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Female Identity Policies in the Islamic State: An Introspective Look at Women

Abstract

The role of women in terrorist organizations has traditionally been reduced to that of a victim. However, these extremist networks provoke profound transformations in global social dynamics, generating constant evolution in their structures and tactics. Although their participation has been fundamental to the operations of these terrorist groups, the role of women remains insufficiently documented, especially in extremist contexts.

This research focuses on the role of women within the Islamic State terrorist organization, whose current political and social impact leads us to analyze the functions they perform in both the ideological and strategic spheres. The aim is to question the established gender roles within the terrorist organization and how it integrates or motivates women's participation despite the gender roles traditionally assigned to them in their sociocultural context.

Keywords: Women, radicalization, Islamic State, gender roles, gender-based violence

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the Islamic State (IS) has gained significant media relevance on the global stage. The radicalization of violence, along with its methods of mobilization and geographic expansion, among many other factors, has become a subject of worldwide study because these elements result in aggressions and extremist violent acts perpetrated by IS. Its impact has been on a large scale, managing to establish territorial control over large parts of Iraq and Syria between 2013 and 2019 (Mohamedou, 2022).

At the same time that the role of the organization itself has evolved over time, the position of women within the organization has also undergone transformation. Women have gradually developed an important role inside IS, carrying out various tasks for different purposes. Some participate by their own decision, while many others are victims of the mechanisms designed for female recruitment. It is currently estimated that there are between “1.500 and 2.000 IS women trained for combat” (Gardner, 2015). Therefore, it is of social interest to identify and understand the growing participation of women in the terrorist activities of this organization, as they are regarded as valuable active agents to ensure its operability¹. It is important to analyze the gender roles and the degree of participation these women play within the organization, since their context can lead to other dynamics and forms of violence that affect them, such as gender-based violence.

The participation of women in extremist organizations has traditionally been underestimated due to gender stereotypes² that associate the “role of women” with a generalized voluntary or imposed distancing from violence (Burman, 2004:39; Siegel, 2014:56).

This analytical category facilitates the examination of how roles and relationships among women, men, and other identities are created and maintained. In this way, gender theory situates individuals within their historical and social context and considers relations of social production and reproduction as critical aspects in the formation of gender (Lagarde, 1996:31). Thus, it is possible to identify social organizations, such as the Islamic State, where gender is crucial for structuring hierarchies, functions, and forms of violence.

This research is based on a comparative study model conducted with information obtained from secondary sources. It proposes a comparison between two profiles of women who have been part of IS: on the one hand, those who joined under conditions of coercion, manipulation, or victimization, and on the other, those who joined voluntarily through individual processes of radicalization and personal decision.

1 This adds the concept of *jihad feminism* to the study, which is a propagandistic construct that promotes the idea that every Muslim woman must join ISIS and support men in the jihad, thereby legitimizing patriarchal roles and female subordination.

2 In this sense, gender is understood as “a sociocultural construction that assigns different roles to women and men for living life” (Fernández, 2011:5).

This distinction is essential to determine whether the processes of integration into IS directly influence the roles these women perform within the organization and their vulnerability to certain forms of violence.

1.1. The Process of Female Radicalization

When discussing radicalization, it is important to note that there is no global consensus regarding its definition. However, for the purposes of this study, we adopt the definition provided by Horgan (2004:27), who describes radicalization as a psychosocial process in which there is a gradual increase in the commitment to join an extremist ideology. Likewise, during this process, a person may transform their thoughts and behaviors, adopting an aggressive and violent attitude. Due to the individual's bond with the cause, they begin to assume that any action necessary to sustain and validate their radical ideas and thoughts is justified (Pearson & Winterbotham, 2017:7-14).

Traditionally, women have been viewed as alien to violence and as having a certain incapacity to participate in these radicalization processes because of their femininity (Pearson & Winterbotham, 2017:1).

On the other hand, radicalization is also linked to the search for identity in a society that dictates what women can and cannot do, as well as to the social discrimination that pushes them toward these organizations in search of power (Pearson & Winterbotham, 2017:7).

Finally, the various narratives that idealize gender roles are clear: while men are promised roles of power that allow them to become "real men", women are offered roles as builders of the Ummah and guardians of the Caliphate (Van Leuven et al., 2015:110; Termeer & Duyvesteyn, 2022:475).

2. Women as Victims of the Islamic State (IS).

One of the fundamental pillars of IS's recruitment of women lies in its strong ideological and religious foundation. The justification for women's participation in the group's structure has been made through the concept of *hijrah* (Aasgaard, 2017:101). This narrative legitimizes the displacement of women to territories controlled by IS and contributes to their role in the territorial reconstruction of the Islamic Caliphate.

Some estimates indicate that at least ten percent of the people who traveled to Syria and Iraq to join IS were Western women (Aasgaard, 2017:103). Their presence is perceived as key to the group's ideological and territorial project, representing an instrumentalized use of women for the symbolic reproduction of the Islamic State (Aasgaard, 2017:101).

The training and recruitment methods, carefully structured and adapted to the conditions of contemporary life³ originate in the group's ideology and in a vision based on gender roles. The existence of specific roles for women within the Caliphate plays a primordial role in the dissemination and reinforcement of IS. These roles reinforce the group's social order, in which practices of submission, control, manipulation, and gender-based violence are normalized as part of an already established social structure.

It is important to note that, in many cases, the roles women perform within IS are not chosen but are the direct result of human trafficking practices⁴ carried out by the organization. The narrative of being "wives of jihadists", as will be discussed below, serves as a cover to conceal the fact that many of them are forced into marriage, reduced to domestic servitude, or sexually exploited.

2. 1. Forced Wives

In a large number of cases, women who traveled to conflict zones to join Daesh ended up being married to jihadists, often as a reward for the combat service these men provided to the organization. Thus, the primary function of the woman is to marry an IS fighter, learn Arabic, migrate, and interact with other women who follow the same behavioral pattern (Aasgaard, 2017:105). In this context, women do not freely choose their partners; instead, they are placed at the service of a matchmaker responsible for assigning them a "suitable" husband (Spencer, 2016:80).

Afterward, and in the words of the group's own ideology, "the main task of the woman is to stay at home, get married, give birth to a child, and raise him to fight in the name of God" (Aasgaard, 2017:105). This is achieved through elements contained in the ideological literature consumed by women, which also generates a negative perception of non-Muslim women (Aasgaard, 2017:99).

From the perspective of "jihad feminism", the Islamic State used forced marriage as a multifaceted tool to subject women to the oppressive lifestyles within the Caliphate. These unions do not respond to an affective or traditional religious logic but instead instrumentalize women as mechanisms of control and sources of income. Many times, these marriages, far from representing a legitimate union, became a formalized business for the commercialization of women and girls (Mncibi, 2021:109).

3 Methods that in recent years have evolved to reach the digital environment and have in turn reflected a movement of digital radicalization, based on tactics of emotional seduction, identification with larger causes and problems, as well as affective manipulation.

4 In this sense, the functions assigned to them form part of a system of exploitation that fits the international definition of human trafficking established in the Palermo Protocol, whether in the form of slavery, servitude, or sexual exploitation. Therefore, rather than a voluntary role, the experience of these women should be understood as the result of a systematic process of trafficking and subjugation.

An example of forced marriage is that of Umi Delima, a 16-year-old girl who was forced to marry Santoso, the leader of the East Indonesia Mujahideen group (EIM), in an unregistered Islamic marriage without the minor's consent⁵. Although Umi initially perceived this union as an opportunity to escape her environment and improve her lifestyle, the reality was extremely different. Umi was rejected by her husband's family, received no economic support, and was forced to move constantly. As a result, she lived in conditions of marginalization, dependence, and both psychological and economic violence (Taskarina, 2020:9-11).

In this sense, IS discourse imposes a model of femininity based on obedience, motherhood, and confinement to the domestic sphere, in which the woman is responsible for motivating and supporting her husband, thereby disabling the possibility of creating female autonomy and limiting her opportunities for personal and professional development.

2.2. Housewives

Another of the most relevant roles assigned to women within IS, closely related to the previous section, is that of housewife. In this role, the woman is confined to the domestic sphere and assigned the responsibility of motivating and supporting her husband, which prevents the creation of female autonomy.

The organization justifies this labor through religious and cultural arguments that position the woman as an indispensable pillar in the transmission of values and in the consolidation of the Islamic Caliphate (Spencer, 2016:80-82).

The housewife function acquires a strategic character for IS, as it not only guarantees biological reproduction, by giving birth to children who will be raised to become future fighters, but also ideological reproduction, by educating them under the extremist principles of the group (Makanda, 2019:143). In this way, the domestic sphere becomes a space for indoctrination in which the woman acts as a transmitter of the group's vision.

2.3. Slavery (*Comfort Women*)

Another role that women perform, against their will in the vast majority of cases, is that of "comfort women", as various cases have been recorded of women traveling to Syria to engage in this activity (Buner, 2016:445) through what is known as *sexual jihad*, where women "offer themselves as comfort women to boost the morale of the warriors" (Buner, 2016:435). There is considerable debate regarding the degree of voluntariness in women's participation, which could suggest that this role

⁵ The young woman's childhood was marked by her parents' divorce, a fact that contributed to the development of patterns of social isolation that increased even further during her marriage.

continues to be performed; however, the information obtained to date has made it clear that this act is not voluntary, although it is prosecuted as complicity in terrorism (Buner, 2016:435-449).

In this logic, it is emphasized that regardless of the degree of agency and impact women may have within the structures of the Islamic State, they were conceived above all as disposable sexual objects, with the possibility of being commercialized within the organization's sex slave market (Mncibi, 2021:114). Although extremist interpretations of the religious texts used by the organization explicitly prohibited a man from selling his wife, in practice these distinctions were ignored and reinterpreted with the aim of maintaining control over women. For this reason, many were indoctrinated through teleological discourses that justified sexual slavery as a religious mandate that reinforced the structural violence exercised against them (Mncibi, 2021:114).

2.4. Manipulation of Discourse

It is necessary to emphasize the Islamic State's skill in manipulating discourse regarding gender roles. Both recruitment techniques and the roles women perform are sustained by women's ability to access different spaces of power and to incite, promote, and care for the group's objectives through militarization and violence.

In contrast, while women are promoted a false sense of empowerment, in the case of men, "pejorative and submissive notations of women are used to reinforce ideas about masculinity" (CTED, 2019:14). Furthermore, there is growing research on gender discourses currently directed at men, in which denigrating stereotypes about women are used to reaffirm dominant masculine roles. This dynamic generates a paradoxical cycle in which women, in an attempt to obtain power and recognition within these groups, end up performing functions that keep them subordinated and exposed to various forms of violence exercised by men.

3. Women Who Join the Islamic State Voluntarily

As noted earlier, studies on terrorism have primarily focused on the roles of men in these types of organizations. In contrast, when analyses focus on the roles of women, they tend to portray them solely as victims. Although it is true that many women are coerced or forced to join groups such as IS, it is also important to recognize that many others make the decision to join voluntarily. "It is crucial to understand that, for the most part, women are not victims or passive instruments in the hands of men" (García-Calvo & Driessen, 2024:13). This leads us to underscore the importance of recognizing the radicalization process as a crucial factor contributing to the voluntary involvement of these women, since through it "there is a gradual increase in commitment to an extremist ideology. This commitment can reach the point of legitimizing the use of violence and even carrying it out" (Moyano, 2020). From

this, we can also understand the active and conscious role that women play within IS, performing an essential function in the development of the organization. On many occasions, they assume leadership roles within the group and seek to develop themselves in various areas; for example, through the recruitment of other women, their participation as fighters, or their work as officials.

3.1. *Recruiters and Propagandists*

Women who take an active role in terrorist groups through recruitment and propaganda do so both online and offline. The Islamic State “mainly had Western recruiters leading social media campaigns” (García-Calvo & Driessen, 2024:12), which is particularly important because these women can more easily approach others from the same sociocultural environment. Likewise, women already belonging to IS use digital platforms as a means of transmitting messages to promote female participation within the group. The *hijrah* is idealized through personal experience narratives and by providing advice on how to carry it out (Aasgaard, 2017:102). Undoubtedly, this medium has been a key ally for women in IS, taking advantage of women on the internet who feel discontent with their lives and disconnected from society. These efforts are directed at them, with “recruitment efforts taking place exclusively online, primarily through Telegram, Tumblr, and Twitter” (Aasgaard, 2017).

In the case of propaganda, it is evident that “local women in the Islamic State territories in Syria and Iraq have been, after the operational years of IS, instructed to traffic women and girls from conflict zones to IS” (Mncibi, 2021:37).

3.2. *Fighters*

The active role of women “has expanded to significantly include roles such as recruiter, propagandist, organizer, security enforcer, and even combat” (García-Calvo & Driessen, 2024:13). This fighter role includes military presence on the front lines, where “Muslim women are called upon to become fighters when there is a shortage of their male counterparts as a result of their imprisonment by opposing forces” (Makanda, 2019:141). This emerged mainly from 2017 onward, when IS began to adopt a new discourse, as seen in articles disseminated by the organization, in which “they called on women to take up arms not to compensate for the limited number of men, but out of their love for jihad” (García & Driessen, 2024:13).

One of the main reasons for the increase in women’s participation in terrorist actions is undoubtedly the fact that they are less frequently associated with this type of activity, primarily due to gender stereotypes. That is, when carrying out a terrorist operation with a woman, “they are less likely to be checked at control points and can easily hide weapons under their loose clothing. They

can even pretend to be pregnant and hide explosives where the belly should be”⁶ (Gaub & Lisiecka, 2016).

3.3. Officials

Despite the structure of the Quran and the restrictions imposed by IS, women can also assume roles as officials, since “Daesh women are not only housewives; they also act as recruiters and work as teachers, doctors, and officials. The role assigned to a woman upon her arrival in the Caliphate depends largely on her origin” (Rodríguez, 2023).

Another way in which women seek to obtain status within the organization is through marriage to fighters. The idea has been promoted that marrying a soldier represents an elevated position within Caliphate society. Such was the case of two young British women who traveled to Syria because “they wanted to marry jihadists, since being wives of fighters would give them status” (Gardner, 2015).

Many of these women are recruited through social media, where the Islamic State has allowed its female members to play an active role. One of the best-known cases is that of Aqsa Mahmood, a 20-year-old who fled Glasgow, Scotland, and joined the Islamic State in 2013. Since then, “Mahmood has maintained an active presence on social media, using the alias Umm Layth. She has supported IS, recruited terrorists for the group online, justified terrorist attacks carried out in Europe and elsewhere, and encouraged the commission of new attacks” (Aqsa Mahmood, n.d.). She has been identified as one of the most active women in terrorist recruitment, using social media as a platform to spread IS ideals, disseminate messages of hate, justify attacks, and offer advice on how to travel to the Syrian Arab Republic.

Additionally, the idea of marrying a jihadist has been promoted as a romantic and tragic element: a love story filled with conviction and sacrifice, which makes it even more attractive to some women.

4. Conclusions

The participation of women in the Islamic State reveals how extremist structures manage to instrumentalize both gender and emotions to strengthen their ideological and operational objectives. Although there is a duality in the way of entering these organizations, it is important to highlight that the two forms are not mutually exclusive; many women join IS seeking identity, purpose, or status, while still being subject to structures and roles that limit their autonomy.

6 The jihadist terrorist group Boko Haram is a good example of this, as it has historically frequently used women in Nigeria to carry out its suicidal terrorist actions.

When analyzing different cases of both women who join under coercion and those who do so voluntarily, fundamental differences are observed, beginning with the motivation for joining. While some are forced to join through dynamics involving human trafficking, others actively seek to become involved in the organization as a result of a radicalization process and the expectation of gaining prestige or recognition within IS.

In the case of victims, the level of autonomy is reduced and their role tends to be more passive, while those women who join by their own decision usually show greater participation, along with a clear interest in assuming a more active role within the organization. However, in practice, both dimensions can coexist: a woman who was initially forced into marriage may transform into a recruiter of new members, while another who joined voluntarily may end up reduced to conditions of domestic servitude or sexual exploitation.

When analyzing the specific roles they perform, it is evident that while some have greater presence in the private sphere, facing situations such as sexual slavery, forced marriages, and domestic subordination, women who decide to join voluntarily tend to develop more in the public sphere. This is manifested in their participation in recruitment activities, the visibility of the attacks they carry out, and the leadership that some exercise within the group's structure.

In this sense, the distinction between forced and voluntary women should not be interpreted as an opposition, but as two sides of the same coin that reveals the Islamic State's capacity to manipulate and configure gender functions according to its strategic needs. It allows the organization to use the vulnerability of victims as well as the initiative of volunteers, generating an environment within the organization where subordination and agency coexist.

Recognizing this duality means that the roles within the organization, although they may differ slightly, are not an absolute reality for all women, who retain the freedom to decide whether or not to be part of the organization.

Furthermore, understanding these nuances is crucial for the academic study of terrorism and radicalization; only by accepting that women can be conscious actors as well as subjects of coercion will it be possible to design strategies that are more humane, effective, and comprehensive for the prevention of violent extremism that also directly involves them.

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