Terrorism: Two Faces of Women

By Lea-Grace B. Salcedo

Background

Societal support for both terrorist groups and state-led counter-terrorism efforts is dependent upon the extent to which the populace believes that these organizations reflect the societies in which they operate. The composition of the society as well as the society's ability to address grievances and meet the expectations of the populace are of key importance when it comes to the integration of women into both types of organizations. In the past, women have primarily played support roles to men but increasingly, especially in recent years, they have also served in non-traditional roles in both terrorist organizations and the security sector. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1) What factors motivate women to join either a terrorist organization or a counterterrorism-oriented state security sector? Motivation refers to the pull and push factors that drive women to join: pull factors are the organization's attractive characteristics; push factors are the underlying root causes that account for her personal dissatisfaction with her current situation and so provide personal reasons to affiliate with an organization.

2) How do these motivations compare?

3) How does an understanding of these motivations shape recruitment strategies for both organizations?

The research project began with a literature review to understand motivations of women, including interviews with members of the military and the police. The study examined forty case studies of women in terrorist organizations including the Lord's Resistance Army; Islamic State in West Africa; Islamic State of Iraq and Syria; Al Qaeda; Taliban; Al Qaeda in Iraq; Hamas; Jemaah Islamiyah; and the Black Widows of Chechnya. The study also examined twenty case studies of women in the security sector (specifically from the military and police forces) of Afghanistan, Chechnya, Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, the Philippines, Syria, and the United States.

Summary of Findings

1. This study examined the motivations of women to join terrorist organizations or the security sector, uncovering a variety of push and pull factors for both types of organizations.

I. **Motivations of Women in Terrorist Organizations**
Pull factors for joining a terrorist organizationwere a desire for a new environment, pride, support of a political cause, free education and training, image, and access to social and political roles.
Push factors were deprivation, redemption and honor, revenge, romantic ties, family influence, commitment to an ideological cause, traumatic experiences, and protection of self and family.

II. **Motivations of Women in the Security Sector**
Pull factors for seeking work in the security factor were a desire for a new environment, free education and training, access to social and political roles, employment, image, support of a political cause, and a sense of pride.
Push factors were deprivation, protection of self and family, traumatic experiences, family influence, patriotism, romantic ties, commitment to an ideological cause, and revenge.

2. There is an 86 percent similarity of *pull factor motivators* among women in the cases studied. Women are motivated by the following: access to social and political roles, free education and training, support of a political cause, a new environment, a sense of pride, and image. Employment is a motivator for women in the security sector but not for women in terrorist organizations. For *push factors* in the cases examined for this study, there is a 67 percent similarity. Deprivation, protection of self or family, family influence, revenge, romantic ties with a man, and traumatic experiences are common responses. Women in terrorist organization are motivated by commitment to an ideological cause but not by patriotism. Redemption and honor motivate women to join terrorist organizations, but this is not the case with women who enter the security sector.

3. Key findings about recruitment strategies were:

- Deprivation motivated women to join both terrorist organizations and the security sector.
- Women continue to seek available opportunities.
- Love of country motivates women to join the security sector while women in terrorist organizations are motivated by a commitment to an ideology.
- Families and loved ones influence women in their choices and decisions in both terrorist organizations and the security sector.
- Recruitment strategy for women in the security sector remained generic.
- The shortage of women in the security sector adversely affects counterterrorism strategies.
- Women victims do not believe that justice will be served.
- There is limited research on motivations of women in terrorist organizations and the security sector.

Conclusions

The implications of the findings on the motivations of women in terrorist organization and in the security sector are as follows:

- Female role models remain unexplored as part of recruitment strategy.
- There is limited participation of women in counterterrorism. What little efforts there have been have not been institutionalized.
- Female victims lack avenues for their grievances.
- Because of experiences of alienation and oppression caused by gender and ethnicity, such exclusion led to no love of country, therefore many women resort to religion.
- Alienation and oppression continues to limit the choices of women, which increases the probability of their membership to terrorist organizations.
- Families and loved ones strongly influence women's belief systems.
- The lack of research in understanding women in terrorism and counterterrorism provides policy makers an incomplete picture as a basis for legislation.

Recommendations

To improve recruitment strategies for women in the security sector and to deter membership of women in terrorist organizations, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Design a recruitment strategy featuring successful women in the security sector.

2. Institutionalize the role of women in counterterrorism strategy to include training and female mentors.

3. Provide aftercare programs designed for women victims of terrorism such as rehabilitation and de-radicalization programs.

4. Include women regardless of race or ethnicity in state programs to promote patriotism.

5. Increase educational opportunities for women and girls to address deprivation and increase their choices to deter them away from terrorism.

6. Strengthen the role of family. Mothers, with the help of religious leaders, have a vital role to play in providing a belief system within their family.

7. Continue to conduct research on women involved in terrorism and counterterrorism. The state and other international organizations should continue to share their findings on this issue and educate other practitioners about this phenomenon.

About the Author

Dr. Lea Grace B Salcedo is a graduate of PTSS 18-12 at the George C Marshall Center for European Security Studies. She was selected to be a Marshall Center Scholar and returned to the Marshall Center in January 2019 to conduct research on the issue of women and terrorism. Dr. Salcedo works for the National Security Council in the Philippines as a Security Specialist.