

Europe tries new tack to keep young women from joining IS

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(The Christian Science Monitor) While the self-described Islamic State continues to attract many young European men with its sophisticated social media campaign and mesmerizing brutality, the extremist group has also demonstrated eye-catching success with a less-visible group: young Muslim women.

An estimated 550 Western women are believed to have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join Islamic extremist groups. The propaganda arm of IS has appealed to them with everything from online cookbooks for the wives of mujahadeen to parenting guides for raising future jihadists.

But across Europe, concerned observers from teachers to family counselors, are striking back with their own set of gender tactics. Counterterrorism experts now see such a tailored strategy as central to detecting girls who could fall prey to IS propaganda. And they are pointing in particular to mothers, with their outsized influence in Muslim households, as forming one of the best lines of defense.

Ross Frenett, the director at Against Violent Extremism in London, said Western European governments need to modify their anti-radicalization programs to target women who are increasingly being lured into extremism.

“When it comes to counter-radicalization, there is an appreciation of the gender aspect of this in a way there didn’t use to be,” Frenett said. “Narrowing down the focus is a very important step of any program.”

Such a need became clear last month at the Bethnal Green Academy, a redbrick building dating from 1900 in East London, after teenagers Shamima Begum, Kadiza Sultana, and Amira Abase traveled to Syria allegedly to join IS.

Three of the school’s highest-achieving students, the girls are said to have shown none of the typical signs of extremist thinking. But one teacher who taught the three at the academy, who preferred not to speak on the record, said the school may have

missed signs by misunderstanding how alluring IS can be to girls from conservative religious backgrounds.

On a recent day, the school fences were covered with photos of the school's extracurricular activities, including cooking and cello classes, that are intended to expand a student's horizons. But many girls from conservative Muslim households have little prospect of life beyond the home, the teacher said, a realization that makes them ripe for the taste of freedom that they believe IS offers.

"They come from families where their mothers only stay at home and don't encourage their daughters to expand their interests and open their eyes to new lives," he said, adding that he'd like to see Muslim women, families, and school teachers alike, talk to them about the reality of their lives in conservative Muslim homes and what it's like to join a terrorist network. Those conversations have been too few, he said.

Gender roles

Gender could also play a more prominent role on the Internet, Frenett said.

"My Facebook account has very different ads to my wife's, and we can use that same technique to make sure we have bespoke messages and reach the right audience," he said.

Although men and women join extremist groups in the Middle East for some of the same reasons, from visions of utopia to a sense of injustice, men more often do so to fight, while women are pulled by family decisions. They have different reactions to birth and death.

"These could and should be exploited by family and state alike as an opportunity for disengagement," he said.

Magnus Ranstorp, an expert on extremism at the Swedish National Defense College, said de-radicalization programs that focus on women have only started to take shape in Europe in part because until now their motivations have been misunderstood.

"I think the general perception is that women are victims and that they are passive, which is not the case," he said. "Behind jihadis you have women who are equally

extremist and radical.”

They might not fight in combat, as it is prohibited by Shari’a law, but they are vital accomplices and recruiters.

Daniel Koehler, the director of the German Institute on Radicalization and De-radicalization Studies in Berlin, said the process of de-radicalization is best done on an individual basis. With women comprising a much smaller fraction of extremist groups and resources to help them already stretched, growing concerns of female jihadists is unlikely to translate into a glut of new programs specifically for them, he said.

But strategies that employ women in prevention are growing in large part because they are both easier to reach and the first ones to reach out. In Koehler’s previous job as a family counselor at an anti-radicalization program in Berlin, he said 80 percent of calls to the program’s hotline were from women: mothers, daughters, and sisters. When men called, they almost never did so alone, he said.

Mothers know best

Because of the status given to mothers in Islam, they have one of the most influential roles in the fight against extremism, Koehler said. Although mothers were not involved in the work he did de-radicalizing Neo-Nazis, GIRDS has created a new program called Mothers for Life. The program is for those with children affected by radicalization, intended as a support group and as a way to create counter-narratives to extremist propaganda.

“In the Qur’an the role of the mother is essential,” Koehler said. As the prophet Muhammad’s saying goes: “Paradise lies at the feet of mothers.”

Edit Schlaffer, the founder of Women Without Borders in Vienna, said mothers have been the missing link in preventing new recruits from joining groups such as IS: A mother’s instinct is the strongest radar for detecting radicalization.

In 2012, Schlaffer launched a training program called Mothers Schools in Pakistan, Indonesia, and four other countries. The schools equips mothers of at-risk adolescents with the confidence to take a lead role in the family, stand up to stubborn and righteous teens, and overcome the shame that often keeps extremism a family secret—until it is too late.

Schlaffer said she never thought she'd establish a school in her own country. But with young Europeans heading to Syria and Iraq, her group recently announced the opening of one in Vienna—the first on the continent. She also hopes to have schools running in Sweden and Belgium by fall.

For Schlaffer, mothers are the key to de-radicalization.

“I think we've found a goldmine with mothers,” she said.