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Countering Violent Extremism: Role of Women and Family

By Mohamed Bin Ali and Sabariah Mohamed Hussin

Synopsis

The recent arrests of female IS supporters in Singapore indicate that the roles of women are evolving to include previously male-dominated domains. In view of the dynamic changes in contemporary women's roles, how can their unique strengths be harnessed and supported for counter-ideological purposes?

Commentary

RECRUITMENT AND radicalisation via the social media today has shifted the roles of women in terrorism. No longer seen solely as supporters and sympathisers of terrorist networks charged with bringing up the next generation of fighters, these women break through the domain traditionally held by men in terrorism.

They now play active roles in recruitment, financing and fundraising for terrorist operations. These additional roles play a crucial part to sustain the longevity of the terrorist movements as they provide an added value to terrorist narratives and are a powerful tool for recruitment.

Women as Cornerstone to Protect Families

Given their nurturing and intuitive qualities, the unique strengths and capabilities of women used to preserve the family institution should be fully utilised to Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts, specifically in preventing the family members from straying down the path of radicalisation.

Their nurturing sides can be deployed to protect their children from radical influences. Wives also play influential roles in helping to deradicalise their husbands who may have subscribed to terrorist ideologies. Their intuitive and familial nature can be

employed to detect any changes in the behavioural or thinking patterns of their family members.

As wives and mothers, women have the most intimate knowledge of their kin and would be able to detect any attitudinal or behavioural changes competently. The womenfolk in the family must be equipped with tools and knowledge to enable them to effectively assess even seemingly innocuous acts such as their husbands or children dabbling with extremist narratives or alienating themselves from the community.

Women and men have important complementary roles to play in the household and society. Collectively, parents play a major role in equipping their children to reject extremist narratives and violence. Specifically, the unique strengths of women need to be fully harnessed to provide a solid cornerstone of the family structure.

What Are Their Roles in CVE?

First, women can help to nurture an environment that censures extremist ideologies or support for terrorist activities. They can encourage their children, among others, to embrace positive values of tolerance and inclusiveness and forging peaceful relations with others. This can help to reduce their children's vulnerability and strengthen their psychological resilience against falling for extremist narratives.

Mothers who observe that their children are attracted to terrorist narratives can intervene to build their children's resilience by: (1) encouraging them to evaluate the information they receive and develop their critical thinking skills; (2) teaching them that violence should not be permitted under any circumstances; (3) providing them with strong counter narratives to challenge and undermine extremist narratives; and (4) explaining why violent extremism must be rejected.

Second, women must have the moral courage and responsibility to advise their spouses if and when the situation arise. From the Islamic perspective, each and everyone has a responsibility to enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil including wives who observe their husbands perform or plan to perform acts of violence in the name of religion.

Naturally, some wives perceive their acts of providing (constructive) 'criticism' as being disobedient to their husbands. Such wives have to be educated to appreciate the difference between being unreservedly disobedient and their religious obligation to advise if their spouse's behaviours go against the religion and possibly border on violent extremism.

Educating Their Families

Third, women must be empowered to educate their families to recognise how extremists have disguised their violent ideologies under the cloak of religion and engage them in discussion about this issue. These women should also be equipped with information pertaining to how to seek help should they encounter difficulties or require further support.

In Singapore, family members can seek help from religious teachers recognised under the Asatizah (religious teachers) Recognition Scheme, as well as Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) counsellors for advice on issues of radicalization and extremism. They can also contact RRG Helpline at 1800-7747747. Alternatively, members of the public can download the RRG mobile application that allows users to converse one-on-one with an RRG counsellor.

Finally, youths, including young women have a very important role to play in CVE since they are usually the targets of groups like IS. This can be done by encouraging them to lead initiatives that focus on conflict resolution and peacebuilding activities among their peers. Young women should also be encouraged to participate in national consultations on security and peace issues so that more comprehensive policies and programmes that address the differentiated needs across the genders and age groups can be successfully formulated.

Spotting Early Signs of Radicalisation

Nipping the radicalisation process in the bud is crucial as this means that the radicalisation is not yet deeply rooted in the person's belief system. Particularly, mothers and wives are known for their ability to spot the tell-tale signs due to their 'sensitivity' and 'close contact' with their children and spouse.

It would be prudent therefore, to be familiar with the warning signs of radicalisation which broadly include: (1) justifying the use of violence to defend a cause; (2) expressing intent to participate in acts of violence locally or overseas, or incite others to participate in acts of violence; (3) idolising terrorist personalities; (4) expressing support for militant groups on social media; and (5) frequenting radical websites or try to establish contact with radical ideologues.

There is real value in reporting early to the authorities if a loved one exhibits some of these potential signs of radicalisation. Multiple research has shown that it is immediate families who play the major role in preventing their family members from further radicalization. Hence, reporting should be perceived as acting in the interests of their loved ones.

The family has always been important in the stability of the society. Ensuring the resilience of family members is a giant step towards countering extremism and reducing its influence in the community. By helping family members who display out-of-the-norm behaviour, it will go a long way to help reduce the threat of violent extremism.

Indeed, the ability of women and the family institution to be an agent of positive change is critical in countering violent extremism. Hence, governmental and community initiatives to provide dedicated support for all women should be sustained and strengthened so that women can successfully strive to build a nurturing environment to develop future generations that are inured to radical influences.

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