# Negating Stereotypes: Women, Gender, and Terrorism in Indonesia and Pakistan

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## Introduction

Although research on women's involvement in Islamist terrorism and violent extremism experienced a rise in attention since the declaration of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in 2014, it remains dominated by Western case studies. As such, literature and policy debates on women's participation in terrorism in parts of South and Southeast Asia remain limited. In Indonesia and Pakistan, androcentric perspectives and women as a minority in numbers within Islamist terrorist groups contributed towards perceptions of women's participation as an anomaly, rather than the norm. This paper discusses how gendered assumptions regarding masculinity and femininity influence women's recruitment, roles, and motivations in terrorism. It aims to counter the gendered assumptions and challenge stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity during conflict through case studies from the terrorist landscape in Indonesia and Pakistan. Islamist terrorist groups in Indonesia and Pakistan are increasingly recruiting women in various capacities. Multiple studies establish the importance of women in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) in the South and Southeast Asian context, and yet, they are marginalized within these programs. In this regard, gendered assumptions from states and policymakers continue to underestimate the capabilities of women as violent actors in terrorism, hindering the effectiveness of P/CVE programs and curbing the implementation of holistic policies that encapsulate women as violent and non-violent actors. By examining the cases of Indonesia and Pakistan, this paper moves beyond a static perspective of women as victims and men as perpetrators, and towards promoting gender-inclusive policy responses and increasing the efficacy of existing programs.

### Background of Terrorism in Indonesia & Pakistan

*Indonesia*

Indonesia faces a threat from Islamist extremist groups, whose origins can be traced to Darul Islam, an insurgent movement that sought to impose Islamic law and eventually led to the creation of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in 1993.[1] During the rise of Al-Qaeda, JI was the most significant terrorist group in Indonesia and responsible for the 2002 Bali bombings, which killed more than 200 people. A splinter group of JI continued to engage in violence until the leader of the group, Noordin Muhammad Top, was killed in 2009.[2] By 2011, the Indonesian authorities determined that JI had largely been defeated, as significant segments of its membership were either killed or incarcerated.[3] In 2014, a few JI members, including Aman Abdurrahman[4] and four of his supporters attempted to bring together all pro-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS) organizations in

the country and formed Ansharut Dawlah Indonesia (ADI), which later became Jamaah Ansharut Dawlah (JAD).[5] JAD represents the most violent group in the country, as it is currently coupled with other smaller IS-linked networks.[6]

*Pakistan*

The Islamist terrorist threat in Pakistan today, and its links to al-Qaeda and the Taliban, traces back to the Soviet-Afghan war and Afghan jihad.[7] Formed in 2007, the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has been one of the major threat groups with links to Al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban. Sectarian terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and groups advocating for separation of Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir from India such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT, now Jamaat-ud-Dawa) have also been involved in violence.[8] Other operationally strong terrorist groups include TTP's breakaway faction, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), and IS-linked Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al-Alami (LeJ-A).[9] In addition, independent IS cells and networks engaging in recruitment and planning attacks have also been reported since the rise of IS in 2014.[10]

In Indonesia and Pakistan, many of these local terrorist groups, regardless of their affiliations with Al-Qaeda or IS, have sought the creation of an 'Islamic State' or enforcement of 'Shariah' (Islamic law). In the past, these groups relied more on traditional bonds, like kinship, and physical networks to recruit new members.[11] The current wave of international terrorism is broadly underscored by online recruitment, whereas local groups are pairing old recruitment methods with manipulation of the online domain. As such, in both countries, radicalization through social media has reduced the barriers to entry within these organizations. It is essential to distinguish between the enablers of radicalization (social media, physical networks) and the motivations for radicalization (socio-economic background, personal experiences, religious beliefs, and political factors). Each of these groups seeks to recruit women in different capacities, yet the security agencies and policymakers continue to leverage an androcentric approach to respond to the threat.[12]

**Masculinity and Femininity in Violent Extremism**

Conceptions of gender are overwhelmingly contextual. In that sense, masculinity and femininity are not absolute, but vary across cultures, societies, and time.[13] Yet during periods of political violence and conflict, specific roles for men and women are discernable. In studies on political violence, masculinity is highly militarized and linked to violence, while being dependent on constructions of femininity that are non-violent, "supportive and complementary."[14] As such, men are largely engaged as fighters and protectors of women and children, while women assume roles of the "heroic housewife," "sacrificial mother" and "loving wife."[15] Femininity during violent conflict subscribes women to auxiliary roles, where women are classified as victims rather than initiators.[16] They are not traditionally seen as perpetrators of violence and instead need to be protected by the "gallant" and "naturally violence-oriented" men.[17] Here, femininity also strongly correlates to women's biological capability to give birth, implying that they are largely life-givers as opposed to life-takers.

The narratives on masculine and feminine roles are dictated by patriarchy, hypermasculinity and cultures of misogyny in violent extremist organizations.[18] This is also evident in the structure of Islamist terrorist groups in Indonesia and Pakistan – males make up the majority of those mobilized

to fight. It is worth mentioning that this paper will not deconstruct notions of masculinity and how they affect the radicalization of men within terrorist groups. Since gendered assumptions of both masculinity and femininity are interdependent, one reinforces the other. Thus, detailing the general roles and expectations from men within these groups allows for a better understanding of women's roles and radicalization processes.

In the context of Islamist terrorism, the role of men encapsulates participation in violent jihad to *defend* the ideology or goals of their organizations, while the women's part is to take up a supportive position by *assisting the men in defending* and facilitating violence through supplementary functions.[19] Broadly, the rigidity of masculinity as violent and femininity as non-violent in terrorism contributes to three key misperceptions regarding women's involvement in terrorism in Indonesia and Pakistan. First, the assumption that men are assigned to violence-based roles while women's roles are non-violent is deemed to be absolute and unchanging. Second, women are constructed as secondary actors or recruits due to their presumably non-violent nature in a violent group. This logic correlates to the idea of women's irrelevance to the broader functioning of the group as they represent a fraction of the overall membership. Third, women's motivations are cast as personal and gendered. For instance, men are believed to join extremist groups for political reasons, while women's participation is linked to personal (feminine) reasons. These key misperceptions are challenged through discussing the diversity in roles, recruitment logic, and motivations of women in violent extremism in both Pakistan and Indonesia below.

(i)      *Women in Non-Violent and Violent Roles*

Masculine and feminine divisions conventionally place both gender identities in categorically different roles based on stereotypical interpretations of their strengths. In both countries, women's roles in terrorism are predominantly confined to the private sphere as mothers, daughters, and wives. Despite the traditional division, women's roles are not static as they continue to evolve with the emergence of new groups and challenges. In addition, they are assigned critical roles in the public sphere as financiers, propagandists, and recruiters. Women showcase their potential to serve in violent roles (as fighters or suicide bombers) at lower rates than men.[20] Security agencies and policymakers still perceive women in combat roles as a complete anomaly and exception rather than the norm.

David Cook discusses the acceptability and prevalence of women waging jihad in Islamist terrorist groups and establishes that women are more visible as suicide bombers in more secular contexts (Chechnya and Palestine).[21] Nelly Lahoud analyzes how the ideology of Islamist terrorist groups traditionally excluded women from combat roles, even though the classical doctrine of jihad urges all Muslims, including men, women, and children to fight and defend their religion.[22] Even within Islamist terrorism, more pronounced changes to these narratives concerning femininity and non-violence were witnessed after the rise of IS in 2014, where women were explicitly called on to become suicide bombers and contribute to 'building the caliphate.' As such, with the rise of IS, tactical considerations and women's attempt to renegotiate their roles have surpassed ideological justifications for women's non-violence in Indonesia and Pakistan as Muslim majority countries. Historically, women mostly contributed within feminine (non-violent) capacities, but there is a somewhat contentious yet growing permissibility for their involvement in fighting.

In Pakistan, women's involvement in terrorism can be traced across three waves – from the Afghan jihad (1980s) to the Kashmir jihad and formation of the TTP (2000s) and now IS-linked groups. During the Afghan jihad, women provided logistic and financial support to the mujahideen and were usually confined to the private sphere.[23] After the formation of the TTP, women's roles became more diversified as Mullah Fazlullah (then emir of the TTP) focused on women as an active support base through his radio broadcasts in the Swat region.[24] Fazlullah urged women to support the group by selling their jewelry to raise funds for the organization. In other roles, women made suicide jackets for men, acted as informants, and raised funds for the group's operations.[25] Some terrorist groups still exclusively tapped into traditional 'feminine roles.' For example, Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD, previously known as Lashkar-e-Taiba) heavily relied on women's roles as mothers and wives, but did not encourage them to engage in violence.[26] In comparison, TTP was more open to violent roles for women by enlisting as suicide bombers, with the first case reported in 2010 in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).[27] In 2017, after the rise of IS, local cells recruited Noreen Leghari to conduct a suicide bombing targeting a church during Easter celebrations in Pakistan.[28] The authorities arrested Leghari before she could conduct the attack and Leghari later admitted to being influenced by IS propaganda. Leghari's efforts are particularly interesting given that IS does not advocate for women to predominantly act as suicide bombers.[29] This then highlights a divergence in women's roles based on the local context of decentralized IS cells and networks in Pakistan.[30]

In Indonesia, a similar trajectory is evident across the three waves of religiously motivated violent extremism – from Darul Islam (DI) to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and currently IS-linked/inspired groups.[31] DI was formed in 1942 and waged an armed struggle to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia. The group only began recruiting women in the 1980s, understanding that they could have a key role in spreading the ideology through religious study groups in schools and universities. While JI also forbade women from getting involved in combat,[32] the group focused on actively recruiting women through family-specific networks. This meant that male JI members' wives, mothers, sisters and daughters also become members of the group. In addition, while women have gone to Syria and Iraq from Indonesia, they did not travel to Afghanistan after the United States invasion in 2001.[33] Some JI members were also encouraged by their leadership to keep their extremist activities private to prevent their wives from "leaking secrets."[34] In comparison, Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT), an extremist group based in Poso, enlisted its female members (wives of senior leaders) in combatant roles. In 2014, women were trained in self-defense, shooting and throwing grenades to ward off advances from the Indonesian security forces. In both cases, regardless of the group's assignment of 'feminine' roles to women, women themselves wanted to engage in violence in the hopes of attaining martyrdom. Alternately, in incidences where women are not involved in combat, they still adopt powerful roles. For instance, in 2017, the Philippine authorities arrested Farhana Maute, known as the matriarch of the IS-linked Maute group.[35] Farhana's sons – Abdullah and Omar – were the leaders of IS' Maute group involved in the siege of Marawi City in May 2017. Reports noted that Farhana was the main funder of her son's operations and had links to IS, leading to her arrest by the authorities.[36]

In the cases of both Indonesia and Pakistan, the first two waves of terrorism before the emergence of IS depicted more rigidity in the masculine (violent) and feminine (non-violent) divide. However, despite the continued preference for these traditional divisions, exceptions are becoming common and acceptable. More women are being trained in combat and as suicide bombers, challenging the

absolutist nature of their roles in Islamist terrorist groups in the two countries. Yet, it still remains unlikely that male members of Islamist terrorist groups will permit women to fight alongside them in the battlefield. [37] Instead, they will continue to enlist them as suicide bombers, propagandists, recruiters, fundraisers and, as a last resort, to fight their opposition.

(ii)      *'Strategic Benefits'[38] of Women's Recruitment*

Although men represent the majority of fighters in Islamist terrorist groups, women are actively recruited. The presence of women in smaller numbers is often misunderstood as a sign of their insignificance within these groups. But the inclusion of women is based on a 'strategic logic' that brings terrorist groups closer to their goals in more ways than one. In this sense, there is a significant disparity between what motivates women to join a terrorist group, and what encourages a group to recruit women.[39] In this sense, women's recruitment is explained by the tactical and strategic benefits their participation offers to terrorist organizations.

Women deployed as attackers allow these groups to gain publicity or 'renown' as referred to by Louise Richardson.[40] Other scholars discuss how female suicide bombers generate more shock value and media attention, giving more publicity to a terrorist group's cause.[41] In Indonesia and Pakistan, women dressed in burqas can perpetrate suicide bombings with relative ease because of the lack of physical security checks. Moreover, organizations use the participation of women as a way to shame men into participating in violent jihad, especially if they are trained in combat and enlisted as suicide bombers.

Some scholarship argues that "state-building jihadi organizations" that seek to build a 'state' through violent means need women to ensure the longevity of the group.[42] This includes family-based efforts, where women supplement the 'people is power' discourse by giving birth and increasing the multi-generational impact of the group. It also extends to women's deployment in social services for women in the form of doctors, teachers and police officers.[43] In comparison, other groups such as TTP, JuD (Pakistan) and JI, JAT and MIT (Indonesia) represent operation-based jihadi organizations that rely on guerrilla warfare. These groups divide into smaller cells and networks which do not hold territory and are unlikely to include women in state-building roles, but still acknowledge their importance in violent and non-violent capacities. Moreover, the active competition from female-centric recruitment campaigns of groups such as IS means that they are more accommodative of women and understand their strategic value in achieving goals. In September 2017, TTP released Sunnat-e-Khaula, its first English magazine targeted towards women after state-led media operations and competition from rival groups (IS and LeJ-A) weakened the organization.[44] The magazine urged women to wage jihad by getting physical training in operating weapons and grenades, distributing the group's propaganda and training their children. Bahrun Naim, Indonesian leader of IS based in Syria, planned several terrorist plots remotely, but failed due to preemptive measures from the security agencies. After these unsuccessful attempts, he decided to incorporate female suicide bombers as a critical tactic because they draw less attention from the authorities.[45]

*(iii)     Women's Personal and Political Motivations*

Mainstream media and policymakers continue to offer overwhelmingly gendered explanations of participation in violent extremism based on masculine and feminine characteristics. Within this logic, men are seen to join terrorist groups for political reasons, while women's motivations are assumed to be personal.[46] While men's motivations are usually linked to fighting against the persecution of Muslims and defending Islam, women's participation is presumed to be linked to personal reasons, such as finding a husband, protecting her children or taking revenge for atrocities against her family.

In other words, the importance of physical and emotional motivating factors is undermined in research on men, while it is overrepresented and perceived as a powerful determinant in the radicalization process of women. Elizabeth Pearson and Emily Winterbotham state that both personal and political factors are key contributors in the radicalization processes of men and women.[47] This research highlights five key factors that played a role in the radicalization process of both genders: belonging and identity, the internet, youth, status, and inaccurate interpretations of religion. Case studies in Indonesia and Pakistan also indicate mixed motivations for women's participation in terrorism. Both men and women's participation in terrorist groups can be influenced by multiple factors – cultural norms, political and religious reasons. Women, then, are not solely joining terrorist groups to take revenge for their family members, seek romantic relationships with male recruiters or out of coercion by husbands or fathers.[48]

In certain cases, personal motivations can play a role in facilitating the radicalization process. Noreen Leghari, a Pakistani suicide bomber was recruited by a few male IS members, one of whom she later married. Leghari was supposed to conduct a suicide bombing with her husband before her arrest during a raid.[49] In other cases, romantic relationships and male influence is not a vital element of the radicalization process many women undergo. In 2015, Bushra Cheema traveled with her four children to Syria from Pakistan to join IS. Cheema's case received media attention specifically after a voice note to her husband surfaced, where she said, "I want to die a martyr's death…if you can't join us then pray your wife and children die in jihad."[50] This evidence aids to show that Cheema was not radicalized because of her husband joining an extremist group; instead, perhaps she made an independent politically and religiously influenced decision to join IS. In 2016, Ika Puspitasari, an Indonesian domestic worker who had spent more than 17 years in Hong Kong and Malaysia, had plans to conduct a suicide attack at a tourist site in Bali. Ika acted as an independent 'jihadi talent hunter' who formed her own cell and recruited male IS members, planned an attack and attempted to fund the operation. Ika did not wait for approval from IS leadership or networks regarding her permissibility to wage jihad and underwent an independent religious transformation through regular exposure to extremist websites and social media content.

Mainstream media and policymakers regard women as instruments for the male-dominated leadership that manipulates them, undermining their agency.[51] Devorah Margolin discusses the myth of women's victimization at the hands of men and the inability to account for their political agency in terrorist groups.[52] This is linked to the static masculine and feminine roles, where violence for men is linked to power and non-violence for women is associated with passivity and weakness.[53] It also partly explains the label of 'jihadi brides' that has been used to refer to IS recruits who traveled to Iraq and Syria. Brigitte L. Nacos has argued that female politicians are more likely to be identified based on their marital status in comparison to male politicians.[54] She further adds that a similar logic is also applicable to media reports on male and female terrorists.

In this case, while IS also expects male terrorists to get married, the variable is overemphasized for women and rarely discussed in the context of men.

**Lessons on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism**

This paper shows that viewing violent extremism through a gendered lens, which conventionally divides men into violent roles and women into non-violent functions, hinders practical understanding of women's contribution to such organizations. Flawed analysis of women's roles in terrorism, recruitment, and motivations in Islamist extremist groups in Indonesia and Pakistan weakens effective policy-making and action planning at the state level.

First, lack of recognition of women's potential to be violent impedes effective security responses to avert and counter this threat. In Pakistan, according to a 2011 survey by the National Bureau of Police, women represent less than one percent of the police force in the country.[55] In Indonesia, women represent only five percent of the Indonesian National Armed Forces and the National Police.[56] Women's appointment within the security sector is critical due to gender segregation norms that do not permit men to conduct physical checks of women at security checkpoints. In the Counter Terrorism Department of Pakistan, cultural perceptions regarding women in combat have prevented their induction and training in response teams.[57]

Second, when policymakers deconstruct their understanding of women's roles as domestic, in the form of mothers and wives, countering violent extremism initiatives are likely to have reduced effectiveness.[58] Simply restricting women's participation in this context also risks falling within stereotypical gendered perceptions of women as non-violent, while neglecting other crucial capacities in which women can be utilized to their full potential within their communities. Aman Indonesia and Amn-oNisa in Pakistan are two key civil society initiatives, among others, geared towards peacebuilding and CVE through empowering and educating women in their communities. In comparison, PAIMAN Alumni Trust has focused on training 655 mothers to deradicalize 1,024 young boys and men, reintegrating them back into society.[59] This approach rests on the assumption that women are uniquely placed to spot early indicators of radicalization in their children and have the ability to influence their children to denounce violent extremism. While tapping into this potential of women might be beneficial in some circumstances, this maternalistic capability is not applicable in all contexts within traditional societies with a strong family-based structure. For instance, in certain cases of radicalization within Afghanistan, mothers and wives have not been aware of their male family members joining terrorist groups.[60] Anecdotally, Pashtun tribes tend to confine women to the private sphere and limit their decision-making authority and influence over their family members. Within this context, it is pertinent that research and academic studies have established that the inextricable link between female terrorists as mothers is flawed, with women showcasing the capacity to independently engage in violent extremism as well.[61]

For the sake of scope and clarity, the discussion of gender dynamics in terrorist groups focused on women. Conversely, masculinity and the link with violence and fighting in the case of terrorist organizations is not sufficiently studied or understood within existing literature.[62] Some scholars have raised the notion of 'men-streaming' or considering men as gendered beings in the radicalization process and understanding how conventions of hegemonic masculinity are

contributing factors.[63] Ultimately, men's roles centered exclusively on violence need to be critically analyzed to formulate better policies to understand why men fight and how to prevent it.

Lastly, terrorist groups have evolved in their recruitment methods, strategies, and target audiences. In both Indonesia and Pakistan, terrorist groups actively recruit women into a wide variety of roles. In other words, they have moved away from a narrow, static and non-violent jihad to a broader, more fluid and violent conception of jihad for women. States and policymakers need to evolve accordingly and account for the differing key roles women assume within these groups. The gendered presumption that women are 'naturally' non-violent, or agents of peace and are coerced by male-counterparts to engage in violence has acted as an impediment towards effective policy responses to identify and mitigate the threat from female terrorists. As such, the translation of more gender-nuanced initiatives into state-run holistic P/CVE programs remain critical.

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[4]Aman Abdurrahman, a 46-year-old radical cleric, is considered the de facto head of IS supporters in Indonesia and founded the IS-linked Jamaah Ansharut Dawlah. In June 2018, he was sentenced to death for his involvement in terrorist attacks in the country.
[5]"The Surabaya Bombings and the Future of ISIS in Indonesia." 2018. *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict*. http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2018/10/IPAC_Report_51.pdf.
[6]A part of the JAD membership also includes defectors from JI. It is important that not all IS-linked activity in Indonesia relates to JAD and many lone-wolf/isolated networks of IS supporters are also present.
[7]Rana, Muhammad Amir. 2018. "Pakistan-based militant groups & prospects of their reintegration: A Structural Analysis." *Mantraya Occasional Paper Series*.
[8]Pakistan also faces an active security threat from the separatist insurgency in the province of Balochistan, which remains beyond the scope of this paper.
[9]These three groups are currently active and have perpetrated multiple large-scale attacks, leading to their identification are major threat groups by the Pakistani state.
[10]Rana, Muhammad Amir. 2015. "The Impact of the Islamic State on Pakistan." *Norwegian Peace Building Resource Centre*.
[11]As these groups were linked to Al-Qaeda, they did maintain a small online presence in forums and websites. However, this did not form the base of their recruitment and outreach tactics.
[12]There are no official statistics available on the gendered membership of these terrorist groups. However, it is broadly known that men formulate a majority in terms of membership and as perpetrators of attacks.
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[26]Yasmeen, Samina. 2016. Pakistan, Muslim Womanhood and Social Jihad: Narratives of Umm Abd Muneeb, Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations 27:3, 251-265.

[27]Indonesia's first case of a female suicide bomber emerged with the onset of IS in 2017. Pakistan's first case occurred much earlier in 2010, where a woman dressed in a burqa targeted a distribution camp of the World Food Program (WFP).

[28]Mahmood, Sara. 2017. "Pakistan's Women Jihadis." *The Diplomat*. https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/pakistans-women-jihadis/.

[29]al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad. 2017. "ISIS' Female Suicide Bombers are No Myth." *Foreign Affairs*. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-09-22/isis-female-suicide-bombers-are-no-myth.

[30]Local IS networks and cells face strong competition from other Islamist terrorist groups that actively engaging in violence and thus, have more visibility. Deploying Leghari as a suicide bomber acts as a effective tactic that would grant IS significant media attention and visibility in the country and elsewhere.

[31]Nuraniyah, Navah. 2018. "Not Just Brainwashed: Understanding the Radicalization of Indonesian Female Supporters of the Islamic State." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30:6, 1-21.

[32]*The Handbook of Womanhood* released by the Al-Mumkin School, established by the founding members of JI, explicitly prohibited women from fighting until the group was faced with extreme circumstances. These circumstances were cited as the inability of men to fight. Instead, the handbook relegated women to patriarchal, non-violent and gendered roles as mothers, wives and daughters.

[33]"Mothers To Bombers: The Evolution Of Indonesian Women Extremists." 2017. *Institute For Policy Analysis of Conflict*. http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2017/01/IPAC_Report_35.pdf.

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