the horrific enslavement and [extensive sex trade](#) of Yazidi women has drawn international condemnation. Despite this violence, Daesh has been surprisingly successful in recruiting both local and foreign women. Nearly [600 women from Western countries](#) have left reasonably gender equitable states to join Daesh in Syria and Iraq. Women compose approximately 12 percent of all Western recruits, and [French intelligence officials](#) estimate that 35 percent of French Daesh fighters are female. What explains this unprecedented flow of foreign female recruits? Why are middle-class, educated, Western women voluntarily joining Daesh?

Explaining recruitment

Western women in Daesh pose an uncomfortable tension for feminist and international relations scholarship: they pursue paths and laud virtues which keep women subjugated and they do so from comparatively progressive and gender-equitable societies. Unable to reconcile Daesh's patriarchal, religious, and political ideology with Western women's desire to participate, researchers assume that female recruits are irrational, deluded, [love-struck](#), and naïve.

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Western commentators infatuated with the idea of ‘jihadi brides’ emphasize sexual motivations and reduce female recruits to sex objects for male insurgents. Intelligence officials in Australia, Britain, Malaysia, and Tunisia accuse women of performing a “sexual jihad,” migrating to perform sexual favors for Daesh fighters. Counterterrorism experts and [government officials](#) almost exclusively view women’s participation as the result of [deception](#) by online recruiters. This explanation treats female participants as peripheral actors and assumes that no woman would willingly join Daesh if she fully understood the organization’s true nature.

Nevertheless, [data from the social media accounts](#) of Western women who have moved to Iraq and Syria to join Daesh suggests that women travel to join for largely the same reasons as male recruits. Western women are pulled by an ideological commitment to Daesh’s brand of extremist Islam and pushed by violence and isolation in their home countries. However, while their motivations may track with male fighters, female recruits are using social media to articulate explicitly gendered spaces for themselves within the organization. Daesh’s radical beliefs are tied closely to a rare and fundamentalist interpretation of the Islamic faith that calls for believers to make *hijra* (migration) to the Muslim world. Western women’s mobilization in Daesh results from religious commitment to a certain form of piety and the radical and physical move that it embodies. For women, the *hijra* mandate intertwines general requirements of faith with a gendered call to support the caliphate from infancy as its mothers, reproducers, and historical couriers. [Much scholarship](#) and Western commentary on women in Islamist movements emphasize that this participation is patently not feminist. However, Western women in Daesh feel agentive, valued, and essential in their supportive roles. [Evidence](#) suggests that marrying fighters, witnessing their

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martyrdom, bearing children, and educating others about Daesh are roles enthusiastically embraced by female recruits. These women view their contributions as political actions that are vital to the organization's survival.

But Western women do not become radicalized to these ideas in a vacuum. Instead, they are often pushed towards Daesh propaganda by feelings of isolation and anti-Muslim violence in their home countries. Although many claims about Muslim radicalization highlight the ease of finding likeminded communities, many women actually have difficulty identifying Daesh sympathizers in Western states. Many recruits believe Western Muslims are not properly pious and that there is a lack of opportunity to follow a deeply fundamentalist strain of Islam in Western countries. Women further feel a particularly gendered form of oppression linked directly to wearing *hijab* or *niqab* and openly practicing their faith in the West. They [report](#) feeling isolated and discriminated against in their home countries because of their public displays of Islamic piety. Many believe that non-Muslim society 'contaminates' women with sexualized expectations and public feminism. Reclamation of modesty is a key concern for female recruits, and many express feelings of safety and belonging after moving to Daesh-controlled territory where veiling is strictly enforced.

Muslim women in the West also face uniquely gendered forms of violence. Civilian violence often aims to forcibly remove women's headscarves or threatens their reproductive capabilities. In 2015, a London woman was [convicted](#) after calling two women 'ISIS bitches,' accusing them of having 'bombs up their skirts,' and threatening to kick one, who was 34 weeks pregnant, in the uterus. Legislatively, countries like France enforce anti-veiling bans that target Muslim women and illegalize their displays of religious

devotion. Western women in Daesh reference this violence on social media and contend that their home states make them feel alone, unsafe, and discriminated against. It is in this isolation that they seek out online and non-contiguous communities, creating a breeding ground for radicalization through acceptance on Daesh platforms.

Gender and counterterrorism

Recognizing both the ideological pull of Daesh and the isolating and violent push of anti-Muslim sentiment in the West has key political and social implications. First, we believe that by victimizing and infantilizing these women, Western policy makers are overlooking vital political actors sustaining Daesh and spreading Islamic extremism. Second, these accounts force us to reevaluate the central role of anti-Muslim discrimination in radicalizing Westerners. Therefore, we advocate for political and social change – we must consider these women real political actors and we must work to shift the social attitudes that isolate them from their Western communities in the first place.

Many policy makers view women who travel to Daesh controlled territory as naïve or confused. This perceived deception leads legal actors to treat female recruits as peripheral. While Western states are preemptively stripping citizenship from male foreign fighters and imposing heavy sentences on online supporters, judges and legislators are often taking a more sympathetic approach to women. When Shannon Conley, a 19-year old woman from Colorado, was convicted for conspiracy to support Daesh, [her attorneys stressed](#) that she is a ‘wonderful person,’ who had been misled by falsities about the Islamic State. During trial, the prosecutor labeled her ‘pathologically naïve.’ Even though the judge ruled she was not mentally ill, he also noted that she was ‘a bit of a mess...not a terrorist.’ This type of treatment reinforces the

idea that these women are not fully aware of what they are doing, despite the fact that social media data suggests otherwise.

In a second case, the Anti-Terror Chief of London's Metropolitan Police [offered immunity](#) to Amira Abase, Shamima Begum, and Kadiza Sultana, three young women who left for Syria in February 2015. He noted that the police have no evidence that these women are responsible for terrorist offenses despite joining the organization. This marks the first time the police have offered immunity from prosecution to a returnee from Daesh and is a stark divergence from increasingly harsh punishments for male recruits from Western countries. An immunity deal suggests that policy makers and legal counselors think of these women as less dangerous domestically than their male counterparts. However, if we view these women as real Daesh sympathizers, motivated by a deep ideological commitment and purposefully acting on political goals, it is necessary to reevaluate this approach. This is not to say that women are never victims of manipulation or deception, or to say that they should be convicted and sentenced in every case. Rather, this critique begs Western policy makers to more equally consider the agency, choices, and political efficacy of these actors.

In addition to these political implications, our analysis emphasizes the importance of anti-Muslim sentiment in alienation. Openly considering the ways in which stigma, overt discrimination, and sexual harassment of Muslim women are connected to Daesh recruitment should be a central part of counterterrorism strategies. U.S. president Barack Obama [recently acknowledged](#) that responding to Daesh attacks by stirring anti-Muslim fears was 'doing the terrorists' work for them.' Despite the fact that [policy makers and counterterrorism experts agree](#) there is 'no place for bigotry in effective

counterterrorism,' levels of Islamophobia and violence against Western Muslims – particularly women – continues to rise. Such treatment creates a space of isolation, alienation, and resentment. Therefore, broader social acceptance of Muslim women in the West may foster a sense of inclusion and alleviate the need to seek community abroad or with terrorist organizations.

Moving forward

This argument is certainly not exhaustive. There are complex motivations behind the movement of Western women to Iraq and Syria, and our work only begins to explore this phenomenon. Nevertheless, even an initial exploration of social media data shows that these women must be taken seriously as social and political actors. They appear to have a deep understanding of Daesh and its ideology, they are willing to take extreme action to support this cause, and they are motivated in part by perceived hate, abuse, and rejection within their home communities. Taking these factors seriously will be an important step in stemming the flow of female recruits to Daesh and counterterrorism policy more broadly. Future research must incorporate scholarship and data on discrimination and Muslim social identity into theories of Daesh recruitment. At baseline, researchers should interview and reach out to Muslim women in Western states about the isolation and violence they experience. Other critically undervalued resources for understanding why Western women join the organization are defectors and women who are apprehended during their journey to Daesh-controlled territory. Most importantly, academics must genuinely take into account these women's voices and explanations instead of relying on theoretical narratives or media assumptions.

Image by Hani Amir (cropped) via [Flickr](#).

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