



What Indonesia is Getting Wrong About Women and Violent Extremism

By

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Introduction

Since events in the past few years in Indonesia signal a change in the nature of violent extremist attacks, it is timely to revisit the question: where are the women¹ in violent extremist conflicts? The answer to this question has often been one-dimensional and based on traditional stereotypes aligning women with the notion of peace and men with violence. The reality is that women are present on all sides of the conflict as perpetrators, mitigators and targets.

In December 2016, Dian Yulia Novi was arrested for planning an attack on the Istana Merdeka presidential complex in Jakarta. In September 2017, she was sentenced to seven years in prison marking the first case of a woman convicted on terrorism charges². At the same time another woman was arrested for planning a separate attack in Bali. In May 2018, a succession of attacks in Surabaya became the first time in Indonesia that a suicide bombing was detonated by a woman, as well as involving children. Research indicates that female suicide attacks are, on average, more lethal than those conducted by men with a study of five different terrorist groups finding attacks carried out by women had an average of 8.4 victims compared to 5.3 for attacks carried out by men and are less likely to fail³. Despite Jihadi teachings espousing the participation of all Muslims, including men, women and children, adherence to this is inconsistent in practice. However, it is apparent that women's participation as violent actors is becoming less anomalous and methods of combatting violent extremism need to account for this.

The growing influence of social media



The growth of social media and online forums has created a significant gateway for radicalisation, allowing easy access to content and communication facilitated predominantly through the encrypted messaging app Telegram. It is the anonymity of chat forums that has allowed women to enter into these spaces without the socio-cultural and religious restrictions in the real world⁴ given that strict gender segregation does not occur online. In particular, this is an area of concern for migrant workers. The feminisation of labour migration has led to a substantial number of women living overseas in often isolating circumstances that cultivate a desire to seek out connections online which are lacking in real life. As such they can go from nominally religious to more susceptible to extremist ideology. This is a concern in particular for Indonesian Muslim workers who migrate to non-Muslim countries and find themselves separated from communities that embrace their religion. Domestic workers can also be targets of extremist groups, particularly for funding as these workers often have higher incomes than most Indonesians and a network of international contacts⁵. According to the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict there are 45 known Indonesian domestic workers who are active supporters of the Islamic State⁶ and likely more who are unknown. Both aforementioned women arrested in December 2016 were former migrant workers⁷.

Problematic assumptions about gender

Stereotypical assumptions about gender encapsulate the majority of discussion about why men and women become radicalised. General perceptions contend that males are motivated by religious or nationalistic fervour while women are motivated more by emotional and personal events⁸. However, the importance of physical and emotional motivating factors is undermined in research on men, while it is overrepresented and perceived as a powerful determinant in the radicalization process of women⁹. Not only are women assumed to be less likely to have political motivation but they are also considered to be lacking autonomy in the process, assuming that if a woman does become radicalised it is because of a man and not because of her agency and ability to make independent, politically and religiously influenced decisions. The reality is not as straight-forward as this. In the case of Abu Hamzah, leader of an ISIS-linked terrorist group it was said that his wife Solimah had been more zealous in her allegiance to the Islamic State than her husband¹⁰. *Arisan* and other forms of fundraising have become commonly dominated by women¹¹ as well as other support roles including but not limited to; sheltering fugitive terrorists, recruitment and dissemination of propaganda, as well as marrying jihadis and grooming their children to become future militants¹². The current shift is the growing prevalence of women outside these traditional roles in more combative circumstances.





Strategic uses of women within extremist groups

Unlike with men, there is a significant disparity between what motivates women to join a terrorist group and what encourages a group to recruit women¹³. While women join extremist groups for the exact same reason as men, their perceived value to the group is different to that of their male counterparts. Extremist groups are aware of these gendered assumptions and strategically play to them for tactical advantage. For example, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) knowing the stereotype of women as passive actors used females on the basis that they would be less likely to be suspected by security officers, generate greater media attention and even shame men into action¹⁴. This alludes to the problem of gender imbalance in security forces which is working to extremists' advantage to aide women in carrying-out attacks. As the lack of female employees reduces the likelihood of encountering a female security officer, female combatants can hide suicide devices under their clothing knowing that they are unlikely to be searched¹⁵. Ensuring a higher number of women working in security could help to close the gap which extremist groups are exploiting and lead to better screening of female perpetrators. In cases where women are successful, they generate more shock value and media attention¹⁶ making the use of women valuable for garnering attention for the group she is associated with. On average, an attack perpetuated by a woman gets eight times as much press attention as a similar attack by a man¹⁷. The tendency to label women committing extremist acts as female terrorists while labelling men committing comparable acts as terrorists is indicative of this as well. The fact that women's ability to act as combatants is a way to shame men into action confirms that extremist groups, although accepting of women, still do not view their participation as equal to that of men.

Analysis/The Verdict

The existing frameworks to address the issue of extremist violence, specifically in relation to women, are severely lacking nuance in the way they understand women's connection to violent extremism. While the United Nations Security Council's Women, Peace and Security Agenda focuses on addressing the problem of women as victims of sexual violence and empowering them as agents of change in the peacebuilding process it fails to acknowledge the other ways women are involved or implicated in extremist conflicts. By isolating the status of women in extremist related to conflict to victim, the continued prevalence of women in other roles will continue unresolved. That said, UNSC Resolution 2242 does call for more research to be done into the drivers of radicalisation of women¹⁸ which is perhaps an indication of a future shift in focus. Producing effective strategies to counter





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violent extremism requires abandoning the binary view that women are either just brainwashed victims or terrorist provocateurs¹⁹ in favour of a nuanced understanding of radicalisation giving equal weight to the experience of men and women. Since the introduction of UNSC R1325 in 2000 it has been understood that if women are given a seat at the table they have the ability to contribute to stable and lasting peace. While this still holds true it does not encapsulate all that women are capable of. Now is the time to expand on that understanding of women's potential to acknowledge their power for destruction just as much as peacebuilding. Women have the capacity to perpetrate acts of terror that contradict the current idealized notions of women and femininity. Frameworks to combat violent extremism need to keep up with the changing nature of women's roles.





Endnotes

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