

# POLICY BRIEF II

Socio-economic Demographics and  
Gendered Recruitment in Tunisia

## INTRODUCTION

This policy brief is a summary of a paper authored by Imen Kochbati, Assistant at the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of Tunis, University of Tunis. The paper is the second in a series of three on women and violent extremism in Tunisia. The research and papers were commissioned by UN Women, as part of a project between UN Women, the Tunisian Centre for Research, Documentation and Information on Women (CREDIF) and Monash University's Gender, Peace and Security Centre. The views are those of the author alone, and do not necessarily reflect those of UN Women and Monash GPS.

This policy brief integrates a gender perspective into preventing and countering violent extremism strategies (P/CVE) in Tunisia. Building on observations that "[v]iolent extremist organizations tailor their recruiting messages around contextualized grievances," it summarizes research findings on the relationship between gender-specific socio-economic factors and violent extremism to provide an evidence base for P/CVE in Tunisia.<sup>1</sup> However, the linkages between women's empowerment and subordination, violent extremism and P/CVE need to be further researched to better understand their potential impacts and effects to inform more effective policies and support programs.

The brief draws on primary sources (court documents) triangulated with secondary data from reports and secondary academic research. The Tunisian Centre for Research and Studies on Terrorism collected the original data set, which was compiled from the court records of 384 cases between 2011 and 2015, involving 1,000 people charged with terrorism, thirty-five of whom were women. Not all relevant information was available for all 1,000 people included in the data set; therefore, some analysis relies on less than this population as a sample size.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Macdonald and Luke Waggoner, "Dashed Hopes and Extremism in Tunisia," *Journal of Democracy* 29, 1 (2018): 128.

<sup>2</sup> Ridha Radaoui, Imen Kochbati and Mariem Kzara, "Le terrorisme en Tunisie à travers les dossier judiciaires" [Terrorism in Tunisia through Court Records], (Tunis: Tunisian Centre for Research and Studies on Terrorism, Forum for Economic and Social Rights, October 2016).

The research used seven socio-economic indicators relevant to gender-sensitive analysis of PVE to determine patterns of recruitment and incidence of violent extremism: Gender, age, geographic location, marital status, education status, area of study and profession. Methodological challenges with sex-disaggregated data collection in Tunisia remain. And potentially relevant variables had to be excluded where the data was limited or unavailable.

Based on the data collected, the main research findings are:

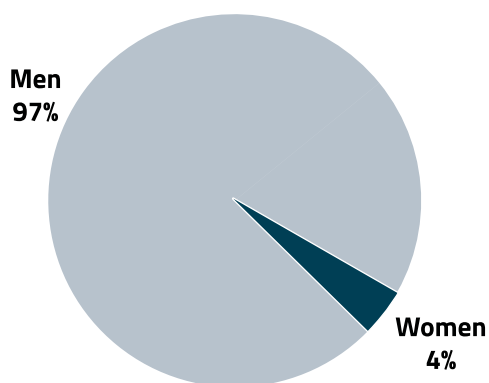
- Women represent only a minority of those recruited into violent extremist groups in Tunisia relative to men.<sup>3</sup>
- Socio-economic vulnerability may promote the women's feelings of disenchantment, which is a potential causal factor for their support and engagement with violent extremist groups. However, there is also evidence that it is relative marginalization that is the factor for their support and engagement with violent extremist groups.
- Women tend to be younger than men are at the age of conviction for terrorism.
- Youth make up the highest number of those engaged in violent extremism.
- Court records show that when girls (minors) are charged with terrorism, that a member of their family is also being charged.
- Most convicted terrorists in Tunisia are not married, suggesting a link between singlehood and violent extremism.
- Of the students recruited into violent extremist groups, both men and women were more likely to have studied science.

<sup>3</sup> Based on available data an estimated 700 Tunisian women out of an estimated 7,000 Tunisians (10%) joined violent extremist groups in Syria, Iraq and Libya since 2011. The majority of these women are engaged in community and support roles. Maro Youssef and Hamza Mighri, "Women's Groups Take on Radicalization in Tunisia," (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 26 March 2019), <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78685>.

## Summary of key analysis and findings

### a) Gender

Based on the survey data used for this project, male gender is the most salient demographic variable among those charged with violent extremism in Tunisia. Of the 1,000 people in the data sample, thirty-five or 3.5% were women. From that sample, women tend to be younger than men are at the time they are being charged. Further data is required to know the ages at which women and men are recruited to support or participate in terrorist groups. The specific charges for the women and men in the sample are unknown; however, a study of 100 women arrested in the period between September 2015 and October 2018, lists several criminal acts that came under the charge of terrorism, ranging from attempting to fight abroad to promoting Islamic State content on social media site.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that women engage in several types of activities in terrorist groups that include both combatant and support roles.



Gender distribution of terrorism convictions based on 1,000-person sample

The low percentage of women charged with terrorism in the sample survey may suggest that radicalized women are less likely than men to be

<sup>4</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Tunisia's Female Jihadists," The Washington Institute Policy Watch, 31 October 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tunisias-female-jihadists>.

formally processed in the court system. It may also highlight the gendered nature of men and women's roles in terrorist groups, and that while women do hold combatant roles, men are more likely to have these roles. This may also mean that men are more likely to be detected than women, who are active in the private sphere in support roles. This significant disparity may also be revealing of the assumption that women do not participate in terrorism and are therefore less likely to be investigated and charged. If any of these assumptions hold, then gender-sensitive legal processing of women members of violent extremist groups is required.

Gender dynamics affect how women and men are radicalized. The strategies used to recruit women and men to violent extremism are distinct. Secondary analysis emphasizes the role of kinship-based recruitment.<sup>5</sup> Women that support or engage in violent extremism, for instance, tend to be recruited by a husband or male relatives.<sup>6</sup> Evidence from large-N studies on the motivations of women terrorists suggest that women are motivated to join extremist groups or commit violent extremist acts for the same reasons as men.<sup>7</sup> A sense or promise of empowerment may be an enticing factor for women from controlling patriarchal societies to support or join terrorist organizations. More research that includes sex disaggregated data collection is needed to understand gender-specific drivers in recruitment to violent extremism. Secondary research on the root causes of violent extremism in other countries in the region advises that empowering women can contribute to building communities that are more resilient to threats posted by intolerance and violent

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Pearson and Emily Winterbotham, "Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation," *The RUSI Journal* 162, 3 (2017): 60-72.

<sup>6</sup> Al Maghreb, "Tunisian Women in the Salafist Takfiri Fighting Organizations," *Al Maghreb*, 5 January 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Karen Jacques and Paul J. Taylor, "Female Terrorism: A Review," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, 3 (2009): 499-515.

extremism.<sup>8</sup> There is also further need to understand the impact that harsh state counter-terrorism policies may have on women and men.<sup>9</sup>

### b) Age and violent extremism

Young people, especially young men, are the group most likely to be recruited into violent extremism in Tunisia. Analysis of secondary data also suggests that youth are more vulnerable to recruitment into violent extremist groups. Adolescents question their own identity, and tend to distrust authority, which makes them more open to radicalization and recruitment into violent extremist groups.<sup>10</sup> They also experience high levels of unemployment in Tunisia and have become less engaged with the political process since the 2011 Jasmine Revolution.<sup>11</sup> The role of masculine identity formation and belonging and their effects on the recruitment of young men is neglected in research and interventions, however.

### c) Socio-economic status and violent extremism

Secondary research demonstrates that in some cases socio-economic or political marginalization is a potential cause for recruitment into violent extremist groups.<sup>12</sup> However, it also indicates that

higher socio-economic status and education level does not necessarily prevent individual support for or engagement with violent extremist groups.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that women support and/or engage in violent extremism because of relative, not absolute, exclusion.

Economic disparity, high unemployment and disenchantment with political and economic reforms have the potential to increase radicalization of both men and women.<sup>14</sup> For instance, the decline in tourism following the 2011 Jasmine Revolution and the June 2016 Sousse attacks have increased the socio-economic deprivation and precarity of those working in this industry, who have since become more vulnerable for recruitment into violent extremist groups.<sup>15</sup>

Financial incentives for women to join violent extremist groups may also play a role; however, again there is little empirical research on this in Tunisia. The relationship between women's poverty and violent extremism requires further research, however. We know too little about how relative deprivation (lack of access to jobs, labor market biases against women, widowhood, and so on) affect recruitment and the radicalization process.

Socio-economic grievances driving violent extremism may be exacerbated in rural areas where deprivation tends to be more acute and access to resources more limited. For example, the highest percentage of women in the study were from Sidi Bouzid. Still, the small sample size for this study is insufficient to support a definitive causal relationship between deprived socio-economic region and support for or engagement with violent extremist groups.

<sup>8</sup> Melissa Johnston Jacqui True and Zineb Benalla, "Gender Equality and Violent Extremism: A Research Agenda for Libya," (Cairo: UN Women 2019).

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment," (UNDP: New York, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Oxfam and UN Women, "Penser le genre dans les réponses à l'extrémisme violent en Tunisie: Enjeux conceptuels, état des lieux, pistes d'action" [Thinking about gender in response to violent extremism in Tunisia: conceptual issues, state of play, possible actions] (Oxfam and UN Women: Tunis, November 2018). <https://maghreb.unwomen.org/fr/ressources-medias/publications/2018/12/penser-le-genre-dans-les-reponses-a-lextremisme-violent-en-tunisie#view>

<sup>11</sup> Macdonald and Waggoner, "Dashed Hopes and Extremism in Tunisia," 129.

<sup>12</sup> Nabila Hamza, "Femmes Jihadistes, actrices à part entière ou simples victimes?" [Female Jihadis: Full Fledged Actors or Simple Victims], Leaders, July 2016. [http://www.leaders.com.tn/uploads/FCK\\_files/Femmes%20jihadistes.pdf](http://www.leaders.com.tn/uploads/FCK_files/Femmes%20jihadistes.pdf); also Jenny Raflick, *Terrorisme et mondialisation: Approches historiques* [Terrorism and Globalisation: Historical Approaches] (Paris: Bibliothèque des sciences humaines, 2016); Macdonald and Waggoner, "Dashed Hopes and Extremism in Tunisia."

<sup>13</sup> Abdellatif Hannachi, "Tunisian women within Armed Salafi-Takfiri Organizations," La Maghreb, 5 January 2017; Grami, "Why Tunisian Women are Involved in Terrorism?"

<sup>14</sup> Youssef and Mighri, "Women's Groups Take on Radicalization in Tunisia."

<sup>15</sup> Lola Aliaga and Kloé Tricot O'Farrell, "Counter-terror in Tunisia: A Road Paved with Good Intentions?" (London: Saferworld, 2017), 3. <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/long-reads/counter-terror-in-tunisia-a-road-paved-with-good-intentions>.

#### d) Educational status, profession and violent extremism

Both male and female students in the sample were more likely to have studied science than social sciences at university. This finding corresponds with the prevalence of student unions with an Islamist affiliation in science faculties.<sup>16</sup>

From the data collected for this study, there was no correlation between level of education and engagement with violent extremism. Further research is needed to understand how socio-economic status and political marginalization influence women with different education levels.

Area of Study	Number	Percentage
Social Science	1	2.9%
Science	7	20.0%
No Response	27	77.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Distribution of women detained in terrorism court cases by academic discipline<sup>17</sup>

#### e) Marriage patterns and violent extremism

Based on the sample data, men and women tend to be unmarried, suggesting a connection between single status and violent extremism. Eighteen of the 29 female respondents (63%) and 518 out of 754 male respondents (69%) men were single.

<sup>16</sup> See Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Radaoui et al., "Le terrorisme en Tunisie à travers les dossier judiciaires."

Marital Status	Men	Women	Total
Single	518	18	536
Married	229	10	239
Divorced	04	1	5
Widowed	3	0	3
No Response	211	6	217
<b>Total</b>	<b>965</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>1000</b>

Distribution of detainees in terrorism court cases by marital status<sup>18</sup>

The distribution on marital status in our sample corresponds with the secondary literature that suggests marriage and forced marriage is a mode of recruitment into violent extremist groups in Tunisia.<sup>19</sup> Reports in Tunisia and elsewhere suggest that violent extremist groups engage women through in-person and virtual suitors, with the promise of a relationship or marriage. Professor Abdellatif Hannachi, a history professor at the University of Manouba and a researcher on jihadi women, has suggested that "dire economic strains have allowed terrorist groups to recruit young women to join jihad in Syria and Libya by promising (but usually not delivering) payments for sexual services."<sup>20</sup> However, there is limited information available on this topic and it is also subject to sensationalism.

The promise of a wife may also be an incentive for men to join violent extremist groups.<sup>21</sup> Jihad

<sup>18</sup> Radaoui et al., "Le terrorisme en Tunisie à travers les dossier judiciaires."

<sup>19</sup> Grami and Arfaoui, *Les femmes et le terrorisme: étude genre*, 260.

<sup>20</sup> Youssef and Mighri, "Women's Groups Take on Radicalization in Tunisia." Based on an interview from Professor Abdellatif Hannachi, Tunis, December 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Grami and Arfaoui, *Les femmes et le terrorisme: étude genre*, 260.

al nikah, as it is called, can take a variety of forms including forced marriage, child marriage, temporary marriage, prostitution, and romantic marriages. In such marriages, the bride's consent is not necessary. As Nabila Hamza argues, the "practice allows for a temporary marriage to satisfy the sexual needs of fighters and to gain paradise."<sup>22</sup> Marriage for terrorism purposes is punishable by imprisonment and forced marriage contravenes Tunisian law.

#### f) Gender dynamics and violent extremism

Gender dynamics affect patterns of recruitment and support for violent extremism. Further research is needed to explore the dynamics and types of roles women adopt in violent extremist groups, although women participate in combat and serve in support roles, logistics, mothering the next generation of fighters, and so on, which are increasingly important to group goals.<sup>23</sup> Some of this research relies on written sources from violent extremist groups, as well as on first-hand accounts of returning women.<sup>24</sup>

Violent extremist groups may also use narratives of women's empowerment in religious revolutions as a recruitment tactic. An 'ideal' representation of women and men's lives based on patriarchal notions of masculinity and femininity may attract women to violent extremist groups. There is tension in the information on women's roles in violent extremist groups. It is, therefore, hard to ascertain how gender dynamics actually govern men and women's lives

inside such groups. Thus, more empirical research (qualitative and quantitative) needs to be done to understand the relationship between violent extremism in Tunisia and women's empowerment both as a mechanism to prevent women joining or supporting violent extremist groups, and as a narrative to entice women to join violent extremist groups.

Other research based on interviews suggests that grievances with the state's limited provision of welfare and lack of responsiveness to basic needs has made women vulnerable to violent extremist groups. This may be a result of higher unemployment levels among women (22.7%) compared to the unemployment rate of men (12.5%).<sup>25</sup>

Violent extremist groups have used online methods to target young men and women. However, there is little research on the gendered dimensions of social media recruitment within Tunisia. Some sources suggest that women are recruited via social media when they feel isolated or live in an environment that does not allow free discussion. Tunisian women have moderated violent extremist websites<sup>26</sup> and become 'influencers' in social media networks recruiting young men and women to the groups. Grami and Arfaoui note that Fatma Al-Zawaghi was a pioneering leader within Ansar Al-Sharia in Tunisia, monitoring social media and issuing orders to the organization's cells after Tunisian authorities imprisoned its male leaders in August 2013 until her arrest in 2014.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Hamza, "Femmes jihadistes, actrices à part entière ou simples victimes?" 9.

<sup>23</sup> Amel Grami, "Why Tunisian Women are Involved in Terrorism?" Tunisie Telegraph, 14 August 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Nelly Lahoud, "Empowerment or Subjugation: An Analysis of Isis's Gender Messaging," (UN Women: New York, 2018).

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<sup>25</sup> Youssef and Mighri, "Women's Groups Take on Radicalization in Tunisia."

<sup>26</sup> Grami, "Why Tunisian Women are Involved in Terrorism?"

<sup>27</sup> Grami and Arfaoui, Les femmes et le terrorisme.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### For the government:

1. The government and other stakeholders should collect **sex-disaggregated data** to better inform research on drivers of violent extremist recruitment, including women's recruitment.
2. **Victims of economic violence** are susceptible to recruitment by terrorist organizations. Government socio-economic policies should be **gender-sensitive** and support women who are at greater risk of economic violence and inequality.
3. Support **reforms to inheritance laws** to make them **more equitable** so that women are able to have more secure economic futures.
4. Government policies in **education, employment and socio-economic development** need to **target and protect vulnerable groups**, especially young men and women. These strategies need to be **regionally specific** to take into account the **diverse socio-economic conditions** across the country. These strategies need to take account of **the different experiences of men and women**.

### For civil society, the UN and other stakeholders, including research-based organizations:

1. More comprehensive empirical research is needed on the **gender-specific** and **socio-economic** dynamics of **recruitment** and **mobilization** to violent extremist groups, and on the **gender-specific impacts of violent extremism** affecting women and men. This includes the role of **masculine identity formation and belonging** and their effects on the **recruitment of young men**.
2. More comprehensive empirical research is needed on **how relative deprivation**, including lack of access to jobs, labor market biases against women, widowhood, **affect recruitment and the radicalization process**. This research can

feed into creating more **targeted and effective government policy**.

3. **Cooperation** between **religious and secular women's associations** will be more effective to preventing violent extremism and supporting women's economic security.

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