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Why Men Fight and Women Don't: Masculinity and Extremist Violence

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CO-EXISTENCE

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Published at <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/why-men-fight-and-women-dont-masculinity-and-extremist-violence>
on September 13 2018

OVERVIEW

Last year, the UK saw four violent extremist attacks, three jihadi and one far right.¹ ISIS and the far right are currently two of Britain's top security priorities. At the same time, policy in this area must take account of UN Security Council Resolution 2242, which in 2015 outlined how efforts to counter violent extremism should consider gender. To date, the British government has understood gender in the context of radicalisation in two main ways: the inclusion of Muslim women in Prevent, the counter-radicalisation programme; and, more recently, awareness of growing support for ISIS among British women. Following a recent high-profile female jihadi plot, there have also been concerns in the media about the possibility of further female violence.²

Most extremists, whether jihadi or far right, are men, but male violence should not be taken for granted any more than female nonviolence.

Policy should not treat gender simply as a synonym for women, however. This paper argues that analysis of masculinity is important to understanding male and female extremism. Current narratives on masculinity, including “toxic masculinity” and a “crisis of masculinity”, are key in discussions of extremism. To understand the likelihood of female ISIS violence, it is also necessary to understand the effects of masculinity in the norms, ideology and culture of groups like ISIS. However, this paper warns against using masculinity as a way of demonising particular groups of men such as

1 See Dominic Casciani, “Was 2017 the Worst Year for UK Terrorism?”, BBC News, 3 January 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42420358>.

2 Nadia Khomami, “How London Teenager Plotted Attacks with All-Female Terror Cell”, The Guardian, 4 June 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jun/04/how-london-teenager-plotted-attacks-with-all-female-terror-cell>.

young British Muslims. Instead, if policy on violent extremism is to succeed, it must engage with gender in ways that go beyond the simple engagement with women as an issue.

The views of the author do not necessarily represent those of the Institute.

INTRODUCTION

That violent extremism is a male domain is often critiqued by researchers. Scholars of gender and security studies have long highlighted the neglect of women in histories of war and conflict. When women are visible, researchers argue, they are often stereotyped as victims and peacemakers, mothers and carers, as is explored elsewhere in this series. Researchers seeking to understand female violence have shown, for instance, how women have historically been supportive of a variety of groups with violent beliefs. Women have been fundraisers, propagandists, supporters and spies across a range of ideologies.³ They have served as leaders, particularly for leftist groups like the Red Army Faction in West Germany. There is now also wider recognition of women's actions in carrying out violent attacks for groups including Hamas, Boko Haram, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Chechen rebels and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Violence—and the support of violence—is by no means an exclusively male preserve.

Nonetheless, women's participation in violence is often limited. Few violent organisations offer gender equality, either in leadership roles or in access to combat. One 2010 review of female terrorism noted that it is only in left-wing groups with a feminist ideology that women are “dominant forces”.⁴ Women are broadly absent as combatants or leaders in Palestinian groups, the American far right, the Basque separatist group ETA, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and al-Qaeda. These roles are adopted primarily by men.⁵ In the UK, for example, some 96 per cent of UK terrorist crimes between 1999 and 2010 were committed by men.⁶ Only one woman has to date been convicted of Islamist extremist violence in Britain.⁷ Nor has female participation in extremist groups equated

3 Philippa Eggert, “Women Fighters in the “Islamic State” and Al-Qaida in Iraq: A Comparative Analysis”, *Journal of International Peace and Organization* 90, no.3-4, 2015: 363-380; Susan G. Mahan and Pamala L. Griset, *Terrorism in Perspective*, Third Edition (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2013).

4 Karen Jacques and Paul J. Taylor, “Female Terrorism: A Review”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 3 (June 2009): 508, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550902984042>.

5 Jacques and Taylor, “Female Terrorism”, 508.

6 Robin Simcox et al., “Islamist Terrorism: The British Connections”, The Centre for Social Cohesion and the Henry Jackson Society, 2011.

to female power. For instance, women have recently become more visible as members of ISIS, travelling to Syria and Iraq from all over the globe. Yet the numbers travelling from the UK are approximately a fifth of those of men.⁸ Once in ISIS territory, women are also given very different roles, mostly restricted to the home and away from decision-making.

What explains this gender imbalance? To some degree, male violence has not been thought to require explanation.⁹ Just as female violence or support of violence has often been ignored, so male violence can be taken for granted in the research and by wider society. It is seen as something natural to what men are, a 'boys will be boys' approach. This assumption implies essential qualities linked to male and female biology. It suggests that when men are violent, there is no need to ask why. Such assumptions are often based on stereotypes rather than evidence. They can become written into how violent extremism is understood, and in the policy to counter it.¹⁰

How people behave as men or women is, at least in part, socially constructed. We learn what being a man or a woman means based on culture, age, where we live, race, class and position. Historian Joan Wallace Scott described gender as "a way of referring to the social organisation of the relationship between the sexes".¹¹

7 Elizabeth Pearson, "The Case of Roshonara Choudhry: Implications for Theory on Online Radicalization, ISIS Women, and the Gendered Jihad", *Policy & Internet* 8, no.1, 1 September 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.101>.

8 Cook and Vale suggest that in Western Europe 1,023 women (17 per cent of the total) have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS, in Eastern Europe 1,396 women (23 per cent of the total), and in the UK, 145 women (17 per cent of the total). See Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to Diaspora: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State", ICSR, 23 July 2018, <http://icsr.info/2018/07/icsr-report-launch-daesh-diaspora-tracing-women-minors-islamic-state/>.

9 Michael Kimmel, "Almost All Violent Extremists Share One Thing: Their Gender", *The Guardian*, 8 April 2018, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/08/violent-extremists-share-one-thing-gender-michael-kimmel>.

10 Katherine E Brown, "Gender and Counter-Radicalization: Women and Emerging Counter-Terror Measures", in *Gender, National Security and Counter-Terrorism*, ed. Jayne Huckerby and Margaret L. Satterthwaite (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2013), 47.

11 Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis", *The American Historical Review* 91, No. 5 (December, 1986): 1053-1075.

Yet work on gender and violence has often become work about women. Researchers have written about female agency, the ability to make informed and active choices, as a means of challenging stereotypes and drawing attention to the possibility and frequency of women in violent extremism.¹² Yet treating gender as a synonym for women is problematic in two key ways. First, it stops people from asking questions about how and why men are violent. Second, work on women's political violence is often focused on the assertion of women's ability to exercise agency, while neglecting analysis of the structures and norms that often seek to limit that agency. It places the focus on people, instead of power, as Scott emphasises.

There needs to be a shift in this thinking. To understand female political violence, the importance of masculinity and femininity in group power structures and norms must be examined. This then helps explain why and how men and women find specific roles in extremist groups. While this paper focuses on the case of ISIS, it also looks at the example of anti-Islam(ist) movement the English Defence League (EDL) to understand how awareness of the way gender operates in group structures and norms shapes male and female behaviour.

¹² Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, "Reduced to Bad Sex: Narratives of Violent Women from the Bible to the War on Terror", *International Relations* 22, no. 1 (March 2008): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117807087240>.

FEMALE VIOLENCE AND MASCULINITY

While violence and violent actors are easily visible, the norms permitting violence—including the way gender shapes power dynamics—are less apparent. The concept of masculinity has been used to better understand male violence, looking at the importance of group norms around manhood in the production of violence.¹³ Masculinity is a complex term. What counts as masculine varies across place, culture and time. Masculinity has been described as relational, with particular masculine qualities seen as high status compared with others.¹⁴ These include heterosexual warrior tropes, which are found around the world.¹⁵ Such aspirational characteristics tend to be defined against what is understood as feminine. Activists of varying ideologies have used violent extremist groups to fight a sense of emasculation in the context of increasing visibility and equality for women.¹⁶ However, masculinity is not just about men; it is about understanding power and gendered practice. This includes the ways in which women—and men—are subordinated.¹⁷

Masculinity is therefore fundamental to understanding female violence, and the emergence of ISIS is a case in point. The migration of thousands of women and girls from across the world to join the group prompted many to ask: How could women be attracted to a

13 Some of the key texts include Michael Kimmel, *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into—and Out Of—Violent Extremism* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018); Michael S. Kimmel, "Globalization and Its Mal(e)Contents: The Gendered Moral and Political Economy of Terrorism", *International Sociology* 18, no. 3 (September 2003): 603–620, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02685809030183008>; Paul Higate, "Drinking Vodka from the "Butt-Crack"", *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14, no. 4 (December 2012): 450–469, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2012.726092>; Randy Blazak, "'Getting It': The Role of Women in Male Desistance From Hate Groups", in *Home-Grown Hate: Gender and Organized Racism*, ed. Abby L. Ferber (Routledge, 2004), 154; Raewyn W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept", *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (December 2005): 829–859, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>.

14 Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity".

15 Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

16 Kimmel, *Healing from Hate*, 20.

17 Paul Higate, "Peacekeepers, Masculinities, and Sexual Exploitation", *Men and Masculinities* 10, no. 1 (1 July 2007): 114, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X06291896>.

self-declared state that prides itself on brutality? That women could feel empowered by a group that imposes severe restrictions on women's dress, movement, sexual lives and behaviour, as well as using sexual violence against captured women, could seem paradoxical.¹⁸ Against a context of past reports of a global trend for female terrorism, the mass movement of women to Syria and Iraq also provoked government and media fears of women carrying out violent Islamist attacks in Europe.¹⁹

Understanding ISIS's structures, rooted in masculine culture and in ideology, illuminates the appeal of the group to women. It also enables an assessment of the likelihood of women committing violence in ISIS's name.²⁰

Like other violent Islamist groups before it, ISIS's ideology is in part a response to secular modernity. It is a development of the 20th-century Islamist politics evolved by the likes of Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb. Qutb advocated sharia law, not only because only God has authority, but also to combat the perceived immorality of the secular West, particularly its sexual practices.²¹ Certain masculinities were vaunted (brave, ideological, virile, warriors), in opposition to particular femininities (caring, maternal, ideological, chaste). Real men proved manhood in battle to protect Muslim women. The role for real women, meanwhile, was made

18 See Mathieu Guidere, "Isis' Politics of Sex", in *Kalifat Des Terrors Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven Auf Den Islamischen Staat*, ed. Martin Schmetz and Janusz Biene, *Sicherheitspolitik-Blog Fokus* (Sicherheitspolitik-Blog, 2015), 19–25, <http://www.sicherheitspolitik-blog.de/files/2015/07/Kalifat-des-Terrors.pdf>.

19 For discussion of the potential threat posed see for instance Jessica Davis, "Women and Radical Islamic Terrorism: Planners, Perpetrators, Patrons?", *The Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, Strategic Link*, no. 136 (May 2006): 3–4; Mia Bloom, *Bombshell: The Many Faces of Women Terrorists* (London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2011), ix.

20 See both Nelly Lahoud, "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women From Jihad", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no.5 (February 2014): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.772511>; Nelly Lahoud, "Can Women Be Soldiers of the Islamic State?", *Survival* 59, no. 1 (2 January 2017): 61–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2017.1282675>.

21 Sara Khan and Tony McMahon, *The Battle for British Islam: Reclaiming Muslim Identity from Extremism* (London: Saqi Books, 2016), 52; See also Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (London: Islamic Book Service, 2006), 97–98.

clear in the Arabic-language manifesto of the al-Khansa Brigade, ISIS's all-female police force, which suggested,

*Women [in the West] are not fulfilling their fundamental roles, the role that is consistent with their deepest nature, for an important reason, that women are not presented with a true picture of man and, because of the rise in the number of emasculated men who do not shoulder the responsibility allocated to them towards their ummah, religion or people, and not even towards their houses or their sons, who are being supported by their wives.*²²

If men should only respect 'real' male fighters, women should too. The ultimate role was the suicide bomber, giving his life for the sake of the group. This trope, and the high status it offered, was vital in mobilising thousands of young men to Iraq and Syria. Martyrdom represented only the glorification of a masculinised culture, with young male migrants offered a recruitment package including access to wives, sex slaves and military training. Meanwhile, the symbol of the male warrior was used to recruit unmarried women. One young woman who had supported ISIS in the past told me how she was attracted to the promise of masculinity when approached online: "These guys were like properly what Muslims should be like . . . like this amazing group fighting back . . . You build an image up and you feel flattered from that status when they contact you. You're inside the ranks then, of these people who are so honoured."²³ For ISIS, it was important to encourage such a response. It was necessary for wives to buy into the honour of the male fighter and the need of the military function of state, with all the hardship that might entail.

This ideology meant that for ISIS, the separation of male and female life and the sequestering of women and girls to the home, while violence was left to men, was the ideological backbone of the whole so-called Islamic State project.²⁴ This does not seem to have changed, even though the group has issued a few pieces of

22 Charlie Winter, "Women of the Islamic State", The Quilliam Foundation, 2015, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/women-of-the-islamic-state3.pdf>.

23 Interview, "Saleha", 2016.

24 Elizabeth Pearson, "Why Female Suicide Bombers Mean the End of ISIS's Caliphate Dream", Newsweek, 18 July 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/why-isis-female-suicide-bombers-mean-end-caliphate-dream-637892>.

propaganda suggesting the possibility of women in combat, including a February 2018 video.²⁵ With each piece of propaganda flirting with the validity of female violence, it has simultaneously issued further edicts, reiterating the key message that violence is the domain of (real) men.²⁶

25 See Charlie Winter and Devorah Margolin, "The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State", CTC Sentinel 10, no. 7 (August 2017), https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/CTC-Sentinel_Vol10Iss7.pdf.

26 With thanks to Dr Nelly Lahoud for a conversation in July 2018.

THE MYTH THAT PARTICULAR MEN POSE A PROBLEM

Researchers have suggested that Islamists and nationalists draw on particular violent or aggressive masculinities as an outlet for disempowerment, resentment and marginalisation. In a globalised world of growing inequalities, young men seek solace in ideas of manhood, it is said.²⁷ Despite this, gender has been largely absent from mainstream discussion of radicalisation.²⁸ However, masculinity and extremism have been linked through narratives of a “crisis of masculinity” and “toxic masculinity”. This was particularly evident in 2013, following the fatal attack in London by two British Islamists on off-duty soldier Lee Rigby. Investigation found Michael Adebawale and Michael Adebolajo were linked to a violent mainly Muslim criminal gang, the Woolwich Boys. The group reportedly functioned as a recruitment pool to Anjem Choudary, leader of the banned Islamist extremist group al-Muhajiroun, who is now in prison for urging support of ISIS.²⁹ Responding to the attack, UK Labour MP David Lammy, then chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Fatherhood, stated that masculinity, gang culture and violent extremism were all linked, whatever the ideology:

There is no escaping the fact that terrorist attacks have almost exclusively been led and executed by young men. Males isolated from the rest of society, fixated by a binary world view where there is only faith and infidelity . . . In one community, the English Defence League³⁰ has radicalised the anger of disillusioned young white men and channelled it towards immigrant communities they

27 Raewyn W. Connell, “Globalisation, Imperialism and Masculinities”, in *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel, Jeff R. Hearn, and Robert W. Connell (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2004), 73; Kimmel, “Globalization and Its Mal(e)Contents”, 605; Robert Morrell and Sandra Swart, “Men in the Third World: Postcolonial Perspectives on Masculinity”, in *Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities* (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005), 102–3, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452233833>.

28 See Kimmel, *Healing from Hate*, 5. The term ‘radicalisation’ is controversial. Like ‘terrorism’ it is pejorative and contested. Governments have predominantly used it to describe pathways to Islamist extremism but it can describe any ideological ‘progression’ to either violence or extreme belief.

29 Matthew Holehouse, “Woolwich Attack: Islamists’ Campaign to Recruit Street Gangs”, *Telegraph*, 27 May 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/10082413/Woolwich-attack-Islamists-campaign-to-recruit-street-gangs.html>.

*believe are destroying their way of life. In another, a culture that idolises guns, knives and nihilism has drawn predominantly young black men into the world of street gangs . . . Here, the very notion of masculinity has been bastardised to the extent that in their code, power and respect can only be achieved through intimidation and fear.*³¹

Lammy's assessment describes what researchers term "toxic masculinity", a combination of characteristics that include a lack of respect for women, homophobia, violence and domination.³²

The idea of toxicity has stuck in discussions of particular types of violence by particular groups of men. Young male Muslims, who can be framed as a suspect community of potential terrorists, are one example.³³ Another example is white working-class men. Discussion of masculinity can easily be reduced to essentialist tropes of violent men that also problematise working-class masculinity. Male involvement in movements opposed to Islam and Islamism is often simplified around questions of thuggery and hate. Sociologist Joel Busher notes that white working-class men involved in the anti-Islam(ism) movement the English Defence League (EDL) can be "pathologised" as "angry, white, damaged and vulnerable".³⁴

It is important when highlighting issues of male violence to link this to wider social and economic disenfranchisement, not to problematic men as such. A number of researchers have considered masculinity in the case of the EDL. The movement was founded in 2009, seeing itself as a form of working-class street protest with a "single-issue" focus to oppose "global Islamification".³⁵ It has always

30 The English Defence League was founded in 2009 as a street movement, protesting Islam(ism) and was mainly white, male and working class.

31 David Lammy, "Islamists, Gangs, the EDL - All Target Alienated Young Men", *The Guardian*, 24 May 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/may/24/islamists-gangs-edl-target-young-men>.

32 Terry A. Kupers, "Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison", *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 61, no. 6 (June 2005): 714, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20105>.

33 See for instance Paul Amar, "Middle East Masculinity Studies: Discourses of "Men in Crisis", *Industries of Gender in Revolution*", *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7, no. 3 (2011): 36–70.

34 Joel Busher, *The Making of Anti-Muslim Protest: Grassroots Activism in the English Defence League* (London ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), para. 51.

involved women, but in smaller numbers.³⁶ The EDL has generally advocated male protection of English women from the perceived aggression of Muslim men. It also sees liberalism and feminism as enemies, although it asserts women's rights. In its early days the EDL's members were mostly young, working-class and poorly educated men.³⁷ Criminologists James Treadwell and Jon Garland looked at why men were involved to such a high degree, and identified masculinity as an important factor. They suggested the EDL was a way for men to gain status. It also allowed them to compensate for a perception that they were victimised, particularly by Muslims. In essence, authors suggested themes of anger, marginalisation, alienation and frustration saw men finding the EDL as a means of legitimate expression, which sometimes included aggression.³⁸

What is important is that this discussion does not see white working-class men as the problem in themselves. It shows the importance of understanding EDL masculinity in the wider socio-economic context, where ideas of manhood are shared, and where they differ.³⁹ Conversations about toxic masculinity can do the opposite, putting the focus onto particular men as a problem, rather than looking at broad structural factors. Understanding masculinity in extremism should not just consist of understanding extreme men as "isolated from the rest of society", as Lammy suggests. Isolation does not mean norms are not shared. Analysis should consider how extremists share societal norms, as well as deviate from them. This principle should apply across ideologies, including for the likes of ISIS.

35 Hilary Pilkington, *Loud and Proud: Passion and Politics in the English Defence League* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 37–38, <http://www.oopen.org/search?identifier=607920>.

36 Jamie Bartlett and Mark Littler, "Inside the EDL", *Demos*, 2011, 18, <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/insidetheedl>.

37 Robert Ford and Matthew J. Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 79.

38 J. Treadwell and J. Garland, "Masculinity, Marginalization and Violence: A Case Study of the English Defence League", *British Journal of Criminology* 51, no. 4 (April 2011): 627–32, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azr027>; James Treadwell, "White Riot: The English Defence League and the 2011 English Riots", *Criminal Justice Matters* 87, no. 1 (1 March 2012): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09627251.2012.671016>.

39 Higate, "Peacekeepers, Masculinities, and Sexual Exploitation", 114.

WHY SEEING GENDER AS 'MORE THAN WOMEN' MATTERS

Policymakers need to understand violent extremism and extremism as modern British phenomena. They want to know why men and women join groups like ISIS or counter-jihadi movements like the EDL. This has become a more important question as ISIS members return to their home countries, and as right-wing populism gains ground in the UK and beyond.

Policymakers also have an obligation to think about gender. Within this, a consideration of masculinity is crucial to thinking about violent extremism in the UK, by both men and women. First, to know whether women returnees from Iraq and Syria pose a risk of violence, decision-makers should look to ISIS ideology, structure and norms and how these position men and women in relation to one another. Here particular ideas about masculinity and femininity are key. Masculinity is already part of the policy discussion, through conversations about a crisis of masculinity and toxic masculinity, but this can prove problematic. While it is important not to simply take male violence for granted, or suggest that this it is normal, discussions of male violence must be careful not to simply demonise particular men.

Policymakers need to consider the ways in which violent and extreme groups can be damaging to men and boys, just as they can feel empowering to women.⁴⁰ Most importantly, conversations about masculinity matter because they allow for an understanding of how both male and female extremism is shaped by structural factors shaping group dynamics, as much as by agency.

⁴⁰ Raewyn W. Connell, "Preface", in *Rethinking the Man Question: Sex, Gender and Violence in International Relations*: 1, ed. Jane L. Parpart and Marysia Zalewski (London; New York: Zed Books, 2008), xii.

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