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Women and Radicalization: Prologue

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Recent interviews with female members of militant groups such as ISIS, conducted by IMAN Research, have shown that they have not flown to Syria or participated in violent acts in the name of jihad.

This brief is the first of a series on women and radicalization.

IMAN Research found that not all women who are radicalized are involved in violent acts, or have visited Syria. While there is a number of women who partake in terrorist acts, it would seem that there are more supporters than cold-blooded killers.

The women themselves come from diverse backgrounds - some are professionals while a number are uneducated. Some become radicalized through marriage, while a few more through their friendships and exposure to militant and jihadi thinking in university. What is true is that all these women, including the ones IMAN met, want Sharia Law (Hudud)

and Islamic Caliphate for their countries.

Sarina M (all names have been changed to protect the persons) is in her 40s, single, and a Malaysian.

Sarina was a highly educated professional in her own right; she was an accountant who worked for one of the Big Four accounting firms, and was educated at the London School of Economics. She also has a postgraduate diploma in Islamic Law from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

She became a radical when she was at IIUM. The course she took exposed her to what she deemed as the "right, proper kind of Islam," which was totally divorced from the brand of Islam she practiced. She took her classes seriously and took to the hijab,

and began preparing for her new life as a "proper, observant Muslim." She became very active in Muslim humanitarian activities, and through the activities, found that radical Islam was the path for her.

It began innocently enough. Like many men and women before her who re-discovered Islam after leading a Westernized, secular life, she rejected conventional medicine, preferring alternative therapies the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had himself applied. Honey, nigella sativa (habbatus sauda), cupping - these were the way of the Prophet and Sunnah. Usrah classes, mingling with pious Muslims at university became her new social life. Her past life as a Western educated professional fast became a distant memory.

She became more stringent in her practice of faith when she befriended the wife of a local and well-known preacher, who is a member of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and herself a militant. Like many female militants, Kak H professed to be a staunch militant, and allowed herself to be physically abused by her preacher-husband, in line with the female jihadi belief of Islamic womanhood. She not just submits herself to Allah, but also to her husband.

Kak H then introduced Sarina to a local usrah group, which was actually a front for a JI cell based in Kuala Lumpur. Sarina found the usrah members to be a surrogate family who understood her passion and desire for the Islam she wanted.

The indoctrination began at these classes: it started with pleas for financial assistance for Syrian victims of war. Then the classes started promoting jihadi messages under the guise of Islamic teachings that preached about how jihad and helping brothers and sisters in Islam would earn the members brownie points with Allah. Save your brother or sister in Islam in Syria, who are dying and wounded in the name of God, the preachers said.

Sarina being the more moneyed of the two, contributed to the usrah's activities, disguised as humanitarian work. (Many sympathisers such as Sarina did not identify themselves as jihadis; as far as they were concerned, they were donating funds to an Islamic cause.)

She has disappeared into the wilderness of Indonesia. She has found peace and contentment in her newfound home as she has the freedom to pursue her passion: she now supports ISIS. She teaches English to the community, and raises funds for the families of ISIS militants who have gone to Syria and are now imprisoned.

Rajmah is in her 50s and Indonesian of Javanese descent.

She is married with five children, of which two have died in Syria as members of and fighters for ISIS. Her family are members of the Muhammadiyah movement in Indonesia and she was educated at Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kali Jaga. Her family is also part of the Majlis Mujahideen Indonesia (MMI).¹

While she attended religious schools when young, it was during university that she became radical. She also met her husband there, who was a member of Jemaah Islamiyah. Ironically, Rajmah holds a leadership position in MMI while her husband does not. He is however open to the idea of his wife working in the said position. Some of Rajmah's friends and peers are doctors, entrepreneurs and pastry chefs who own their own bakeries. They agree that marriages require a lot of sacrifice, and many of her friends, upon entering marriage, no longer work for MMI or do jihad. Rajmah however issued an ultimatum to her husband: if he wanted to marry her, he would allow her to work and fight for the cause.

Unlike many other female militants and sympathizers, Rajmah disagrees with the idea that women should not be active in the public sphere. MMI has decreed that women cannot work as it would lead to a decline in moral values but Rajmah dissents on this.

"Men have a higher status in the eyes of God, but women play two roles. Women must be active even in the public sphere. They must work for the cause, help the community."

She also disagrees with child marriages as children would not have the maturity to carry out God's work.

However, as Muslims, Rajmah and these women are mainly attracted to the cause as they want to uphold Sharia Law. Anyone who wishes to even discuss this is deemed a kafir. Sharia Law cannot be questioned. Democracy and politicians are two ills that must be done away with. Even demonstrations are haram.

Rajmah shatters the perception of women jihadis and jihadi supporters. She is progressive in her thinking and is vocal about what she thinks is right or wrong for the movement. In fact, she is rigorous in her pursuit of mentoring women when they enter the fold.

Female sympathisers and supporters of militant groups believe and adhere to the ideology of Islamic femininity, which is opposed to the Western ideals of feminism. To them, Islam is the antidote to all ills.

Their notion of Islamic femininity is based on purity of faith embodied in their very selves.² Women are the bearers of purity, stability, peace and status quo, and want to be seen and perceived as The Ideal Muslimah.

Women's role in religious radicalization and recruitment cannot be underestimated. The social network is important. As Sylva Frisk noted, Muslim women like their Pentecostal Christian sisters, claim that the divine doctrine of submission leads to freedom and to transformation.³ The usrahs and meet-ups Malay Muslim women have are safe spaces for them to create the ideal Muslim environment for socializing and educating themselves on Islam.

The importance of education, especially religious education, is impressed deeply in many Muslims' psyches. In fact, religious education helped, rather than hindered Malay women's political awakening. Traditionally, the spaces these women congregate are mosques, classes in private homes, religious lectures held in the workplace's surau and dakwah groups. Now, modern technology has created a boom in Islamic religious teachings: online webinars conducted by organisations such as The Al Maghrib Institute (<http://almaghrib.org/>), Bayyinah TV (<http://www.bayyinah.tv/sp/9942-bayyinah-tv>), social media platforms such as Facebook, and telecommunications' instant messaging platforms such as What's App and Telegram, have reached Muslims in ways they could not have before. Videos on tajweed and prayers are forwarded and photos of Islamic doas and supplications are viraled. The observant and seeking Malay Muslim woman need not go far to find out more about her faith, even

... memurnikan perempuan adalah cara paling mudah dan sekaligus paling murah, lagi pula paling sedikit resistensinya.

¹ MMI was founded in 2000 through a resolution by the Kongres Mujahidin 1 in Yogyakarta. The congress was attended by 1800 members from Indonesia, Malaysia, Moro and Saudi Arabia.

² Kesaksian Para Pengabd: Kajian Tentang Perempuan Dan Fundamentalisme Di Indonesia, Rumahkitab, June 2014, pp v - ix
³ Frisk, Sylva (2009), *Submitting to God*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, Marie Griffith's God's Daughters, page 13

if many of the teachings available are of a parochial, or even intolerant nature.

Women involved in militant activities as supporters, activists and fighters themselves are not as weak and gullible as the media portrays them to be. This is a demographic that cannot be underestimated.

Next Brief: The Recruitment of Women into Militant Groups

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