

Caliphettes: Women and the Appeal of Islamic State



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Foreword by Baroness Sandip Verma



Quilliam is the world's first counter-extremism think tank, set up to address the unique challenges of citizenship, identity, and belonging in a globalised world. Quilliam stands for religious freedom, equality, human rights, and democracy. Challenging extremism is the duty of all responsible members of society. Not least because cultural insularity and extremism are products of the failures of wider society to foster a shared sense of belonging and to advance democratic values. Quilliam seeks to challenge what we think and the way we think. It aims to generate creative, informed, and inclusive discussions to counter the ideological underpinnings of terrorism, whilst simultaneously providing evidence-based recommendations to governments for related policy measures.

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AUTHORS’ NOTE

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FOREWORD

The push and pull factors at play in radicalisation are well established, and the rise of Islamic State in recent years has refocused analysis into this process and these drivers. The current manifestations of the global Islamist phenomenon have led to particular focus on two aspects: firstly, the dissemination of extremist propaganda online and therefore the ability of Islamic State to reach a wider target audience of potentially vulnerable Muslims in the West; and secondly, perhaps due to Islamic State's occupation of territory and claims to statehood, the increased roles for non-combatants in general, and women in particular, in that terrorist group. With that in mind, Quilliam have set about researching the interplay between these two factors, namely Islamic State's propaganda targeted at women, and the appeal of this propaganda to women.

Of course, Quilliam's other work into the push factors present domestically for would-be female recruits is important too, and is complementary alongside the insights in this report to explain the bigger picture of female radicalisation and recruitment by Islamic State. It is clear that many Muslim women in Britain feel isolated, are not integrated, suffer from identity crisis, express a range of grievances including anti-Muslim hatred, gender inequality, and lack representation, all of which contribute to their vulnerability, and which can be exploited in the radicalisation process. Those who end

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up with Islamic State are just a small percentage of those who may be experiencing similar problems. Quilliam's other research on the life and conditions of women in the Islamic State, as first revealed in their translation of the manifesto by the *Al-Khansa Brigade* also helps explain this phenomenon, but this is the first piece of work that I have seen that bridges that gap to consider the impact of Islamic State propaganda and the appeal of the different narratives that the group spins to attract young British Muslim women to terror.

This report fills this gap by combining the official and the unofficial propaganda aimed by the organisation at women. By studying the blogs, social media content, and magazine articles published by the organisation on life within the "caliphate", the report contributes to a much larger analysis on women and their process of radicalisation.

Islamic State propaganda is not exclusively consumed by men. The organisation's propagandists - from its official producers to its unofficial proselytisers - expertly leverage *negative* grievances like marginalisation and dislocation with *positive* promises of utopian state-building and camaraderie, in a manner unrivalled by other jihadist groups. Through close examination of the organisation's female-targeted messaging, Quilliam has discerned the key to Islamic State's pull, the four promises – empowerment, deliverance, participation, and piety – that underpin its appeal to women.

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That women should want to leave their lives in democratic countries to willingly commit themselves to childbearing for strange men would seem, without the context of ideology, rather odd, and we must work harder to disrupt this appeal, debunk the ideology, and offer both safeguards and alternatives. Key to this ideology is the idea that women, by joining the organisation and contributing to it – be it as mothers, wives, nurses, or teachers – are able to reverse the ‘ills’ they faced in the West. This is coupled with the notion that their struggles within the cause, the hardships they will inevitably have to endure, are divinely mandated. The premise remains that, for these recruits, the Western model for women has failed, and that migrating to Islamic State-held territories holds the only solution.

It is rarely the case that propaganda alone can drive a potential recruit to action. However, it is important to understand how propaganda is used as an exploitative tool for recruiters, as a means of instrumentalising push and pull factors, and a way to normalise the so-called “caliphate’s” ideals. Thus, it plays a central role in driving individuals to join the group, and helping us to understand their situation here in the United Kingdom.

Gender inequality, and the acceptance of violence towards women, is in itself ‘extremist’ and contributes to the push factors in radicalisation. Children brought up in violent homes have a weaker sense of self and lack the support structures that might safeguard them. They are therefore more susceptible to radicalisation by

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charismatic organisations that offer superficial “solutions” to their identity crisis. We must see more research regarding the relationship between abuse and extremism. So too, must prevention and assistance programs address extremisms holistically, and consider both domestic violence and religiously-inspired extremism, as they often seem to work together to create reinforcing cycles of control and coercion.

As such, I welcome the policy recommendations aimed at combating the appeal of this propaganda narrative by directly addressing its key promises. The establishment of workshops and media campaigns in the United Kingdom and beyond, as well as the necessary encouragement of mothers to understand and prevent extremism at home, are just a few of the important and immediate actions government and civil society must take in combatting the appeal of propaganda by Islamic State. I also endorse the call for increasing engagement with women in community outreach work to ensure that we do not forgo our responsibilities to protect Muslim women from gender extremism and their coercion into Islamist extremism.

Baroness Sandip Verma

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following report discusses the appeal of the Islamic State “caliphate” to women. To do this, the authors have embarked upon a close analysis of Islamic State’s official propaganda and unofficial proselytisers. In the process, four promises – empowerment, deliverance, participation and piety – are identified as the organisation’s key pull factors.

- The promise of empowerment conveyed by Islamic State’s official and unofficial propaganda encourages women to understand joining the organisation as a means to reverse the ills that they face in life outside the “caliphate”. By joining Islamic State, the line goes, women can defiantly take charge of their lives in the same way that men can: through living in Islamic State’s “caliphate” and supporting its jihad by marrying a fighter, women are led to believe that they can emancipate themselves from *kufr* (disbelief).
- The deliverance promise focuses on the idea that, by joining Islamic State, grievances that women suffer in the West are immediately resolved. Women can be freed from daily degradations and disbelief, and are instead assimilated into a tightknit collective sisterhood that will provide them with a network of support and friendship. Reflective of this, the ideas of

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redemption and deliverance tend to be directed to females by females.

- The participation promise incentivizes women to join Islamic State even though their role is strictly non-military. It conveys a sense that there is more to the “caliphate’s” jihad than fighting and that, for women, there is a specific state-building role. A constant theme in Islamic State propaganda is that supporting the “caliphate”, making it grow and flourish, is the job of everyone. For women, this takes the role of providing, maintaining and educating its “cubs”, the next generation of fighters, as well as supporting their soldier spouses.
- The last promise of Islamic State’s women-orientated propaganda is piety, something built up the theological imperative to join the group. The alleged pristine nature of an “Islamic existence” in the “caliphate” is a means of justifying each stress and sacrifice and also acts as a means for recruiters to exert peer pressure to push others to make *hijra* (migrating).
- These four themes alone do not cause female supporters of Islamic State in the West to make *hijra*. However, when combined with the group’s copious amounts of audio-visual propaganda, they play a crucial role in the rhetorical armoury of the “caliphate’s” recruiters.
- The discussion on the radicalisation of women is overly gendered and, all too often, predicated on misconceptions. In reality, when

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it comes to joining violent extremist causes, women are susceptible to the very same processes as men: narratives, ideology, grievances, and various push and pull factors. Reflecting this, the last part of this report delivers policy recommendations on how we must reappraise our attempts to counter the twin processes of female radicalisation and recruitment, in line with general counter-radicalisation, but using women as specific entry points.

The four promises used in Islamic State propaganda, and cited in this report, are not exhaustive. There are a multitude of factors that contribute to an individual's radicalisation, of which propaganda can play an important part. As such, research into the key narratives employed by the "caliphate" can shine an important light on the motivations behind an individual's journey to jihad.

INTRODUCTION

The precipitous rise of Islamic State has brought with it several unprecedented phenomena, foremost among them the many thousands of foreigners that have travelled from around the world to join the group in Syria and Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Libya.¹ While it is true that jihadists have been migrating to join Islamic State and its predecessors for years, this trend accelerated markedly after the “caliphal” declaration on 29th June 2014. Reflecting its shift from “state” to “caliphate”, Islamic State’s propagandists redoubled their efforts to shift the fulcrum of their group’s appeal from war to utopia² – reflective of their successes, its foreign subjects are no longer just men looking to fight, but non-combatants of both sexes, too.

It is imperative that a rational assessment is injected into the discourse on women and Islamic State. While social media is an important source of insight – and should be treated as such – our understanding of the organisation’s appeal to women must not be based exclusively on the public ruminations of English-speaking female jihadists. By no means is monitoring female jihadists on

¹ The foreign fighter phenomenon itself is not unprecedented. However, the numbers are.

² The idea of utopia is a key narrative that Islamic State propagandists exploit, which is arguably its broadest and most important theme. Islamic State’s establishment and implementation of the ‘caliphate’ is the organisation’s unique selling point. Constantly reminding the world – particularly rival jihadist groups and potential recruits – of this is imperative. The more ‘evidence’ that is made available, the more resilient Islamic State becomes to assertions that it is illegitimate. Read Winter, “The Virtual Caliphate: Understanding Islamic State’s Propaganda Strategy”.

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Twitter and Facebook a redundant practice – much information can be gleaned from what these women broadcast to the world – however, there has been a tendency to draw conclusions from the words of a minority within a minority.³ It is important that the field of vision for assessing this issue is expanded beyond the public postings of the English-speaking Internet activists who unofficially proselytise for the group. There is much material that has not yet borne the scrutiny it deserves: among it the numerous appeals that Islamic State makes directly to its female supporters and the official and unofficial Arabic-language gender-specific content, all of which deserves significant attention. It is, after all, propaganda that equips the “caliphate’s” female members with an evidence base for their recruitment efforts.

Given Islamic State’s particularly austere version of the jihadist ideology, it should come as no surprise that women do not feature prominently in official visual propaganda. They are rarely photographed in attendance at executions, nor, with one notable exception, do they feature as executioners.⁴ While they are, on occasion, shown being stoned as alleged perpetrators of “crimes”

³ Contrary to how it has been portrayed, not all foreign members of Islamic State have a social media accounts. Indeed, there is much evidence to suggest that Islamic State is now forcefully discouraging its members – foreign or otherwise – from having free access to the Internet. See, for example, “Alert: all owners of Internet cafes must adhere to what follows”, *Security Office of the Islamic State*, 18 July 2015.

⁴ Exception: “Application of the ruling of qisās in Ḥimş Province”, Homs Province Media Office, 2 April 2015.

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against religion, it is relatively uncommon that such punishments are broadcast officially.⁵ This is not because Islamic State is seeking to avoid alienating its female support base; rather, the organisation is seeking to limit just the *presence* of women in videos and photographs.

This discrepancy has fostered misunderstanding, something that this report intends to correct. By closely examining the organisation's female-targeted messaging in both an online and offline context, it will present a more nuanced approach to understanding why Islamic State appeals to women. In doing so, our research draws together different formats of Islamic State content regarding women – from Arabic- and English-language source material including, but not limited to, social media, blogs and essays, as well as administrative documents, all of which have been distributed online and many of which appear offline in the “caliphate” itself.

⁵ Exception: “Implementation of the ḥadd on an adulteress”, Nineveh Province Media Office, 15 January 2015.

A REVIEW OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN JIHAD

It is only recently that commentators have attributed sufficient agency to female terrorists or supporters of terrorist causes. Indeed, even though the idea that 'women terrorists are more fanatical[,] have a greater capacity for suffering [and are motivated by things that are] predominantly emotional and cannot be shaken through intellectual argument' has been dismantled over the course of the last decade or so, the discourse still remains too fixated on the *irregularity* of the motivations that prompt women to engage in terrorism, demonstrative of the belief that women's participation in violent extremist groups is an unusual phenomenon.⁶

Mia Bloom's book *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism* authoritatively debunks the above assumption, but a large part of the non-academic discussion on female supporters of terrorist groups is still held back by a gendered approach that focuses as much on mystique as it does on fact.⁷ As a result, the minutiae of the organisations that encourage female membership – as well as the stories of the women that join them – are understudied. This issue is particularly salient with regard to Islamic State.

⁶ Walter Lacquer, *The new terrorism: fanaticism and the arms of mass destruction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 38.

⁷ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell: women and terrorism*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

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Since the phenomenon of girls and women joining the “caliphate” was first noticed by the mainstream media, it has been the subject of fierce discussion. However, while the recent swell of female recruits to the group has fuelled debate, much of this debate has, at best, lacked nuance. At worst, it has perpetuated myths and untruths, foremost among them the idea that this is at all novel. Categorically, the phenomenon of female participation in terrorist groups is not new: in the context of Islamic State, though, it is routinely treated as such. Certainly, Islamic State’s ability to inspire girls and women from around the world to make *hijra* to its “caliphate” is unparalleled, but that they are willing to do so should not surprise us. Indeed, their involvement is just as inevitable as that of their male counterparts.

THE JUSTIFICATION HYPOTHESIS

New recruits to violent and non-violent extremist groups – male *and* female – often arrive in such a situation after an identity crisis of some sort. In the West, this can stem from grievances both real – anti-Muslim hatred, racism, or bullying, for example – and perceived – a sense of marginalisation or dislocation that is sharpened by a prevalence of conspiracy theories and a generalised dissatisfaction with democracy. Alongside these factors are other grievances like anti-Muslim hatred and poverty that contribute to the identity crisis and can ultimately render the individual more vulnerable to

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extremism. This is not only the case with Islamism⁸, of course. Radicalisation and recruitment to all extremisms – from far left or right to religious – are processes borne of a distinct cocktail of grievance, mobilisation and ideology⁹. The interconnection of these factors is critical.

In the context of Islamic State, real and perceived grievances are exaggerated and exploited by its carefully crafted narrative, which it promotes through massive propaganda output, replenished daily and peddled constantly by the group's online 'swarm'.¹⁰ A susceptible individual's difficulties are subsequently magnified further by Islamic State proselytisers who, after identifying and exaggerating their grievances, promise solutions to them, something which usually involves making *hijra*.

In the processes of radicalisation and recruitment, men are no less – or more – victims than women. "Grooming", if such a term is appropriate, happens to both genders. This is a particularly salient

⁸ The belief that Islam is a totalitarian political ideology. It claims that political sovereignty belongs to God rather than people. Islamists believe that their reading of Shariah should be state law, and that it is the religious duty of all Muslims to create and pledge allegiance to an Islamic state that reflects these principles.

⁹ Raffaello Pantucci, *'We love death as you love life': Britain's suburban terrorists*, London: Hurst Publishers, 2015, 8-15.

¹⁰ See Charlie Winter, "The virtual 'caliphate': understanding Islamic State's propaganda strategy", *The Quilliam Foundation*, 7 July 2015; and Ali Fisher, "Swarmcast: how jihadist networks maintain a persistent online presence", *Perspectives on Terrorism* (9:3), June 2015. On the subject of Islamic State propaganda, also worth consulting is Aaron Zelin, "Picture it or it didn't happen: a snapshot of the Islamic State's official media output", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, (9:4), July 2015.

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point in Islamic State's case, as its propaganda is not exclusively consumed by men. Indeed, its female supporters are just as aware of what life in the "caliphate" holds for them – at least, Islamic State's idealised version of life – as their male counterparts are. The organisation's propagandists, from its official producers to its unofficial proselytisers, expertly leverage *negative* grievances like marginalisation and dislocation with *positive* promises of utopian state-building and camaraderie, in a manner unrivalled by other jihadist groups. This side of the equation – the "pull" side – is examined below, specifically in the context of the participation of Western females in the group. Through close examination of the organisation's female-targeted messaging, it is possible to discern the key to Islamic State's pull, the four promises – empowerment, deliverance, participation, and piety – that underpin its appeal to women.

PROMISE 1: EMPOWERMENT

One of the most striking features of Islamic State’s female-orientated messaging, either that which is officially sanctioned, or that peddled by *muhājirāt* (plural of *muhājira*, female migrant) on social media, is the persistent promise of empowerment. The group constantly seeks to convey the idea that women, by joining the organisation and contributing to its cause, are able to reverse the ills they face from marginalisation and “oppression”, whether they are based in Saudi Arabia or the United Kingdom. On male jihadists, Scott Atran wrote that, rather than theology, recruits are attracted by the ability to respond to a ‘call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends, and [...] eternal respect and remembrance in the wider world’.¹¹ Even though they are not going to fight, the female migrants of Islamic State are lured in by a very similar set of aspirations.

SHE SEEMS TO TAKE IT FOR GRANTED THAT THOSE THINKING OF MAKING HIJRA TO ISLAMIC STATE KNOW WHAT AWAITS THEM: MARRIAGE.

After all, Islamic State is not just a militant jihadist group; rather, it is an insurgent movement driven by utopia-building programme that is at least as important – arguably more so – than its military activities.

¹¹ Scott Atran before the United States Senate, “Pathways to and from violent extremism: the case for science-based field research”, *Statement before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities*, 10 March 2010.

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Hence, potential female recruits are not excluded in the same way as they have tended to be from other jihadist organisations. Just like their male counterparts, they are lured in by the promise of being part of something bigger than themselves, something that is, allegedly, divinely mandated.

A recurring theme in media coverage of the women who join Islamic State is that they are victims: young girls who have been tempted into Syria or Iraq without understanding what it is that awaits them. By the admission of one prominent *muhājira*, this is, to an extent, true. Umm Layth writes that, ‘most sisters when in the land of Kuffr [sic] have a different understanding on what living under the Khilafah will be like before arriving’.¹² Essentially, she is warning that the Islamic State “state” is not quite functioning as the utopia it promises to be. However, she does not warn potential female recruits that their role in the “caliphate” is different to that which they are expecting. On the contrary, it is evident both here and elsewhere that she takes it for granted that those thinking of making *hijra* to Islamic State have a good idea of what awaits them.

The idea that a young woman who has grown up in a democracy would willingly commit herself to a life of childbearing for strange men seems, absent the context of ideology, diametrically opposed to the very idea of empowerment. However, when understood from

¹² Umm Layth, “Baby steps in the Khilafah”, *Fi-tubalilghuraba*, 28 June 2015.

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within the jihadist value-set, it makes sense. Such an existence is, through the eyes of a committed female Islamic State supporter, 'hallowed'.¹³ Indeed, to the ideologically driven supporter, this lifestyle is at once a manifestation of empowerment, worship, and participation.

In its Arabic-language messaging, Islamic State also promises its female supporters the ability to radically change their lot. It offers women a way to emancipate themselves from secular culture and fulfil what is their 'fundamental' role, inherited as it is 'from the Mother of the Believers Sawdah Bint Zam'ah (radiyallāhu 'anhā), the wife of their Prophet (sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam)'.¹⁴ If they are Westerners living in a secular state, the propagandists seek to convince their audience that such lives leave them at risk of falling into *kufr* (disbelief), that feminism – 'the Western model for women' – has failed and that the only solution to this is *hijra*.¹⁵ Somewhat paradoxically, a very similar set of arguments is made to female jihadists living in states like Saudi Arabia, a place where, they argue, the 'Westernisation of women' also prevails.¹⁶ Either way, becoming a member of the organisation is sold as a failsafe way to take hold of the future, transform one's personal status quo and, as Umm

¹³ Al-Khanṣā, "Women of the Islamic State", 12.

¹⁴ Al-Khanṣā, "Women of the Islamic State", 17; Umm Sumayyah, "The twin halves", 34.

¹⁵ Al-Khanṣā, "Women of the Islamic State", 19.

¹⁶ Al-Khanṣā, "Women of the Islamic State", 38.

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Sumayyah al-Muhājirah writes in *Dabiq*, 'pu[t] an end to every deficiency'.¹⁷

Islamic State's *muhājirāt*, if they are committed to its ideology, feel empowered. They believe that they 'live freely and [are] not oppressed'.¹⁸ In their eyes, a woman's migration to the "caliphate" is the ultimate in self-expression, a way to demonstrate that she and her companions have souls that are like 'those of men, with ambitions almost hugging the heavens'.¹⁹ While women may not have the same role as men, their importance in fulfilling God's project is no less.

¹⁷ Umm Sumayyah, "Slave-girls", 48.

¹⁸ Shams, "Women under the shade of Khilafah", *Diary of a Traveler*, 5 April 2015.

¹⁹ Umm Sumayyah, "The twin halves", 34.

PROMISE 2: DELIVERANCE

Another prominent theme in the Islamic State female propaganda milieu is the promise that, by joining the organisation, the grievances one suffers in the “Dar al-Kufr” (Abode of Disbelief) can be comprehensively resolved. Of course, they may be replaced with other “trials”, but these are just tests that are ‘very minor compared to the issues in the land of kufr’.²⁰ Promises of deliverance abound in Islamic State propaganda. In both its Arabic- and English-language messaging, supporters regularly claim that, in ‘the shadow of the caliphate’, fear is replaced with security, alienation with belonging, and uncertainty with certitude.²¹

ANOTHER “SOLUTION” THAT ONE’S MIGRATION TO ISLAMIC STATE PROVIDES IS THE ALLEGED CLAIM THAT UNCERTAINTY IN ONE’S LIFE WILL BE REPLACED WITH A DIVINE SENSE OF DIRECTION. *HIJRA* DELIVERS THE *MUHĀJIRA*’S SOUL FROM ‘LOSS OR MESS’, IT PROVIDES DIRECTION AND MEANING.

As mentioned above, in the Islamic State narrative, women are portrayed as more “oppressed” in Westernised countries than they are anywhere else. Feminism, rather than being a force of positive change, is deemed to be an artificial construct, borne of the failings

²⁰ Umm Layth, “Baby steps in the Khilafah”, *Fi-tubalilghuraba*, 28 June 2015.

²¹ Al-Khanṣā, “Women of the Islamic State”, 41.

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of men.²² As a direct result of it, women in Westernised states are constantly subjected to daily degradations: work that ‘takes the woman outside of the house’, education in ‘worthless worldly sciences’ and fashion that involves ‘things hanging from ears, hair shaved in some places and other things that do not please the eye of the beholder’.²³ The “caliphal” proselytisers promise that, upon arrival in the territories controlled by Islamic State, one may immediately be delivered from these perceived ills and become able to return to their true nature, one that, the line goes, revolves around the ‘values [of] sedentariness, stillness and stability’.²⁴

One of the chief offers that Islamic State’s proselytisers emphasise is that of deliverance from social marginalisation and assimilation into the communal body. Just as is the case with its non-female-orientated messaging, Islamic State constantly emphasises the idea of the collective to women – throughout all of Umm Sumayyah’s essays in *Dabiq*, for instance, she writes in terms of ‘us’ and ‘we’, entreating her readers to act impulsively to support the “caliphate” project.²⁵ Islamic State bases much of its appeal on its alleged egalitarianism and the fact that anyone can become part of its collective. While this, too, only holds true when understood in an

²² Al-Khanṣā, “Women of the Islamic State”, 17.

²³ Al-Khanṣā, “Women of the Islamic State”, 25; Al-Khanṣā, “Women of the Islamic State”, 20; Al-Khanṣā, “Women of the Islamic State”, 21.

²⁴ Al-Khanṣā, “Women of the Islamic State”, 19.

²⁵ Umm Sumayyah, “Slave-girls”, 47.

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ideological context, it is one of the organisation's greatest draws to foreign recruits, especially those who feel marginalised in their respective countries. Reflective of this, the idea of sisterhood is just as pervasive as that of brotherhood in Islamic State's official and unofficial propaganda.

Another key "solution" to grievance that Islamic State provides is the claim that any uncertainty in one's life will be replaced with a divine sense of direction. The sense of relief that one receives upon arriving in the "caliphate" is, according to both propagandists and proselytisers, absolute. For example, one British *muhājira* tweeted seven days after her arrival in Syria that 'the only regret [she has] is not making Hijra to the Islamic State earlier'.²⁶ This sort of claim repeats often, though it is usually expressed with caution, as the proselytisers also tend to stress that, physically and emotionally speaking, life in the "caliphate" is difficult. In spite of these trials, though, they claim that sanctuary and direction is found in the knowledge that the reward will be great.²⁷ As the anonymous author of *Diary of a Traveler* [sic] claims, albeit rather idiosyncratically, *hijra* delivers the *muhājira*'s soul from 'loss or mess' – according to Islamic State, it provides direction and meaning.²⁸

²⁶ Umm Usamah. [@ummmuawiyahh], *Twitter*, 13 October 2014.

²⁷ Shams, "Do Hijra only for the sake of Allāh alone!", *Diary of a Traveler*.

²⁸ Shams, "Women under the shade of Khilafah", *Diary of a Traveler*, 5 April 2015.

PROMISE 3: PARTICIPATION

A belief of profound importance to the female recruits of Islamic State is that, by making *hijra*, they are *not* entering a life of meaningless passivity. Indeed, a central theme in much Islamic State propaganda is the idea that all are able to participate. On a regular basis, calls from the very highest echelons of the organisation go out requesting non-military recruits: ‘scholars[,] judges, as well as people with military, administrative and service expertise, and medical doctors and engineers of all different specialisations and fields’.²⁹

Crucially, these calls also go out to women. After all, the group’s political project revolves around its “statehood” and, for that to stand up, it needs teachers, doctors and nurses of both sexes. As well as these roles, the very act of mothering the child of an Islamic State soldier is marketed as an active contribution to the group’s jihad, an idea is repeated time and time again in the organisation’s propaganda. Whatever the case, official calls for female participants are circulated often. For example, in February 2015, the wife of late Paris attacker Amedi Coulibaly, Hayat Boumedienne (also known as Umm Basīr al-Muhājirah), urge her audience ‘to be concerned about the condition of the Ummah in the world, to *act* in accordance to such while following the Qur’ān and Sunnah’.³⁰ Umm Sumayyah al-

²⁹ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “A message to the mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah in the Month of Ramadan”, *Al-Ḥayāt Media Center*, 1 July 2014.

³⁰ Umm Basīr, “A brief interview”, 51.

Muhājirah echoes this in the tenth issue of *Dabiq*, writing, ‘and here I call on you to make hijrah to us here in the lands of the blessed Islamic State!’.³¹

FEMALE PARTICIPATION CAN BEST BE SERVED THROUGH SUPPORT OF FIGHTERS AND THE PROVISION OF “CUBS”. UMM BASĪR STATES IN *DABIQ*, ‘KNOW THAT THE COMPANIONS (RADIYALLĀHU ‘ANHUM) DID NOT SPREAD ISLAM IN THESE VAST LANDS EXCEPT WITH THEIR RIGHTEOUS WIVES BEHIND THEM’

The call for participation is often echoed unofficially, too, by the likes of Umm Layth, who wrote in June 2015 that ‘the Islamic State is the state of the Muslims and WE are responsible for making it grow and flourish, if we aren’t aiding it then who are we to criticize it and those who are working tirelessly to improve it’.³² Constantly, self-appointed proselytisers claim that it is an individual obligation to support Islamic State, and their argument is simple – supporting the “caliphate”, ‘making it grow and flourish’, is the job of everyone.³³

It is worth exploring further the prospects of participation for both genders. The ways in which a male recruit can involve himself in Islamic State’s jihad are plain to see: they may, for example, fight and

³¹ Umm Sumayyah, “Not lawful spouses”, 47.

³² Umm Layth, “Baby steps in the Khilafah”, *Fi-tubalilghuraba*, 28 June 2015.

³³ Umm Layth, “Baby steps in the Khilafah”, *Fi-tubalilghuraba*, 28 June 2015

martyr themselves. For female members, participation is not so active. Indeed, despite the fact that photographs occasionally emerge showing groups of *muhājirāt* apparently engaging in battlefield training, there has been nothing empirical to suggest that these are anything other than propagandistic reports showing self-defence training. Ideologically, this makes sense. As is set out in the al-Khanṣā Brigade's manifesto, within the Islamic State understanding of jihadism, women may not fight, nor may they martyr themselves, unless it is specifically ruled otherwise.³⁴ This is reiterated in a document released by the al-Zurā' Foundation in October 2015, which specifies that martyrdom operations are only permissible for women 'after the Amir has permitted it and if it is for the public good' and that mixing with the army or the brigade is not allowed because of the 'corruption' it entails.³⁵ The al-Khanṣā manifesto explicitly argues that a woman's contribution to the cause is better served through 'sedentariness' than 'movement', something again echoed in the al-Zurā' document, which states that a woman 'must offer what she can for the jihad [...] by treating the ill, sewing cooking, or washing'.³⁶

For some Western women a key pull factor to Islamic State is similar to that of their male counterparts: the opportunity to engage in

³⁴ Al-Khanṣā, "Women of the Islamic State", 22.

³⁵ Al-Zurā' Foundation, "Valuable advice and important analysis on the rules for women's participation in fighting", 1.

³⁶ Al-Khanṣā, "Women of the Islamic State", 19.; Al-Zurā' Foundation, "Valuable advice and important analysis on the rules for women's participation in fighting", 1.

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violent jihad. As specified by the Al-Zūrā' Foundation, though, a women can engage only by 'prepar[ing] herself by studying nursing, cooking, sewing, weaponry (with which she can defend herself such as a revolver or a Kalashnikov) or making suicide belts'.³⁷ Beyond weapons training, then, female participation in Islamic State is not manifested in violent action. Rather, a female participates primarily by living 'purely for the sake of Allah', with military preparation considered to be supplementary. The progress of the state, it is constantly stressed, is best served through marriage and motherhood, supporting fighters and providing "cubs".³⁸ Umm Basīr states in *Dabiq*, 'know that the Companions (radiyallāhu 'anhum) did not spread Islam in these vast lands except with their righteous wives behind them', arguing that the expansive jihad of the "caliphate" may only continue for as long as its ranks are being replenished.³⁹ With this in mind, while assistance from female doctors and teachers is welcome, such roles are considered secondary to motherhood, the source of 'the greatness of her position [and is] the purpose of her existence'.⁴⁰

The consistency in Islamic State's messaging on the required role of women – official and unofficial, English and Arabic – makes its

³⁷ Al-Zūrā' foundation, "Valuable advice and important analysis on the rules for women's participation in fighting", 1.

³⁸ Shams, *Diary of a Traveler*.

³⁹ Umm Basīr, "A brief interview", 51.

⁴⁰ Al-Khanṣā, "Women of the Islamic State", 18.

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organisational position clear, and it is the group's organisational position that potential recruits adhere to. Women are constantly told that they can directly assist in Islamic State's programme – the reversal of the regional status quo, the building of its "caliphal" state and the offensive against its enemies – through motherhood and spousal support. The frequency with which these reminders are served up, coupled with the urgency of the rhetoric amid which they are delivered, inflates the curious observer's desire to take the leap.

PROMISE 4: PIETY

The last promise central to Islamic State’s women-focused propaganda is the group’s claimed divine credibility and, hence, the theological imperative to join it. This religious dimension of its messaging not only appeals to potential recruits but is targeted at those already present, too, as the group’s propagandists seek to allay concerns and assure active members that their stresses and sacrifices are justified and worthy. In this way, the belief that her difficulties, while inevitable, will be ‘rewarded’, is used by the *muhājira* to ring-fence herself from self-doubt and insulate herself from fear.⁴¹ As well as this, the emphasis on the religiosity of the cause is also a way to exert peer pressure upon others to push them to make *hijra*.

In terms of easing personal grievance and justifying sacrifice for those just-arrived or living in the “caliphate”, the role of religious reference is critical. By couching all things undesirable – from daily inconveniences to “state”-sanctioned crimes against humanity – with claims that this is life in “the Prophetic way”, members of the group are able to rationalise almost anything to both themselves and their target audiences, potential recruits and ideological co-travellers.

⁴¹ See Umm Layth, “Diary of a muhajirah II”, *Fi-tubalighuraba*, 11 September 2014; Shams, “Do Hijra only for the sake of Allāh alone!”, *Diary of a Traveler*; and Umm Layth, “Surely this world is temporary”, *Fi-tubalighuraba*, 28 June 2015.

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Just as the prospect of death is made attractive by the promise of martyrdom, potential recruits are constantly advised that they should expect to make sacrifices. It is perhaps worth pointing out here the redundancy of the “five star jihad” myth that is regularly spoken of in policy circles.⁴² Certainly, there have been isolated incidents in which *muhājirāt* have photographed themselves with hip hop video motifs like guns or fast cars and periodic references to Nutella, but these are few and far between.⁴³ By far the most pervasive narrative espoused by Islamic State’s female jihadists is that life in the “caliphate” is difficult and the trials numerous. However, through the instrumentalisation of religion, all these negatives are spun into a positive: the tougher the difficulties and the greater the sacrifice, the better. As Umm Sumayyah writes, ‘reward is in accordance with the degree of hardship’.⁴⁴

Islamic State manipulates religion to justify that which is, to many, unjustifiable. For instance, most would argue that there is no rational argument to support a recently widowed teen’s marriage to an unknown man, many years her senior, who fights for a group that brags about its use of sex slaves. However, by referencing de-contextualised excerpts of Islamic scripture, it is really quite simple to

⁴² There is a persistent but misdirected belief that a key feature of Islamic State propaganda is the idea that life in the “caliphate” is luxurious. To be sure, this narrative appears now and again, but it is not as prominent as is regularly made out.

⁴³ See Winter, “Women of the Islamic State: beyond the rumour mill”, *Jihadology*, 31 March 2015.

⁴⁴ Umm Sumayyah, “The twin halves”, 37.

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make a case for it, as Umm Layth does when she advises her peers to ‘let the sahabiyyat [female companions of the Prophet] be [their] examples [,] don’t be put down by what the kuffar [disbelievers] or even the Muslims, who view this as a taboo issue, say’.⁴⁵ In attempting to legitimise another, to the vast majority of people, inexplicable act, the author of *Diary of a Traveller* explains that severing ties with her ‘solid-bond family’ was made bearable because ‘Allāh put such contentment in [her] heart’.⁴⁶ By constantly referencing the fact that sacrifice is part and parcel of joining Islamic State, whether male or female, its propagandists seek to convince migrants of the alleged merits of bearing “worldly” difficulties.

Consistent with their English-speaking counterparts, the Arabic-speaking authors of the al-Khanṣā Brigade manifesto declare that Muslim women ‘should emulate the women first called to religion’.⁴⁷ In doing so, they will find themselves having to put up with inconveniences and bear what many would deem to be unbearable. Made unambiguous by official administrative documents, the limitations imposed upon the Islamic State’s female members are myriad: for example, clothing must be ‘baggy’ and made of ‘dense’ material; it ‘should not be decorated’; nor may it ‘draw attention to’

⁴⁵ Umm Layth, “Surely this world is temporary”, *Fi-tubalighuraba*, 28 June 2015.

⁴⁶ Shams, *Diary of a Traveler*.

⁴⁷ Al-Khanṣā, “Women of the Islamic State”, 17.

the wearer.⁴⁸ The wearing of perfume is tantamount to behaving like a 'whore'.⁴⁹ Traveling unaccompanied (without a *maḥrim*), or being in the company of the opposite sex is strictly forbidden (this includes a nurse being in the presence of a doctor).⁵⁰ All of these restrictions, far from being resented by the ideologically driven, are embraced and celebrated, for they embody a fervent religious rejection of that which is considered corrupt.

The documents referenced above do not tell us anything new. That faith is used to justify such laws is inevitable and, indeed, a practice common to many modern-day states. In the pursuit of justifying abhorrent actions, though, Islamic State cherry-picks religious sources like no other group, notably though its al-Buḥūth w-al-Iftā' Committee. For instance, in December 2014, the committee released the now infamous pamphlet detailing the theological underpinnings permitting (and encouraging) sex slaves. The document, entitled 'Questions and Answers on Taking Captives and Slaves', was circulated as propaganda by Islamic State's Arabic-speaking supporters to justify the crimes committed against women in the

⁴⁸ "Erection of da'wa billboards in the city of Sirt", *Tripoli Province Media Office*, 15 July 2015.

⁴⁹ Available in Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi's excellent *Archive of Islamic State's Administrative Documents*. "Statement V: Warning against certain customs on 'Īd al-Aḍḥā", *Baraka Province Hisbah Office*, October 2014.

⁵⁰ See al-Tamimi's *Archive of Islamic State's Administrative Documents*, "Fatwa 42: the Question: what is the ruling on the presence of a nurse with a doctor in the same clinic without a maḥrim in the city and some of the villages", *Al-Buḥūth w-al-Iftā' Committee*, 17 December 2014.

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name of the “caliphal” cause.⁵¹ Such selective use of the Islamic scripture is something the group is well-known for – as one disillusioned fighter in Syria said in conversation with jihadist ideologue Hani al-Siba’i, ‘they [Islamic State jurists] look in *fiqh* books for anything to justify their actions’.⁵²

Those hostile to Islamic State unanimously reject all such acts as un-Islamic, but it remains something of which the organisation’s ideological females are supportive. On the issue of Islamic State’s systematic rape of Yazidi captives, Umm Sumayyah writes, ‘what really alarmed [her] was that some of the Islamic State supporters[,] after the kāfir media touched upon the State’s capture of the Yazīdī women[,] started denying the matter as if the soldiers of the Khilāfah had committed a mistake or evil’.⁵³ She goes on to quote the organisation’s official position on the matter – that it is lawful and to be commended – something that is sufficient to allay any of her potential concerns on the matter. While it is undoubtedly true that passages like these are intended as much for media attention as they are for attracting new recruits, their recurrent presence is reflective of Islamic State’s constant attempts to make forbearance in the face

⁵¹ “Questions and answers on taking captives and slaves”, *al-Buḥūth w-al-Iftā’ Committee*, 3 December 2014.

⁵² X, quoted by Hani al-Siba’i, in “Sheikh Hani Alsiba’i speaks to an IS defector”, *Justpaste*, 15 October 2015.

⁵³ Umm Sumayyah, “Slave-girls”, 45.

of all difficult matters – from daily inconveniences to crimes against humanity – an act of worship.

ISLAMIC STATE’S PROPAGANDISTS DO NOT JUST USE RELIGIOUS INJUNCTIONS TO JUSTIFY CRIMES OR MINIMISE GRIEVANCES; THEY USE THEM AS A MEANS OF PEER PRESSURING SUPPORTERS – REGARDLESS OF THEIR GENDER – INTO TAKING THEIR SYMPATHIES BEYOND THE INTERNET.

In a similar manner, the “caliphate’s” supporters work around the thorny issue – for those of a jihadist mind-set – of a woman’s traveling alone. After all, if travel without a *mahrim* (guardian) were not permissible, female supporters of the “caliphate” would be ideologically and structurally impaired from joining the group. Manoeuvring around the issue, Umm Layth writes that ‘it is permissible for her to travel as a Muhājirah (one who is performing Hijrah) even if without a mahram [sic], like Umm Kulthum bint Uqbah ibn Abee Mu’et travelled (for Hijrah) and like Zainab, the daughter of the Messenger of Allah sallallahu alayhe wa sallam travelled’.⁵⁴ In *Dabiq*, Umm Sumayyah deals with it in a similar way, albeit more audaciously: *hijra* ‘is obligatory whether or not she has a mahram [sic]’.⁵⁵ She goes further than Umm Layth, arguing that ‘it is not permissible for you in any case to remain under the same roof with

⁵⁴ Umm Layth, “Hijrah without a mahram [sic]”, *Fi-tubalilghuraba*, 3 April 2014.

⁵⁵ Umm Sumayyah, “The twin halves”, 35.

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someone who has removed the noose of Islam from his neck, and the marriage contract between you and him was nullified the moment when he apostatized from the religion of Islam'.⁵⁶

Islamic State's propagandists do not just use religious injunctions to justify crimes or minimise grievances, they use them as a means of peer pressuring supporters, too. The urgent need to walk in the footsteps of Islamic heroes and heroines (both religious and historical) is regularly emphasised in the "caliphate's" written propaganda. Appealing directly to her female readers, Umm Basīr is quoted as saying 'there were many righteous women in history, so follow their example'.⁵⁷ The al-Khanṣā Brigade echoes her as it demands that women 'emulate the first called to religion, Mariam and Asiya and Khadija, Fatima, Aisha and the mothers of the believers [and] women of the Companions and their followers'.⁵⁸ Elsewhere, Umm Sumayyah writes that all women should have inherited 'this ambition [to make *hijra*] from the Mother of the Believers Sawdah Bint Zam'ah (radiyallāhu 'anhā), the wife of their Prophet (sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam)'.⁵⁹ The above is but a snapshot of the reality – supporters and sympathisers are put under constant pressure to emulate their forebears, as mythologised by Islamic State.

⁵⁶ Umm Sumayyah, "Not lawful spouses" 44.

⁵⁷ Here, their "example" is the act of *hijra*. Umm Basīr, "A brief interview", 51.

⁵⁸ Al-Khanṣā, "Women of the Islamic State", 17.

⁵⁹ Umm Sumayyah, "The twin halves", 34.

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The fact that Islamic State's official propagandists and unofficial cheerleaders weave religious narratives into their messaging should not surprise. Indeed, the organisation has become adept at relating almost everything it does to the scriptures, whether it is a "positive" development – like a battlefield victory – or a "negative" one – the death of a senior leader. For precisely this reason, the issue of whether Islamic State is "Islamic" or not is redundant as it couches all of its actions, especially the abhorrent, within a repeating religious framework.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In the above pages, four key themes of Islamic State’s female-orientated messaging – empowerment, deliverance, participation and piety – have been identified and analysed. By bringing together the various strands of official and unofficial “caliphal” propaganda, it is possible to examine in detail the “supply-side” factors that make joining Islamic State appealing to Western women. Previous analyses of the social media postings of English-speaking *muhājirāt* have rightly asserted that female jihadists were not victims and that media depictions of the “jihadi bride” are largely unhelpful. However, these investigations did not inquire into how the group markets itself, be it to current members or prospective ones.

None of the above promises are new to jihadist propaganda. Indeed, groups like al-Qaeda have long promised redemption and deliverance to their new members. In the context of the Islamic State “caliphate”, though, there is novelty in the fact that the twin ideas of redemption and deliverance are being specifically directed at females *by* females. This is symptomatic of the fact that Islamic State’s jihad is, tactically speaking, very different to the jihad of its rivals. It does not just revolve around fighting. In any case, the promise of deliverance from personal grievance is far more powerful if it is reflected by members of the same sex, who claim to have once suffered from the same set of grievances and identity crises. It is for precisely this reason that the

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phenomenon of recruitment-by-friendship has become so salient an issue.⁶⁰ It seems that, when it comes to the final stages of recruitment to an organisation like Islamic State, a familiar voice that can guarantee the group's promise of deliverance is of untold importance – the more that proselytisers and “proselytisees” share, whether it is in terms of experience and grievance, or friendship group and hometown, the more the twin processes of radicalisation and recruitment are lubricated. Whatever the case, propaganda alone does not tend to make someone take action.

In the second half of Islamic State's inaugural year as “caliphate”, women began to make regular appearances in its official written propaganda. While it is currently rare that women appear in official video or photographic propaganda, it is not out of the question that the organisation may engineer a theological loophole to render it permissible, in an attempt to generate attention for itself. Even if that does not arise, the role of the female propagandist must not be dismissed – because they are better able to relate to their subjects as jihadist role models, a *muhājira's* words of encouragement are far more effective at galvanising support from female potential recruits than their male counterparts. The very fact that Umm Sumayyah al-

⁶⁰ Indeed there are a multitude of cases in which young women have travelled to join Islamic State in the footsteps and at the advice of their friends, the most notable being that of the three girls from Bethnal Green who travelled to Syria in February to ‘join a friend from the same school’. See “Missing Syria girls: ‘Business as usual’ at Bethnal Green Academy”, 23 February 2015.

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Muhājirah now appears to have a regular slot in *Dabiq* is testament to Islamic State's recognition of this, at the highest levels. Indeed, the "caliphate" appears to have adopted her as something of a female figurehead.

Female supporters are not only targeted in Islamic State's official propaganda. Indeed, members who blog and tweet the organisation's line unofficially are replete and, on balance, are more important to the recruitment process. Making use of the flexibility permitted to unofficial propagandists, Islamic State's bloggers are able to go into depth about their respective stories and personalise their experience of *hijra*. Crucially, they, along with the multitude of *muhājirāt* tweeters, are able to directly interact with those who are curious and provide logistical advice on how to join the group.⁶¹ Using official propaganda as evidence to support their claims, these women work constantly to assure potential recruits of the legitimacy of the "caliphate" and the reality of its nascent utopia. Their goal is to maintain the Islamic State echo chamber and maximize its accessibility. Manipulating the four promises of empowerment, deliverance, participation and piety, they use the "facts" presented in Islamic State propaganda to demonstrate its superiority. Without audio-visual output to reinforce their claims, their narrative would be

⁶¹ See, for example, conversation transcripts from the peer-to-peer communications app, Kik, in 'LOL! UK Schoolgirl jihadi's sick reaction to the Tunisian beach massacre in a series of extraordinary messages with undercover MoS reporter', *The Mail on Sunday*, 4 July 2015.

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more difficult to support, and their message would not get through to recruits.

None of the points made in this report are gender-specific. Indeed, many male supporters of Islamic State are lured in through variations of the same promises made to women: empowerment is promised through the realisation of radical ambition; deliverance from grievances is offered through the persistent promise of the collective; participation in Islamic State's revolutionary agenda is assured through fighting; and absolute piety is achievable through involvement in and commitment to the organisation's jihad. Islamic State's propagandists and proselytisers reach out to female supporters in the same way that they seek to attract men. As such, it is imperative that observers take gendered misconceptions out of the analytical equation.

Simple exposure to such messaging does not *cause* radicalisation. Beyond observation of videos and photographs, there must be some interaction. Indeed, Islamic State's recruits, whether male or female, do not usually find themselves leaving their home countries out of mere curiosity. Whether it is online or offline, external interaction is a necessary ingredient in the recruitment cocktail, one that is all the more potent if it is between friends who already trust each other, have shared experiences and heightened empathetic sensitivities. Above, we argue that mainstream discussion of this issue has been derailed by an overly gendered approach. However, when it comes

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to the thesis that women make more effective recruiters of other women than men, gender is critically important and must be taken into account.

Policy Recommendations

To challenge the persistent appeal of Islamic State, it is crucial that the messages its proselytisers convey are understood, publically denounced, and meaningfully contested. Based on our analysis of the four key promises of empowerment, deliverance, participation, and piety, we put forth the following policy recommendations to address the continued appeal of the “caliphate” to women. Our recommendations centre on two categories: first, reducing the exposure of individuals to Islamic State propaganda and increasing resilience towards it; second, equipping families with the appropriate critical consumption skills to make this propaganda less appealing. In order to achieve the latter in the United Kingdom, it is imperative that the government works towards structural policy changes that will mitigate the grievances Islamic State exploits – racism, anti-Muslim hatred, sexism, and oppression – both inside and outside the home. Part of this strategy must focus on combating gender extremism, which we define as ideologies that significantly and negatively impact the human rights of one gender by control, coercion, violation, or the systemic promotion of the superiority of one gender over another.

Proactive Policy Recommendations

The Islamic State recognises, and encourages, the active but ‘divinely limited’ role of women in its propaganda.⁶² Its propagandists and proselytisers are consistent in telling women that they have an important, necessary role to play in the creation and the improvement of the “caliphate”. The same must be done in empowering women to actively engage in the prevention of extremism⁶³. With respect to keeping children safe from radical influences, the importance of women – mothers in particular – must not be underestimated. Mothers play a central role in families and, as such, are well positioned to notice and counter violent and non-violent extremist influences. As such, we recommend the following:

- The establishment of a hotline for mothers who fear their children are being exposed to extremist ideas. The hotline would allow them to quickly and easily reach a support group where they can air their concerns and discuss a way to mitigate the risks their children face. We recommend the hotline is run by the support group itself, and funded by various donors, of which the government can be a part. The hotline must respect the confidentiality of those who use it.

⁶² Charlie Winter, ‘What ISIS women really want’, *The Daily Beast*, 2 June 2015.

⁶³ Excellent work has been done by FAST, Extreme Dialogue, JAN Trust, and Women Without Borders. It is critical that this continues, and is expanded.

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- We advocate the advanced training of women in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) to build awareness on tackling Islamic State propaganda. This should take the form of confidence training workshops for mothers, where CVE and knowledge-building on conflict situations are prioritised. Conflicts are regularly manipulated as potential grievances to be exploited by Islamic State, especially if they can be used to demonstrate the idea that the West is at war with Islam.
- Teachers should also be enrolled in training modules to familiarise them with these grievances. As manifestations of institutional best practice, sessions should focus on debunking extremist claims regarding the importance and duty of marriage, the struggle against the West, and the significance of "honour".
- Relationships should be built between mothers and teachers. As such, workshops including both should be provided alongside gender extremism toolkits. All workshops, and toolkits and packages arising from them, should be delivered in multiple languages, including English, Arabic, Urdu, Hindi and Bengali, to appeal to the widest audience possible.
- Young people at risk of radicalisation often use Islamic State propaganda as an authentic source of religious information. Arenas where young women can talk about spirituality beyond a religious ritualism must be encouraged. These should not be exclusively for Muslims, so they can provide spaces for active

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engagement and interfaith debate, enabling women to voice concerns and discuss gendered extremism.

- Further research on women of the Islamic State must be completed and widely disseminated. A key narrative employed by Islamic State is that by making *hijra*, the twin ills of marginalization and oppression will be reversed. Efforts must be redoubled into resolutely demonstrating that this is not the case – the realities of life in the “caliphate” must be as accessible as the myths peddled by its propagandists online.

Reactive Policy Recommendations

- We strongly advocate for the involvement of women’s rights activists, government officials, parliamentarians, civil society representatives, researchers, and academics in policy and decision-making to empower women. More important is the inclusion of girls, mothers and daughters from the groups and workshops mentioned above in the policymaking process. Too often, policymakers only speak to self-appointed male community leaders. Involving more women in community issues will facilitate meaningful progress in both gender equality and empowerment against extremism, thus aiding social cohesion by allowing a platform to air gender extremism issues.
- We recommend the utilization of media campaigns that foster female empowerment and liberation from gender violence, such as honour-based violence, female genital mutilation (FGM), and forced marriage⁶⁴, to be campaigned and coordinated by the new Women’s Equality Party (WEP), as well as other political parties in the United Kingdom. More air-time needs to be given to women who have been affected by gender extremism; they must be empowered to let other women know that they are not alone. A good example of this is the video [“I Can Hold My](#)

⁶⁴ We must add here that gender violence is not unique to one religion or culture, and can be found across a spectrum of patriarchal institutions and norms.

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[Breath](#)", produced as a result of Quilliam's arts, media, and outreach work. Using creative messaging, and providing a media platform for inspirational speakers, not extremists, would prevent radical groups from being able to propagandise through the mass media and claiming, as they do, to be spokespeople for the majority.

- At a community level, we advise regular workshops on life and employability skills for young women and the provision of scholarships to help women make the most of education and workforce opportunities. This will enable those at risk of radicalisation to have more, and better, opportunities. It must be encouraged and organised by the government.
- The government must provide shelters to women at risk of gender extremism with far-reaching health, psychosocial and economic services. Funding for these shelters and provisions must be ambitious and long-lasting, to enable women vulnerable to both radicalisation *and* gender extremism to know that they have a network of support and that their grievances can be solved in the United Kingdom. Further funding must also be directed to support the reintegration of women in vulnerable conditions, either as family members of extremists, or those who have been involved in extremist groups in the past. As such, the focus will be on women creating both counter narratives and

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alternative narratives, to combat the appeal that IS propaganda would have amongst its target audience.

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