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Gender, Agency and Vulnerability: The Case of Western Muslim Women Joining the ISIS

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Abstract:

In this article I look at the case of Western Muslim women who joined the Islamic terrorist group of ISIS. I deconstruct the generally held assumptions in the main stream Western media about the desirability of an unrestricted life. One of the major questions that I raise through this article is whether or not feminist scholarship should aim at developing a certain standard of emancipation of women. To be more specific, through this study, I want to understand what freedom means for different actors—Western Muslim women, mainstream media, and social media—involved in the debate on young western men and women joining the ISIS.

Key words: feminism, freedom, ISIS, media, muslim women.

Introduction:

By portraying freedom as desirable, feminism as a political project often operates on the premise that just like men women also have an innate desire to be free. However, when women take part in violent movements, for instance in the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), then the feminist literature assumes that such activism on the part of women results from their 'false consciousness'[1]--"harboring of false beliefs that sustain one's own oppression"[2]– rather than on their desire to be free, or from their 'internalization of patriarchy'[3]– a

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situation in which the oppressed blames herself for her oppression. In this article, I look at the case of certain Western Muslim women who joined the Islamic terrorist group of ISIS. I deconstruct the generally held assumptions about the desirability of an unrestricted life.

One of the major questions that I raise through this article is whether feminist scholarship should aim at developing a certain standard of desires or emancipation for women or should it base the standard of freedom on the understanding of the people concerned. To be more specific, through this study, I want to understand what freedom means for different actors—Western Muslim women, mainstream media, and social media—involved in the debate on young western men and women joining the ISIS. I also look at the conditions that push Western Muslim women to join the ISIS and in this way assert their sovereign agency in the face of monolithic white hetero-normative and neo-liberal economic discourse.

A Britain think tank, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), has recently compiled and made available data from social media postings (Facebook, Twitter, ask.fm, Tumbler, and Instagram) of six western women: two come from the Netherlands, one from France, one from Canada, and one is believed to be from Austria. To verify the authenticity of their claims the data includes pictures of these women in their home countries before their departure to the ISIS territories, and those taken alongside ISIS fighters in the ISIS territories. I critically examine this data in attempt to make sense of the so-called motivations of these women for joining the ISIS. I then compare their narratives with those of the Western men who joined the ISIS. One of the purposes is to find out whether or not the motivations for these women are different from those of the men.

I want to acknowledge at the outset that the sample size is relatively small and might not be representative of all women joining the ISIS, or more so for that matter of women joining religious movements that are deemed to be suppressing women freedom. It is also my understanding that their social media accounts provide only a glimpse of their views. However, since much of the debate about these women was based on the data retrieved by the ISD from social media accounts, I deem it significant to make my argument as well. And no doubt social media was the only outlet available to them where they could speak to the wider audience about their experiences and views.

ISIS Beliefs about the Role of Women in the Islamic State:

The ISIS was created as a result of a split within al-Qaeda in Iraq (AIQ). The leaders of the ISIS, especially Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, believed that because the activities of al-Qaeda were limited to

terrorism and could not draw any clear goals for creating an Islamic state therefore the organization failed. Baghdadi and his fellow commanders thus decided to establish a more conventionally organized militia that aimed at making an Islamic state governed by a caliph.[4] After taking over large territories in eastern Syria and northwestern Iraq, the ISIS militia declared to have created an Islamic State there with an Islamic Caliphate as its governing model.[5]

After creating a de facto Islamic state, the ISIS began to commit violence against the religious minorities (for instance, Yazidis and Christians) and against their fellow Shiite Muslims. However, it is women of these communities who received greater brunt of the ISIS' terror. In August 2014 a UN report, for instance, noted that the ISIS forced an estimated 1500 women, girls, and boys into sexual slavery. According to another report after the city of Mosul fell to the ISIS, they went door to door for raping women.[6] A Woodrow Wilson Center report noted that for ISIS "the female body has effectively become both a weapon of war and a "reward of war."[7] One can argue that the ISIS singled out women from the 'out-group' for such brutality. As Baaz and Stern writing in the context of Congo argue that instances of rape and humiliation demonstrate that sexual violence is deployed as a 'weapon of war.'[8] On the other hand, evidence suggests that even women who work in the ranks of ISIS have to live under significant restrictions and face sexual violence.[9]

The ISIS obviously seeks to revive a version of Islamic caliphate founded on the "pre-modern conception of patriarchy."[10] One of the clearest indications in this regard came with the publication of its manifesto for women— "Women of the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study." Allegedly published by an all-female al Khanssaa Brigade of the ISIS, the document provides an account of women's rights under the Islamic State.[11] The manifesto recommends women to stay at home for much of the time and go outside only in absolute necessity. It advocates early marriages--as early as nine years of age. The manifesto, however, allows girls to get education, but only if it is *Islamic* in nature. The manifesto specially criticizes the 'western model' of life for women and chastises the so-called "soldiers of devil [supporters of western cultures]" for "keeping women from paradise."[12] The manifesto seems to aim for immensely reducing women presence in the public sphere, especially in politics. However, even with such blatant and well publicized restrictions on the 'freedom' of women, many individuals, including women, from western societies are drawn to joining the Islamic State. This is of course puzzling. Therefore, in the following section, I read the expressed motivations of these women joining the ISIS.

Gender and the Question of Western Muslim Women Joining the ISIS

A number of estimates suggest that the number of foreign fighters who have joined the ISIS since the beginning of the civil war in Syria stand at around 12000. According to these estimates by February 2015 around 3000 foreign fighters were of western origins who traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the ISIS. Among these foreign fighters around 550 were women.[13] It is also worth highlighting or acknowledging at the outset that most of these western men and women were Muslims or their countries of origin were the Middle East and Africa.

My assumption in this essay is that the western men who join the ranks of ISIS join in protest of the hegemonic hetero-normative neo-liberal economic order in their countries. The rise of the ISIS for these men represents what Connell describes as the "contestation in hegemonic masculinity."[14] Many of these western men believe that they regularly face discrimination and alienation in the society.[15] Therefore, they take to the image of male warrior fighting the system of hegemonic hetero-normative masculinity that they believe to be the source of subjugation and subordination. Here I agree with Connell and Messerschmidt that "challenges to hegemonic masculinity arise from the "protest masculinities" of marginalized ethnic groups."[16] The global nature of the western hegemonic masculinity and the global appeal of resistance by the ISIS make it particularly hard for the two masculinities to negotiate.

Other explanations of young men joining the ISIS include ideological motivations and adventure-seeking. My earlier explanation based in the concept of hegemonic masculinity and these latter explanations are, however, not mutually exclusive. As sociologist Patricia Sexton notes: "Male norms stress values such as courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body."[17] Therefore a sense of adventure clearly is part of the performativity associated with hegemonic masculinity.[18] Similarly, as we noted earlier, part of the appeal of the ideology that the ISIS espouses is its militaristic orientation.

Whereas it is understandable that western men would join the ISIS for their perceived upward movement in the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinities, the question regarding the motivations of women migrants to the ISIS still begs an answer. According to reports, these women do not engage in fighting. As the ISIS manifesto for women I mentioned earlier makes it abundantly clear that the organization prescribes a limited domestic role for women working

for it. These women are only allowed to leave homes accompanied by a male "guardian."[19] Further, women are made to wear "double-layered veil, loose *abayas* [robe-like dress] and gloves."[20] The decision on the part of these women to relinquish the relative 'freedom' they enjoyed in the west for the 'restrictive' life they have to live with the ISIS puts into question the idea that given sufficient agency individuals opt for enhancing their choices – freedom.[21]

In this article I make use of the analysis undertaken by Jessica Auchter and Saba Mahmood. Auchter discusses the notion of agency with regard to women active in Islamist terrorist organizations. She asserts that these women are seen and explained differently from their male counterparts. They are described as victims who have little or no role in their situation.[22] Similarly Mahmood studies the women's mosque movement in Egypt. Her analysis also problematizes the generally accepted idea that given sufficient choices women break away from such movements.[23] The object of both these lines of argument is to enable us to look beyond the binary of victim-oppressor in such contexts, and complicate our understanding of the women agency in the same manner as that of the men.

Auchter writes that the dominant narrative explaining terrorism is that men have a greater natural tendency to resort to violent methods than women. Women terrorists on the other hand are seen as just a further proof of the ineptitude of women in male domains. Women terrorists are generally presented as victims. They are perceived to be motivated by factors relating to their male family members (such as taking revenge for their male family members). On occasions, participating in such organizations is also seen as an effort on the part of these women to reclaim their agency by resorting to violence, since violence is generally seen as the token for meaningful political participation.

Mahmood maintains that the dominant (feminist) narrative of understanding women actively involved with Islamic movements is that these women support the organizations due to their liking for the system of patriarchy. These feminists believe that if provided with sufficient social and intellectual freedom these Muslim women will likely oppose these movements, or at least break away from them. She also notes that the debate about religion and feminism is most prominently carried out in relation to Islam, especially as Islam is seen to be at odds with the secular-liberal politics. However, Mahmood concludes that most women associated with the mosque movement do not view their movement to be supportive of patriarchy. Rather, these women have created their own spaces within mosques, which are typically exclusive of men.

Social Media and Motivations of the ISIS Women

Now I want to look at the use of agency by Western Muslim women joining the ISIS. I first look into some of the mainstream media narratives about these women. Then, I compare and analyze the data from formal media and social media to determine the motivations of these women for their migration to the ISIS. I also survey the actions of these women in comparison with men who have migrated to join the ISIS.

A CNN report described three British girls who left their home to join the ISIS in the following words: "It took so little time for these three young, innocent, vulnerable girls to go from the heart of London to the heart of Turkey."[24] It is important to understand the implication of language – young, innocent and vulnerable. On the one hand, it negates the agency of these women and; on the other hand, it also relieves them of any responsibility for their actions. It is also pertinent to mention that the girls in question were in their teens. However, it draws a sharp contrast to the manner in which law enforcement and news media refers to young men in similar situation. For instance, when young men in their teens were caught at Chicago airport while trying to board a plane to join the ISIS, *The Washington Post* mentioned a senior US official saying, "The Justice Department is not eager to prosecute juveniles, but it will do so when they are so radicalized that they pose a potential threat."[25]

Although both young men and women joined the ranks of ISIS in similar age groups the news coverage often highlighted young women to be less responsible for their actions than young men. For instance, the title of an article read: "The Syria-bound schoolgirls aren't jihadi devil-women, they're vulnerable children."[26] The media has thus often portrayed young schoolboys joining the ISIS to be expressing their masculine agency as compared to young girls. I would like to mention that despite my intensive probe into various mainstream media outlets, I could not locate a similar narrative of vulnerability presented for young men as I did for women.

If we heed to sociological theory it views agency as the ability of actors to consider choices, take decisions, and make choices regard themselves and the social setup around them. In contrast to the aspect of agency, there is the aspect of social structures, which are thought to be the external limiting factor for actors' choices.[27] The structure-agency debate – the debate over the extent to which social structures determine individual actions – is quite long-standing. In light of this debate if we look at the media reports we get the sense that for women it is always the social structure while for men it is the agency that is emphasized. For instance, young men who migrated to join the ISIS are projected as motivated by more carnal desire or

ideological reasons, rather than by their vulnerability. A Reuters news headline came clear about this aspect: "Joining Islamic State is about 'sex and aggression,' not religion."[28] While the presumption about 'sex and aggression' may not necessarily be wrong, the idea that only men are motivated by these drives is one that needs to be questioned and debated.

Another aspect in the media coverage about Western migrants to the ISIS is the impression of irrationality of women as opposed to men. Whereas the intentions, choices, and actions of men joining the ISIS are portrayed as well calculated; those of the women are portrayed as lacking thought and calculation. As I discussed earlier, this aspect also arises from the misunderstanding of the agency of women. The news coverage of women joining the ISIS, for instance, goes like this: "The ISIS Online Campaign Luring Western Girls to Jihad."[29] In fact the word "lure" is a recurring theme across media coverage while reporting about the process involving women's decision to join the ISIS.[30] In one interesting instance, various news stories focused on a young woman who tweeted about her ISIS fighter husband allegedly threw her kitten out.[31] While one can see the comic dimension in this instance, men who join the ISIS are generally projected as much more purposeful and much less vain than women.

In another instance a male Canadian convert who joined the ISIS received wide coverage in the mainstream media. Identified as Abu Muslim (previously Andre Poulin) the man was killed in March 2014. The coverage received by Abu Muslim in media projected him as a man with a purpose, albeit a deadly one. CBS reported him stating, "This is more than just fighting. We need the engineers, we need doctors, we need professionals … There is a role for everybody."[32] The reported statement itself sounds mundane and unremarkable but compared to the manner of reporting done on women, like the story about the kitten, it is portrayed to carry a serious purpose.

The gender-based comparison in media coverage of western migrants joining the ISIS demonstrates the manner in which major mainstream media outlets project women as vulnerable, irrational and/or vain. While the men migrants are projected as determined and rational. Abu Muslim is just one example in this larger trend involving a large a number of stories. Let me clarify that I do not contest the idea of vulnerability of individuals joining the ISIS. In fact, as I mentioned earlier it is the sense of subordinated masculinity that prompts these men to take such action. However, the purpose here is to highlight how media projecting with women migrants as more vulnerable than men.

Further, as feminist literature suggests, there is a tension between agency and vulnerability.[33] Whereas agency suggests the ability of the actor to take initiative and determine outcomes, vulnerability implies susceptibility to injury.[34] In other words, greater vulnerability suggests an actor's inability to take initiatives and shape outcomes. However, as Mahmood suggests, agency does not have to be absolute. An actor displays agency and vulnerability at the same time. My contention is that women joining the ISIS do not portray vulnerability or agency that is drastically different from their male counterparts. The media portray it in a manner that makes it sound like there is an absence of any agency on their part.

In my opinion, these women certainly assert a degree of agency when they embark on the journey so far from homes. They evidently also defy the social structures by going against the wishes of their families, the dominant public narrative, and government policies in their countries.[35] Although in the structure-agency debate it remains hard to determine which structural imperatives play greater important role in a given context, it is still of considerable importance to note that these women were able to disregard the important institutions in taking their actions.

Explaining the Motivations of Muhajiraat (Migrant women) to the ISIS

While looking at the social media accounts and activities of these women, it is also important to give special attention to their activity before their arrival in the ISIS territory. I think that after they arrived in the ISIS territory, their use of social media would come under significant controls. Moreover, it is also important to point to the vulnerabilities that might have been expressed either before or after their joining the ISIS. It is also crucial to highlight here that the report by Institute for Strategic Dialogue, which prepared the data from social media networks on these girls, focuses only on the women who traveled without a male companion.

As I mention earlier, ideology stands out as a prominent motivation for these women in their journey. Before their departure, all these women have their social media full of accounts of alleged wrongs committed against Muslims. They post supposed pictures of severely disfigured Muslims killed or injured in conflicts around the world – for instance, Palestine, Bosnia and Burma etc. Their message is almost uniform: the world is divided between believers and non-believers. And that non-believers have declared a war on Islam and Muslims.[36] These women refer to the West as *kafir* (infidels) and Muslims who support the western countries as *munafiqeen* (hypocrites).

As against the popular narrative about supposed innocence of women fighters, we find that their social media accounts show the desire for violence. One woman, for instance, after watching a video of murder of a foreign hostage by the ISIS exclaims, "gut-wrenchingly awesome"; another one reacts to a video of beheading by saying:, "I was happy to see the beheading of that *kaffir* [non-believer], I just rewinded to the cutting part, more beheadings please!" Yet another one takes to Twitter to register her feelings about the violent *jihad*, "Know that we have armies in Iraq and an army in Sham [Syria] of angry lions whose drink is blood and play is carnage."[37] This type of glorification of violence by women echoes across social media accounts of ISIS activists, fighters, and aspirants irrespective of their gender.

The glorification of violence and the ideological factors expressed thusly by these women highlight that the motivations of these women are not much different from those of their male group members. Ideology and desire for violence is a consistent thread in the narratives of all these women observed in the report. Although given that any direct mention of sexual attraction is considered a taboo in the Islamist movements, the last statement quoted in the above paragraph does betray a certain romantic bent.

As we discussed earlier, the male *jihadis* are portrayed in the popular media as more purposeful and rational than women. But let me reemphasize that women's idealistic thought about the Islamic caliphate of the ISIS is not much different. The sentiment in which one of the women described her ambition speaks of such purposefulness that is missing in the mainstream media, "We are trying to build an Islamic state that lives and abides by the law of Allah."[38] The ideological orientation of their "adventure'" reflects in such statements as this: "The most important reasons the *muhajireen* [migrants] came here was to reestablish the *khilafah* [caliphate] & be part of bringing back the honor to this *ummah* [Community of Muslims]."[39] It is interesting to note that these women see an important albeit spatially restricted role for themselves in their imagined caliphate. The report suggests broadly three factors behind their migration: grievance about the mal-treatment of Muslims; western attitudes towards Muslims; and the creation of a Muslim caliphate as the final solution for the problems of Muslims around the world. In all these different ways, one can hardly distinguish the aspirations of these women from their fellow male migrants.

When we compare these women's own accounts of their motives to travel to the ISIS with those of different Western analysts, they express much greater agency and single-mindedness than is ascribed to them. One analyst, for instance, states, "Most of the women fit into

two groups: those who travel with their husbands to jihad, and those who travel to Syria or Iraq to get married."[40] While even if we give the benefit of doubt to the possibility of romance and getting married as one of the factors involved in their decision to join the ISI, we clearly see in their own accounts that these women also give a variety of other reasons just as do men. Therefore, such reasoning would constitute reductionism that greatly limits our understanding of these women.

Now looking back at the question I raised in the introduction about the manner in which various groups and individuals define their freedom, there are contrasting narratives in the mainstream media and in the accounts of women joining the ISIS. The media often assumes that the adventure of these women is based on 'false promises', and that they are vulnerable to lose their 'freedom'. It sounds like a reasonable assumption given the well-documented atrocities that the ISIS has committed against women of the 'out-groups'. The ISIS's manifesto regarding women living under ISIS rule proposes a restricted life for women of the 'in-group'. And interestingly some women have also agreed to their more domestic role. One such woman, Umm Ubaydah, for instance, says: "The best thing for a woman is to be a righteous wife and to raise righteous children."[41] Another woman, Umm Layth, says that the "normal day for a *muhajirah* revolves around the same duties as a normal housewife."[42] These statements were posted on social media accounts while the women were in the ISIS territory. Therefore, one might argue that their expression would be significantly limited by the group's influence on them. However, obviously they definitely suggest a departure from the commonly held opinions regarding individual freedom.

Conclusion:

This article complicates superficial explanations about Western Muslim women joining the ISIS. I present evidence from the mainstream Western media and official statements to show that the narratives regarding male and female migrants joining the ISIS are vastly different. Whereas men are projected to be rational and, therefore, responsible for their actions, women are portrayed as irrational and, therefore, vulnerable to luring of the ISIS. Again women are projected as 'innocent and vulnerable' whereas men as having a desire for violence.

I argue that such narratives take away women's agency in shaping their own lives and the society around them. While such approach on the surface appears to be sympathetic to women, as it to a degree exonerates them from the responsibility for joining a terrorist organization; it on the other hand indirectly limits women's

ability to participate and role in political life. On the other, the narratives that show that women join the ISIS for reasons other than violence make the same mistake. By trying to suggest that women have a lesser propensity to violence, the narratives depict women as unfit for operating in the "male domain." However, I maintain that these women show a desire for violence (just as do men). And although these women generally remain away from battlefields, they do at times express and show their desire to participate in violent combats.

The aim of this article is not a moral one. I do not intend to prove that these women are more or less responsible for their actions. In my opinion, unless we take a more nuanced academic approach to the issue, we will neither be able to understand and nor do anything practical about the issue. By adopting a more nuanced approach, I think that we will be able to make better sense of other extremist movements initiated and led by women as well. I want to end with the words of Nimmi Gowrinathan who says: "For many women, and especially for women from the marginalized Sunni community, violence becomes a vehicle for political agency. Women fight for personal as well as political power, often sacrificing one for the other. If the world ignores that fact, it will miss a chance to deal with the identity politics that sustain war."[43]

Notes:

1. González, *Islamic Feminism in Kuwait,* 96.
2. Cunningham, "False consciousness."
3. Bosankic, *Psychosocial Aspects of Niqab Wearing,* 22.
4. Laub, "The Islamic State."
5. Bengali, "Militants declare Islamic state."
6. Peritz and Miller, "The Islamic State of Sexual Violence."
7. Esfandiari, "Barbarians."
8. Baaz and Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War?*
9. Kneip, "Female Jihad–Women in the ISIS."
10. Parramore, "The Srange, Complex Story."
11. Spencer, "ISIS releases Guide to Women's Rights."
12. Winter, "Women of the Islamic State."
13. Hoyle, Bradford, and Frenett, *Becoming Mulan*?
14. Connell, "The Big Picture."
15. Boneillo, "Why are Girls Flocking to ISIS?"
16. Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity."
17. Donaldson, "What is Hegemonic Masculinity."
18. Gieseler, "Performances of Gender and Sexuality."

19. Ferran and Kreider, “Selling the 'Fantasy.'”
20. Mahmood, “Double-layered veils and despair.”
21. Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty,* ix.
22. Auchter, “Gendering Terror.”
23. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety.*
24. Mullen, “What is ISIS' Appeal for Young People?”
25. Sullivan, “Three American teens.”
26. Iqbal, “The Syria-bound schoolgirls.”
27. Germov and Poole, *Public Sociology,* 6.
28. Kruglanski. “Joining Islamic State.”
29. Dettmer, “The ISIS Online Campaign.”
30. Some of the other headlines read: “Lured by ISIS: How the Young Girls who Revel in Brutality are Offered Cause;” “How IS Message Lures Western Women;” “CNN: ISIS Lures Women With Nutella and Kittens.”
31. Sherwood, “Schoolgirl Jihadis.”
32. Breslow, “Why Are So Many Westerners Joining ISIS.”
33. Allen, “Keeping the Feminist in our Teaching,” 354.
34. Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 8.
35. Cusick, “Families appeal.”
36. Hoyle, Bradford, and Frenett, “Becoming Mulan?”
37. Malik, “Lured by Isis.”
38. Hoyle, Bradford, and Frenett, “Becoming Mulan?”
39. Ibid,12.
40. Vinograd, “Jihadi Brides Swap Lives.”
41. Hoyle, Bradford, and Frenett, “Becoming Mulan?” 22.
42. Ibid.
43. Gowrinathan, “The Women of ISIS.”

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