

Malaysian Women in DAESH: A Reflection of Their Roles & Recommended Counter-Measures

Siti Syahariyah Shaharuddin
Siti Fatimah Nurain Mohamad

Introduction

Daesh has adopted a rather secular approach with its stance on gender roles in its organisation. Their support for female militancy in terrorism sets them apart from other “religious-based” terrorist organisations. For example, they differ from Al Qaeda, whose relatively conservative use of women limits women to passive roles as simply mothers or wives of soldiers. Daesh, on the other hand, encourages the participation of women within the organisation, especially through the establishment of the Al Khansaa Brigade, which is an all-women police and religious unit.

Based on this approach, Daesh, as a patriarchal terrorist organisation, will selectively limit as well as encourage the types of women’s participation according to the needs and benefits of the organisation. Its focus lies on two categories of female target audiences that the group appeals to. The first are those who oppose western feminist ideals, and wish to live a traditional and pious life serving their husbands and households. The second are women who desire combative roles. With this in mind, Daesh has expanded female participation in its organisation and has utilised different narratives to attract these women from all over the world to play specific roles.

The media has reported various occurrences of Malaysian women participating in Daesh activities, including travelling to the so-called ‘land of the Caliphate’ in Syria and Iraq. In essence, Malaysian women have undertaken supportive roles without any engagements in the “battlefield”. However, a few terror-linked arrests made by the Royal Malaysia Police (RMP) recently uncovered disturbing information in the intention of these women. Some were found with the desire to play active and aggressive roles, specifically planning to conduct attacks on non-Muslim civilians on Malaysian soil. At the same time, there are Malaysian women who are constrained within certain familial conditions that suppress their ability

to act independently. These women come from an extremist or terrorist family background, where they face challenges in living up to family expectations, which often make them victims or passive supporters of their families’ extremist and terrorist ideals

Therefore, this article illustrates the multifaceted roles that Malaysian women play in Daesh based on the reported terror-link arrests, as well as provides an insight on the motivational factors of these women to engage in extremism and terrorism, albeit within the limitations of the findings. The final section of the article offers several prevention and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) recommendations in addressing the issue of Malaysian women’s involvement in extremism and terrorism.

The Multifaceted Roles of Malaysian Women in DAESH

A number of Malaysian women have been successfully recruited online to join Daesh. Some of these women further engage in Daesh activities, such as spreading Daesh propaganda and participating as online recruiters, travelling to Syria and Iraq, aiding in fund raising, marrying Daesh militants and also nurturing extremist ideologies in their children, in line with a carefully-selected, curated version of *salafi* jihadism and *wahhabism* teachings of their rendering of Islam.

Malaysian women in general can be deduced to these roles: (i) acting as wives of Daesh militants and upholding the duty to procreate the next generation of militants, (ii) masterminding and executing aggressive operations, (iii) spreading propaganda and recruiting women, (iv) being part of logistical support, and (v) being victims who are unable to break free from family constraints of a generation of Islamist extremists. They may also play passive roles as inactive supporters of their families’ extremist ideologies.

With regard to the first role of women as wives of Daesh militants, women are

valued assets to Daesh that is facing a diminishing number of fighters resulting from the regular loss in continuous combat operations. Great honour and emphasis on the traditional roles of women as wives, mothers and nurturers are deliberately advertised and propagated in various social media platforms. The rhetoric and language used often romanticise *jihadi* marriages, which have been successful to resonate with women who are anti-feminists and aspire to live their life supporting their husbands as traditional wives, mothers and nurturers. Various arrests in Malaysia disclosed cases of women planning to travel abroad for the prospect of marriage. For example, a 27-year old Malaysian woman who planned to travel to southern Philippines through Sandakan, Sabah, to marry her Filipino recruiter. Another example is a 26-year old college student who was engaged to a militant in Syria. He promised her his hand in marriage upon her arrival but she was detained by the Turkish authorities and deported back to Malaysia.

The second role observed is women involved in planning and executing combat operations. Conventionally, “religious-based” terrorist organisations take a conservative stance on women’s militaristic roles. For example, the wife of Al-Qaeda’s leader, Umayma Hassan Ahmed Muhammad Hassan, in her letter to Muslim women, propounded for women to support their husbands and bear their children, dissuading women from seeking active roles in combat operations. Daesh, however, urges all Muslims to take up arms for defensive purposes irrespective of their gender, and encourages women’s participation as propagators of violence and female *jihadi* warriors. In response, more women outside Daesh-controlled territories in Syria and Iraq, especially Malaysian women, have been found to plan and carry out lone-wolf attacks. Most recently, a 51-year old housewife was arrested for planning to ram a vehicle into voters at a voting centre during the Malaysian polling day on 9 May 2018. In 2016, four women, including a police official,

an aeroplane technician, a mosque cleric and a student were found to be taking orders from a Daesh-Malaysian man in Syria to launch attacks in Malaysia.

Additionally, there are Malaysian women who became online recruiters that influence other women to live under the Caliphate by migrating to Syria and Iraq under false pretences of better livelihoods, prospects of marriage, and a sense of belonging. A notorious case is Shams, a Malaysian woman and blogger known as "Bird of Jannah". She wrote the *Diary of a Muhajirah* on Tumblr which romanticised her personal life and marriage to a Daesh militant. Her appealing stories were successful in attracting young women to join Daesh. Another case is a Malaysian housewife and widow who was arrested in 2014 for recruiting undergraduates to travel to Syria for the purpose of joining Daesh. Their motivational drive was the belief that their actions was a form of *jihād*.

The fourth is women's logistical support role in Daesh that facilitates the operations of the group. In the Malaysian context, some of these women are professionals and officers in the workforce. In 2017, a Malaysian woman, who worked as an airport immigration officer, was arrested under suspicion of accepting payment for aiding individuals with invalid travel documents, including Malaysian and Indonesian Daesh followers, to enter and exit Philippines through Sabah. It is part of Daesh's advocacy to attract women from various professional and academic backgrounds to join the organisation under the notion that their skills are crucial and valued.

Lastly, Malaysia also faces challenges on the issue of women and girls who become victims to family constraints. These women and girls are considered passive supporters of their families' extremist and *jihādīst* ideals. In some instances, they were forced into arranged marriages with men from similar extremist or terrorist families who were engaged in combat operations and relocated in conflict areas where wives were expected to follow suit. The common motivational push for these women to abide by family expectations is their fear of family disownment. There are also women who support their families' long-standing practice of religious extremism and do not perceive themselves as neither radicals

nor extremists.

Recommendations

There is a need to review the issue of gender in both counter-terrorism (CT) and non-CT policy frameworks. The United Nations (UN) Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism or PVE Plan of Action, for example, highlights gender equality and women empowerment as part of the seven priority areas in addressing violent extremism that need to be included in the member states' own National Action Plan for P/CVE. All agencies, with or without CT in their agenda, need to recognise that their existing efforts in gender equality and women empowerment are also part of a larger national and global P/CVE initiative. Additionally, agencies in the field of CT need to create more integrated capacity-building programme modules that are inclusive of gender issues when discussing terrorism and counter-terrorism.

One of the methods in advancing gender equality and women empowerment is expanding the role of women in the safekeeping and monitoring of local communities or villages. The involvement of women in monitoring the community has been found beneficial in terms of early detection and treatment of radicalisation. Additionally, empowering women by equipping them with skills development to be financially independent has dampened "push factors" behind violent extremism. For example, women who are financially dependent on their husbands would face the loss of income when their husbands are detained. Some women may be pressured by the lack of emotional and financial support and turn to their extremist communities for financial aid.

In this regard, it makes it even more imperative to increase efforts in reintegrating families of terrorists or terrorist returnees back into mainstream society, especially wives and children who often face bullying and rejection by society. This is also a necessity in the long-term rehabilitation of groups of women and girls who were highly radicalised to prevent them from seeking refuge in their previous extremist communities.

Another important effort is building a social movement for societal change, especially in the attitude, the mindset

and the behaviour towards women's role in tackling P/CVE and society at large. Encouraging activism from women and girls at the community level has historically enabled the foundation for political change. This is crucial for gender issues to take centre stage in the P/CVE arena at the local and national level.

Conclusion

Malaysian women have proven to be susceptible to Daesh's appeal. In addition, they have illustrated their capability and willingness to conduct violent acts against civilians. For this reason, Malaysian women do demonstrate similar tendencies for violence as men, and their participation should not be regarded as merely indoctrinated, naïve victims. Therefore, stepping up efforts in including women in P/CVE in local communities or villages, encouraging female activism, aiding women, especially those affected by extremism and terrorism, by equipping them with the right skills to generate income and providing a safe haven for those who are in the process of rehabilitation and reintegration into society, are all crucial in diminishing women's vulnerability to extremism, radicalisation and terrorism.

The number of Malaysian women arrested for terror-linked activities may appear significantly lower than men, but there is a need to be mindful that most of their undetected extremist activities occur behind closed doors, unrepresented by discernible data. It is timely for Malaysia to consider issues of gender equality and women empowerment and increase efforts to include women at the local and national level of P/CVE initiatives.

Ms. Siti Syahariyah Shaharuddin is the Assistant Director with the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter Terrorism, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Ms. Siti Fatimah Nurain Mohamad is the Assistant Director with the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter Terrorism, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.