Mothers, Recruiters, and...? 
Variations of Female Participation in Violent Extremist Groups

Rosamund Mutton

Overview of research:
Exploring variations in female violent extremist participation by analysing performances of ‘mother’ & ‘recruiter’ roles.

Women participate in violent extremism through:
- an array of ideologically disparate groups;
- complex & heterogeneous ways, where role progression is neither static nor linear (i.e. shared gender identity does not equate to shared experiences regarding violent extremist participation);
- a number of different roles simultaneously;
- violent & non-violent actions;
- varying degrees of engagement & commitment;
- ‘invisible’ roles.

However, existing terrorism research:
1. is inherently biased, implicitly gendering violent extremist actors as male;
2. conflates ‘active’ participation with an individual’s use of violence;
3. is framed through gender stereotypes that dictate appropriate gender behaviours and norms, making female actors’ participation difficult to perceive.

Research that does consider female actors often fails to capture the nuance of different purposes and ways of performing roles that seem similar, thus inaccurately representing their participation.

My research assesses how and why female participation varies, and the effect that this variation has on each group, asking: Why are roles that are categorised as similar in type, performed differently by women across violent extremist groups?

Comparative analysis of a range of roles enacted by women from 7 case studies, identifies performative differences (the practical actions that contribute to the fulfilment of the role). I argue that these differences are key in explaining variations in female participation.

Key findings:
How does female participation in violent extremist groups vary?
My research finds that female participation varies qualitatively, in the way that a role is performed.

Role performance is influenced by numerous factors. Examples include individual membership status; external pressure on the group; and wider socio-cultural context a group is situated in.

The Recruiter Role:
Despite sharing a function (the addition of new members to the group), each performance involves diverse practical actions; targets distinct audiences; and occurs through various mediums:
- ETA & IRA – kin and peer networks: less formalized; relies on close relationships involving trust.
- ISIS – online: remote targeting; no pre-existing relationships.
- FARC & LTTE - interpersonal: develop relationships with wider community; use of propaganda to encourage recruitment.
- Boko Haram - incentivisation and persuasion; target specific women perceived as likely to join.

The Mother Role:
The function; practical actions; and outcome the role enables differs for each group, influenced by an individual woman’s membership status:
- ISIS & Boko Haram – mothers as state-builders, integral to producing ‘state’ population; central to achieving group aims.
- IRA, ETA, & AQC – external to group do not fulfil a group aim; pass down cultural knowledge and grievances to children, with intention of motivating children to be involved when older.

Implications:
- Female participation varies through role performance, contributing to multiple externally visible and invisible practical actions.
- Group context is important when analysing the purpose and performance of a role. Roles externally perceived as unimportant because they are ‘supportive’, are likely to be considered by the group as vital to maintaining and sustaining their continued existence.
- Acknowledging seemingly unconventional actors and roles as engaging in violent extremism aids policymaking. Counter-terrorism policies that recognise the full range of actors would be more effective.

Rosamund Mutton is a CREST PhD student at Lancaster University. Supervisors: Dr Sarah Marsden and Prof. Kim Knott.

Figure One: This diagram demonstrates the range of roles women in various extremist groups perform. While this is key to demonstrating the variety in role type, my research seeks to take this further, through analysing how roles are performed in different ways and roles.

Figure Two

Figure Three