

WHY SOME WOMEN JOIN ISIS

The Singapore Government recently detained three people, including one woman, for wanting to join ISIS. In these two articles, the first writer explains why some women join the terror group, while the other argues that those who join ISIS should be treated as would-be terrorists, not victims.

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Out of three Singaporeans detained for wanting to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) by Singapore's Internal Security Department, one was a woman.

Women, including from Southeast Asia, are increasingly joining ISIS. Last month, European police agency Europol reported that women are now playing a greater role in ISIS, "both in front-line fighting and terrorist activities in the West", with at least 123 women terrorists as recently as 2017.

A King's College London report from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation revealed that 4,761 of 41,490 foreign citizens who became affiliated with ISIS between April 2013 and June last year were women. Another 4,640 were minors.

In 2014, the Singapore Institute of International Affairs reported that ISIS also targets professional women.

Women risk sexual exploitation and death when they join ISIS battlefields – yet some do so. They are motivated by a complex mix of factors.

The journey or *hijrah* to the Islamic State is a decision made by some women who seek a better life. For other women, it is about *hejira* or retracing the Prophet Muhammad's steps from Mecca to Medina, which is what he did to escape persecution.

Women who join ISIS may do so because they believe they are leaving a life of oppression and ill-treatment for one of milk and honey.

It is sometimes asked why women in the West, who live in affluent societies with strong civil rights, would wish to join ISIS. Part of the reason is that among young immigrant girls in developed Western countries, brought up in a life of relative luxury (compared with their Arabic, African or South Asian sisters), some may feel alienated and disenfranchised. Rather than viewing Western culture as a path of enlightenment, they see it as a sham, an empty shell with empty values. They desire to empower themselves and embrace a new religion and political ideology, and ISIS appears to present such an opportunity.

I recently interviewed a terrorism analyst about why women in Singapore would join ISIS. The analyst told me that despite how it looks, some women who have never worn the cloth, veil or burqa, discover freedom from wearing such garments. Rather than being restrictive, these garments ensure modesty and keep away men's prying eyes, so common in densely populated urban cities. Therefore, to join ISIS would be to increase their chances of self-empowerment, agency and, ultimately, to secure a place in the hereafter.



A picture posted on Twitter by a social media account affiliated with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria purportedly shows members of an armed, all-female militia. Despite their dreams, women who choose to join ISIS in the battlefield will be treated as second-class citizens, to say the least, given the distance between what they desire and what they experience.

The analyst listed seven facts that explain why women join Daesh, the Arabic name for ISIS. These include kinship with other Muslim women, martyrdom as a way to secure a place in the hereafter, escape from masculine persecution, belief in a utopian Daesh State, justified revenge against infidels, the desire to be a good Muslim and the ominous threat of Armageddon.

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Those who write articles or books about women who join Daesh often refer to these women as "brides". In Western as well as Asian culture, many, if not most, women desire to be a bride, married to one man, in her lifetime.

In contrast, "brides" of ISIS must subscribe to its wartime ideology with its quotidian horror. Brides are often shared. Teenage brides who become widows are married

off to other fighters.

On April 16, columnist Robin Wright wrote in *The New Yorker*: "Women were among the earliest targets of ISIS, for slavery and sex trafficking. Many women who ended up in Syria's al-Hawl refugee camp had experienced gender-based violence, according to the United Nations Population Fund. A high number of adolescent girls were already mothers, or pregnant; some had been child brides. Many women had children by two or three men because their husbands were killed fighting for the Islamic State, so they wed again, voluntarily or involuntarily, to survive."

They live close to death: Many witness the beheading of traitors and infidels. The dehumanisation of life and death in Raqqa and Syria can be desensitising, leaving these women with little room for sentiment or remorse. Some women take part in torturing other women. For many, serving men and nurturing children become their primary functions.

Another group of women join

123

Number of women terrorists in the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria as of 2017, according to European police agency Europol, which says women are now playing a greater role in ISIS.

ISIS not out of choice, but compulsion: Families may be threatened by local terrorists and other militant Islamists, and coerced to force their daughters to join ISIS as child brides. They do this to protect their families from violence and to secure a safe place in heaven or the hereafter.

There is no consensus on the number of such child brides. In post-conflict Raqqa, for example, Islamic feminist workers claim there were at least 30 to 40 cases of child

brides. But others say the number is far higher. This is not surprising as the population of Raqqa was once almost 300,000, with at least half of them women.

Just what can societies like Singapore do to deter women from joining ISIS?

First, parents are critical educators of their children and models for Islamic youth. It is the job of all Muslim parents to educate their children, both girls and boys, on the importance of moderate Islam and the correct interpretation of the Quran.

Second, the Singapore state must carefully screen all religious clerics, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish and Muslim alike. This is to filter "the sheep from the goats", so as to ensure that foreigners do not propagate falsehoods at Singapore's many places of worship.

Third, the Ministry of Education must continue to emphasise respect for all universal religions in its curricula. Students should be exposed to courses in Singapore studies where ISIS cases can be added

so that the burden does not only fall on Muslims, but also on all who live and work in Singapore.

Where child brides are concerned, the solution lies within the family. In Islam, to become a bride, a woman needs to have her father's permission. Therefore, the solution would be to raise women with the kind of education that makes them aware of the potential pitfalls of going on a *hijrah* or *hejira* and of becoming part of ISIS.

A comprehensive education programme for older teens and young women above 21 should also be considered to educate them on the horrors and consequences of moving to Syria and joining ISIS. A dose of reality might just be the best medicine against misplaced idealism.

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