



GENDER EQUALITY AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM: LIBYA, TUNISIA, AND MOROCCO

REGIONAL BRIEFING

AUTHORS: MELISSA JOHNSTON & JACQUI TRUE¹

KEY FINDINGS

- 1. Appeal to socially-constructed masculinities and femininities is integral to the recruitment strategies and propaganda of extremist groups in Libya, Tunisia and Morocco.*
- 2. Gender roles and dynamics are critical to the internal functioning of violent extremist groups. Manipulating social constructions of masculinity and femininity is a tactic of group control.*
- 3. In Libya, hostile sexist attitudes toward women and support for violence against women are the factors most strongly associated with support for violent extremism based on survey research. More than any other factor, support for violence against women predicted support for violent extremism.*
- 4. Violent extremist groups use financial incentives to radicalize men and women to violence, playing into masculine gender norms of breadwinning, and women's economic vulnerability, especially in the context of a war economy in Libya.*
- 5. Women who are subordinate to and/or dependent on male relatives who are members of violent extremist groups are likely to be recruited by those relatives.*

1. Synthesising additional regional research by the authors and Libya researchers: Oum Elezz El Farsi (University of Tripoli), Faiza El Basha (University of Tripoli), Abeir Ameina (University of Benghazi), and Zineb Benalla (Eirene Associates). Tunisia researchers: Tunisian Centre of Research, Documentation and Information on Women (CREDIF), Emna Jebblaoui, and Imen Kochbati, Slim Kallel. Morocco researchers: Knowledge Lab Consulting.

INTRODUCTION

Every story of radicalization is unique, however, there are patterns in both the push and pull factors for rising violent extremism, such as, the existence of localised economic and political grievances versus globalised ideological and religious motivations. Country-specific factors conducive to extremism and violent extremism in Libya, Tunisia and Morocco, are also highly relevant. To date, none of these general or region-specific theories have considered the role of gender identity, dynamics and ideology in the spread of violent extremism.

In this regional briefing based on extensive primary research in Libya, primary research in Morocco, and secondary research in Tunisia, we examine the relevance of gender in explaining how and why radicalization to violence occurs, addressing recruitment and mobilisation patterns. We discuss the impacts of violent extremism, and how best to counter and prevent this violence, with a gender lens. In addition, we analyse the connection between violence against women and violent extremism, with respect to both attitudes and practices.

METHODS AND SCOPE

The research investigated the gendered motivations of individuals to join violent extremist and terrorist groups, and how gender inequality and discrimination interact with other economic, political, and religious factors to spread violent extremism across three countries (Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco). Two research questions were explored across the three countries:

1. How and why do societal gender identities and relations contribute to both the spread and prevention of violent extremism?
2. How are constructions of masculinity and femininity used by violent extremist groups to radicalise and recruit men and women to use violence for a political or ideological cause?

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF METHODS IN LIBYA

FIELDWORK DATA	SURVEY DATA	RESULTS
237 PEOPLE (OVERSAMPLE OF WOMEN)	1007 PEOPLE	DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS
4 SITES (TRIPOLI, BENGHAZI, SABHA, AJDABIYA)	NATION-WIDE SAMPLE	CORRELATIONS BETWEEN VARIABLES
		THEMATIC ANALYSIS + QUOTES

The field research data was collected during fieldwork undertaken by the team of Libyan academics (Dr Oum Elezz El Farsi, Dr Faiza el Basha, and Dr Abeir Amina) from October 2018 to March 2019. In Libya overall, 237 people participated in field research interviews across four sites, with an oversample of women. People with direct experiences of violent extremism were interviewed, as well as a few members of extremist groups. Religious minorities and members of ultra-religious and moderate discussion groups also participated.

Survey research of 1007 people across all of Libya examined gender differences in attitudes toward violent extremism and in social media use, religiosity, sexism, and violence against women using a five-point scale. The survey in Libya took place between April and June 2019. In the survey, questions examined demographic issues, gendered recruitment messaging, support and opposition to violent extremism, sexism, and violence against women.

In Tunisia, research conducted by the Tunisian Centre of Research, Documentation and Information on Women (CREDIF) drew on secondary data from a variety of sources: government statistics, court reports (this included court records of 384 cases between 2011 and 2015, involving 1000 people charged with terrorism, 35 of whom were women), newspapers, academic experts, academic journal articles, as well as a government stakeholder roundtable.

In Morocco, primary research was used to reconstruct narratives about women’s recruitment and radicalisation

to violent extremism. Interviews were conducted with 21 Moroccan women to understand why Islamic State appealed to them. Of these 21 interviews, five were conducted in Fez and Rabat with women violent extremists, seven were conducted in Tangiers, Fnideq, and Ceuta with families of extremists and women’s groups, and twelve were conducted in Casablanca, Rabat, Madagh and Fez with women religious leaders. This interview data was interpreted with the aid of secondary statistical studies; official documents, NGO and news reports, and violent extremist group materials (propaganda review, leaflets, statements, etc).

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF METHODS IN TUNISIA AND MOROCCO



RESULTS

Libya

Six overarching research findings emerged from research in Libya: (1) violence against women and hostile sexist attitudes correlate with support for violent extremism; (2) economic push and pull factors in recruitment are gendered; (3) recruitment online and offline targets men and women differently; (4) kinship is crucial to the recruitment and reproduction of violent extremist groups; (5) in the context of war and violence, religious schools and institutions are more easily instrumentalised by extremists; and (6) women’s rights activism puts women at risk, but their solidarity is also a bulwark against violent extremism.

On the first finding, sexist attitudes toward women and support for violence against women are the factor most strongly associated with support for violent extremism based on our survey research. There was no correlation at all between the degrees of religiosity, age, gender, level of education achieved, employment, or the region of Libya in which a respondent resided, and support for violent extremism. In the survey, support for violence against women was widespread. Women’s experiences of violence may influence them to either reject or support violent extremist groups. In the survey, 39 per cent of respondents thought rape was a factor pushing women to join violent extremist groups.

TABLE 3: Q43. WOMEN WHO HAVE BEEN RAPED OR SEXUALLY ABUSED ARE MORE LIKELY TO JOIN A VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUP

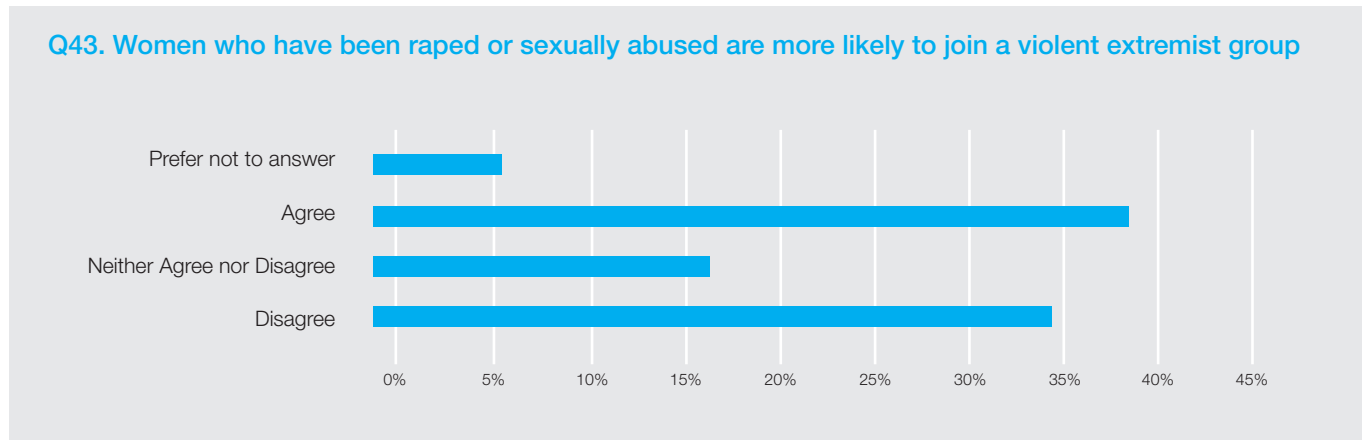
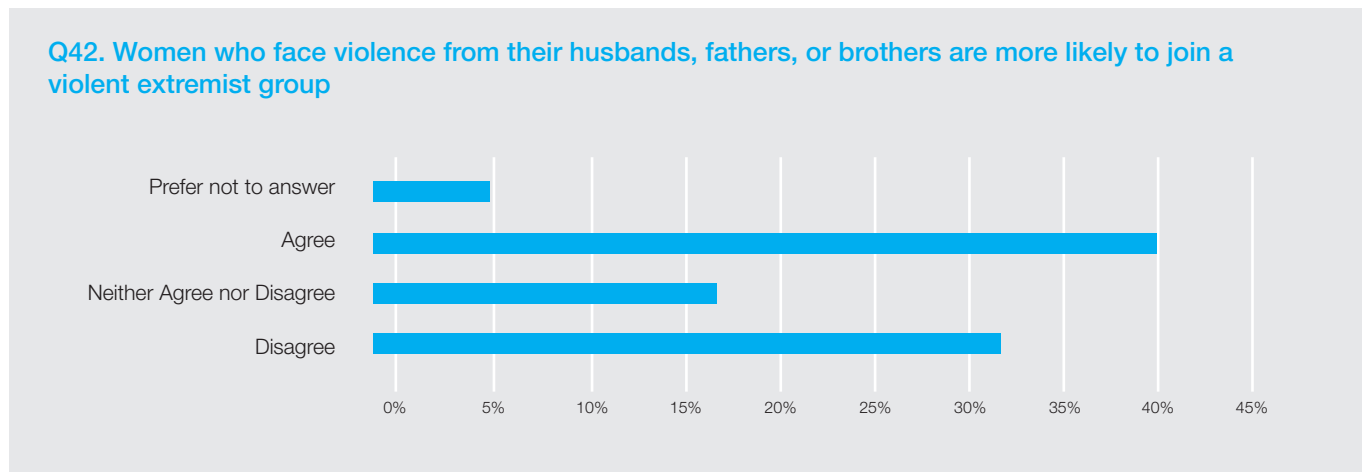


TABLE 4: Q42. WOMEN WHO FACE VIOLENCE FROM THEIR HUSBANDS, FATHERS, OR BROTHERS ARE MORE LIKELY TO JOIN A VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUP



The second finding is that violent extremist groups use financial incentives to radicalize men and women to violence, playing into masculine gender norms of breadwinning, and women’s economic vulnerability, in the context of a war economy in Libya. Half of all survey respondents in this study agreed or strongly agreed that men should sacrifice their wellbeing to support the women in their lives. Relatedly, violent extremist groups target excluded and vulnerable women, especially spinsters, widows, and divorcees for recruitment.

The third finding was that recruitment messaging in traditional and online media is distinctively tailored to men and women. Traditional and online media, including social media are an important vector for spreading extremist ideologies, and a medium of individual recruitment. Recruitment messaging of violent extremist groups appeals to Libyan men’s sense of masculine dominance over women as fighters, breadwinners, and decision-makers. A notable minority of male (13 per cent) and female survey respondents (12 per cent) also reported seeing recruitment to violent groups online. This is significant given the relatively low internet access in Libya.

Violent extremist groups “seek to attract women who are going through financial hardship and who need work, because now more families depend more on women”.

Woman Interviewee, Tripoli

TABLE 5: Q15. HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU SEEN VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS TRYING TO RECRUIT MEMBERS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA IN SOCIAL MEDIA?

Q15	Male	Female	Total
Never	41%	43%	42%
Rarely	11%	11%	11%
Sometimes	16%	10%	12%
Often	7%	6%	6%
Very often	13%	12%	12%
Prefer not to answer	11%	18%	15%

The fourth finding is that women who are subordinate to and/or dependent on male relatives who are members of violent extremist groups are likely to be recruited by those relatives. Kinship relations in a system of legal inequality where men are heads of households affect violent extremism. Gendered power relations are exploited by violent extremist groups in their recruitment strategies. Once married to an extremist, women and girls experience financial insecurity and social stigma if they seek to separate from, or divorce, their spouses.

The marriage of women to the followers of extremist ideology by her guardian without her consent does take place. Then she has to stay with him because a divorced woman isn't acceptable in society

Community Meeting 2, Ajdabiya

The fifth finding is that religious schools and women-only koranic study groups are sites of recruitment, largely because the conflict in Libya has resulted in limited regulation, supervision, and/or democratic oversight. Licenses for private schools are not monitored while the curriculum in public schools also promotes discriminatory gender norms and religious intolerance. Parents are largely unaware of the curriculum content being taught in private or public schools. Educational reform is constrained by the current conflict and a lack of oversight and regulation of school funding, management and curriculum, contributes to violent extremism and gender inequality.

There is a spread of religious schools in the South of Libya because the government has neglected the South, which resulted in weak policies and the dominance of religious schools biased perspectives on women.

Community Meeting 4, Sabha

The sixth and final major finding was that women seek to counter and prevent violent extremism by advocating for women's rights. There is an important trend of women seeking to prevent and counter violent extremism by advocating for women's rights. Standing up for their rights motivates some women to resist violent extremist groups. There is a slightly contradictory tendency, that inequality mobilizes people (especially men) to join violent extremist groups, while it mobilizes people (especially women) to fight violent extremism. That violence took many forms; violent extremist groups were known to use extortion, blackmail, and smear campaigns to obstruct women leaders specifically.

Tunisia

Based on analysis of secondary data, there are five major findings: (1) Extremist participation is gendered; (2) being young and unmarried was a common demographic variable among those charged with violent extremism; (3) relative socio-economic marginalization may drive individual women to be violent extremists; (4) violent extremism disproportionately negatively affects women and violence against women plays an as yet unclear role in extremist ideology, recruitment and retention of women extremists; and (5) women's empowerment and resilience to violent extremism has provoked backlash as well as solidarity.

The first finding in Tunisia is that most convicted extremists are men. Although Tunisian women support and engage in violent extremism and become active members in violent extremist groups, in combat and non-combat role, women do not join such groups or commit acts of violent extremism as often as men do.

Secondly, youth make up the highest number of those engaged in violent extremism. Most convicted terrorists in Tunisia are not married, suggesting a link between singlehood and violent extremism. More primary research is needed to

explore these links. Women tend to be younger than men are at the age of conviction for terrorism.

The third finding echoes that of Libya, in that socio-economic vulnerability may promote the women's feelings of disenchantment, which is a potential causal factor for their support and engagement with violent extremist groups. However, there is also evidence that it is relative marginalization that is the factor for their support and engagement with violent extremist groups.

Fourthly, violent extremism disproportionately negatively affects women. Violent extremist groups promote gender regressive laws and practices, and commit acts of gender-based violence, especially against women leaders. A better understanding of the relationship between violence against women in public and private spheres – including intimate partner violence, sexual harassment in the workplace and public spaces, and violence directed towards women leaders and activists – and violent extremism would be able to feed into policies and programs to prevent and combat violent extremism. Violence against women is high in Tunisia and exacerbated by ultra-conservative ideologies, which justify such violence. This is regardless of recent legal reforms on combatting violence against women and supporting greater gender equality.

Finally, there is a clear relationship between protecting women's rights and deterring violent extremism, but this is not a linear one, as was the case for Libya. The empowerment of women in post-revolution Tunisia has been a potential factor driving both support for, and resistance to, violent extremism. These dynamics are likely gendered, with women's empowerment a possible factor in provoking "backlash" among some men. At the same time, the regressive effects of violent extremism may encourage women to become politically active.

Morocco

Research in Morocco supported findings from other violent extremism affected contexts that for women in particular, **familial relationships proved to be a key factor driving recruitment in Morocco.** Men were recruited first in general, in turn leading to the recruitment of female family members. These relationships, between men and women, are thus fundamental in understanding women's involvement in violent extremism.

As elsewhere, **depictions of traditional gender roles** were used as a selling point to both men and women of violent extremist groups in their propaganda and by recruiters. Online imagery displays women in "perfect"

(traditional) romantic relationships with members of violent extremist groups, targeting both men and women. Online propaganda likely plays an important role in recruitment across the region.

Aside from the commonality of family relationships, Moroccan women interviewees had diverse reasons for joining Islamic State. Some participants suggested they were fighting what they see as the West's oppression of Muslims; others were looking for a purpose or action different from their day-to-day life, one where they could both make a difference and be viewed by others as equal citizens. These views tally with other studies of women violent extremists in the region, where women do not describe their experiences as violent but as working towards national, religious, or humanitarian goals.

Socio economic conditions were also seen as a push factor with 74% of returnees coming from underprivileged background.

Importantly, the women interviewees did not make reference to religion as a factor in their radicalization.

REGIONAL ANALYSIS

Across the three countries examined here, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco, various methods were used to probe the relationship between gender and violent extremism. Extensive primary data (qualitative and quantitative) was gathered in Libya, with a smaller amount gathered in Morocco. Secondary data formed the basis of analysis in Tunisia and Morocco. Further, qualitative and quantitative primary research is needed in the region to enable comparative insight. Nonetheless, comparable themes and findings emerge:

- Gender analysis is not about women and women extremists, it requires looking at how unequal gender power relations between men and women drive recruitment, radicalisation and retention.
- Violence against women was empirically linked to violent extremism in the Libyan case; evidence of the links between support for violence against women and support for violent extremism was emergent but lacked a wide evidence base in the other two cases.
- Personal religiosity was not found to be linked to violent extremism in any of the countries.
- At the political level, gender goals of violent extremist groups (traditional roles for men as breadwinners and women as homemakers; reassertion of male dominance of public and private spheres) are cognate across the region.

- Although extremism could be part of a response to women's increasing empowerment in the region (comprising both conservative backlash against it and women seeking to participate and lead conservative political movements), extremism could provoke women to participate in preventing and countering violent extremism. The double movement of extremism/women's empowerment was visible across the region.
- Financial incentives were proven to be a key driver of recruitment in the Libyan case, and socio-economic conditions as well as financial incentives were seen to be factors in recruitment in Morocco and Tunisia, however more concrete research is required.
- Opposition to women's leadership or empowerment (by extremist and other groups) exists on a spectrum from dissent, to protest, to violence.
- Women's religious leadership has been a focus of policy reform in Morocco to prevent violent extremism; but in Libya, women-only Koranic study groups had become vectors of extremism.
- Violent extremist groups use depictions of traditional gender roles as propaganda online and offline to appeal to both men and women across the region. While men's support of such gender politics is unsurprising, the appeal of traditional roles to a (smaller) number of women warrants further investigation.
- Clear evidence on kinship ties in Libya showed that women who are subordinate to and/or dependent on male relatives who are members of violent extremist groups are likely to be recruited by those relatives, and comparable findings emerged in the other cases, demonstrating the need for a gender lens.

IMPLICATIONS

The UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda provides a framework for promoting women's participation in the prevention of conflict and violent extremism. This agenda highlights the gender dynamics and attraction of violent extremism, especially the systemic gender inequality and discrimination that provides a fertile ground for radicalization to violence. Sexual and gender-based violence particularly impacting women and girls, for instance, are frequently used as tactics of violent extremist groups. Despite the gendered impacts of violent extremism, there are still limited spaces for women's participation in the design and implementation of CVE and PVE responses.

There are three main implications of this research on gender and violent extremism in North Africa:

1. **Women's roles are not confined to victim or perpetrator: women and girls can be simultaneously victims of sexual or gender-based violence as well as recruiters, fundraisers and perpetrators of violent extremism.** As the research in Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia has shown, gender dynamics inside families can be volatile. Women are most likely to join an extremist group, whether voluntarily or through coercion because of their family and kinship links to such groups. For policymakers who want to understand why women radicalize, join or are recruited to violent extremist groups, it is important to understand women's gendered experiences within the family with respect to loyalty, honour, obligation, abuse, and coercive control (i.e. gender power relations).
2. Pertaining to women specifically, the finding from Libya that **women who justify violence against women are also those women most likely to support violent extremism suggests there is a major gap in CVE and PVE policy responses that are not presently sensitive to gender relations and women's multiple roles as both agent and/or victim.** Gendered violence likely affects women's roles in maintaining extremist social networks and transmitting violent extremist social norms to the next generation in ways researchers and practitioners do not yet appreciate. Research in Libya provides an emerging evidence base, but further primary research is needed to investigate the gendered motivations to perpetrate violent extremism as well as the gendered dynamics within violent extremist groups in Tunisia and Morocco.
3. Demonstrating the links between support for violence against women, misogyny, and violent extremism is a key finding in the field of terrorism and conflict. The primary research **could be expanded beyond Libya to other countries in the North Africa region in order to inform gender-sensitive policymaking aimed at preventing violent extremism and promoting gender equality.** The Libyan research provides evidence of the connection between violence against women, and violent extremism, at level of individual attitudes and practices. At a political level, however, misogyny is part of the branding and appeal of different types of extremism worldwide. Widespread sexism and gender stereotypes in everyday politics enable various political movements use misogyny to appeal to both men and women.

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Melissa Johnston is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Monash GPS. Jacqui True, FASSA is Professor of Politics and International Relations and Director of Monash GPS.

www.arts.monash.edu/gender-peace-security |   #MonashGPS | Arts-MonashGPS@monash.edu



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