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Women

and Violent

Radicalization

Summary



CENTRE DE PRÉVENTION
DE LA RADICALISATION
MENANT À LA VIOLENCE

Québec 

Women are victims of all forms of violent radicalism, but can also be participants or active accomplices of violence in the name of an ideology, cause or political project.

Background

Pursuant to the mandate in the 2015-2018 Government Action Plan, *Radicalization in Québec: Act, Prevent, Detect and Live Together*, the Secrétariat à la condition féminine and the Conseil du statut de la femme were asked to work together to document the differentiated radicalization factors among women and men in Québec. The two agencies also drew on the expertise of the Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence for detailed information on the subject.

Since 2012, hundreds of young Western women have joined jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, including some from Québec. The present study examines their motivations and attempts to explain this phenomenon.

Radicalization leading to violence: A complex process whereby people adopt a system of extreme beliefs and a willingness to use, encourage or facilitate violence, to promote an ideology, political project or cause as a means of social transformation.

The report produced under this mandate, entitled *Women and Violent Radicalization*, begins by defining radicalization leading to violence. It then examines the reality of women's involvement in radical Islam and certain jihadist groups. The analysis is based on a comprehensive literature review and unpublished empirical data from a field study conducted in Québec.

• • • • • Women's involvement in violent radicalism

Throughout history women have been involved in violent radicalism, whether during the French Revolution, in extreme left-wing or right-wing movements, nationalist groups like the Tamil Tigers, or revolutionary groups like the FARC in Colombia. In short, **the violent radicalization of women is not a new phenomenon.**

Despite the presence and participation of women in certain episodes of political violence, violent radicalism involving women is marginal.

• • • • • Violent radicalization

– beyond public and media representations

Media representations of women in extremist groups, or who engage in political violence, are often rife with sexual stereotypes that stress their supposed passivity. Yet such women should not be seen exclusively as victims, since they are also active participants.

Women involved with jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq do not escape this reading, which views their radicalization through the optics of gender stereotypes. They are often described as naive, controlled by romantic impulses, dependent on the men who indoctrinate them.

That approach reduces a complex phenomenon, the violent radicalization of women, to a caricature, denying the fact that those who become involved have a capacity to determine their own lives and to change their environment. Also, the simplistic view contributes to a belief that some of the women concerned, when they are recent immigrants, are more submissive toward the men in their environment and more easily influenced in their radicalization. The present study avoids such prejudices by considering the point of view of the women themselves.

••••• Québec women who leave for Syria

To date there are no official numbers on women who have left Québec for Syria; however, our research indicates that from three to seven have gone to the region since 2013. This estimate does not include those who tried to make the journey but were stopped along the way or gave up on the idea.

Jihadist organizations have an extremely patriarchal, conservative vision of relations between the sexes, yet still succeed in drawing a certain number of women to Iraq and Syria. How can we explain the attraction felt by some Québec women for such organizations?

To complete our research, we met with young radicalized women, their families and their friends to gain a better understanding of the paths they had taken, their motivations and the factors behind their radicalization.

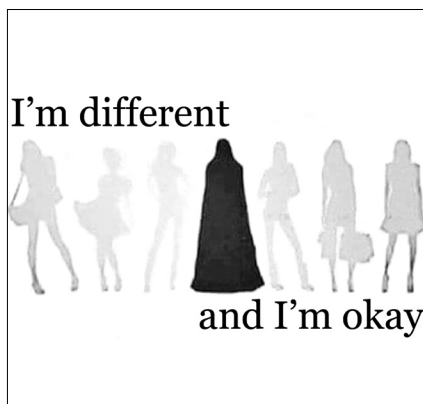
A juvenile phenomenon •••••

The strongly juvenile dimension must be emphasized. All the young women in our study began their radicalization in late adolescence, when they were 17 to 19 years old. They are all middle class and were educated in Francophone schools. In most cases their school career was crowned with success, and none are from dysfunctional families.

Conditions for radicalization •••••

Personal factors create the conditions for radicalization: **traumatic life experiences, confusion over identity, a search for meaning and reference points.** These factors combine with an environment in which family heritage (for some, an immigrant or Muslim background) is hard to reconcile with Québec identity. Added to the mix is a complex relationship with the models of womanhood proposed in Québec.

In this context, adopting a “total Islam” is one way for these young women to fulfill their need to belong. Some develop a “shell identity” that gradually separates them from the outside world, including family, friends and the rest of society.



Identity shell or “shell identity”: Logic by which a person adopts an identity that, in her eyes, provides her with meaning as well as protection from a social environment that generates identity anxiety.

What jihadists offer

To these fragile identities, jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq offer a discourse and propaganda that resonate with some women, who become convinced that they can go to the aid of local populations and live their religious identity to the full, which they can’t do in the West.

We feel like we’re not helping the community over there. We feel bad in fact, because we’re not doing anything, whereas we ought to be good Muslims and stand beside our brothers and sisters.

(Young woman who tried to leave Québec to go to Syria)

For the young women we met, the idea of leaving Canada to go to Syria is shaped by jihadist propaganda online, the messages of charismatic figures, and the interpersonal dynamics of a small network of peers. All these factors accentuate their withdrawal into a rigid identity.

Sometimes I feel lost, I feel kind of foreign here, and in my country too. I'm too *Québécoise* for the country I came from, because I don't have the same accent or the same customs. Here, I feel kind of foreign too... I hang onto my religion, it's what I am.

(Young girl who wanted to leave Québec to go to Syria)

The prospect of an alternate life ●●●●●●●●

To these young women seeking meaning and reference points, the jihadist discourse offers an alternate life. IS propaganda presents a romantic ideal, glorifying the brave and pious masculine partner who would sacrifice himself for a higher cause. They see themselves as active participants in building an Islamic society in which not only will they be free to practise their religion, they will be valued for wanting domestic fulfillment.

Executing the plan to go to Syria involves preparations that are almost always made within a small group of peers, and a series of actions that can make it difficult to turn back. Though they understand the brutal reality of the Syrian conflict, the young women are convinced that they have to go there.

They're not selling me a dream, on the contrary, they tell me it's difficult and there are bombings. But even so, at the end of the day, they're together and they live their religion fully, without restriction.

(Young woman who tried to leave Québec to go to Syria)

The idea was there, but when I heard that he [a young Québec man] had gone to Syria, that really gave me the impression that it was possible and was the right thing to do.

(Young woman who tried to leave Québec to go to Syria)

Understanding for better prevention

The process of radicalization leading to violence, though extreme, does not seem irrational to the young women concerned. Rather, it consists of a series of decisions molded by their environment, personal frailties, an ideological discourse, the influence of authority figures, and the power of relationships with peers. In light of these facts, it seems important that this phenomenon continue to be explored from a gender perspective, and that women's involvement in other forms of violent radicalism also be examined.

Many issues could not be adequately addressed in our report. The rejection of Western models of womanhood, mother-daughter conflicts, the role of the father, social marginalization as a catalyst for the radicalization of young women who at first glance seem well integrated into Québec society, all of these aspects should be studied in greater depth.

Despite being a minority phenomenon, women's involvement in violent radicalism necessitates collective prevention that takes into account the differences and inequalities between the sexes.

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**Conseil du statut
de la femme**

Québec

