The Role of Women in Violent Extremist Groups

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Research questions

a) How does a woman's gender, religious and national identity relate to membership of, and participation in, an extremist group?
b) In groups where women are present, is their femininity important in shaping the group's perception of masculinity, encouraging violence?
c) What do differences in the qualitative performance of roles enable for extremist groups?

Aims

The aim of this research is assess the extent to which female participation in violent extremist groups:

• Varies within and between groups
• Is influenced by a range of factors, including the context from which the group has emerged; organisational structure; individual performance; ideology; external pressures on the group; and the character and purpose of a role, thus producing qualitatively different roles.

Why is this important?

There are a number of reasons why this research is of value:

• It aims to refute previous assumptions made about women's relationship to, and role in, conflict and violent extremism, including that women do not engage as actors of violence; only as victims, and that women are a monolithic group, with the same life experiences.
• It draws attention to the different identities of women, which enable and restrict how a woman participates in extremism and affects opportunities for female participation.
• It furthers understandings about the role of gender in extremism which could lead to a reconsideration of what constitutes 'active' involvement in a group. This has the potential to impact how security agencies perceive women as security threats, shaping their reactions and the type of preventative action that might be required to address this threat.

Approach

Sources

I draw upon primary and secondary accounts of female involvement, using a range of predominately literature-based, open-source data. This includes academic and newspaper articles; social media posts; and biographies. I will also use oral histories taken from existing datasets, such as the University of Northampton's archive of far-right oral history interviews.

Method

I have built several case studies, which catalogue the actual roles women engage with in militant groups. From this, I aim to develop a comparative account of what shapes these roles, and how female involvement in turn shapes militant groups.
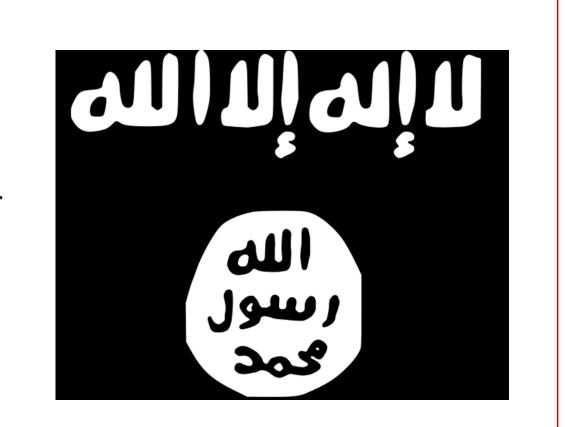
Theory

I will apply the theory of gender performativity, which argues that gender is a state of 'doing' rather than 'being'. Thus, identity is produced through the repetition of acts. This theoretical framework illuminates how gender is performed within each militant group, and the effect this has on identity, group membership and female participation in extremism.

Case study: Islamic State (IS)

'State-builders', skilled workers and social enforcers

Although official propaganda states that women are restricted to performing a 'state-building' role, through participating as wives and mothers, there is evidence that women in the Islamic State engage with a variety of roles. These range from domestic support to recruiters and fund-raisers, to more unexpected roles such as skilled workers (including doctors, engineers, teachers) to participating in the al-Khansaa Brigade, which enforces IS's strict conservative moral code among other female members.

'The Role of Women in Violent Extremist Groups' ©2017 R. Stevens / CREST (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Much of the previous research conflates the roles played by Western female migrants as representative of all female participation in IS. This fails to recognise the distinction between ideologically committed female members who migrated voluntarily with the specific purpose of participating in building the 'State', and local women who were unable to leave once IS claimed control of their local area, and so are forced to act in ways which benefit IS. Such distinctions regarding a woman's status within the group affect the kinds of opportunities that are open to her and thus the types of roles she is able to participate in.

For example, in addition to motherhood, Western female migrants perform a recruitment role, targeting other Western women, whereas the focus of participation for Arabic and Asian women is to fulfil their Islamic duty. In stark contrast, local Yazidi women are treated as domestic and sexual slaves, forced to assist IS in achieving their aims.

Case study: The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)

First-aiders, fund-raisers and fighters

The role of women within the LTTE evolved alongside the conflict. Initially, women performed traditionally feminine roles, shaped by the socio-cultural attitudes held by wider Tamil society. As such, women were excluded from using violence, and fulfilled first aid and domestic support roles. However, a number of factors, such as an insufficiency of men and pressure exerted by young women, resulted in the types of roles women could engage with becoming broader and increasingly more violent. Female roles expanded to include propaganda and intelligence gathering as well as providing safe houses for male operatives.

'Flag of the LTTE' ©2017 MartinKassemJ120 / Wikimedia Commons (CC0 1.0)

This culminated in the formation of the 'Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers' ('Suthanthira Paravihal') in 1983 and by 1984, it had become an all-female combat unit, providing women with the same training as male combatants. Evidence suggests that since the 1990s, female participation as combatants dramatically increased from 3,000 (in 1992) to almost 5,000 (by 2001). Female engagement in violence was not limited to battlefield activities, but also included participation in assassination squads and as suicide bombers.

The role of women as suicide bombers was increasingly associated with motherhood, and was performed in a way that invoked nationalist sentiments, portraying women as symbolic mothers of the nation. This echoed the idealisation of women as mothers found in many other ethno-nationalist groups, such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Euzkadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA). Thus, female martyrs are described as 'patriotic' self-sacrificing mothers, with the nation constructed as her 'children'.

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