

What About the Women? Understanding and Addressing the Problem of ISIS Female Recruitment in the Western Balkans

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By Eric Mietz

Belgrade, 2016

This policy paper aims to bring attention to an oft-neglected security problem in the Western Balkans: women being recruited by—and migrating to—the Islamic State. In many ways, female recruits, both from the Western Balkans and other regions, are attracted to the Islamic State for the exact same reasons as men, yet the roles of women in the Islamic State and the messaging the group uses to lure women to migrate to Syria and Iraq are sufficiently different to warrant a gender-based perspective in countering violent extremism (CVE) policymaking. The Islamic State and ways to defeat it dominate current media headlines and policy discussions, but as propaganda continues to attract women, strategies to topple the Islamic State will require equal attention to both male and female recruits in order to be successful.

The first part of the paper looks at the numbers of women leaving from the Western Balkans to Islamic State-held territory, the profiles of women who migrate, and the roles they take on in the Islamic State. To explain why women are influenced to migrate, the second part examines the “push” and “pull” factors of Islamic State recruitment. The last part focuses on the efforts of Western Balkans governments to criminalize participation in or support of the Islamic State and the disadvantages of relying solely on this policy.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In order to contribute effectively to international action to defeat the Islamic State, governments and members of civil society in the Western Balkans must officially recognize that women are also being recruited by and are willingly migrating to the Islamic State. Governments must additionally show steps they are considering to incorporate a gender perspective into their CVE and counterterrorism efforts.
2. Gender-mainstreaming should occur in institutions working on terrorism issues, in order to empower women, to obtain their perspective on integrating gender perspectives into counterterrorism, CVE, de-radicalization, and rehabilitation programs, and to show that women have a voice in issues of security.
3. Alter criminal legislation in order that lengthy prison sentences are given only for those women who incited, provided material support for, or engaged in violence and criminal activities in the Islamic State. Require participation in rehabilitation and reintegration in lieu of prison sentences, which will offer psychological support to traumatized women and opportunities to de-radicalize. Provide incentives for women who have been rehabilitated to participate in the reintegration process for other returnees.

ISLAMIC STATE RECRUITMENT OF WOMEN IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The presence of women in the Islamic State is dangerous—although women currently do not participate in violent jihad, they are responsible for raising the next generation of jihadists, for performing professional functions while the men engage in violent jihad, and for the recruitment of more individuals to populate the caliphate. Women who migrate tend to feel marginalized in the societies where they live, and also may have psychological problems, which will only be exacerbated by their experiences in the Islamic State.

While violent extremist groups are often thought to be the domain of men, the numbers of women migrating to Syria and Iraq from the Western Balkans and around the world are proving otherwise. As numbers of foreign fighters traveling from the Western Balkans to Islamic State-held territory¹ continue to increase, there is a corresponding problem of women from the Western Balkans being recruited to join the Islamic State. Current evidence shows that there are visible numbers of women who have already migrated — in particular, from Bosnia-Herzegovina (36), Kosovo (42), and Albania (13-29). Estimates show that around 10-15% of total Islamic State recruits are women.

Table 1: Media and analytical estimates of foreign fighters and migrants to the Islamic State from the Western Balkans*

	Estimated Total	Estimated Women	Estimated Returnees
Albania	90-150	13-29	42
Bosnia-Herzegovina	192-340	36	51
Croatia	1-6	1-4	0
Kosovo	100-232	42	N/A
Macedonia	12-146	1	N/A
Montenegro	13-30	N/A	N/A
Serbia	50-350	1	N/A

*The data represent the ranges currently found in a variety of media sources, analytical reports and government data

PROFILES OF FEMALE ISIS RECRUITS

Women recruits are often stereotyped to be inherently peaceful and submissive and are commonly thought to join jihadist groups only out of irrationality. It is important, however, to remember that women recruits, like their male counterparts, may also be outspoken about their

¹ Islamic State (IS)-held territory refers to land in Syria and Iraq currently claimed by the Islamic State “caliphate”, also referred to in English as “ISIS”, “ISIL”, or “Daesh”. The analysis will refrain from legitimizing the “Islamic State” as an actual state.

beliefs, are ready to incite violence, or are aware of the decision they have made to join the Islamic State.

There is no single profile of the typical female recruit, however two distinct groups are evident: 1.) young women (as young as 15) who travel to ISIS territory to marry a jihadist and 2.) women who are already married and travel with their husband. For young women still living with their parents, evidence from the Western Balkans and elsewhere shows that parents had little to no prior indication that their daughters were being radicalized or had the intention of departing for Islamic State-held territory.²

Active Role of Women in the Islamic State’s “caliphate”

The women who migrate have taken on a variety of roles, and although they are predominantly expected to keep to the domestic sphere, their participation is nevertheless critical for developing the Islamic State’s „caliphate“ into what they believe will be a Muslim utopia. Women may create and disseminate propaganda, encourage violence, give birth to and raise the next generation of fighters and members of the caliphate, or take on certain professional positions, such as nurses or teachers.³ Women also help expand the Islamic State’s network by recruiting other women, and even their presence in the Islamic State is sometimes enough to shame men into joining.⁴ Women are barred from taking up combat, and while they do not pose a security threat to European countries at the present time, there exists the possibility that they could be trained to become suicide bombers or fighters in the future.

Women are not seen as agents of terrorism

The primary problem is that governments, institutions, and civil society in the Western Balkans have not done enough to publicly acknowledge the migration of women from the region to Syria and Iraq. Additionally, there is no evidence that a gender perspective is being included in current counterterrorism or counter violent extremism (CVE) efforts. Western Balkans governments only have enacted legislation to criminalize participation in, material support of, or recruitment for foreign paramilitary groups, and there is an absence of action to establish programs to de-radicalize or to rehabilitate women.

2 Prominent examples include cases in rural Albania and Kosovo which featured in reports by Balkans Insight: Arbana Xharra, “Few but Fanatical — the Kosovo Women Who Go Over to ISIS,” Balkans Insight, 26 January 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/rs/article/few-but-fanatical-the-kosovo-women-who-go-over-to-isis-01-22-2016>; Aleksandra Bogdani, “Albanian Villages Ponder Local Spike in ISIS Recruits,” Balkan Insight, 25 April 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albanian-villages-ponder-local-spurt-of-isis-recruits-04-22-2016>.

3 Anita Peresin and Alberto Cervone, “The Western Muhajirat of ISIS,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38 (2015): 499.

4 Ibid, 496.

The fact that women are actively joining the Islamic State indicates that countries in the Western Balkans are not doing enough to create opportunities and to foster gender equality for their female Muslim citizens and youth to promote the Western Balkans as a better place for women than the Islamic State.

Governments in the region must take responsibility for their citizens migrating to Syria or Iraq—there must be incentives for women to return, but likewise the necessary structures need to be in place to rehabilitate women. Without providing the means for reintegration, there is a risk that women will import even more extreme strains of radical ideology which they can use to recruit on behalf of the Islamic State (even from within prison) or to engage in violence.

In addition, Western Balkans states must take action before the problem of extremism reaches a point where outside actors (i.e. the United States and international organizations) will seek to exert their influence over and direct these states' counter violent extremism and counterterrorism policies.

CAUSES OF THE PROBLEM — PUSH/PULL FACTORS OF MIGRATION

Exposure to ISIL propaganda is not enough to explain why women are being recruited successfully by the group, and poverty or social marginalization are by themselves equally insufficient justifications.⁵ The main reasons for which both women and men choose to travel to Syria or Iraq can be found through an analysis of the „push-pull“ factors of their recruitment and migration.

Push Factors of Islamic State recruitment

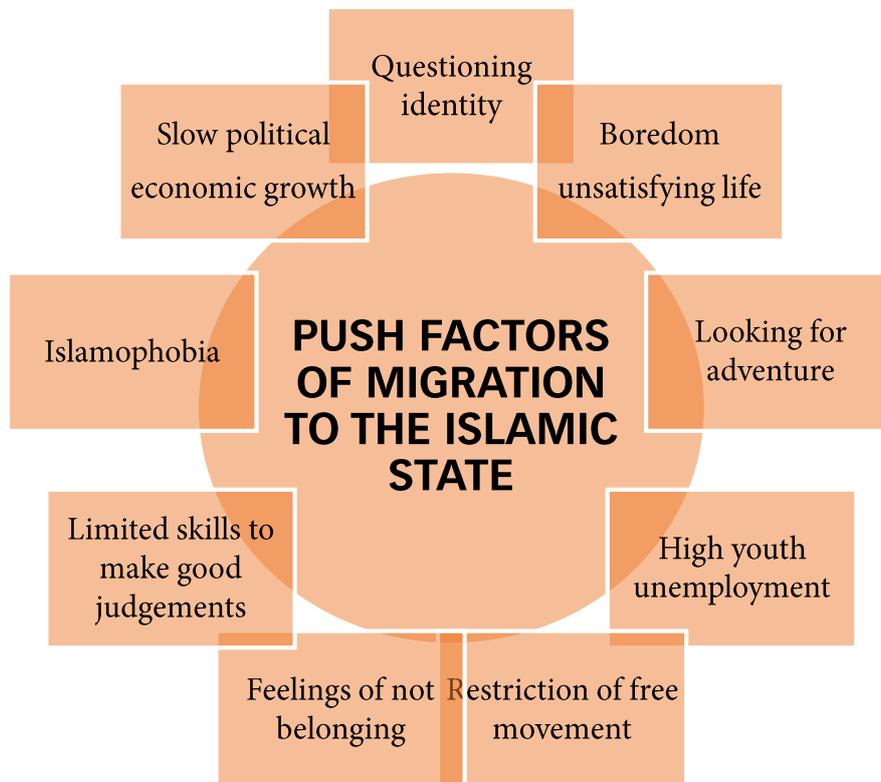
Push factors are generally the personal characteristics, negative life experiences, or socio-economic problems that encourage women to migrate.

While it appears that women from the Western Balkans are traveling to Syria or Iraq for many of the same reasons as female recruits from other parts of the world, high unemployment, ineffective government institutions, and the inability of Islamic communities to establish control over radical mosques are three sets of push factors which are unique to the Western Balkans:

1. High (youth) unemployment
2. Weak institutions
3. Wahhabi “charities” and radical mosques

⁵ Sasha Havlicek, “Prepared Statement: The Islamic State’s War on Women and Girls,” United States House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs (2015): 6.

Graphic 1: Push factors of migration to the Islamic State



High (youth) unemployment

High unemployment and the lack of meaningful opportunities for both women and men—particularly in rural areas—are significant contributing factors to the region’s radicalization problem.⁶ Youth unemployment is even more urgent an issue, as no country in the Western Balkans currently has a youth unemployment rate under 30 percent. Bosnia-Herzegovina, with a youth unemployment rate of 62.8 percent, is one of the world’s highest, and according to the most recently available data, Kosovo is not far behind with 61 percent. Unemployment of young women in Kosovo has reached a staggering rate of 71.7 percent, compared to 56.2 percent for men.⁷ Rural areas in particular offer limited employment opportunities beyond small-scale farming.

6 Ebi Spahiu, “The Islamic State’s Western Balkans Strongholds,” *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* 13 (2015), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44446&no_cache=1#.VzGfoja5O_U, 6.

7 Data for women between the ages of 15 and 24 were retrieved from the Kosovo Agency for Statistics. The latest publicly available data is from 2014.

Table 2: Unemployment Rates in the Balkans*

	Total Unemployment	Youth Unemployment
Albania	17.7	32.2
Bosnia-Herzegovina	42.8	62.8
Croatia	17.2	45.9
Kosovo	35.3	61.0
Macedonia	24.6	53.1
Montenegro	18.3	39.5
Serbia	17.9	49.5

*Percentages give are based on the latest available data from Q4 2014 to Q1 2016.

Due to the growing sense of boredom of youth and discontent with their future outlooks, traveling to the Islamic State offers them a chance for adventure and to participate in the creation of a utopian „Islamic caliphate“, which they are convinced is their religious duty.⁸

Weak institutions

Government institutions in the region, especially those in rural and more remote areas, are considerably deficient—governance is weak, and there is little rule of law. Radical Salafist villages purportedly having allegiance to the Islamic State have thrived due to the lack of government presence in remote areas of Bosnia. Even though, for example, police patrols of the Bosnian Salafist village of Gornja Maoča do occur, the residents are able to determine through informants when the federal police will arrive, allowing them time to hide their Islamic State flags.⁹ In the vicinity of the rural Albanian village of Leshnicë, where both women and men have traveled to Syria, family members of the departed migrants have „little faith“ that the Albanian government will engage with them to discuss strategies to prevent radicalization.¹⁰

Wahhabi “charities” and radical mosques

Ultra-conservative, Wahhabi charitable non-governmental organizations from the Persian Gulf, particularly from Saudi Arabia, have had a significant presence in countries like Bosnia, Kosovo, and Albania through funding mosques, training imams, and organizing lectures or community programs, etc. These „NGOs“ established their influence following the 1992-1995 Bosnian War

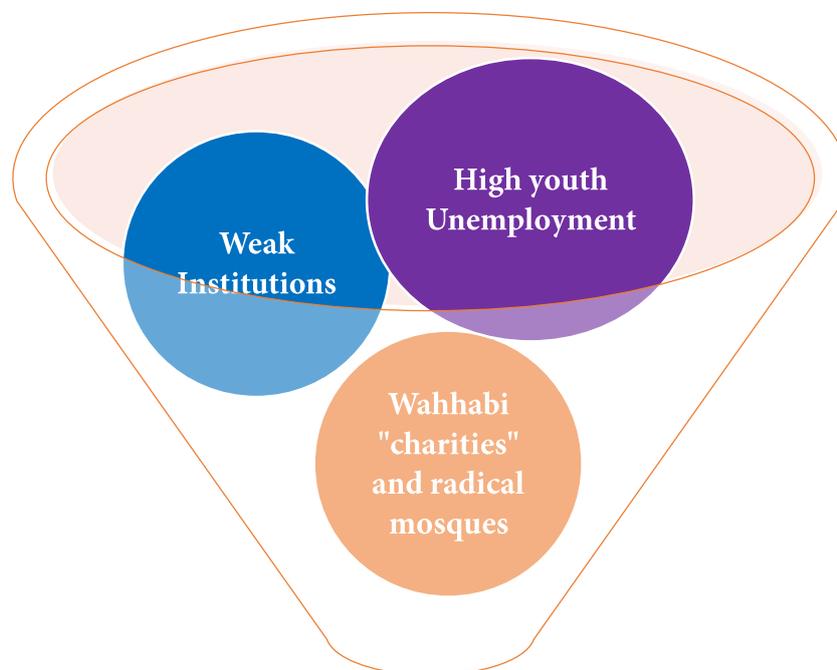
8 Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, “‘Till Martyrdom Do Us Part’: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/caliphettes-women-and-the-appeal-of-is.pdf>, 13.

9 Walter Mayr, “Sharia Villages: Bosnia’s Islamic State Problem,” Spiegel Online International, 5 April 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/islamic-state-presence-in-bosnia-cause-for-concern-a-1085326.html>.

10 Aleksandra Bogdani, “Albanian Villages Ponder Local Spike in ISIS Recruits,” Balkan Insight, 25 April 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albanian-villages-ponder-local-spurt-of-isis-recruits-04-22-2016>.

and the 1998-1999 Kosovo War, and have been successful in spreading their ideology due to both the lack of governance in rural communities and Western Balkans countries' need for investment.¹¹ In addition, Bosnia and Albania have struggled to control mosques—some of which may be receiving outside funding—where there is evidence of the imam recruiting individuals for the Islamic State.¹² It is important to remember that ultra-orthodox religious beliefs or behaviors do not automatically imply participation in radicalism, however these influences—in combination with lack of oversight and influence by outside organizations with potential connections to terrorism—can set the groundwork for violent extremism.

Graphic 2: Factors particularly favorable to migration from the Western Balkans to Islamic State territory



Pull Factors of Islamic State recruitment

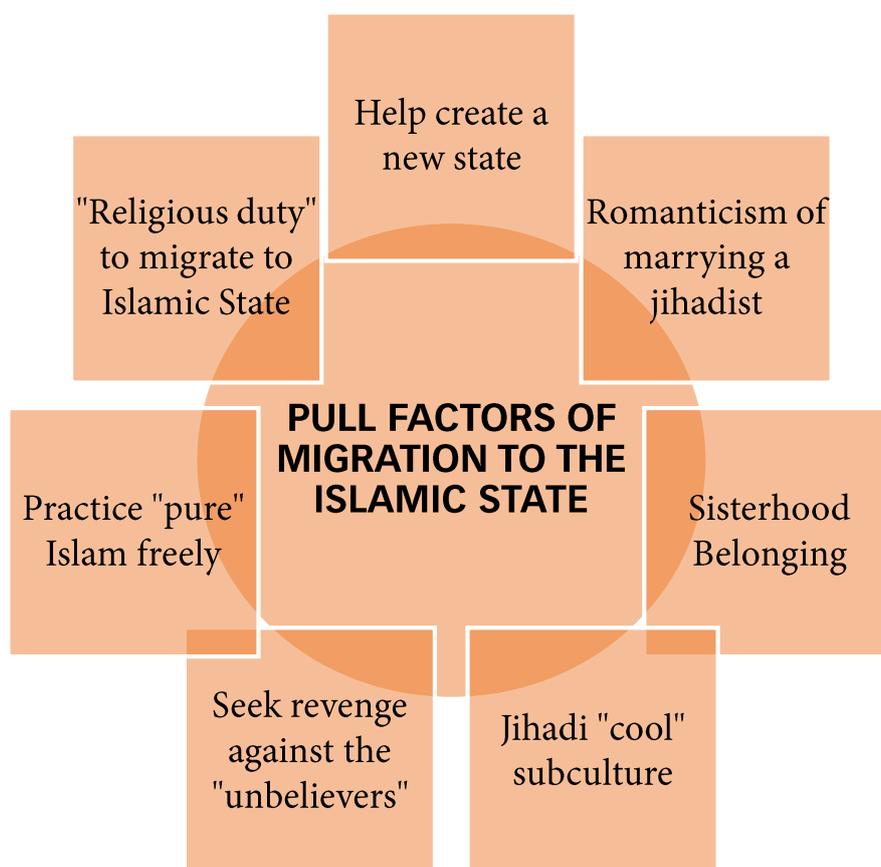
Pull factors arise mainly from the Islamic State's ideology and compelling propaganda. A number of the pull factors are the same for women as they are for male recruits: individuals are responding to the call made by Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi upon the proclamation

11 Shpend Kursani, "Report inquiring into the cause and consequences of Kosovo citizens' involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq," Kosovar Center for Security Studies, April 2015, http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Report_inquiring_into_the_causes_and_consequences_of_Kosovo_citizens'_involvement_as_foreign_fighters_in_Syria_and_Iraq_307708.pdf, 59.

12 Aleksandra Bogdani, "Albania Faces 'Jihadi Fighters in the Shadows' Threat," Balkan Insight, 23 March 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albania-faces-jihadi-fighters-in-the-shadows-threat-03-21-2016>; Rodolfo Toe, "Bosnia Struggles to Control 'Rebel' Mosques," Balkan Insight, 26 April 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnian-islamic-community-struggling-to-control-parallel-mosques-04-25-2016>.

of the „caliphate“ on 29 June 2014 that all Sunni Muslim believers have a religious duty (fard) to migrate to the Islamic State. Migration goes hand in hand with other pull factors—with this duty comes a sense of purpose in that the recruits believe they are part of the founding generation to establish a pure Islamic utopia based on Shari’a law. Apart from the creation of the Islamic caliphate, recruits are attracted by the opportunity to seek revenge on the „infidels“ (kuffar, those who do not follow the beliefs of Islam), in order to divide the world into a system of Dar al-Islam („House of Islam“, where Islam is the predominant religion) and Dar al-Harab („House of War“, or countries where Islam/Shari’a do not predominate).

Graphic 3: Pull factors of migration to the Islamic State



Of all the possible pull factors, there are a few elements of Islamic State propaganda affecting women in particular:

1. romanticism of the conflict,
2. ideology via online propaganda,
3. a feeling of "sisterhood" and
4. women's empowerment in the Islamic State.

According to current information, women from the Western Balkans are migrating to Syria and Iraq for entirely the same reasons as women from Western Europe or other parts of the world. Like with other regions, there has been no „typical“ female migrant—the women range in age from 15 years to mothers in their early 30s; additionally, women come from a mix of backgrounds—including women who are well-educated and are from wealthier backgrounds.

Online propaganda

The combination of online propaganda and the Islamic State’s brand of ideology serves to entice women to migrate to Syria and Iraq. Islamic State propaganda comes in many forms, including: high-quality videos depicting apocalyptic scenes and presenting life in the „Islamic State“ as a utopia for Muslim families; social media accounts and blogs (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Kik, etc.); Dabiq, the Islamic State’s online magazine; and radical imams who exhort individuals to take up violent extremism. Propaganda videos and messaging on social media also form part of the „jihadi cool“ sub-culture pull factor („jihadi cool“ also includes music, clothing, video games, etc), which seeks to make the Islamic State attractive for younger recruits.

While women currently do not play a leading role in propaganda, it is important to remember that women from all regions are taking an active part in the production of messages directed towards other women: despite the stereotype of female migrants as submissive and silent, women propagandists are often portrayed as „outspoken and assertive“ and are many times just as likely to engage in divisive, raging debates.¹³

The warped Muslim ideology espoused by the Islamic State plays a role in encouraging women to engage with the content to which they are exposed.¹⁴ The main elements are women’s empowerment, sisterhood, participation in the formation of a caliphate, and the attraction of living in an „Islamic utopia“.

Women’s “empowerment” in the Islamic State

Islamic empowerment messaging serves to show women that they can escape marginalization or oppression and exercise „control“ over their lives by migrating to the Islamic State.¹⁵ Life for women in the Western Balkans and in other non-Muslim societies — where women may

13 Jörg Diehl and Björn Hengst, „Verschwundene Österreicherinnen: Als Teenager in den Dschihad,“ Spiegel Online, 23 April 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/oesterreicher-salafisten-koedern-maedchen-fuer-dschihad-a-965741.html>.

14 Haras Rafiq and Nikita Malik, „Caliphettes: Women and the Appeal of the Islamic State,“ Quilliam Foundation, November 2015, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/caliphettes-women-and-the-appeal-of-is.pdf>, 43.

15 Ibid, 18.

be pressured to wear makeup and revealing clothing, and are the objects of sex appeal — is portrayed as vain, materialistic, secular, and contrary to Muslim beliefs.¹⁶ Under Islamic State ideology, migration becomes „the ultimate form of self-expression“ for women, becoming an opportunity for them to escape the secular lifestyle of what they view as „apostate“ countries in the Western Balkans.¹⁷ Empowerment encourages women ultimately to reject materialism for a pious life in the Islamic State.

Sisterhood of believers

Beyond their sense of “empowerment”, women are attracted to the Islamic State by the concept of “sisterhood”. Women recruits believe that the Islamic State will offer them the opportunity to integrate into a support network of women with similar beliefs, giving them a greater sense of belonging. The message of “sisterhood” targets in particular women who may be facing an identity crisis or who are feeling isolated due to their perception of gender inequality, lack of voice, or domestic problems in their home country.¹⁸

Sisterhood in ISIS messaging gives the women the impression that they can leave behind highly individualistic societies to come to the Islamic State to develop real friendships with other women, to discover meaning in their life, and to practice Islam freely. Messaging on Twitter and other social media platforms propagates the concept of sisterhood by showing images of groups of women, often brandishing weapons.

Romanticism of marrying a jihadist fighter

The chance to marry a jihadist fighter draws unmarried women to the Islamic State—for teenage recruits especially, marriage symbolizes the transition from childhood to adulthood. Jihadists are romanticized like princes or knights in a fairy tale in order to attract women—they are portrayed as strong and brave, and young women are convinced that they can seek out adventure by marrying a jihadist fighter.

This lifestyle hardly seems empowering for women, but prospective recruits are told that they are „making a worldly sacrifice“ by leaving their lives behind to migrate and face a life of hardship in order to strive for what they believe is a higher religious ideal—living in and helping build

16 Erin Marie Saltman and Ross Frenett, “Female Radicalization to ISIS and the Role of Women in CVE,” in *A Man’s World: Exploring the Roles of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism*, ed. Naureen Chowdhury Fink et al. (Hedayah and the Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2016), 150.

17 Rafiq and Malik, 21.

18 Nikita Malik, “The Women of the Islamic State,” *Wall Street Journal*, 19 November 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-women-of-islamic-state-1447912860>.

the „Islamic utopia“ of the caliphate.¹⁹ Despite the difficulties which may be discussed openly on social media and blogs, women are not being effectively deterred from migrating to Syria or Iraq.

WESTERN BALKANS RESPONSE TO ISIS RECRUITMENT: CRIMINALIZE IT

Beyond the criminal and judicial system, no action has been taken by any of the concerned states to de-radicalize or to rehabilitate fighters who return, nor is there sufficient attention being paid to counter violent extremism (CVE) policies and gender. The government of Albania led a „Balkans Regional CVE Initiative“ in May 2015, yet it is unclear of whether statements acknowledging the role of women in ISIS are being translated into action by summit participants, or if timelines for implementing gender-focused recommendations have been set.²⁰

Following the declaration of the Islamic State caliphate and evidence that male foreign fighters were departing the Western Balkans region for Syria and Iraq, governments of all countries in the region (with the current exception of Croatia) passed legislation in 2014 or 2015 criminalizing recruitment, participation, incitement, or material support of foreign paramilitary groups by their citizens.²¹ Punishments for these criminal offenses generally range from 6 months to 15 years in prison.

Table 3: Western Balkans Criminal Legislation on Participation In/Support of Foreign Paramilitary Groups

Country	Article of Criminal Code	Punishment for Recruitment	Punishment for Participation	Punishment for Mobilizing	Punishment for Incitement	Rehabilitation for returnees
Albania	265 (a/b/c) July 2014	8-15 years	5-10 years	8-15 years	8-15 years	No
Bosnia and Herzegovina	162 (b) April 2014	1-10 years	3 years	5 years	3 months - 3 years	No
Croatia	Under Consideration					No
Kosovo	Law 05/L-002 March 2015	5-15 years	3-15 years	3-15 years	6 months - 5 years	No
Macedonia	322 (a) Sept 2014	5 years	5 years	5 years	4 years	No

19 Haras Rafiq and Nikita Malik, „Caliphettes: Women and the Appeal of the Islamic State,“ Quilliam Foundation, November 2015, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/caliphettes-women-and-the-appeal-of-is.pdf>, 31.

20 „Recognized that women are also vulnerable to radicalization and are participating in terrorist groups and serving as FTFs; underscored the important role women play in countering violent extremism and committed to integrating women into CVE efforts“, United States Department of State, „Balkans Regional Summit on Countering Violent Extremism: Statement by the Ministry of the Interior for the Government of Albania,“ 19-20 May 2015, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/245704.pdf>, 2.

21 It should be noted that some countries (for example, Serbia), citizens are also migrating to fight in conflicts in non-Middle Eastern countries — particularly Ukraine.

Montenegro	449 (b) Oct 2014	2-10 years	6 months - 5 years	1-8 years	6 months - 5 years	No
Serbia	386 (a/b) Oct 2014	2-10 years	6 months - 8 years	2-10 years	2-10 years	No

Focusing solely on criminalizing involvement with the Islamic State leads to a number of challenges, and it must be emphasized that punishment does not fully address the migration problem:

First, the solution shows that the government is taking immediate action to punish participants in violent extremism, yet does not address the underlying causes to prevent other individuals from radicalizing and migrating. Second, there is insufficient evidence that police and the courts have the know-how to address women in extremist groups and terrorism in general.²² The justice system must be able to gather credible evidence and use it properly, as well as understand events happening in the Islamic State and the ideological appeal of the group. Third, prison sentences offer no opportunity for women or men who become disillusioned with the Islamic State and who comprehend the seriousness of their actions to reject violent extremism or extremist ideological beliefs altogether. Finally, while the major advantage of criminal legislation serves as a deterrent for potential recruits, the threat of a prison sentence also discourages women who want to escape the Islamic State and return to their home country.

By failing to entice women recruits to return, states miss out on the opportunity to rehabilitate them and to help them reintegrate into a non-violent society. The absence of a comprehensive approach runs the risk of the women joining other terrorist groups or continuing to recruit more individuals due to their „statelessness“.

CONCLUSION

Adding a gender perspective now to CVE action plans will not only address the current problem of female migration to the Islamic State, but will be beneficial in the future, as women will be equally susceptible to recruitment and participation in jihadist or violent extremist groups beyond the Islamic State. Government leaders and legislators at the national and local level, the police forces, members of civil society, and national and local religious leaders in all Western Balkans countries must be responsible for including considerations of women in their efforts to stem the flow of recruits to the Islamic State, as well as for working together to implement the policy recommendations in this paper.

²² Andreja Bogdanovski, “We did criminalize it — now what? Western Balkans response to the foreign fighters threat,” Analytica, September 2014, http://www.analyticamk.org/images/stories/files/2014/Foreign_Fighters.pdf, 4.

Publisher

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Belgrade, 2016