# Women Involvement in Terrorism: Influencing Factors and Prevention Approaches

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## Abstract

*In the intricate tapestry of women's participation in terrorism, especially in the tumultuous South Asian context, this research delves into the multifaceted factors motivating their engagement. Drawing upon historical insights and contemporary case studies, the study thoroughly investigates the compelling motivations driving women into the shadowy world of terrorism. It examines their resistance to oppression, pursuit of justice, and quests for revenge within a region marked by insurgency and conflict. The research methodology employed comprises qualitative data from interviews, a comprehensive analysis of historical and contemporary sources, and an exploration of the 3N, and Precht's theoretical model. These factors illuminate the complex interplay of state policies, religious ideologies, coercion, and the harrowing spectre of women trafficking. The research findings reveal the nuanced nature of women's roles in these movements, emphasising the critical need for gender-sensitive counterterrorism measures. This research equips policymakers, terrorism experts, and scholars with essential insights, guiding their understanding of the intricate contemporary landscape involving women in terrorism. Additionally, it contributes to the discussion on counterterrorism and prevention with timely recommendations and insights.*
***Keywords:*** *terrorism, extremism, women trafficking, gender-sensitive counterterrorism, South Asia*

## Introduction

The involvement of women in terrorist activities is a complex and longstanding global phenomenon that extends across various historical and geographical boundaries. This research aims to explore

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the multifaceted role of women in terrorism, offering insights into their participation in criminal acts, violence, destruction, and, in some cases, acts of heroism, as exemplified in the life of Joan De Arc.[1] These women often find themselves labelled as criminals or terrorists, embracing roles ranging from leaders and spies to suicide bombers within extremist groups and organisations.

The history of women's participation in terrorism can be traced back to their engagement in radical and revolutionary struggles of the past. For instance, the women of Narodnaya Volya[2] demonstrated a remarkable willingness to sacrifice themselves for their cause, often surpassing their male comrades in dedication. Women have actively participated in anti-colonial and revolutionary movements in the developing world for decades.

Women's involvement in the most extreme forms of participation in terrorism varies from one group to another and is influenced by distinct reasons. In regions such as Türkiye and Sri Lanka, women's activism has a rich history, with their full participation permitted even in the early stages of these organisations. In contrast, the emergence of Palestinian women suicide bombers or isolated terrorists in Chechnya challenged societal expectations, emerging more recently, against all odds. It is crucial to recognise that a patriarchal structure often dominates the societies where these terrorist organisations are located. Nevertheless, within these patriarchal frameworks, women's involvement is often strategically planned.

Women who engage in terrorism may seem to be both literally and metaphorically 'dying'[3] to have a more active role in armed conflict, yet their participation does not shield them from exploitation. While men often undertake suicide missions motivated by religious or nationalist fanaticism, women use combat as a means to escape the confines of predetermined societal roles. When women become

human bombs, they aim to make a statement, not only in the name of a country, religion, or leader, but also in the name of their gender.[4]

The willingness of women to engage in terrorist activities is harnessed both internally and externally. Within the ranks of terrorist groups, their eagerness to kill and die is exploited by male leaders. Externally, women are often portrayed and exploited by the media as symbols of the desperation of 'freedom fighters', blurring the line between portraying them as cold-blooded murderers and victims themselves.

This dichotomy is further exemplified by the societal expectation of women as gentle, submissive, and nonviolent individuals. Terrorist groups exploit this stereotype to further their cause, demonstrating that even individuals traditionally seen as 'good wives and mothers' can commit acts of violence in extreme circumstances, justifying them as responses to unjust and desperate situations.

Historically, women have played pivotal roles in terrorist organisations, as seen with Peruvian women of Andean-Indian origin in the Shining Path. The Central Committee of the militant organisation had at least eight women holding key positions, with women comprising nearly 40 per cent of the Shining Path militants.[5] The People's Will, an organisation involved in revolutionary activities, also witnessed significant female participation, with figures like Vera Figner, Maria Oshanina, Anna Yakimova, and Sophia Perovskaya being key members.[6] Even today, the legacy of these women continues to inspire revolutionary movements.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) marked a turning point in the history of women in terrorism, with women comprising up to 30 per cent of the total number of suicide attackers between 1991 and 2007. Women formed specialised attack (tank) units in the Battle of Elephant Pass that displayed remarkable success on the battlefield, challenging conventional expectations.[7] In the context of South Asia,

the region has not been immune to the phenomenon of women's participation in terrorism. India and Pakistan, in particular, have experienced the involvement of women in extremist groups, further highlighting the complexity and relevance of this issue to the South Asian region. Various extremist organisations in the region have harnessed the potential of women, underscoring the need for an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon in a South Asian context.

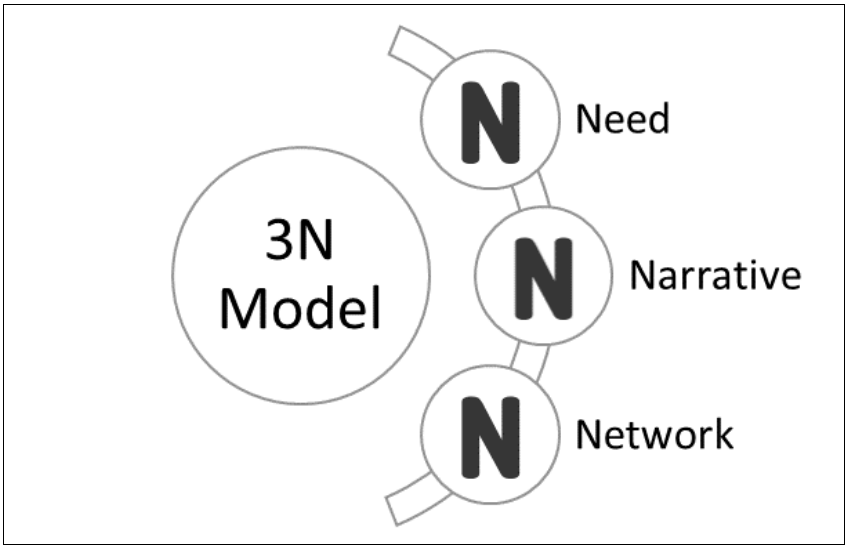
The research seeks to address three key aspects: a) a theoretical model explaining women's involvement in terrorism, b) the roles and types of female terrorists, and c) the factors influencing women's participation in terrorism. To fulfil these research objectives, a mixed-methods approach was employed, utilising both quantitative and qualitative tools, such as books, journal articles, and news articles. Additionally, a wide range of interviews were conducted with subject matter experts, including a former Director General of the Inter-Services Public Relations, Pakistan (DG ISPR), journalists, and terrorism studies experts from Pakistan, Kashmir, and Balochistan. While the focus extends beyond South Asia to encompass real examples from other regions, there are three theoretical models applied in the research. The models include the 3N model proposed by Arie W Kruglanski, another model proposed by psychologists and behavioural scientists at the Joint Military Information Support Center (JMISC), and lastly Precht's Model of a 'Typical' Radicalisation Pattern. The study concludes with recommendations based on the findings.

## Theoretical Framework

Radicalisation is the process by which an individual adopts unconventional and often violent methods to achieve their objectives. The theories on radicalisation have traditionally been non-gendered and often overlook the role of women in terrorism and extremism. This oversight is largely due to the perception of terrorism as a male-centric activity, with women viewed as weak and submissive. However, as more cases of female terrorism emerge worldwide, there is increasing

attention to the theoretical roots of women's involvement in terrorism. For this research, three different models have been selected to collectively identify the various causes and motivations behind female involvement in terrorism. The first model is the 3N model and the second is Precht's Model of a 'Typical' Radicalisation Pattern.

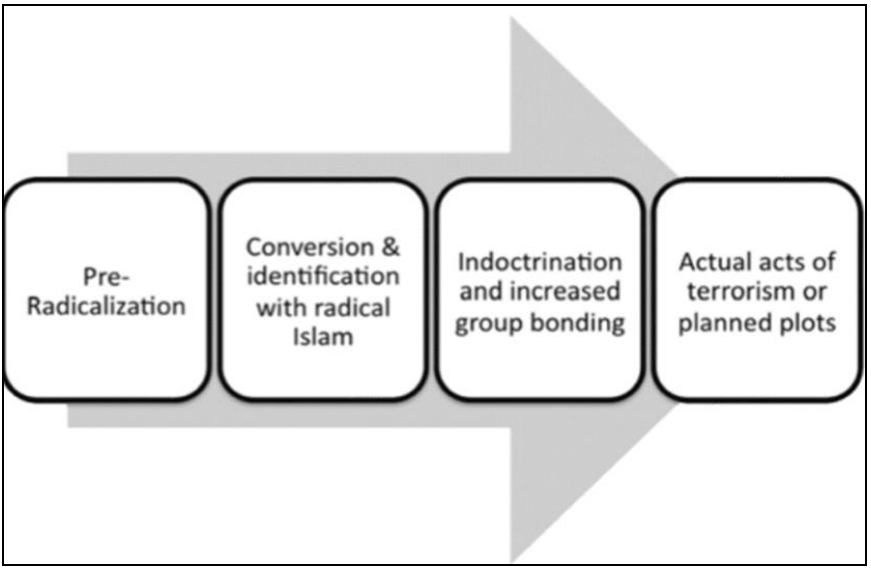
The 3N theory, developed by Kruglanski, suggests that radicalisation results from the interplay of three key factors: individuals' needs, the narratives that they encounter, and the networks that they are a part of. [8]




According to this theory, these three elements significantly influence the progression toward violent extremism. The first factor is the need, referring to an individual's universal desire for personal significance. The second factor is the narrative, which shapes how members of a group seek significance based on the group's collective story. The third factor is the network, representing the group membership that supports the narrative and provides rewards, such as respect and recognition, to those who adhere to it.[9]

The second is the Precht model, delineating the stages of radicalisation, which aligns closely with frameworks developed by

both the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the New York Police Department (NYPD) Intelligence Unit. This model outlines a four-phase progression: pre-radicalisation, conversion and identification with radical Islam, indoctrination coupled with intensified group cohesion, and the execution of terrorist activities or formulated plots. Precht emphasises that the dynamics within small groups and the sense of identification within these groups often significantly accelerate the adoption of extremist ideologies.[10]




Precht's analysis extends to identifying and examining the factors that drive the radicalisation process in militant Islamists. He categorises these motivational factors into three groups:

- Background Factors: These involve personal challenges related to religious identity, experiences of discrimination, and issues with social integration.
- Trigger Factors: This includes influential individuals, such as mentors or charismatic leaders, and specific events or policy decisions that might provoke a reaction or drive activism.
- Opportunity Factors: These refer to the extent of an individual's access to and the likelihood of encountering

extremist ideas or individuals. Such factors include physical and virtual spaces like the Internet, mosques, prisons, and various social groups or collectives.

The two frameworks offer valuable insights into understanding the motivations, recruitment strategies, and organisational roles of female terrorists. However, it is essential to recognise that while these models provide an initial understanding, they may not universally apply to every case detailing women's involvement in terrorism.

For instance, the 3N theory's 'Needs' component delves into the personal, psychological, and socio-economic motivations that drive women to engage in terrorist activities. Examples abound, such as the Chechen 'Black Widows' or female participants in the Palestinian intifada, who often cite motives like revenge or resistance. Similarly, female terrorists from the LTTE demonstrate dedication to a cause. Furthermore, narratives highlight the ideological or propaganda messages used by terrorists to attract women, as evidenced in cases involving the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA).

Moreover, the social and organisational structures that facilitate women's involvement in terrorism, often termed networks, can be illustrated by examples of individuals influenced by familial bonds or common ties. The second model expands on these examples, providing a more nuanced understanding by identifying phases and determinants applicable to many cases. However, it is important to acknowledge that these frameworks may not fully encompass every aspect of female terrorism, as individual motivations and circumstances can vary widely.

## Types and Roles of Female Terrorists

Female terrorists and militants can be found across the world, participating in a wide range of activities within extremist organisations. Their roles transcend geographical boundaries, reflecting the global nature of terrorism. These roles can include

operatives or foot soldiers, suicide bombers, cyberterrorists, lone wolves, leaders, spies and infiltrators, supporters and financiers, propagandists, human shields, social and political activists, and individuals with specialised roles.

**Operatives or Foot Soldiers**

Women actively participate as operatives in various regions, such as South Asia where groups like the LTTE had female combatants. Globally, women have served as operatives in organisations like the Irish Republican Army (IRA).[11]

*Suicide Bombers*

Female suicide bombers have gained notoriety in regions like South Asia and the Middle East, including instances in Pakistan, Palestine, and Sri Lanka. Beyond these areas, women have carried out suicide bombings globally, exemplified by the 2015 Paris attacks and numerous other incidents. In 2017, following the emergence of ISIS, local extremist cells recruited Noreen Leghari intending to orchestrate a suicide bombing during Easter celebrations at a church in Pakistan.[12] However, authorities apprehended Leghari before she could carry out the attack. Subsequently, Leghari confessed to being influenced by ISIS propaganda. Her case is particularly intriguing because ISIS generally does not encourage women to primarily serve as suicide bombers. This underscores the variations in women's roles, influenced by the specific local contexts and decentralised ISIS cells and networks in Pakistan.[13]

*Cyberterrorists*

Women with technical skills engage in cyberterrorism, which is defined as "the convergence of cyberspace and terrorism." It involves hacking computer systems, disrupting critical infrastructure, or spreading extremist propaganda online. Sally Jones, also known as Umm Hussain Al Britani,[14] exemplifies the role of a cyberterrorist. As a British hacker and recruiter for ISIS, she harnessed her technical skills

to effectively disseminate extremist ideologies and recruit individuals via social media platforms.

*Lone Wolves*

Female lone-wolf terrorists typically operate independently and are not affiliated with any formal terrorist group. They often carry out attacks driven by personal grievances or extremist ideologies. Lone-wolf terrorism is defined as "acts of terrorism committed by individuals acting alone or with minimal assistance, having no direct connection to any organisation." While female lone wolves are relatively rare, they are not entirely unheard of. A prominent example of a female lone wolf is Tashfeen Malik, who played a key role in the San Bernardino shooting. She and her husband were motivated by extremist ideologies and carried out the attack without formal connections with any larger terrorist organisation, embodying the classic 'lone wolf' archetype.

In another case, the lone woman arrested during the Pulwama investigation was found to have played a significant role in aiding Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) terrorists who executed a deadly suicide attack the previous year. According to the National Investigation Agency (NIA), Insha Jan, aged 23, was linked to the primary conspirator of the Pulwama attack while Mohd Umar Farooq was the Pakistani bomb-maker killed by security forces in Kashmir.[15]

**Leaders and Commanders**

Women have risen to leadership positions in South Asian militant groups like the Maoists in India. Globally, female leaders have been found within organisations like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Black Widows.

*Propagandists*

Female terrorists globally engage in propaganda, utilising social media for recruitment. Relevant examples of the aforementioned include women affiliated with Al-Qaeda and ISIS, who

are recruited through propaganda and play diverse roles, including disseminating extremist content online and participating in phenomena like the "jihadi bride" recruitment strategy.[16] Their involvement highlights the multifaceted roles women play within terrorist organisations.

*Specialised Roles*

Women have played pivotal roles within terrorist organisations, enhancing operational effectiveness both in South Asia and globally. These specialised roles encompass bomb-making, medical support, and recruitment. While comprehensive data may be limited, it is assumed, given the historical involvement of women in terrorism, that they also participate in bomb-making activities. This assumption is based on their long-standing contributions to various aspects of terrorist operations. In addition, women's roles as medical personnel and recruiters have been well-documented across right-wing and left-wing extremist groups, exemplified by the willingness of female doctors to join organisations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS in South Asia.

Women's involvement in terrorism is not confined to one particular region; it is a global phenomenon. The roles that they assume within extremist organisations are diverse, multifaceted and not limited to the ones stated above, reflecting the varied motivations and contexts in which they operate. South Asia, with its historical and ongoing conflicts, serves as a pertinent case study to understand the dynamics of women participation in terrorism and the enduring and complex nature of their roles.

## Influencing Factors

Women's engagement in terrorism is driven by a complex interplay of factors. Understanding the motivations behind their actions is crucial. Here are some key factors that highlight the involvement of women in terrorism:

i. *Resistance Against Oppression:* Women have actively taken part in terrorism to resist the oppression of occupying forces in their regions. Notable examples include Maryam Goris, who plotted a car bomb attack against oppressors, and Sajida Mubarak Atrous al-Rishawi, who attempted a suicide bombing during a wedding party in response to perceived oppression.

ii. *Demonstrating Commitment:* Engaging in acts of terrorism demonstrates a strong commitment to a cause. Women, often marginalised in society, have undertaken extreme actions to assert their dedication, which has a compelling influence on male fighters. Other reasons for women's involvement in terrorism include autonomy, self-determination, and fear of sexual violence.[17]

iii. *Empowering the Family:* Becoming a female suicide bomber challenges the patriarchal norms and significantly enhances the social status of the woman and her family. The theatrics of suicide attacks may solidify the family's standing in a particular society.[18]

iv. *Resistance to Suppression:* Women have resorted to terrorism as a response to personal suppression, particularly in conservative and less educated areas. Notable cases, such as Noreen Laghari, who felt suppressed at home and subsequently took action, exemplify this motivation.[19]

v. *Seeking Notoriety:* The allure of achieving notoriety through suicide attacks, often recorded and posted online as recruitment tools, attracts individuals looking for an escape from their ongoing circumstances. There are plenty of such female suicide bomber recruits from South Asia and the West who joined Al-Qaeda, ISIS and Al-Shabab for it.[20] Another example is Farabundo Marti's preference to join domestic terrorist groups influenced by the desire to maintain a higher status and the impact of inequality.[21]

To comprehensively analyse the motivations behind female terrorists and militants in South Asia and worldwide, it is essential to focus on some other major factors too. Every region and country has its unique dynamics and challenges, and this holds true for the motivations of women in these diverse contexts as well. The other factors include:

**Revenge**

Revenge serves as a prevalent motive for both men and women when they join terrorist organisations and engage in extremist activities. It can be rooted in personal factors, such as the loss of loved ones or incidents of sexual abuse by foreign soldiers. Additionally, it may have social origins tied to experiences during an occupation. Research on gender differences regarding the need for revenge has yielded varying results. While some studies suggest men may be more vengeful, others find no significant gender-based distinctions. Furthermore, the desire for vengeance appears to be unrelated to gender. Studies focusing on aggressive triggers and capabilities for revenge indicate that both men and women possess the capacity for aggressive behaviour and exhibit no gender-based disparities following frustrating events.

A notable illustration of women motivated by revenge is the Black Widows. A group of female suicide bombers primarily of Chechen origin, the Black Widows have played a significant role in the Chechen conflict against Russia since their first attack in 2000. For instance, Khava Barayev and Luisa Magomadova drove a truck filled with explosives into the temporary headquarters of an elite OMAN (Russian Special Forces) detachment in the village of Alkhan Yurt in Chechnya. While the group also includes male members, a majority of the group members are females who serve as suicide bombers and recruiters, partly driven by their desire for revenge. The motive of revenge is also found in females from Balochistan as they have seen their family members go missing or murdered in front of them. To

avenge their deaths, they take part in terrorist activities and play various roles including that of suicide bombers, facilitators, etc.[22]

**State**

The role of governments is a significant factor in encouraging women's participation in extremist activities. A prominent example is North Korea's use of Kim Hyon Hui. When Seoul was chosen for the 1988 Olympics, North Korea, viewing it as a political affront, aimed to deter participation by orchestrating the bombing of Korean Air Flight 858, Kim Hyon Hui, a petite woman, was specifically recruited and indoctrinated to carry out this act. Her gender made her less conspicuous, and she was prepared to commit a suicidal act for her country. The North Korean operative intended to blow up an airline full of people, an act that took eight days of intense interrogation to reveal.

According to former DG ISPR Lt. General Asif Ghafoor, a state's foremost responsibility is to secure its youth, with education being a top priority. Weak state authority and poor governance are the root causes of radicalisation. The state must address these issues to counter the emerging female involvement in terrorism.[23] Also, patriarchal inequality plays a significant role in society's downfall. The belief that boys are more important than girls or that girls require male protection due to safety concerns can lead to repressive and submissive behaviour among women, in turn leading to women's potential involvement in terrorism. Moreover, the changing roles of women in terrorism and the unpreparedness of political and military leaders to understand these transformations are other provocative factors for women. The 4Rs Plus One, i.e., revenge, redemption, relationship, respect, and rape theory, further explains why women participate in terrorist groups, underlining the role of government actions in their recruitment.[24]

In Nigeria, the abduction of schoolgirls by Boko Haram highlights the failure to address the root causes of the insurgency.

Poverty and lack of education in the country's North East make it easier for Boko Haram to recruit followers. Allegations of corruption within the Nigerian military and government have hindered the fight against terrorism. President Buhari has also cited the pandemic as a factor allowing insurgents to gain more support.[25] These instances underscore the complex relationship between state actions and societal norms and the motivations driving women's involvement in terrorism.

**Religion and Nationalism**

Religion and nationalism are prominent motivations behind female involvement in extremist activities. Group membership is often the catalyst, fostering a collective identity and shared objectives that take precedence over individual beliefs. This dynamic leads to de-individualisation, where individuals shift their focus to group values and become more willing to carry out suicide attacks in service of the group's cause.

In some cases, young individuals who travel to the Middle East for religious rituals find themselves coerced into performing tasks, and/or are pressured in the name of religion.[26] Certain individuals are drawn to extremism through their interpretation of Islam and the concept of Jihad, viewing self-sacrifice for a cause as a more meaningful alternative to a purposeless existence. It is crucial to recognise that such interpretations do not represent the true teachings of any religion, including Islam, as extremist groups deliberately manipulate these interpretations to influence susceptible minds.

In Balochistan, ethno-nationalism has fuelled the increased use of female militants as suicide bombers, driven by a combination of environmental, organisational, and individual factors. Notably, the BLA (Bashir Zaib Baloch faction) has employed female suicide bombers. For instance, Sumaiya Qalandarani Baloch was identified as the second female suicide bomber for this faction, with others like Shari Baloch

and Noor Jahan also being trained for suicide bombings. Sumaiya Baloch, a female suicide bomber, previously worked as a journalist for the BLA's media wing for five years. She was associated with Rehan Baloch and Aslam Baloch and came from Tootak in Khuzdar, a place where several of her relatives were 'forcibly disappeared.'[27]

In a significant development, a woman carried out a suicide attack in the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). Although her bomb exploded prematurely, it marked a noteworthy occurrence. A spokesperson claiming to represent the proscribed Jaish-e-Mohammad militant group took responsibility for the incident. The act, however, does not come under the definition of terrorism because IIOJK is a disputed territory—as per the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions—under illegal occupation of an aggressor state. The individuals under occupation resort to violence because they believe that their basic rights and freedoms have been denied. They view these rights as essential and are willing to use various means, including violence, to secure them. In light of this, females in IIOJK never resort to terrorism. If they use violent means, it is for a just cause.[28]

**Ideology**

Some women are attracted to extremist or terrorist groups due to their deeply held ideological or political beliefs. They become radicalised by the ideologies these groups propagate and believe that violent actions are necessary to achieve their goals. An illustrative example of this phenomenon can be seen in the involvement of women in various Maoist insurgencies in Nepal, particularly within the ranks of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).

The Maoists have claimed that approximately one-third of the 'People's Liberation Army' is comprised of women. Over a span of eight years, the Maoist revolution extended its influence from two districts in Nepal to encompass almost two-thirds of the country. Women cadres play diverse roles within this movement, serving as

propaganda activists, members of agricultural production teams, and even guerrilla fighters. Comrade Parvati, an alias used by a prominent leader who heads the women's department of the Central Committee, highlights the rise of women in significant positions within the movement, such as battalion vice commanders and political commissars.

In 2003, a Nepali human rights organisation known as Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC) reported that women constituted at least 159 of the 1,308 individuals killed by security forces. This statistic underscores the profound impact and sacrifices made by women within the Maoist movement. The so-called 'People's War' was initiated by the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-Maoist) in 1996, to abolish the monarchy and establish a communist republic. The ensuing clashes between the Maoists and security forces resulted in the deaths of over 10,000 individuals. 'Comrade Prachanda', the chairman of the CPN-Maoist, acknowledged that the party was taken aback by the unexpected response of women who joined the armed struggle.

A prominent female Maoist leader, Hsila Yami, has emphasised the emancipatory potential of the movement for women. She highlighted the benefits that women, particularly from Tibeto-Burman and non-Aryan backgrounds, especially those from lower castes, stand to gain from the 'People's War'. Yami, who is the wife of the second-highest-ranking Maoist in Nepal, Baburam Bhattarai, stressed the importance of women's involvement in radical activities. She underlined the significance of women in a subsistence agro-economy, where half of the households engage in seasonal migration. Women form the majority of the rural community, particularly in de facto female-headed households. Yami concluded that an agrarian revolution cannot materialise without mobilising women and involving them in activities that support the movement, even donning guerrilla attire. This reflects the crucial role women play in the

ideological and revolutionary landscape of Maoist insurgency in Nepal.[29]

**Family**

The pressure to engage in suicide terrorism can often originate from peer or familial influence. Research indicates that pre-existing friendship bonds play a significant role in the formal integration of terrorists, with 68 per cent of them having close friends or acquaintances within the extremist group. Moreover, familial bonds also play a crucial role in the recruitment of terrorists. Approximately 75 per cent of terrorists have pre-existing familial ties to individuals involved in terrorist organisations or join these groups with friends or relatives. Such kinship links have been identified as influential in recruiting women as well. For example, the Egyptian religious militant group Repentance and Holy Flight showed that female terrorists were often relatives or wives of male members.[30]

The role of kinship bonds can be observed in the case of the Hamburg Cell, responsible for the 9/11 bombings. The strong in-group bonds and radicalisation of ideologies within this cell were facilitated by intensive interactions among friends and peers, leading to the absence of extra-group bonds. Both men and women can be influenced by such peer and familial connections.[31]

A more recent trend is the mobilisation of entire family units as suicide bombers[32], partly attributed to the Islamic State's appeal for increased female participation in terrorist attacks. While Southeast Asia has been relatively slow in deploying women as suicide bombers, there have been recorded instances of women's involvement in suicide bombing campaigns in places like Sri Lanka and Pakistan. One significant turning point was the 2018 suicide attack in Surabaya, which initiated the trend of family suicide bombings in Southeast Asia. It garnered attention from the media and academia, shedding light on the exploitation of women and children in terrorist attacks. More recently, the widows of deceased terrorists have been recruited to

become suicide bombers in the Philippines. For example, in August 2020, the widows of two deceased terrorists carried out a twin suicide attack near Paradise Food Plaza in Jolo, and further arrests were made in a counterterrorism raid on 24 February 2021.[33] Another case involved Ayesha Jannat Mohona, who attempted to pass herself off as Bangladeshi while being linked to Neo-Jama'at Mujahideen Bangladesh (Neo-JMB). She had converted to Islam from Hinduism in 2009 and played a role in recruiting members, both men and women.[34]

The rise of female squads and the involvement of women in militancy have been notable developments. Counter-terrorism efforts in Bangladesh have reported the arrests of at least 100 female members of militant outfits, with 11 female militants losing their lives.[35] Furthermore, in March 2022, Pakistan's Counterterrorism Department (CTD) arrested three individuals, including a woman involved in the 2015 attack on the Pakistan Air Force base in Badaber. In April, Shari Baloch, a mother of two, conducted a fatal suicide attack at the University of Karachi's Confucius Institute, resulting in the tragic loss of four lives, including three Chinese nationals. In the following month, Noor Jahan Baloch was arrested in Balochistan's Turbat region, allegedly linked to the BLA's Majeed Brigade and planning a suicide attack. In June 2023, the BLA employed another female suicide bomber in an attack on paramilitary troops in Balochistan. Furthermore, in 2023, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) released two magazines highlighting the pivotal supporting role women play for their male relatives actively engaged in jihad.[36]

**Women Trafficking**

Human trafficking is a factor often overlooked when examining the motivations behind female involvement in terrorism. This issue serves as the root cause of many wrongdoings by women and plays a significant role in their vulnerability to exploitation by terrorist groups. In certain cases, young girls and children are trafficked when they travel to the Middle East for religious duties.[37] They are

often lured under false pretences and not allowed to leave until they complete the assigned task. This phenomenon is more prevalent in underdeveloped regions, where girls are exchanged for money that helps their families survive.

For terrorist organisations, human trafficking serves multiple purposes. It generates revenue, inflicts terror, and attracts new fighters. Trafficking tactics are used to deceive and forcibly recruit both adults and minors into these groups, and to keep them in exploitative situations. However, it is crucial to recognise that recruits themselves can be victims of trafficking. To address this situation appropriately, it is necessary to consider when the legal definition of human trafficking applies to foreign recruits of groups like ISIS and why authorities often fail to acknowledge this phenomenon.

The case of Shamima Begum provides insight into these complex issues. Shamima was only 15 when she left East London to join ISIS in Syria. She was recruited online by a known female ISIS recruiter and was swiftly married off to an adult Dutch fighter upon arrival in Raqqa. She experienced a harrowing journey as a child bride, giving birth to children who tragically died.[38]

Detecting trafficking in recruitment or unlawful association with extremist groups hinges on understanding when individuals may be trafficked. International law defines trafficking through three elements for adult recruits: 1) an 'act' like recruitment or transportation, 2) the specific 'intent' to exploit, and 3) the use of certain 'means.'[39] These means can include deception or the abuse of power or vulnerability. However, trafficking can also occur through an exploitative process or when an exploitative situation results or is sustained without a preceding exploitative process. For example, individuals may be falsely promised jobs that lead to involuntary recruitment or may be genuinely deceived about the conditions in extremist-controlled territories. Changed circumstances can also turn voluntary travel into involuntary captivity.

The case of ISIS child recruits highlights the complexity of this issue. Shamima Begum's recruitment at the age of 15 and her experiences as a child bride illustrate how children can be trafficked as well. Her treatment and the legal decisions regarding her case have raised questions about recognising the trafficking of child recruits within extremist groups.[40]

In regions like Nepal, where insurgency and trafficking intersect, the vulnerability of girls is a grave concern. Young boys may find employment across the border, but the options for girls are limited, putting them at risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation. In Nepal, approximately 5,000 girls are trafficked to India each year.[41]

**Coercion**

Coercion is a potent factor driving the actions of many terrorist and non-terrorist organisations, manifesting in various ways. Women often find themselves subjected to force and pressure from both internal and external sources, leaving them with limited choices and a sense of compulsion.

Internally, women are often pressured to engage in activities they are reluctant to undertake. Their inner conflict compels them to comply with these demands, even as their hearts cry out for autonomy. Externally, terrorist organisations employ coercive tactics, particularly in recruiting women as sex slaves, irrespective of their desires. This coercive recruitment is a prevalent aspect of these groups' operations, as exemplified by Boko Haram.[42]

Boko Haram, the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabab, and similar organisations employ sexual violence as a means of terrorising populations into submission. It serves to displace civilians strategically, instil unit cohesion among fighters, and generate revenue through trafficking. The suppression of women's rights not only subjects them to subjugation but also allows extremists to control reproduction and exploit female labour.[43]

In Nepal, young girls like Sharmila Gatri and Sangeeta Chettri fled their villages in response to forceful recruitment attempts by Maoist rebels. They sought refuge in Kathmandu but ended up working in an environment marked by sexual exploitation. Maoist recruitments in the Lamjung district showed a preference for sending daughters rather than sons when the rebels called for one family member to join. This illustrates how coercion and gender-based violence play a role in recruitment processes.[44]

Similarly, the LTTE, while initially appearing to have voluntary female recruits, also had reports revealing coercive recruitment methods. Some women were mobilised and recruited under duress, often at the behest of family members or due to gender-based violence. This recruitment process mirrors the approaches of Jihadi Salafi groups in Afghanistan, Iran, etc., which exploit women in various ways, expanding the scope of women's involvement. A similar case is examined in Africa where girls who have hardly crossed puberty are kidnapped and forced to take part in terrorist activities.[45]

Coercion is a pervasive element in the involvement of women in terrorist activities, both as a result of internal pressures and external exploitation. Therefore, understanding the coercive tactics employed by these organisations is crucial in addressing and preventing the involvement of women in such activities.

**Environment**

Environmental factors significantly influence the motivations and behaviours of individuals in conflict-affected regions. One notable example is the Palestinian territories, where Fatah Tanzim, a militant organisation, has incorporated women into various roles, including battlefield intelligence gathering. Although women like Leila Khalid were involved in terrorist actions in the 1970s, it was not until 2002 that women achieved equal status with men in terrorist activities.[46]

The emergence of women engaging in suicide bombings in the Palestinian territories can be attributed to the prevailing anti-Israeli

environment in these areas. Environmental pressures, coupled with hostility toward Israeli occupation, have driven women to participate in suicide bombings. Palestinian clerics have had to issue fatwas to rationalise these unexpected events that were not part of their initial plans. These women, motivated by their self-declared aspirations to become martyrs, volunteered independently and carried out suicide bombings. However, not all terrorist organisations, such as Hamas, are open to the inclusion of women in their ranks.

These environmental factors contributing to female involvement in terrorism are not exclusive to the Palestinian territories. Similar dynamics can be observed in the conflict-prone environment, historical context, socio-political and economic conditions and ongoing insurgencies in countries like Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan which have compelled women to participate in extremist activities for various causes. For example, the role of female militants in insurgencies in India's North-Eastern states, such as Assam and Manipur, offers a lens into the regional dynamics of female involvement in terrorism.

**Weak Counter-Terrorism Strategies**

The increasing threat of violent extremism by women demands a fresh approach to counter it effectively. For too long, women in extremist movements have been viewed as lacking agency, often treated as mere accessories, manipulated into embracing extremist ideologies or assigned peripheral roles. This approach has consequences; female terrorists are not treated as seriously as their male counterparts, impacting security. For example, radicalised American women commit similar crimes with nearly the same success rates as men but are less likely to be arrested and convicted of terrorism-related offences.

In recent years, ISIS has recruited an unprecedented number of women, primarily through tailored, age-appropriate narratives appealing to Muslim teenagers and young adults worldwide. Similar to

QAnon, ISIS targeted well-intentioned young women with messages of helping orphans victimised by the Syrian conflict. This approach had a direct impact on events such as the 2015 San Bernardino shooting, where Tashfeen Malik played a significant role in radicalising her husband.[47]

Western women have also been influential online recruiters, particularly luring girls from their home countries. Teenage girls, being cautious when communicating with unknown men online, are less guarded when connecting with older women who share their interests and concerns. Hoda Muthana from Alabama and Aqsa Mahmood from Scotland effectively recruited girls from the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively.[48]

The rise of extremist ideologies among women, the success of female-to-female recruitment, and the changed dynamics of identity and belonging in the ideological ecosystem underscore the looming threat that demands immediate attention. Countering this threat requires a deep understanding of the psychology of belonging, agency, and identity, as well as tailor-made programs employing former female recruiters. Unfortunately, policymakers have been slow to recognise this threat, treating radical women as a curiosity and failing to create science-driven, gender-sensitive counterterrorism solutions.

It is essential to acknowledge the historical involvement of women in terrorism, from early figures like Vera Zasulich to their participation in European terrorist groups in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, women have been marginalised in the fight against terrorism. Female terrorists have been overlooked as both recruits and victims, with 10-20 per cent of Westerners joining ISIS being women. In 2017, women accounted for 11 per cent of suicide attacks and constituted 26 per cent of those arrested on terrorism charges in Europe,[49] in which after the Paris attacks, women were reported to be 20 per cent from France alone. The oversight of France's intelligence in recognising women's

roles in terrorism is evident from the huge ratio of women joining ISIS and ISIL.[50]

Omitting women from terrorism prevention efforts squanders their potential contributions as extremism mitigators. Women can detect early signs of radicalisation, provide crucial insights, and influence countering-terrorism efforts in schools, religious institutions, social environments, and local government. Neglecting the role that women can play in combating extremism compromises national security, leaving states less secure. Moreover, Pakistan government's inadvertent neglect of gender, particularly women, in its counterterrorism approach has created a societal vacuum, leading to gender-based terrorism issues in the country. This gender-blindness in counterterrorism policy has allowed such issues to flourish.[51]

## Conclusion

The surge in women's involvement in terrorism and militancy reflects a multifaceted dynamic influenced by various factors. A closer examination of the intricate web of motivations, dynamics, and challenges reveals that women are not mere observers but active participants in the complex world of terrorism, each with their unique stories and roles. Notably, areas in South Asia marked by conflicts and insurgencies witness a higher prevalence of female terrorists, suggesting a correlation between geopolitical turmoil and increased female involvement.

Understanding the recruitment and radicalisation of women into extremist ideologies is crucial for devising effective strategies to prevent and counter their participation in terrorism. This phenomenon is not new, yet the persistent negligence by states and their agencies emphasises the urgent need for an effective application of the counter-terrorism model that encompasses all the phases including radicalisation, extremism, terrorism and prevention. Additionally, adopting a comprehensive, gender-sensitive approach in counterterrorism efforts is paramount. Traditional perspectives on

extremism and radicalisation fall short as women's roles continue to evolve, urging policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and civil society organisations worldwide to adapt strategies that consider the nuanced realities.

A holistic prevention-extremism framework for females is imperative. This framework should involve intelligence and security, counter-radicalisation and prevention, economic development and social inclusion, rehabilitation and reintegration, and regional and international cooperation. The urgency of such measures is underscored by the potential loss of another generation to extremism, particularly in the context of Pakistan.

It is however noted that non-Islamist terrorist organisations and left-wing groups distinguish themselves by empowering women with elevated statuses, including leaders, masterminds, recruiters, and even hijackers. Conversely, roles assigned to women in so-called Islamist terrorist organisations or right-wing groups are often constrained, relegating them to positions such as sex slaves or sympathisers. This constraint is justified through distorted interpretations of Islamic ideology or Prophetic traditions. Notably, there is a discernible shift in this trend, particularly in South Asia, and Pakistan, where terrorists are increasingly recruiting women for roles such as suicide bombers, recruiters, and propagandists. Importantly, each case is propelled by distinct motivations.

It is also observed that familial bonds play a pivotal role in terrorist recruitment, with approximately 75 per cent having pre-existing familial ties. These kinship links wield influence in recruiting women, as seen in the Egyptian religious militant group Repentance and Holy Flight, where female terrorists often had familial ties to male members. Similarly, the inclination of women towards terrorism is depicted as a by-product of societal constructs. This underscores the assertion that societal structures, norms, and expectations significantly shape women's choices. Addressing broader social issues, spanning

cultural, economic, and political factors, is imperative in effective counterterrorism efforts.

Another interesting revelation dispels the misconception that women do not operate as lone wolves and brings to light diverse motivations, ranging from personal reasons and revenge to family ties. Although examples are currently limited in South Asia, the potential for increased numbers looms, particularly amid the rising insurgencies and extremism in Pakistan.

In all interviews that were conducted and literature that was consulted, the involvement of some states was one of the major factors. However, it is noted that state involvement takes a dual-pronged approach. On the one hand, there is direct recruitment of females for specific acts of terrorism, while on the other hand, state negligence in providing basic education, safety, protection, and justice, and maintaining a male-centric counter-terrorism agenda serves as an indirect provocation for women to turn to terrorism.

Furthermore, religion and nationalism also emerge as significant drivers for women. Those joining extremist activities due to religious interpretations and ethno-nationalism, observed in Balochistan with the BLA emphasise the need to address these ideological dimensions in counterterrorism efforts. Lastly, it is fair to state that women's involvement in terrorism transcends regional and organisational boundaries. Conflict-prone environments, historical contexts, and socio-political conditions contribute to their participation, exemplified by instances in the Palestinian territories and conflict regions in Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan.

In conclusion, unravelling the complexities of women's involvement in terrorism requires a nuanced and comprehensive approach. Adaptive strategies such as robust gendered P/CVE strategies must be embraced urgently to address the root causes, safeguard women against exploitation, and prevent the loss of future generations to extremism. It is imperative for Pakistan, as well as the

regional and global community to foster a more secure and inclusive world.

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