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U.S. Naval War College
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Women and Terrorism
Perpetrators, Victims, Resisters, and Solution Finders

Brenda Soya

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College.

ABSTRACT:

We have a limited view of women as victims of terrorism, because of a “strategic blind spot.” This blind spot keeps us from understanding the complexity of women and terrorism and the multiple roles women play as perpetrators, victims, resisters, and solution finders. Thus, this hinders our ability to develop effective programs to counter violent extremism (CVE). However, if we understand the complexity of women’s roles we can develop better programs to prevent and to counter violent extremism, specifically in Africa. This paper discusses how AFRICOM can include women as an active part of the counter terrorism conversation by treating men and women’s potential for violence equally, including local women in planning CVE programs, and increasing women as part of national security forces.

The idea of female terrorists both fascinates and horrifies us. We are conditioned to think of women as peacemakers, not killers, and certainly not terrorists. We try to understand the motivations of Tashfeen Malick, the San Bernardino attacker, and the numerous stories of teenage girls from the U.S., UK, France, Kosovo, and Canada who joined the Islamic State (IS), and we want to stop this from happening in the future because it seems like their innocence was taken away and these young women were manipulated. We see them as victims of terrorism and yet, they supported IS and its violent activities, so could it be argued that they are also perpetrators of violence? Women’s roles within violent extremist organizations (VEO) are complex. This is evident in IS, as well as transnational violent extremist organizations in Africa like Al Shabaab, Boko Haram and AQIM. These organizations operate in remote areas and have not been the subject of much academic study. In a sense, there has been a lot of attention on ISIS and counter terrorism in the Middle East. Therefore, it makes sense to look specifically at CVE and women in Africa. AFRICOM recognizes transnational VEOs as a “direct threat to U.S. interests in Africa, but also a threat to stability across the continent.”¹ AFRICOM’s approach is

to “work by, with, and through” local partners therefore, AFRICOM has opportunities to implement the international commitment to gender equality in women, peace and security.

In order for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs in Africa to succeed in reducing the threat of violent extremists, AFRICOM must include women as an active part of the terrorism conversation addressing their roles as victims, as perpetrators and as peacebuilders. Not only will the inclusion of women fulfill the UN mandate on Women, Peace, and Security, but it will give the U.S. government a more complete picture of the problem. Before looking at what can be done, we must first understand the complexity of the roles of women in terrorism from examples of the Islamic State (IS) and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Second, we will take this understanding and apply it to terrorism in Africa, and third, we will draw from successful CVE programs and consider what AFRICOM could do to include women as part of the planning and ultimately increase its effectiveness in fighting violent extremism.

The multiple roles of women in terrorism

Looking at the multiple roles of women in IS demonstrates the complexity of the agency and victimization of women. Debangana Chatterjee maps women’s roles in IS through a gendered lens which sees women as victims, resisters and perpetrators.² First, the view of women as victims is most often adopted because it fits our cultural view that women are generally peaceful and would not willingly cause harm. Women as victims being gathered as slaves to satisfy the needs of militants as IS moved through Iraq.³ They were forced to remain in occupied cities to cook and provide for IS fighters. Numerous articles interview and document how these “Brides of ISIS” suffered and survived as victims in a war not of their making. Because of these stories, we tend to view women as victims.

Moreover, the same conflict shows us a view of women as resisters. After approximately 2000 women were repeatedly raped, abused and held as sex slaves, a group of Yazidi women stood up as resisters.⁴ They committed themselves to military revenge in addition to establishing an all-female council and decided “that families must not intervene when girls want to participate in any part of the struggle and committed to internally democratizing and transforming their own community.”⁵ On the surface the Yazidi women seemed to be only victims of terrorism, yet they embodied the roles victims, resisters, and solution finders. Both of these examples bring into question the general stereotype of women as victims. We can applaud the Yazidi women, and others, who find strength and agency to resist. Underlying the applause, however, is an assumption that a woman who takes on agency, does so to right a wrong. There is in fact, a spectrum of agency that manifests itself in the complexity of women’s roles. On one end, a woman has a noble role as a survivor who overcomes something done wrong to her. On the other end is the woman who follows an ideological belief or voluntarily chooses to do a violent act. The idea of women as only victims denies the idea that women can be the causes of violence.

In the same conflict in Iraq, women were victims, resisters and also, perpetrators. It is estimated that 600 women travelled from Europe or North America to join IS in Syria.⁶ Other women fundraised to send funds to IS and recruited fighters on social media.⁷ When considering what women can do to counter violent extremism, we have to remember the complexity of women and terrorism from these examples of IS. In order to overcome the complexity, we need to include women as part of the solution. If one can acknowledge that women have power to do harm and good, one can then imagine a spectrum of action, not limited by stereotypic roles or

level of agency. Looking further back in history, this spectrum of women's agency is evident in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

There is a similar pattern of women as perpetrators, victims and resisters in an ideological fight for an independent state for the Tamil people. As with IS, we find women who volunteered; however in LTTE women had a greater variety of roles. With LTTE, women served as ideologues and strategic leaders, in addition to managing logistics and guerrilla fighting.⁸ Women were a tactical asset because they were able to easily pass detection while carrying weapons because soldiers (with a gender bias) did not search them because they did not expect women to be perpetrators or supporters of violence! The government security force was blinded by particular beliefs about gender and women as terrorists. Later, the LTTE needed women as foot soldiers to supplement the number of men available and women were trained as fighters.⁹ This is a similar practice by violent extremist groups currently. However, it must be recognized that though many women volunteered for the Tamil cause and willingly took up arms, some may have been coerced by rape.¹⁰ Coercion through violence is one of several similar tactics found in IS as in LTTE.¹¹ Women in both situations and in Africa may choose to live under or stay with a VEO because of fear or self-preservation. Their reasons are complex and lie on a spectrum of willing support by force or by independent choice. We must accept that women are not always the peacemakers and their roles are multiple and complex which is critical to finding the right strategy to counter the complexities of CVE.

Understanding the roles of women in terrorism as victims, supporters, and resisters is important as we look to implement effective CVE programs. Lauren Sjoberg and Caron Gentry argue that "gendered assumptions" about women's motivation and recruitment into terrorist organizations lead to equally gendered counterterrorism policies. If policy makers only see

women terrorists as victims and acting against their natural will, the policy will be handicapped in responding to women who have been recruited and in preventing future recruitment.¹² The question then arises, are we going to see more female terrorists in Africa and are we going to have to change our approach to now target women as tactical operators? The Director of Duke University International Rights Clinic, Dr. Jayne Huckerby, asserted, “There tends to be a presumption of women being very peaceful, very motherly, as them being the ones to persuade individuals against terrorism. We need to move beyond that and look at the wide range of roles women can play both in terrorism and terrorism prevention.”¹³ Because of our limited view of women as victims of terrorism, we have a “strategic blind spot.”¹⁴ That blind spot leads us to assume women will come to the community meeting to help fight VE or they will report a family member as an extremist, preventing us from addressing the fact that she might be an active part of the terrorist network.

If we carry this blind spot to Africa and determine a strategy where women are generally considered subservient to men, we will fail. By understanding the multiple roles women have played with IS and LTTE, we can frame the current threat and look toward solutions that include women in the planning process. On a very basic level, the gender bias can be expressed simply as a search of passengers on a bus. If a security force officer only sees women without agency, as victims or as allies, he or she will overlook that female bus passenger’s potential as an agent with a weapon and her potential as a suicide bomber. Perhaps he or she will not question if the female passenger is carrying funds to support an extremist cell. The gender bias is also evident in a well-intentioned CVE program targeting women and encouraging them to attend community meetings on identifying radicalization, when, in fact, the programs should be addressing their potential as terrorists like men. AFRICOM puts considerable resources and political capital in

countering violent extremist organizations, so in light of women as victims, perpetrators, and resisters of terrorism we need to explore what these roles mean for AFRICOM's fight against terrorism.

What is unique about women and terrorism in Africa?

The majority of African countries face destabilizing conditions from conflict, political instability, food insecurity, and lack of economic opportunity. On top of that, there are 18.5 million people categorized as refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people and stateless persons.¹⁵ These numbers and these conditions create a challenging environment fertile for VEOs. In addition, women bear much of these burdens because of the social inequality. They do not have the same political, legal, educational or economic opportunities as men.¹⁶ While countries vary, as a whole, the number of women is limited in most professions (doctor, lawyer, academic), government technocrat, and elected officials and in the formal business sector. CVE programs are learning from decade-old lessons in development. We have learned that women involved in development activities return the benefits to the communities. Because they build communities, it is easy to assume that women are peacemakers. This image is problematic because it lets us put our guard down against women as terrorists and overlook their multiple roles when it comes to terrorism.

Most women in Africa are not perceived to have much agency, and when it comes to terrorism, they are pawns in the fight. They fall into gendered roles reinforced by male-dominated institutions.¹⁷ Thus, they are not found in government, councils of elders, or among religious leaders. While elite women have more opportunities in education and professions, most women will be limited to subsistence farming or to participate in the informal economy.¹⁸ When it comes to terrorism, women are taken advantage of and often made victims. For

example, Boko Haram is an extremist, separatist movement which fights for a caliphate and is most known for kidnapping school girls. Many of the girls bore children and Boko Haram leaders saw them as home-builders for the new caliphate. Their passive (albeit forced) support for terrorism is contrasted by their actual kinetic threat as suicide bombers. Jessica Davis in *Women in Modern Terrorism*, estimates that since 2014 Boko Haram has averaged 2.4 suicide attacks per month and many of the bombers were women or girls and it is highly likely that they were coerced, kidnapped or brainwashed.¹⁹ Women, or girls, have simultaneously been agents of violence as suicide bombers and victims forced to live with and, by extension, support the terrorists.

In contrast, Al Shabaab and AQIM limit women's roles and influence. Davis's research found that Al Shabaab employs women as fundraisers and as recruiters and denies them leadership or strategic planning roles.²⁰ The most public example is Samantha Lewthwaite from the UK, who was allegedly tied to the Westgate mall attack by offering cash to suicide bombers. Lewthwaite's support from overseas to Kenya has similarities with women financially backing IS. However, Samantha's influence came from abroad and most often, African women are not visible in formal leadership positions. Groups like AQIM have specific goals and localized demands and Davis states that it is extremely difficult to assess the exact role of women living in the occupied territory. They are not visibly leaders, nor does it make sense culturally to see them in positions of influence. An area of growing concern is collusion in refugee camps and the growing ground for recruitment in these camps. So how should current AFRICOM strategy address the complexity of roles?

The immediate response is to look at success in foreign assistance and development in Africa, where investment in women is a good return on an investment in the community. Based

on this, it is easy to assume that women are peacemakers. They build communities. It is considered a development fact that investment in women's education and training pays dividends in communities, as women are more likely to use any income toward school and feeding the family. There is a trend of women managing the family farm as men turn to more formal employment.²¹ So while women are victims of war and suffer as internally displaced people, or refugees, we still find them in VEO controlled territory, perhaps coerced, forced, or voluntarily. Here lies the particularity of AFRICOM's challenge in CVE programming. Does it reinforce the gender bias that women are peacemakers (found in years of community development programs) or does it treat women as equally vulnerable to radicalization with potential to kill as men are? Either option shows that women have agency. This is further reinforced by the example of Hannatu Mai who took up arms like the Yazidi women to fight against Boko Haram with a militia.²² Only by recognizing the multiple roles of African women as resisters, victims, and peace makers can AFRICOM move forward. AFRICOM must address the multiple roles of women in its CVE programming by treating them with the same potential as men, by including them in planning CVE programs and making them part of the security forces.

Women are part of the solution

AFRICOM needs to include women's voices at every level from preventing and countering violent extremism, to actually engaging in counterterrorism in order to achieve its goals. As discussed earlier, our limited view of women as victims of terrorism creates a strategic blind spot that is costing us the lives of our soldiers. There are three ways to include women to prevent violent extremism in Africa.

First, women need to be treated at the same threat level as men. They live in the same environment and may hold the same grievances as men that push them to radicalization. It

cannot be assumed they are an ally of the state because of their gender. It would “be wrong to assume that these were always men, or that mothers would either naturally agree with governments or ally with the state.”²³ As shown by the Yazidi and LTTE, women do act violently. This understanding challenges the overall assumption of women’s propensity for peace. CVE programs that target community grievances and bring national governments closer to the people cannot meet with only men, or mostly men. Programs that offer job training cannot only aim for unemployed young men. Both high unemployment and absence of governance can “push” people towards violent extremist actions, and they are not limited to men. When searching a cross-border bus, men and women should be searched equally and treated with the same suspicion. Women can carry weapons and funds, perhaps more easily than men, because they are easily overlooked and assumed to have good intentions. Whether selecting target audiences for CVE programs or training security forces, we need to remove the blind spot and women need to be treated with the same threat level as men.

Second, women should help design the programs that target their communities. It is easy for international NGOs or U.S. civil-military operators to rely on off-the-shelf programs, understanding that women routinely prioritize education and generally are seen as the caretakers of community values. CVE programs that include women in the planning process will get the most out of these interests, strengthening families against being vulnerable to recruitment. It will also adapt the program to target women who are most vulnerable to radicalization. In Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger and Cameroon the *Moderate Voices* program uses narratives that undermine extremist propaganda through increasing dialogue and access to information.²⁴ The voices include moderate imam’s theological discussions opposed to extremist ideology, mixed-gender youth groups performing for peers, and experts explaining what good governance and citizen

participation by both men and women can do for the community. The women involved in planning *Moderate Voices*, ensured that the voices spoke to both men and women.

On the surface, the inclusion of women in the planning can appear to reinforce the gender bias of women as peacemakers. That is true. However, if women are left out of the planning, then the community will suffer more than if women are included in the planning process. USAID programs capitalize on the role of women as mothers and their influence within the family and in teaching cultural values to prevent radicalization from taking root in the communities. For example, in Bangladesh, women teach families the values of non-violence as well as how to speak out as community activists..²⁵ This program reaches the roots of building community resilience and therefore addresses some of the root causes that drive men and women to terrorist acts.

Third, women need to be more involved in the operational CT effort as part of the security forces and in gathering intelligence to reach other women in ways men cannot. AFRICOM should engage host nation militaries to recruit women for security forces. This would increase the ability of the military to do searches of potential female suicide bombers. A large part of AFRICOM's efforts in the theater are military to military training, which rarely includes women because of their small numbers in African security forces..²⁶ A portion of that training includes working with civilian populations and civilian-military relationships. Without women's inclusion in the training, the security forces are missing key insights into how best to work in a population.

In addition, women's orientation toward culture and sense of what is happening in the community needs to be harnessed in the security realm..²⁷ This was a valuable lesson for Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan. They were missing evidence because insurgents took

advantage of U.S. forces separating women from the men after a raid. The insurgents hid weapons with the women who were not questioned or searched.²⁸ After realizing this, the U.S. established cultural support teams that function alongside of Special Operations Forces. These female-led units gave U.S. soldiers access to key information to placement of explosives or the whereabouts of an insurgent.²⁹ The access of female units in Afghanistan is a model for AFRICOM.

In Africa, society is often segregated, and groups of women can be found near a well or a kitchen cooking for a community event, a wedding or a funeral. Women have agency in this seemingly benign domestic activity around a cooking pot. These are times of comradery and sharing of information. The ground is equally fertile for community building as it is for extremist recruitment. There is an opportunity for women who have been trained to spot radicalization to reach out to vulnerable women. In addition, some of the information learned during these times may be extremely valuable for security forces. Men who make up the majority of these forces do not have access to these intimate moments and, as pointed out earlier, one cannot assume that women will report a radicalized family member just because she is a woman. The paradox of the cooking pot or well lies in the fact that development programs that encourage women to conduct domestic activities together may also seem to reinforce a gender bias. This does not have to be true, because in Africa, the domestic or private sphere is where women wield the most power and influence.

Anyone can be a threat- regardless of gender

It can be argued that gender does not matter. Anyone, male or female, with a gun or on the side of a terrorist organization is a threat. There is no disagreement with this point and the evidence presented in this paper reaffirms that women have agency. This paper advocates that

CVE programs target both men and women as potential terrorists. Yet, they cannot be treated the same and off-the-shelf programs need to be tailored to the target community. The bottom line is gender *does* matter. Women's role in terrorism is complex because women are perpetrators, victims, resisters, and solution finders. However, at times, those roles may all be wrapped up in a single woman.

CNN recently published the story of Samantha Sally that seems to embody the complexity of women and terrorism. Samantha Sally followed her husband to the border of Syria, where she faced the choice to join him in the IS Caliphate or lose her daughter. She was a victim, coerced to staying with him and yet, arguably, she was enabling the IS fight and a perpetrator of violence. She also used their money to purchase a Yazidi woman as a slave, further condoning oppression, but then seemingly resisted IS by protecting the young women from much of the extreme violence that many of her peers faced. As the authors said, "Sally flits between the role of naïve, manipulated housewife, and the savvy pragmatist able to survive the savage, male-dominated world of ISIS."³⁰ There are many women who live under Boko Haram, AQIM, and Al Shabaab controlled areas in Africa, and they, too, are victims and supporters of terrorism. It can be argued that very few men would find themselves in this duality of roles. Gender does matter.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no singular way to address women when creating outreach strategies related to CVE, but they will be more likely to succeed if women are part of the planning and design. Women have multiple roles within the same conflict and can be labeled as perpetrators, victims, resisters, and solution finders. By understanding this complexity, we can design programs that incorporate these different roles and will be more effective in our fight

against terrorism. There is a large body of data dedicated to gender perspective and an increasing awareness of harnessing women as positive agents of change in their communities..³¹ This article extended the research by Debangana Chatterjee, Lauren Sjoberg, and Caron Gentry with examples in Africa that reinforce the UN efforts to engage women in peace and security. We can only move forward and fight terrorism by accepting that women are perpetrators of violence whether willingly or unwillingly, and by consciously overcoming our gender blind spots. The first step in accepting the complexity of roles and overcoming the gender bias is to include women in the conversation.

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- ¹ AFRICOM posture statement March 18, 2018. www.africom.mil (Accessed April 19, 2018).
<http://www.africom.mil/about-the-command/2018-posture-statement-to-congress>
- ² Debangana Chatterjee, "Gendering ISIS and Mapping the Role of Women," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 3 (2016): 201, accessed September 11, 2017.
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2347798916638214>
- ³ Chatterjee, *Gendering ISIS*, 207.
- ⁴ Chatterjee, *Gendering ISIS*, 207.
- ⁵ Chatterjee, *Gendering ISIS*, 208.
- ⁶ Laura Sjoberg, and Caron E. Gentry, "It's Complicated: Looking Closely at Women in Violent Extremism," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2016): 24.
- ⁷ Chatterjee, *Gendering ISIS*, 209-210.
- ⁸ Jessica Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad and the Islamic State* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 74 and 113.
- ⁹ Davis, *Women*, 74.
- ¹⁰ Chatterjee, *Gendering ISIS*, 213; Davis, *Women*, 72.
- ¹¹ Chatterjee, *Gendering ISIS*, 203; Davis *Women*, 69-79.
- ¹² Sjoberg and Gentry, *It's Complicated*, 23.
- ¹³ Krista London Couture, "A Gendered Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned from Women in Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention Applied Successfully in Bangladesh and Morocco," Brookings: 2014, 10. Accessed September 27, 2017.
<https://www.brookings.edu/research/a-gendered-approach-to-countering-violent-extremism-lessons-learned-from-women-in-peacebuilding-and-conflict-prevention-applied-successfully-in-bangladesh-and-morocco/>
- ¹⁴ Dharmapuri, *UNSCR*, 149.
- ¹⁵ AFRICOM posture statement March 18, 2018. www.africom.mil (Accessed April 19, 2018).
<http://www.africom.mil/about-the-command/2018-posture-statement-to-congress>
- ¹⁶ April A. Gordon, "Women and Development" in *Understanding Contemporary Africa*, 4th Edition, Ed by April A. Gordon and Donal L. Gordon, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, 2007, 293.
- ¹⁷ Gordon, *Women and Development*, 299.
- ¹⁸ Gordon, *Women and Development*, 312.
- ¹⁹ Davis, *Women*, 107.
- ²⁰ Davis, *Women*, 114.
- ²¹ Gordon, *Women and Development*, 301.
- ²² "The Woman Standing up to Boko Haram," *bbc.co.uk*, April 14, 2017, accessed October 1, 2017,
<http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-39591879/the-nigerian-woman-standing-up-to-boko-haram>
- ²³ Emily Winterbotham & Elizabeth Pearson, "Different Cities, Shared Stories," *The RUSI Journal* 161, no. 5 (2016): 61. <https://rusi.org/publication/rusi-journal/different-cities-shared-stories-five-country-study-challenging-assumptions>. Winterbotham and Pearson led five focus groups within vulnerable communities in Canada and Europe to discuss CVE programs. The majority of the participants were Muslim and in these focus groups they underlined only a small minority actually went to Syria but more importantly that many CVE programs were missing out on the fact that women could also be radicalized and not just be supporting CVE.
- ²⁴ USAID "Countering Violent Extremism in West Africa," *USAID.gov*. Last updated October 25, 2016, accessed September 27, 2017, <https://www.usaid.gov/west-africa-regional/fact-sheets/countering-violent-extremism%0B-west-africa>
- ²⁵ Couture, *Gendered*, 5.

²⁶ Liesl Louw-Vaudran, "African Women are Increasingly Part of the Military and Police, but These Remain Strongly Male-dominated Institutions," *Institute for Security Studies*, June 10, 2015, accessed October 9, 2017, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/women-in-africas-top-brass-its-not-just-about-the-numbers>

²⁷ Couture, *Gendered*, 11.

²⁸ Michaela Bilotta, "Presence and Access: What Women Bring to the CVE Fight," (unpublished paper, Naval War College, 2016), 6.

²⁹ Bilotta, *Presence*, 9-10.

³⁰ Nick Paton Walsh and Abdelaziz, Salma, "Beaten, tortured, sexually abused: An American ISIS widow looks for a way home." *CNN*, cnn.com. April 19, 2018. (Accessed April 19, 2018.) <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/19/middleeast/syria-us-isis-bride-intl/index.html>

³¹ Couture, *Gendered*, viii. And Dharmapuri, *UNSCR*, 150.

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