

# Women in Jihad: A Historical Perspective

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By exploring the different roles women have historically played in jihadist movements, this policy brief aims to broaden the understanding of women's positions in, and their relevance for contemporary jihadism. Women have maintained and propagated jihadist ideology, supported their jihadist husbands, raised their children according to jihadist ideology, recruited others, helped create alliances through strategic marriages, raised funds and transported messages, weapons and goods. On a smaller scale, women have taken on operational roles in the planning and execution of attacks, including as suicide bombers. As the principal focus in understanding (global) jihadism is often on perpetrators and leaders – positions in which women are underrepresented in jihadist movements – women's facilitative and supportive contributions are often poorly understood and assessed. This policy brief demonstrates that women's roles have been complementary to men's and argues that women form an integral part of contemporary jihadism that cannot be seen as separate from or secondary to men's contributions to jihad.

Since the proclamation of the so-called ‘Caliphate’ by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 29 June 2014, hundreds of women and teenaged girls from all over the world travelled or attempted to travel to Syria and Iraq to join the self-styled Islamic State (IS). From the Netherlands, over eighty women have travelled to IS-controlled territory since 2012.<sup>1</sup> From the United Kingdom and France, these numbers are even higher, respectively around 145<sup>2</sup> and 200<sup>3</sup> women and teenaged girls. This phenomenon has prompted a (renewed) interest in women’s role in jihad. Studies of the roles of (predominantly) Western women in IS so far show that these women mostly played supportive or facilitative roles as mothers and wives, as propagandists, and as recruiters. Some women have been involved in educative, administrative, logistical, social, and medical positions. On a smaller scale, women in IS have been involved in operational positions, including those that are related to the planning or execution of attacks.<sup>4</sup>

There has been increased attention for women’s significance as proselytisers for jihad and their potential frontline roles, particularly since the rise of female suicide bombers from the mid-1980s onwards. Yet, it often remains poorly understood how to interpret women’s supportive and facilitative capabilities in waging jihad and, as a consequence, how to assess women’s relevance for jihad. Drawing from existing literature, this policy brief explores the different roles women have played in jihadism in the past to offer a deeper understanding and interpretation of their relevance to this form of violence.

The aim of this policy brief is to use historical illustrations to broaden the understanding of the different roles that women can play in contemporary jihadism and how these roles may be understood. While this brief will commence with a short discussion of jihadist doctrine regarding the permissibility of women in militant operations, it is not the aim of this brief to provide an exhaustive theological overview regarding this matter. This introduction merely has the purpose of pointing out the controversy within jihadist ideology concerning the position of women in militant jihad. Subsequently, the discussion focuses on women’s roles as mothers and wives; as propagandists and recruiters; as facilitators and enabler and as planners, plotters and attackers and on how these roles can be interpreted and understood.

## Definition of terms: jihad and jihadism

Jihad can generally be translated as struggle. Within Islam, there is a distinction between two forms of jihad. There is the inner struggle to do ‘the right thing’, a struggle against temptation. For the majority of the Muslim community, this inner jihad is a daily practice

<sup>1</sup> “Jihadist Women, a Threat not to be Underestimated,” General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), November 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Seran de Leede, R. Haubfleisch, K. Korolkova, M. Natter, “Radicalisation and violent extremism - focus on women: how women become radicalized and how to empower them to prevent radicalization,” *EU parliament*, (December 2017): 15.

<sup>3</sup> Bibi Van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann eds., “The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union, Profiles, Threats and Policies,” *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 2 (2016).

<sup>4</sup> See for example: De Leede et al., “Radicalisation and Violent Extremism - Focus on Women”; Edwin Bakker and Seran de Leede, “European female jihadists in Syria: exploring an under-researched topic”, *ICCT*, April 2015; E.M. Saltman and M. Smith, “Till martyrdom do us part, gender and the ISIS phenomenon”, *Institute for Strategic Dialogue and ICSR*, 2015; Anita Perešin, “Fatal Attraction, Western Muslims and ISIS,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9 no.13 (June 2015); S. Patel, “The Sultanate of Women, Exploring Females Roles in Perpetrating and Preventing Violent Extremism”, *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, (February 2017); The Carter Center, “The women in Daesh: Deconstructing Complex Gender Dynamics in Daesh Recruitment and Propaganda,” May 2017; Elizabeth Pearson and Emily Winterbotham, “Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalization,” *The RUSI journal*, (28 July 2017); Ayesha Navest, Martijn de Koning and Annelies Moors, “Chatting about Marriage with Female Migrants to Syria, Agency Beyond the Victim Versus Activist Paradigm,” *Anthropology today* 32, no. 2 (2016); Amanda N. Spencer, “The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 9 no. 3 (2016); E.J. Strommen, “Jihadi Brides or Female Foreign Fighters? Women in Daesh – From Recruitment To Sentencing,” *PRIO Center on Peace and Security*, (January 2017).

of their faith. The term jihad is also used to refer to fighting injustice and oppression, spreading and defending Islam, and creating a just society through preaching, teaching and armed struggle or holy war.<sup>5</sup> When this policy brief refers to jihad, it refers to this latter interpretation and not to the inner struggle of individual believers.

The origins of contemporary jihadism can be traced back to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Starting out as a defensive jihad against the Soviet invasion, it evolved into a proxy war with recruits travelling to Afghanistan to support the *Mujahedeen* (jihadist fighters) from all over the world.<sup>6</sup> During and after the jihad in Afghanistan, and under the influence of ideologues such as Abdallah Azzam and Osama bin Laden,<sup>7</sup> modern jihadism developed into a transnational ideology with strong anti-Western views.<sup>8</sup> Rather than an organised, singular movement, the jihadist movement should be considered a loose network of actors, connected through similar views and subject to constantly changing alliances. Nevertheless, it shares the broad goals of safeguarding what they see as 'true' Islam and establishing its supremacy over enemies both internal and external by returning to a puritanical and literalist understanding of the faith found in Salafism.<sup>9</sup> Jihadists constitute one of several currents within the Salafist movement, set apart by their belief that violence alone can save a beleaguered community of true believers and pave the road to final victory.<sup>10</sup>

## The discussion of women's role in Jihad

The classical Islamic literature does not provide for one particular reading of what are 'permissible' roles for women in jihad. During the early Islamic battles in the seventh century, women predominantly took care of wounded fighters, brought food and water to the battlefield and encouraged their (male) family members to support and join the struggle.<sup>11</sup> However, the classical texts also refer to women who fought in the early years of Islam. Umm Umarah, for example, defended the prophet in the battle of Uhud. She fought in at least six battles during her lifetime.<sup>12</sup> Other women include Mohammed's wife Ayesha, who led the battle of the Camel, his granddaughter Zaynab, who fought in the battle of Karbala, and Khawlah bint al-Azwar, who took part in the battle against the Byzantines.<sup>13</sup> While these women were never commanded by the prophet Mohammed to fight, he was said to have praised them for their sacrifice and bravery.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, modern-day leading jihadist ideologues and clerics are equivocal regarding the permitted role for women in jihad. They honour the historic women who fought to

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<sup>5</sup> John L Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 27-28.

<sup>6</sup> Sebastian Kusserow and Patryk Pawlak, "Understanding Jihad and Jihadism," European Parliamentary Research Service, 2015, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS\\_ATA%6282015%629557007](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_ATA%6282015%629557007).

<sup>7</sup> See for further reading on Abdullah Azzam: Andrew McGregor, "Jihad and the rifle alone: 'Abdullah 'Azzam and the Islamist revolution," *The Journal of Conflict Studies* 23, no. 2 (2003).

<sup>8</sup> T. Hegghammer, "Why jihad went global", *Hegghammer.com*. [http://hegghammer.com/files/Hegghammer\\_-\\_IAS\\_Newsletter\\_-\\_Why\\_jihad\\_went\\_global.pdf](http://hegghammer.com/files/Hegghammer_-_IAS_Newsletter_-_Why_jihad_went_global.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Salafism is a fundamentalist, Sunni Islamic movement that aims for a return to a pure Islamic society. Although Salafi positions vary considerably and do not necessarily prescribe the use of violence, their rejection of large parts of Islamic tradition and jurisprudence has de facto created favourable conditions for the spread of the jihadist ideology. See for further reading: Sebastian Kusserow and Patryk Pawlak, "Understanding Jihad and Jihadism," European Parliamentary Research Service, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, (London: Hurst, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Farhana. Qazi, "The Mujahidaat, Tracing the Early Female Warriors of Islam," in *Women, Gender and Terrorism*, ed. L. Sjoberg & C.E. Gentry (Athens Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 35; N. Lahoud, "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women from Jihad," *Terrorism and political violence* 26 no. 5 (2014), 793.

<sup>12</sup> Qazi, "The Mujahidaat", 33.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 33-35; David Cook, "Women Fighting in Jihad?" In *Female Terrorism and Militancy, Agency, Utility and Organization* ed. C., (New York: Routledge, 2008), 38-39.

<sup>14</sup> Lahoud, "The Neglected Sex", 786 - 793.

defend Islam and consider them iconic heroines.<sup>15</sup> Yet, rarely have they explicitly encouraged or called on women to take part in combatant positions themselves.<sup>16</sup> So far, only Chechen separatists, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and Boko Haram have allowed women in militant positions, mostly as suicide operatives, on a significant scale. The following section will explore this in more detail. Predominantly, women are ascribed supportive and facilitative roles, as mothers, daughters and wives of male fighters.<sup>17</sup> The statements of various jihadist leaders on the relevance of these supportive roles show that they are not considered to be of secondary importance. Yusuf al-Uyayri (1973-2003), the first leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and an influential jihadist ideologue stated, for example, that the success or failure of jihad depends on the commitment and support of women.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda's current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri emphasized the importance of women's role in jihad as mothers and wives.<sup>19</sup>

## Women in militant positions

Employing women in combatant positions, including as suicide bombers, brings several advantages for jihadist movements. Besides doubling the pool of potential recruits, these tactical and strategic advantages are related to gendered assumptions about women and violence. As women are mostly perceived as the victims of violence rather than the perpetrators, they are often seen as less of a (security) threat. They therefore attract less security attention than men and, as a consequence, can enter crowded areas more easily without raising suspicion and have a better chance to pass through checkpoints undetected.<sup>20</sup>

Also, because women are generally not seen as perpetrators of violence, their deployment in combat roles has proven to send a powerful message of intimidation and imply that nobody is safe if 'even women' carry out violent attacks.<sup>21</sup> It provides jihadist movements with the advantage of increased media attention and it underscores the seriousness of the cause if 'even women' are prepared to engage in violence. In addition, including women in combatant positions can have a shaming effect on men, impelling them to participate in jihad.<sup>22</sup> The online propaganda magazine of IS, *Dabiq*, for example, wrote that because men fail to take their responsibility in jihad, women carry out attacks in their place.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the deceased former leader of AQI, remarked in a website posting: 'are there no men, so that we have to recruit women?'<sup>24</sup> Al-Zarqawi also declared in a speech that if men did not want to be knights, they should make room for the women to wage war and men can take the eyeliner.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 786-788; Katharina von Knop, "The Female jihad: Al Qaeda's Women", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 30 (2007), 407.

<sup>16</sup> Lahoud, "The neglected Sex."

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 786-788.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 783.

<sup>20</sup> Jennie Stone & Katherine Pattillo, "Al Qaeda's Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq, a Case Study", in *Women, Gender and Terrorism* ed. Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry (University of George Press, 2011), 163-165; Kathy Laster and E. Erez, "Sister in Terrorism? Exploding Stereotypes", *Women and Criminal Justice* 25, no.1-2, (2015) 88.

<sup>21</sup> Kathy Laster and E. Erez, "Sister in terrorism? Exploding stereotypes," 83-99; see also Stone & Pattillo, "Al Qaeda's Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq," 163-165.

<sup>22</sup> Stone & Pattillo, "Al Qaeda's use of female suicide bombers," 165.

<sup>23</sup> "Foreword", *Dabiq* Issue 13, p. 3. Accessible through the Clarion Project: <https://www.clarionproject.org/factsheets-files/Issue-13-the-rafidah.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Stone and Pattillo, "Al Qaeda's use of female suicide bombers in Iraq," 161.

<sup>25</sup> Charlie Winter & Devorah Margolin, "The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 7 (August 2017) 23, footnote c.

However, despite these potential advantages of using women in combatant roles and suicide missions, few jihadist groups in the past have explicitly accepted women in such roles. Traditional gender norms are dominant in jihadist ideology and conservative societies,<sup>26</sup> and the consequential risk of losing popular support when putting women in harm's way, might explain this reluctance to employ women in combatant missions. Groups that have employed women in suicide missions, include Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, AQI, Chechen separatists, and Boko Haram. The al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade of al-Fatah has also orchestrated several suicide attacks carried out by women, but as the group is a secular, nationalist movement,<sup>27</sup> it falls outside the scope of this brief. Hamas claimed responsibility for two suicide attacks by women, one in 2004 and one in 2006.<sup>28</sup> According to Davis, Palestinian Islamic Jihad has deployed women in five of its suicide attacks that predominantly took place between 2003 and 2006.<sup>29</sup>

Chechen separatists, Boko Haram, and AQI have deployed women as suicide bombers on a much larger scale. Chechen separatists have made extensive use of female suicide bombers since 2000. The estimates of the number of Chechen women involved in violent attacks vary. In 2008, Speckhard and Akhmedova wrote that a total of 42 percent of all Chechen suicide bombers were female.<sup>30</sup> In a more recent publication, Davis puts that percentage between 28 and 31.<sup>31</sup> AQI's al-Zarqawi introduced female suicide bombers to the organization, having orchestrated four attacks involving women. It is estimated that in the three years after his death in 2006, between 25 to 44 women carried out suicide attacks in Iraq.<sup>32</sup> Whether these women were affiliated to AQI or aligned groups is not completely clear.<sup>33</sup> Boko Haram has deployed women in suicide missions since 2014.<sup>34</sup> Davis puts the participation rate of female suicide bombers in Nigeria at around 54 percent,<sup>35</sup> similar to Warner and Matfess, who put that percentage on around 56 percent.<sup>36</sup> These groups, though, form clear exceptions to the prevalent perspective regarding the acceptable, facilitative role for women in jihad.

## Mothers and wives

One of the most cited roles for women in jihad by jihadist ideologues is that of mother and wife. Mothers bring forth the next generation of fighters. This role can hardly be overestimated and is emphasised by influential jihadist ideologues, including Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden remarked that the women's role is just as valuable as men's, as women brought forth the generation of men fighting in Palestine, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Chechnya.<sup>37</sup> His successor, al-Zawahiri, also stresses the importance of women's non-

<sup>26</sup> Stone and Pattillo, "Al Qaeda's use of female suicide bombers in Iraq," 170.

<sup>27</sup> Jessica Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism, From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad and the Islamic State*, (Maryland: Rowland & Littlefield, 2017), 58-60.

<sup>28</sup> Karla J. Cunningham, "The Evolving Participation of Muslim Women in Palestine, Chechnya, and the Global Jihadi Movement," in *Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility and Organization* ed. Cindy D. Ness, (Routledge, 2008), 90; Kim Cragin and Sara Daly, *Women as Terrorists, Mothers, Recruiters and Martyrs*, (California: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 62; Jessica Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2017), 56, 165.

<sup>29</sup> Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, 60.

<sup>30</sup> A. Speckhard and K. Akhmedova, "Black widows and beyond. Understanding the motivations and life trajectories of Chechen female terrorists", in C. Ness ed., *Female terrorism and militancy*, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Davis, *Women in modern terrorism*, 94.

<sup>32</sup> Caron E. Gentry, "The Neo-Orientalist Narratives of Women's Involvement in Al Qaeda," in *Women, Gender and Terrorism* ed. Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, (University of George Press, 2011) 186.

<sup>33</sup> Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, 121.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>36</sup> Jason Warner and Hilary Matfess, "Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram's Suicide Bombers", *Combating Terrorism Center at Westpoint, United States Military Academy*, (August 2017), 4. <https://ctc.usma.edu/report-exploding-stereotypes-the-unexpected-operational-and-demographic-characteristics-of-boko-harams-suicide-bombers/>

<sup>37</sup> Lahoud, "The Neglected Sex", 783.

military contributions, and praises them for their heroic job of watching over the homes and children of the *mujahedeen*.<sup>38</sup> In their charter, Hamas also clearly states that one of the main duties of women is to raise the next generation of fighters.<sup>39</sup>

Women themselves have also emphasised their importance in jihad as mothers and wives. The mother of a Hamas suicide bomber said in a television interview that it is the responsibility of mothers to constantly remind their sons of their religious obligation to partake in jihad.<sup>40</sup> The women of Hezbollah do the same and encourage their daughters to marry Hezbollah fighters.<sup>41</sup> Women in the Southeast Asian Jemaah Islamiyyah have kept the different cells and networks together through strategic marriages.<sup>42</sup> Asiya Andrabi, the leader of a conservative women's group in a radical Islamist movement in Kashmir<sup>43</sup> pleads for a strict separation of gender roles in jihad. Fighting jihad, she says, is a man's job. Women's task is to take care of the family. The reason for this, she argues, is simple. If women would also fight in jihad, who is going to raise the children? Andrabi stresses women should not participate in military operations, as this will cause social instability.<sup>44</sup> Women should encourage their men to join jihad and they should offer them moral support, so men can carry out their tasks. However, she adds, if the time comes that women are needed to pick up arms, they will be more than ready to do so.<sup>45</sup>

## Propagandists and recruiters

The supportive role of women extends, however, beyond that of mother and wife. The rise of the Internet in particular has provided women the opportunity to propagate and disseminate jihadist ideology on an unprecedented scale, enabling them to reach out to both men and women. For example, the Belgian-Moroccan Malika el-Aroud singlehandedly ran an online jihadist network where she glorified the jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union, propagated a jihadist worldview, and disseminated messages and images that underscored her conviction of the worldwide suppression of Muslims.<sup>46</sup> Like el-Aroud, the women around the Dutch Hofstadgroup were also highly active online and disseminated inflammatory material, glorified violence, and translated and spread jihadist texts.<sup>47</sup> Female supporters of al-Qaeda have similarly reached out to other women, through online glossy magazines in which they reminded other women of their religious obligation to support jihad.<sup>48</sup>

## Facilitators and enablers

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 783.

<sup>39</sup> Article 18 in the " [Hamas Covenant 1988](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp)," Yale Law School Avalon Project.

<sup>40</sup> "An Interview with the Mother of a Suicide Bomber," *the Middle East Media Research Institute MEMRI*, 19 June 2002.

<sup>41</sup> "Every Woman, Women of Hezbollah," *Al Jazeera*, June 19, 2007, <https://www.memri.org/reports/interview-mother-suicide-bomber>.

<sup>42</sup> Mia Bloom, *Bombshell, Women and Terrorism*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 173-196; Institute for policy analysis of conflict (IPAC), "Mothers to Bombers: The Evolution of Indonesian Women Extremists," Report no. 35, (31 January 2017), 5-6.

<sup>43</sup> The conflict in Kashmir has developed from a nationalist movement into a radical Islamist movement in the last decade. See for further reading: Swati. Parasahar, "Aatish-e-Chinar, in Kashmir, Where Women Keep Resistance Alive," in *Women, Gender and Terrorism* ed. Sjoberg & Gentry (2011) 96-119.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 105.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 106.

<sup>46</sup> Beatrice De Graaf, *Gevaarlijke Vrouwen, Tien militante vrouwen in het Vizion*, (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Boom, 2012), 189-215; Bloom, *Bombshell*, 197-206.

<sup>47</sup> Janny Groen & Annieke Kranenberg, *Women Warriors for Allah, an Islamist Network in the Netherlands*, trans. Robert Naborn, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

<sup>48</sup> "Al-Shamikhah, Al Qaeda women's magazine, launches: Report," *Huffington Post*, 25 May 2011, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/14/al-shamikhah-al-qaeda-womens-magazine\\_n\\_835572.html?guccounter=1](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/14/al-shamikhah-al-qaeda-womens-magazine_n_835572.html?guccounter=1).

Women have also raised funds, collected tactical information, smuggled weapons and explosives, and taken care of wounded fighters to support the jihad. The women of Hezbollah and the female members of the Kashmiri Dukhtaran-e-Millat operated as couriers; transporting messages, money and weapons between different cells.<sup>49</sup> Female supporters of Hezbollah have also cared for wounded fighters<sup>50</sup> and, like the women of Hamas, have been involved in the organization's social activities.<sup>51</sup> Such social activities can increase popular support as it helps create a positive, sympathetic and social image of the group. Women of Hamas are also active as logisticians and facilitators,<sup>52</sup> as are women in al-Qaeda, who have been known to have opened bank accounts, translated documents and carried out book-keeping duties for the network.<sup>53</sup> These roles have also been taken on by women in the Jemaah Islamiyyah.<sup>54</sup> Women of al-Shabaab have similarly been known to raise funds for the movement (also from within the United States and Europe).<sup>55</sup>

## Planners, plotters and attackers

Lastly, women have been involved in the plotting and execution of terrorist violence, albeit on a smaller scale than the aforementioned roles. Aafia Siddique ended up on the 2003 American Most Wanted List after she was linked to a planned attack in Baltimore, D.C. Her name and email address were used to purchase equipment, manuals for assembling bombs and body armour.<sup>56</sup> Ahlam al-Tamimi played a crucial role in the planning of a suicide attack coordinated by Hamas on the Sbarro pizza restaurant in Jerusalem in 2001 that killed fifteen and left 130 people wounded.<sup>57</sup> The American Colleen LaRose was arrested in 2009 for her involvement in an attempted attack on the Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks.<sup>58</sup> In another example, on 4 May 2010, Roshonara Choudhry, a British citizen of Bangladeshi origin, stabbed the British Member of Parliament Stephen Timms. She later told the police she stabbed him as a "punishment" for his parliamentary vote in favour of the 2003 Iraq War.<sup>59</sup> With her attack, Choudhry became the first would-be assassin linked to al-Qaeda in the United Kingdom and the first British woman convicted of a violent Islamist attack in the UK.<sup>60</sup> She received a life sentence, with a minimum of fifteen years for her assassination attempt.<sup>61</sup>

As a final observation, it is interesting to see that women have been notably excluded from leadership positions in jihad. A notorious exception is the British Samantha Lewthwaite, the widow of one of the suicide bombers of the 7/7 attack on the London subway in 2005. She has been reported to be involved in the leadership of al-Shabaab.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion and policy recommendations

<sup>49</sup> "Every Woman, Women of Hezbollah," *Al Jazeera*; Parasahar, Aatish-e-Chinar, 104, 105.

<sup>50</sup> "Every Woman, Women of Hezbollah," *Al Jazeera*.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.; A. Amer, "Women's roles in Hamas slowly evolve," *Al Monitor*, 2 March 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, 57.

<sup>53</sup> Stone & Pattillo, "Al Qaeda's Use of Female Suicide Bombers", 171.

<sup>54</sup> IPAC, "Mothers to Bombers."

<sup>55</sup> Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, 114.

<sup>56</sup> Gentry, "The Neo-Orientalist Narratives of Women's Involvement in Al Qaeda," 181.

<sup>57</sup> Bloom, *Bombshell*, 112-139.

<sup>58</sup> M. Bruner, "Jihad Jane' Gets 10 Years for Terror Plot," *NBC News*, 6 January, 2014,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/investigations/jihad-jane-gets-10-years-terror-plot-n4566>.

<sup>59</sup> Vikram Dodd, "Profile Roshonara Choudhry," *The Guardian*, 2 November, 2010.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/02/profile-roshonara-choudhry-stephen-timms>.

<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Pearson, "The Case of Roshonara Choudhry: Implications for Theory on Online Radicalization, ISIS Women, and the Gendered Jihad," *Policy and Interne* 8, no. 1, (March 2016), 5-33.

<sup>61</sup> V. Dodd and A. Topping, "Roshonara Choudhry Jailed for Life over MP Attack," *The Guardian*, 3 November 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, 114.

The roles that women have fulfilled in jihad have historically been different from those taken up by men. Leadership positions, for instance, have almost exclusively been taken on by men. Generally speaking, the same holds true for front-line positions. The ambiguity in the classical texts on the issue whether women are allowed to take part in combat roles offers jihadist groups the theological space to incorporate women in such positions if deemed necessary. However, despite the potential tactical advantages that could be gained by deploying women in operational roles - related to gendered assumptions about women and violence - few jihadist groups allow women in such roles. Those who do, predominantly deploy women as suicide operatives.

Within jihad, women have most frequently taken on supportive and facilitative roles. They have been active in propagating the jihadist ideology. Not only by supporting their jihadist husbands and raising a next generation of jihadist fighters, but also by disseminating jihadist propaganda, both online and offline, and by convincing others to join or support jihad. Furthermore, through strategic marriages, women have strengthened internal bonds between jihadist networks and groups and they have played important roles behind the scenes by raising funds for the jihadi struggle and by transporting messages, weapons and goods to different jihadi cells.

As women's roles are often less visible compared to men's, they can become easily overlooked, downplayed or considered of secondary importance by outside observers. However, as this policy brief has demonstrated, the ways in which women contribute to jihadi efforts are wide-ranging and diverse and their supportive and facilitative roles can be considered just as crucial for jihad as operational roles. Particularly in light of ensuring the continuity of the jihadi struggle - in terms of the influx of new fighters, popular and financial support and maintaining and expanding networks - these facilitating and supporting roles should not be underestimated. So, rather than being considered of secondary importance or subordinated to men's roles, women's roles should be viewed as complementary to and interconnected with them. Women and women's roles form an integral part of jihad. Recognising the relevance of women for jihad, and the myriad ways in which women can contribute to the jihadi cause, provides a more comprehensive understanding of (global) jihadism.

The preceding discussion leads to several policy-relevant recommendations. First of all, rather than focussing solely on the perpetrators of violent acts, the relevance of women's supportive roles should not be underestimated. Women have considerable agency in the context of jihadi groups. One implication of this is that policymakers and practitioners working to curb or prevent involvement in jihadism should not consider women solely as potential victims, coerced by their jihadist husbands into subservient roles, but as full-fledged actors in their own right.

Considering women as active rather than passive participants in jihad and increasing our understanding of why and how women end up in jihadi groups can inform preventative efforts. Although there is still a lot of ground to cover, research on gender-based aspects of (involvement in) extremism and terrorism is increasing.<sup>63</sup> Studies focusing on why Western women join or support IS so far show that these women are driven by many of the same factors as their male counterparts, including (but not limited to) a search for identity, a sense of religious duty, to defend the *Ummah*, to help build and live in the Islamic State, to be part of something bigger and divine, a sense of adventure, the

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<sup>63</sup> See for example: Seran de Leede et al., "Radicalisation and Violent Extremism - Focus on Women"; The Carter Center, "The Women in Daesh"; Pearson and Winterbotham, "Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalization".

prospect of a clean slate and expressing societal discontent.<sup>64</sup> However, that is not to say that there are no gender-specific drivers. Awareness of these gendered motivations could prove useful for policymakers and practitioners working to prevent women's involvement in jihadism. Research so far has identified the following gendered differences.

First of all, the Carter Center found that IS has produced a highly-gendered narrative in which women are offered alternative concepts of freedom and empowerment, based on Islamic virtues. In this narrative, Western feminism is portrayed as imperialist and exclusively advantageous for white women, leaving little to no room for Islamic women and their values. IS promises women the opportunity to free themselves from the superficial and materialistic principles that are imposed on them by the West and to reclaim their true identity as intended by God, promising women perspective, meaning and self-worth.<sup>65</sup> Deradicalisation and prevent programmes aimed at radicalised Islamist women and girls could expand on this by offering women an alternative route to empowerment within the context of Islam, for example by including an Islamic feminist approach.

Second, women and girls can be exposed to radicalisation differently. The developer of a Dutch prevention-, intervention- and deradicalisation programme explains that adolescent women with a Muslim background deal with different issues compared to their male peers. She describes how in many Muslim cultures, women's (sexual) behaviour is directly linked to the family honour. Often, girls are prohibited to have contact with boys and issues around (female) sexuality are not discussed within the family sphere. As underscored by different cases in the Netherlands where young girls with questions about their identity and their sexuality within Islam were approached by recruiters, this exposes Islamic girls to a gender-specific vulnerability to radicalisation.

Several of these girls were told by recruiters that within Islam, women too have the opportunity to explore their sexuality. Through informal marriages, they were told, women are allowed to have physical contact with men. However, after the consummation of such a marriage, the girls found themselves in a problematic situation. Having lost their virginity, the girls realised they could be disowned by their families, or worse. As a consequence, some of these girls became even more isolated, and ended up deeply involved in the jihadi network. Some of them ended up trying to travel to Syria/Iraq.<sup>66</sup> Programmes aimed at the prevention of radicalisation of women and girls could help obviate this vulnerability by including issues around (female) sexuality within Islam in their programming and by raising awareness among parents about this increased vulnerability to radicalisation.

A final point of practical relevance to take into consideration, is that women can have an increased risk of experiencing discrimination, due to their choice of attire (burqa or niqab). This can cause feelings of exclusion, which can spiral into an increased vulnerability to radicalisation.<sup>67</sup> Programmes aimed at the prevention of radicalisation could increase the resilience of women and girls to the rhetoric of violent extremists by

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<sup>64</sup> See: Seran de Leede et al., "Radicalisation and Violent Extremism - Focus on Women"; Bakker and De Leede, "European Female Jihadists in Syria"; Saltman and Smith, "Till Martyrdom do us Part"; Perešin, "Fatal Attraction"; Patel, "The Sultanate of Women"; The Carter Center, "The Women in Daesh"; Pearson and Winterbotham, "Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalization"; Navest, De Koning and Moors, "Chatting about Marriage"; Spencer, "The Hidden Face of terrorism"; Strommen, "Jihadi brides or Female Foreign Fighters?".

<sup>65</sup> The Carter Center, "The women in Daesh", 5-6.

<sup>66</sup> De Leede et al., "Radicalisation and Violent Extremism - Focus on Women," 62.

<sup>67</sup> Pearson and Winterbotham, "Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalization," 64-66.

addressing issues around identity and self-image, by raising awareness of the risks of radicalisation and by providing a safe space where sensitive topics can be discussed.<sup>68</sup>

To summarize, in order to effectively prevent women from joining or supporting jihadi groups, preventative efforts should understand the complexity of the wide-ranging motivations of women to join or support jihad, recognise and respond to the gender-specific recruitment efforts and tactics of jihadi groups and address those issues that specifically expose women to an increased risk of radicalisation.

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<sup>68</sup> Seran De Leede et al., "Radicalisation and violent extremism - focus on women", 62.

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# Women in Jihad: A Historical Perspective

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