

Stanford Law School: Law & Policy Lab

Countering Violent Extremism By Countering Stereotypes

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“Women are not only peacemakers. . . . Women do volunteer and women are victims—you have to think in a nuanced kind of way.”

-Naureen Chowdhury Fink,
Head of Research and Analysis at the Global Center on Cooperative Security

Executive Summary

When considering the role of women in Preventing & Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) efforts, policy makers have traditionally seized on stereotypes about women as the “gentler sex.”¹ According to this stereotype, women are “peacemakers” who can prevent men in their communities from radicalizing, who can be counted upon to alert authorities of at-risk individuals, and who can serve as a counterweight to extremist influence.² Policy recommendations that flow from these stereotypes often fail to acknowledge women’s own potential for radicalization and willingness to engage in conflict or support others engaged in conflict. Policy makers may also ignore how terrorist organizations can use women in more coercive ways to accomplish their goals, regardless of any presumed nonviolent inclinations. Most importantly, these stereotypes overlook the crucial social, historical, political, and geographic contexts that result in important distinctions among terrorist organizations and their strategies for recruiting women and using gender narratives to their advantage.

These distinctions among terrorist groups reveal the need for gender-related P/CVE efforts that avoid a “one size fits all” approach eschew generalizations about women. This paper develops two case studies to illustrate (1) how seemingly similar terrorist groups, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Boko Haram, incorporate and employ women in completely different ways to accomplish their goals, and (2) how women engage with these groups differently. Drawing on a mix of current news and scholarly articles focusing on these organizations and P/CVE generally, this paper adopts a gender perspective to illuminate limitations in traditional P/CVE policies and offer targeted gender-based options directed at containing the recruitment efforts of ISIL and Boko Haram. More broadly, this paper argues that P/CVE efforts must be context-specific, especially with respect to how terrorist organizations employ and deploy women and how policy makers can respond.

Background: ISIL and Boko Haram as focal points for P/CVE study

Boko Haram is a jihadist terrorist group originating in northeastern Nigeria that is believed to be composed of several thousand fighters. The organization gained international prominence in 2014 with the kidnapping of hundreds of schoolgirls. Since it was founded in 2002, Boko Haram has displaced over a million people and used brutally violent tactics to terrorize communities. Although Boko Haram was originally associated with Al Qaeda, it has recently pledged its formal

¹ Mia Bloom, a security studies professor at the University of Massachusetts. Strohlic, Nina. “The New Face of Boko Haram’s Terror: Teen Girls.” *The Daily Beast*. December 13, 2014.

² Naureen Chowdhury Fink, head of research and analysis at the Global Center on Cooperative Security. *Ibid.*

allegiance to ISIL.³ This formal allegiance may tempt policy makers to lump the groups together. But Boko Haram and ISIL employ different tactics to accomplish different goals. Boko Haram remains mostly isolated in Northeastern Nigeria, although it does not maintain control over any area or population and does occasionally cross borders. When the organization brutally seizes an area, most people flee, so there is “not much left to rule.”⁴ By contrast, ISIL has taken control of territory in Iraq and Syria and recruits people from around the world to join its organization. It also has greater territorial ambitions and endeavors to govern areas under its control.⁵

These differences have major implications for P/CVE efforts, especially with regard to women. The two organizations’ approach to employing women mirrors their broader strategy: Boko Haram’s commission of gender-based violence contrasts sharply with ISIL’s effort to recruit women to voluntarily join the organization. Boko Haram and ISIL illustrate how P/CVE efforts addressed to women must be tailored to combat disparate tactics.

Methodology

Because there are few formal databases that address gender issues related to contemporary terrorist organizations, this paper canvasses a mix of propaganda, news, and academic sources to draw conclusions about how ISIL and Boko Haram both recruit women and deploy narratives about gender to advance their goals. The news accounts describe recent events that illustrate how these women participate in external-facing operations. Additionally, public propaganda materials (e.g. YouTube videos, “manifestos,” etc.) offer crucial insight into the messages that these organizations hope to convey to the outside world and to potential recruits. Finally, academic studies have begun to usefully compile and analyze firsthand social media accounts and interviews with the women involved in these organizations. Combining these primary and secondary sources with external and internal accounts provides an understanding of how ISIL and Boko Haram each deploy women and narratives about gender to accomplish their goals of inciting terror, spreading their ideology, recruiting members, and gaining political and territorial control.

Boko Haram

Boko Haram uses gender-based violence to terrorize local populations, abduct girls and women, and coerce them into participating in the group’s violent activities. Women who voluntarily choose to participate in the organization are rare. Instead of focusing on indoctrination, “radicalization” occurs primarily through abduction, forced marriage, and sexual violence. While women initially played more supporting roles in the organization, Boko Haram seems to have shifted tactics and started using women to achieve their violent goals more directly, including through the use of suicide bombings. Boko Haram’s primarily coercive tactics for involving women in the organization demands a different response than groups that use more persuasive methods to recruit and involve women.

³ The Associated Press. “Boko Haram Pledges Allegiance to ISIS.” CBC News. March 7, 2015. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/boko-haram-pledges-allegiance-to-isis-1.2986041>.

⁴ Cédric Jourde, a West Africa expert at the School of Political Studies at the University of Ottawa.

⁵ Wood, Graeme. “What ISIS Really Wants.” The Atlantic. March 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV): New Emphasis on Abductions

Boko Haram gained international prominence in 2014 when it kidnapped almost 300 schoolgirls from the village of Chibok.⁶ While this was not Boko Haram's first display of gender-based violence (GBV), it did "mark an expansion" of this strategy.⁷ Since the start of 2014, the group has abducted at least 2,000 women and girls.⁸ In propaganda videos, Boko Haram claims that this strategy is a response to the Nigerian government's arrest of women connected to Boko Haram.⁹ In other words, the group frames their actions as a form of gender retaliation. However, the abductions serve as an obvious way to terrorize and display power over a community.¹⁰

When Boko Haram abducts women, they usually take them to a "makeshift transit camp" where several things happen.¹¹ First, members of Boko Haram subject girls to systemized sexual violence.¹² They also force girls as young as nine to marry members of the group.¹³ Next, Boko Haram teaches women the group's interpretation of the Koran, and may kill those who refuse to convert to Islam.¹⁴ Finally, they train at least some women how to fight "infidels" by teaching them how to operate weapons and attack villages.¹⁵

After their abduction, women are coerced into helping Boko Haram through traditional female roles. One Christian teenager explained how after being abducted by Boko Haram, she was "forced to cook and clean for the group."¹⁶ Other women and girls told Human Rights Watch that they served as porters, "carrying the loot stolen by the insurgents from villages and towns they had attacked."¹⁷ These accounts indicate that Boko Haram uses kidnapped women for daily domestic necessities.

⁶ Segun, Mausi, and Samer Muscati. "Those Terrible Weeks in Their Camp": Boko Haram Violence against Women and Girls in Northeast Nigeria. Human Rights Watch, 2014. http://features.hrw.org/features/HRW_2014_report/Those_Terrible_Weeks_in_Their_Camp/assets/nigeria1014web.pdf.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Amnesty International. "Nigeria: Abducted Women and Girls Forced to Join Boko Haram Attacks." April 14, 2015. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/articles/news/2015/04/nigeria-abducted-women-and-girls-forced-to-join-boko-haram-attacks/>.

⁹ Zenn, Jacob, and Elizabeth Pearson. "Women, Gender, and The Evolving Tactics of Boko Haram." *Journal of Terrorism Research* 5, no. 1 (2014). <http://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/jtr/article/view/828/707>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ "Amnesty International." Nigeria: Abducted Women and Girls Forced to Join Boko Haram Attacks.

¹² Nossiter, Adam. "Boko Haram Militants Raped Hundreds of Female Captives in Nigeria." *The New York Times*. May 18, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/19/world/africa/boko-haram-militants-raped-hundreds-of-female-captives-in-nigeria.html>.

¹³ "We would marry them out at the age of 9," the leader, Abubakar Shekau, said in a video message soon after the girls were abducted. *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Amnesty International. "Nigeria: Abducted Women and Girls Forced to Join Boko Haram Attacks."

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Zenn, Jacob, and Elizabeth Pearson. "Women, Gender, and The Evolving Tactics of Boko Haram."

¹⁷ Segun, Mausi, and Samer Muscati. "Those Terrible Weeks in Their Camp": Boko Haram Violence against Women and Girls in Northeast Nigeria.

There are also many recorded examples of women being forced to participate in military operations. For instance, a 19-year-old who was held in several camps was forced to participate in attacks on villages and to carry ammunition for the fighters.¹⁸ Another woman, Aisha, told Amnesty International that she was forced to help attack villages, including her own, and participated in the attacks by burning homes.¹⁹ Other women who successfully escaped from the group reported being forced to lure men into ambush.²⁰

It is difficult to ascertain what happens to women who cannot escape from the group, but based on reports from women and girls who have managed to escape, life for women within the organization is focused on helping to achieve the group's goals, either through direct violent action or through the supporting role in a forced marriage. Rather than persuade women to join their cause, Boko Haram abducts women and then forcibly conscripts them into the group until and unless the women die or escape. Because Boko Haram's attempt at Islamic instruction is intertwined with horrendous sexual violence, forced marriage, and brutal punishment (daily floggings take place to punish failure to attend daily prayers²¹), it is unlikely that this tactic successfully indoctrinates women into the group's ideology. As one Christian abductee described to Human Rights Watch after being brutally beaten for refusing to convert to Islam, "An insurgent who I recognized from my village convinced me to accept Islam lest I should be killed. So I agreed."²² Muslim abductees report similar experience when they refuse to accept Boko Haram's ideology ("I was not moved by the soul searching preaching of bounties in the heaven and it was at this point, their leader resorted to threat and intimidation to obtain my consent."²³), which indicates that "conversions" to Boko Haram's version of Islam are mostly out of fear.

Female Suicide Bombers: Evolving Tactics Put Women on the Front Lines

Although Boko Haram may not be successful in converting women ideologically, the organization has discovered that using women on the front lines of their violent operations is an effective strategy. In June 2014, Boko Haram deployed female suicide bombers for the first time in the organization's history.²⁴ This marked another escalation in Boko Haram's strategy from using women as domestic servants, couriers, and in peripheral ways on the battlefield to bringing them to the front and center of the violence.²⁵ Using women as suicide bombers offers two distinct advantages for the group. First, since men usually carry out acts of terror, women can more easily blend into crowded areas without raising suspicions. Second, women who carried out the suicide

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Amnesty International. "Nigeria: Abducted Women and Girls Forced to Join Boko Haram Attacks."

²⁰ Segun, Mausi, and Samer Muscati. "Those Terrible Weeks in Their Camp": Boko Haram Violence against Women and Girls in Northeast Nigeria.

²¹ Amnesty International. "Nigeria: Abducted Women and Girls Forced to Join Boko Haram Attacks." April 14, 2015.

²² Segun, Mausi, and Samer Muscati. "Those Terrible Weeks in Their Camp": Boko Haram Violence against Women and Girls in Northeast Nigeria. Human Rights Watch, 2014.

²³ Onuoha, Freedom, and Temilola George. "Boko Haram's Use of Female Suicide Bombing in Nigeria." Al Jazeera Center for Studies. March 18, 2015. <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2015/03/2015317105714685938.htm>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

bombings wore hijabs, which makes it more difficult to see the weapons and protects them against being patted down, which is prohibited by Islamic law.²⁶

One important question that remains unanswered is whether these suicide bombers have volunteered for or been coerced into their missions. There is at least some evidence of coercion. For example, one 13-year-old suicide bomber who was arrested in December of 2014 explained how her father (a member of Boko Haram) had transferred to her to a Boko Haram radicalization camp where they tried to “brainwash” her into the mission.²⁷ However, when that did not work, the leader “resorted to threat and intimidation to obtain my consent. We were shown a deep hole where the leader of the group threatened to bury us alive at a point if any of us refused to play along, and at another time he picked a big gun and threatened to shoot anyone who fails to obey his command.”²⁸ While efforts at true indoctrination remain part of Boko Haram’s strategy, there is at least some evidence that new strategies that put women on the front lines of combat are based on coercion rather than successful indoctrination or voluntary engagement.

Active Roles of Leaders’ Wives

Evidence of women playing active, voluntary roles in Boko Haram’s activities comes in mostly the form of wives of the group’s leaders. One woman who eventually escaped from Boko Haram after being abducted described how she and other abductees were ordered to slit the throats of some other captives. When she was unable to complete the order, the “camp leader’s wife took the knife” and did the killing.²⁹ Another captive woman who had been forcibly married to a member of the group described how the “commander’s wife blocked the cave entrance and watched as the man raped me.”³⁰ These anecdotes reveal that women closely connected to the group through familial ties play an active role in Boko Haram’s violent activities.

While these actions do seem voluntary, they may also be the result of prolonged coercion through forced marriage and sexual violence. More research is needed to determine whether the “wives” who participate directly in the group’s violence are voluntarily marrying the leaders of the organization or whether they are the abducted, forced brides who have simply been unable to escape and are participating in the group’s activity as a survival strategy.

Boko Haram’s New “Female Wing”?

Hafsat Bako, the widow of a deceased Boko Haram commander, was leading what was being described as a new “female wing” of Boko Haram out of the Sambisa Forest (where some of the abducted Chibok school girls were originally held) until her arrest in June 2014.³¹ She was

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Segun, Mausi, and Samer Muscati. “Those Terrible Weeks in Their Camp”: Boko Haram Violence against Women and Girls in Northeast Nigeria.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Zenn, Jacob. “Boko Haram: Recruitment, Financing, and Arms Trafficking in the Lake Chad Region.” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. October 31, 2014. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/boko-haram-recruitment-financing-and-arms-trafficking-in-the-lake-chad-region>.

arrested with two other women who were accused of “luring ladies, especially widows and young girls, by enticing them with male suitors who are mainly members of their terror group, for marriage.”³² So far these three women and their recruitment scheme are the only evidence of an independent, female wing of the organization. The arrest coincided with several female suicide bombings, although a direct link to Boko Haram herself has not been confirmed.³³ In addition to promising potential recruits husbands, the female wing recruited women who were the wives of fighters killed in action. These women were offered small amounts of money to join in Boko Haram operations.³⁴ However, since the arrests of the three women (who may have comprised the entire “female wing” of the organization), these activities seem to have dwindled.

It is clear that Boko Haram’s female leadership is limited. The group’s focus on gender-based violence and forced conscription seems to mostly limit Boko Haram’s active, female participation to women who have relatives in the group. However, more research is needed to determine the extent of women’s voluntary participation in violent activities like suicide bombings.

ISIL: A Case Study in Persuasion

Whereas Boko Haram incorporates female aid and membership primarily through abduction and coercion, ISIL has deployed a successful public relations campaign to recruit women voluntarily from all over the world, relying on persuasion rather than coercion to enlist women into the organization.³⁵ ISIL has employed a variety of narratives to successfully recruit women through online campaigns, public documents, and the use of other women as recruiters. Once in the organization, ISIL has carved out various roles for women, working to make these activities appealing and religiously-defensible despite their departure from the original recruitment narrative. ISIL’s international scope and persuasion-based strategy have different implications for P/CVE efforts than Boko Haram’s use of gender-based violence to obtain and retain women’s involvement.

A great deal of media attention has focused on Western women being recruited by ISIL, which is a serious P/CVE concern. But this paper does not address another serious concern: how ISIL employs/exploits women who already live in areas it occupies. Some reports indicate that ISIL leadership employs brutal tactics similar to Boko Haram to conscript women who are already living in areas it comes to occupy.³⁶ More research is needed to explore this issue, but it is clear that the narratives ISIL uses to appeal to Western women are often completely contradicted by the group’s treatment of women living in areas under its control.

³² Col. Onyema Nwachukwu, Director of Defense Information. Gigova, Radina. “Nigeria: Women Recruiting for Boko Haram.” CNN. July 5, 2014. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/07/04/world/africa/nigeria-women-suspected-boko-haram/>.

³³ Zenn, Jacob. “Boko Haram: Recruitment, Financing, and Arms Trafficking in the Lake Chad Region.”

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ For a start, see Wolfe, Lauren. “The Advent of ‘jihadi Brides,’ ‘caliph-ettes’: A Timeline of How Media Are Getting It Wrong and Right.” Timeline. May 27, 2015. http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org/pages/Advent-of-jihadi-brides-timeline-of-how-media-wrong-and-right?utm_content=buffer5f8e2&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer.

³⁶ “ISIS slave market sells girls for ‘as little as a pack of cigarettes,’ UN envoy says.” The Guardian. June 8, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/09/isis-slave-markets-sell-girls-for-as-little-as-a-pack-of-cigarettes-un-envoy-says>.

Recruitment: Ideology, Alienation, and Romantic Narratives

ISIL has successfully recruited women using various narratives through multiple platforms. The first narrative is religious—deeply religious women believe that by migrating to ISIL territory they will be closer to God and “secure their place in heaven.”³⁷ The success of this narrative illustrates ISIL’s ability to frame its mission in terms of Muslim values and to reach women who want to live by those values. Additionally, ISIL propaganda materials portray life in ISIL as “a kind of Islamic paradise” that is a “religious alternative” to life in the “decadent and depraved” West.³⁸

Interestingly, not all ISIL recruits are motivated by religion.³⁹ For example, European teenagers who grew up in families that were not heavily religious have traveled to Syria to join the organization.⁴⁰ According to *Time* Magazine correspondent Vivienne Walt, who has been reporting on the trend of Western women fleeing to Syria to join ISIL, this is a “common story.”⁴¹ One theory is that Muslim youth who struggle with Islamophobia and alienation in their home countries feel like they can “find stability and acceptance” by joining ISIL.⁴² This is especially true in Western Europe, which has struggled to integrate Muslim populations, but also impacts the United States, where post-9/11 Islamophobia has alienated many Muslim communities.⁴³

ISIL also utilizes romantic narratives to recruit women. These narratives are disseminated through propaganda videos that show women marrying handsome fighters and raising warrior sons who will protect them and their new homeland.⁴⁴ ISIL promises women a “strong Muslim man, who is a true Muslim, who is fighting for this very heroic cause.”⁴⁵ In addition to this narrative, ISIL uses a somewhat counterintuitive “adventure” narrative that promises a Muslim utopia where women will be able to play a direct role in an exciting political movement.⁴⁶ And unlike other

³⁷ Hoyle, Carolyn, Alexandra Bradford, and Ross Frenett. “Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS.” Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 2015. http://www.strategicdialogue.org/ISDJ2969_Becoming_Mulan_01.15_WEB.PDF.

³⁸ Erlanger, Steven. “In West, ISIS Finds Women Eager to Enlist.” *The New York Times*. October 23, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/24/world/europe/as-islamists-seek-to-fill-ranks-more-western-women-answer-their-call.html?_r=0.

³⁹ In fact, some sources say that *most* women who are recruited by ISIL are *not* deeply religious, and many are not even Muslim. Randall, Colin. “Despite Brutality, ISIL Continues to Recruit European Teens.” *The National*. October 10, 2014. <http://www.thenational.ae/world/europe/despite-brutality-isis-continues-to-recruit-european-teens#page1>.

⁴⁰ “Increasing Number Of Western Women Flee To Syria.” NPR. January 14, 2015. <http://www.npr.org/2015/01/14/377122767/increasing-number-of-western-women-flee-to-syria>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Shinkman, Paul. “ISIS Ability to Recruit Women Baffles West, Strengthens Cause.” *US News*. March 2, 2015. <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/03/02/isis-ability-to-recruit-women-baffles-west-strengthens-cause>.

⁴³ Johnson, Kevin. “ISIL’s Sophisticated Recruiting Campaign Poses Persistent Threat in U.S.” *USA Today*. April 26, 2015. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/04/26/foreign-fighters-isis-fbi/26202741/>.

⁴⁴ Shinkman, Paul. “ISIS Ability to Recruit Women Baffles West, Strengthens Cause.”

⁴⁵ Taub, Amanda. “No, CNN, Women Are Not Joining ISIS Because of “kittens and Nutella” *Vox*. February 18, 2015. <http://www.vox.com/2014/10/20/6987673/isis-women>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

extremist organizations, ISIL does not rule out the idea of women participating in the fighting directly.⁴⁷ This may lead some female recruits to imagine themselves as heroic fighters, even though in reality ISIL strongly discourages and almost never allows women to fight on the frontlines.

ISIL's most significant recruitment tool for girls and women is social media, where the organization can reach a younger global audience often unbeknownst to the girls' parents.⁴⁸ A journalist for *The Guardian* who went undercover as a teenage girl interested in joining ISIL was contacted almost immediately by an ISIL recruiter who waged an aggressive campaign to bring the "girl" to Syria.⁴⁹ He promised to make the "girl" his wife and treat her "like a Queen," sending her multiple messages a day.⁵⁰ In addition to this contact, the journalist started receiving multiple messages a day from other girls asking her for advice about the best way to travel to Syria, and what they should pack, all in response to her few Facebook posts about jihad.⁵¹ This swift and aggressive social media response, combined with personal outreach efforts from people who have already been recruited into the group, is threatening to "outpace the government's capabilities across the intelligence community."⁵²

Traditional Roles for Women in ISIL

In March 2015, ISIL released a manifesto that articulated its views on women's appropriate positions within the organization.⁵³ The document spells out different roles for men and women, explicitly rejecting equality in the Western sense and stating that only under "exceptional circumstances" should women work outside of the home.⁵⁴ One example of an "exceptional circumstance" is if not enough men were available to protect the organization, in which case women may be asked to go on jihad.⁵⁵ This would require an edict from religious leaders, however, and is clearly not the normal or ideal state of affairs.

One main point of the manifesto is that women should spend their time in the home cooking, reading, and studying religion:

⁴⁷ Shinkman, Paul. "ISIS Ability to Recruit Women Baffles West, Strengthens Cause."

⁴⁸ Pearson, Elizabeth. "What Is Luring Western Women to Syria To Join ISIL?" *The Telegraph*. February 23, 2015. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11429118/What-is-luring-Western-women-to-Syria-to-join-Isil.html>.

⁴⁹ Erelle, Anna. "Skyping with the Enemy: I Went Undercover as a Jihadi Girlfriend." *The Guardian*. May 26, 2015. http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/26/french-journalist-poses-muslim-convert-isis-anna-erelle?CMP=fb_gu.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Johnson, Kevin. "ISIL's Sophisticated Recruiting Campaign Poses Persistent Threat in U.S." <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/04/26/foreign-fighters-isis-fbi/26202741/>

⁵³ The full text of the manifesto is available here: <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/women-of-the-islamic-state3.pdf>

⁵⁴ Abdul-Alim, Jamaal. "ISIS 'Manifesto' Spells Out Role for Women." *The Atlantic*. March 8, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/03/isis-manifesto-spells-out-role-for-women/387049/>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Yes, we say ‘stay in your houses,’ but this does not mean, in any way, that we support illiteracy, backwardness or ignorance. Rather, we just support the distinction between working—that which involves a woman leaving the house—and studying, as it was ordained she should do.⁵⁶

This depiction of life under ISIL may resonate with Western women who would not subscribe to a completely restrictive view of women. The manifesto also emphasizes women’s roles as mothers, describing motherhood as a “divine duty.”⁵⁷ One tweet referring to a woman as a righteous wife who was raising righteous children was retweeted sixty times, which indicates that this theme resonated with other ISIL members and sympathizers.⁵⁸ Other ISIL materials emphasize the importance of learning to cook and sew (in order to mend uniforms among other purposes).⁵⁹ While these roles seem antiquated to Western feminists, ISIL has “been successful in providing these women with a clearly defined and influential role.”⁶⁰ In other words, ISIL has promulgated a counter intuitively empowering role for women by giving them a “prominent, yet highly restrictive” role that elevates their status as educated mothers crucial to the cause.⁶¹

Once women actually reach ISIL, their lives are more restrictive than elevated. Women must be accompanied by men whenever they leave the house, and must wear a “double layered veil, gloves, and a ... cloak.”⁶² These restrictions are especially challenging for women who are single. However, single women who join ISIL are provided with free housing, an allowance, and monthly food supplies.⁶³ Even this symbolic independence stands in sharp contrast to Boko Haram, which forcibly marries women to fighters soon after capturing them.

Women as Moral Police

There is some evidence that women’s roles in ISIL are changing from being solely “jihadi brides” to more active recruiters who are sometimes involved in military and other governance operations.⁶⁴ It is unclear why this evolution is taking place. Some analysts believe it is a sign of desperation for ISIL to involve women in active military operations. But as ISIL gains political control, this explanation does not seem satisfactory.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Hoyle, Carolyn, Alexandra Bradford, and Ross Frenett. “Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS.” Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

⁵⁹ “Increasing Number Of Western Women Flee To Syria.” NPR.

⁶⁰ Manning, Ruth. “ISIL and Feminism.” Quilliam Foundation. February 24, 2015. <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/blog/isil-and-feminism-by-ruth-manning/>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Hoyle, Carolyn, Alexandra Bradford, and Ross Frenett. “Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS.” Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

⁶⁴ Frayer, Lauren. “In A Spanish Enclave, Women Recruit Women To Join ISIS.” NPR. April 12, 2015. <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/04/12/398756119/in-a-spanish-enclave-women-recruit-women-to-join-isis>.

ISIL has two female brigades that serve a moral policing function.⁶⁵ Their primary role is enforcing women’s compliance with ISIL requirements of wearing a full veil and not going out in public without male accompaniment.⁶⁶ One woman in an ISIL-controlled territory described how armed women from one of the brigades arrested her, pointed a firearm at her, and “tested [her] knowledge of prayer, fasting, and hijab.”⁶⁷ These brigades illustrate how ISIL uses women to uphold and enforce female norms outside of the home.

Women as Recruiters and Fighters

All-female jihadi networks recruit women over social media and then meet interested women in person.⁶⁸ Additionally, women have been “key actors in terms of going on home raids and operating checkpoints,” which indicates some willingness to allow women to be part of the violence.⁶⁹ However, it is important not to overstate these roles—women are currently forbidden from taking up arms and fighting directly in ISIL conflicts.⁷⁰ As one ISIL woman explained in her blog, “For the time being Qitaal [fighting] is not fardhayn [a compulsory religious duty] upon the sisters. We have plenty brothers who don’t even get selected on going on operations.”⁷¹ Other sources confirm that ISIL leadership has prohibited women from fighting, which may run counter to some depictions of women in propaganda recruitment tools.⁷² ISIL’s successful propaganda campaign brings women from all over the world to Syria, but once they arrive, life is mostly about supporting the organization through traditional domestic roles.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Boko Haram and ISIL’s vastly different approaches to employing women in their operations illustrate the need to tailor P/CVE efforts to specific contexts. More research is needed to understand exactly how Boko Haram conscripts and recruits women into violent operations and how ISIL’s actual roles for women differ from their recruitment narratives. But using the information that is available, below are some recommendations that could assist policymakers in thinking about how to combat both organizations’ use of women.

Boko Haram

- Because Boko Haram mainly forces women to participate in the organization against their will, policy makers should focus on stopping the group’s gender-based violence, which has escalated dramatically in the last year. This may mean more active involvement from the

⁶⁵ Taub, Amanda. “No, CNN, Women Are Not Joining ISIS Because of “kittens and Nutella” Vox.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Winsor, Ben. “ISIS Is Actively Recruiting Female Fighters To Brutalize Other Women.” Business Insider. October 14, 2014. <http://www.businessinsider.com/isis-has-female-battalions-too-2014-10>.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Hoyle, Carolyn, Alexandra Bradford, and Ross Frenett. “Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS.” Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 32-33.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

Nigerian government and international community in arresting and prosecuting Boko Haram leaders.

- Short of targeting Boko Haram directly, policymakers should think about ways to help women and girls defend themselves against kidnappings. This may mean more security measures in girls' schools or teaching women techniques to avoid being kidnapped through radio, leaflets, or training programs in school.
- Policymakers should also find ways to disseminate information about how to escape once kidnapped, and encourage the Nigerian government to use its military and aid organizations to help rescue and rehabilitate women who have been conscripted.

ISIL

- By contrast, ISIL uses persuasion-based strategies to recruit women from around the world to travel to Syria and join their cause. In order to prevent continuing widespread global recruitment, governments must identify the sources of ISIL's propaganda campaign and counter those narratives effectively. (*See Countering Extremist Speech Online white paper*).
- Besides working to counter these messages, there is some evidence that empowering families to recognize when a family member is planning to leave for Syria may effectively prevent young women from joining ISIL.⁷³ Policymakers should find ways to help people who fear their family members or children may be susceptible to recruitment without risking arrest.
- Some P/CVE efforts should focus on identifying how Muslim women may feel alienated in their countries and work to counter the Islamophobia and isolation that may make them susceptible to ISIL's narratives.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

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