

Jihadi Feminism: A Detour in Islamist Militancy with the Same Destination

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It has been only two months into the year 2020, and already two cases of female extremism have caught limelight in national news, out of which, one stands out like a sore thumb. Asmani Khatun (Asma) is a recently apprehended female leader of Neo-JMB, who was involved with planning and heading an operation to carry out destructive activities and destroy public property. Asma had an online influence where she would recruit new members and have connections to other Neo-JMB leaders. But why is she of so much importance to us? Asma is one more example of the increasing female radicalisation that is taking place in Bangladesh and serving as a reminder that now women are at a leadership position, a never before seen phenomenon in the country. This is not a progress; this is a threat.

Terrorism has evolved to keep up with the changing time and trends, from spreading their message by internet and social media to using the latest technology and arms to fight for their ideologies. During this, the roles of women in terrorism evolved as well. Participation of women in terrorism isn't a new trend nor a phenomenon developed in the recent decade. Vera Ivanovna Zasulich, the first person to ever be tried in court of law for terrorism in history, was a woman after all. For at least political terrorism, women's participation is imperative. However, the same

could not be said for religious terrorism. But now we are witnessing the increasing participation of women here, particularly in Islamist terrorism.

With the evolution of movements towards gender equality and the progress and development of women's role in every sector, comes a strong and debatable question that we all have to deal with. In the route to fighting patriarchy and paving a smoother path for all genders, are women successfully thwarting systemic patriarchy, or, in order to become equal (in a few cases) are women becoming agents to serve that very same patriarchal system? This question comes up when we think of women serving in the military or participating in war, wars that at the core are carrying patriarchal messaging and intentions, and worse, promoting violence (which should never be condoned). Similarly, women's rising participation in terrorism, particularly Islamist terrorism, where active female participation was once frowned upon, has also brought in similar questions, and has at the same time, become a new challenge to deal with.

IS's intention to establish an Islamic "State" is not going to come to reality if the other gender of their recruited members, that is, women, are kept at home, and not included in their so-called state-building. Following this thought process, began the shifting of female roles in Islamist terrorism.

Formerly given only sedentary roles, such as house helps, posing as family members and to raise children in their ideology, women were taken in to marry foreign fighters and militants, performing "Hijrat" as well. Soon, women began to perform in more significant roles, as they went in field to deliver messages and information, propagate and recruit members and sometimes even be used to carry concealed weapons. Then, women who were relatively more educated were recruited to work in the IT sectors of these terrorist cells, and more women were used to recruit both men and women into the cause of the organisation. Women began to now have active roles and some were even used in suicide attacks, forsaking their former safe-spaces inside their homes, guarded and guaranteed security by their male counter-parts. Women now were being used as foot soldiers, and up until recently, women actively began *choosing* this life.

Women in this shifting of roles find a strange source of empowerment. A new wave of feminism, called the *Jihadi Feminism*, has taken the Islamic world by storm now. Not to be mistaken for Islamic Feminism, Jihadi Feminism gave women connected to Islamist Jihad a sense of obligation to participate in war directly alongside their men to fight the dissolution of Islam. Women who were once unable to provide solvency to themselves and feared social norms to become barriers against their choices, found solace and comfort in a form of sisterhood, began to mobilise into "Jihad" in order to establish equality, partake in their obligated duty as a Muslim and fight for their agenda. The manner where Jihadi feminism empowers women even in the toughest of situations, making them their own decision-makers and financiers and helping them contribute to their own society is rattling. But to what extent is this true form of feminism? Despite empowering them, the women are being used to take part and carry out the violence and intentions of harming civilians that are thought of by men. Women aren't empowered because of just their intentions to be empowered, but because militants of ISIL, HuJI-B, Taliban, etc. want them to begin participating in their extremist activities.

Jihadi feminism thrives on the concept of the obligation of all Muslims to participate in war to protect their ideology and religion. Hence, it promotes the idea of women becoming active Jihadis and not just raising the next generation of jihadis. This is more than equal participation; this is active quest for Islamic feminisation, calling women to challenge the leadership roles of men in Jihad. And it is spreading beyond the communities of (extremist organization such as) ISIS, being adapted in Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Taliban, Boko Haram and are now beginning to affect the ISIS-inspired terrorist organisations like Neo-JMB in Bangladesh for example. What is ironic is that, despite the feminist leadership flare that Jihadi feminism is trying to invoke in these Muslim women who join the ISIS, they have no potential ability to dismantle and disintegrate power relations within ISIS's operations and governance in reality.

Relatively new, *Jihadi Feminism Theory* has been quite useful at shedding light into the inner mind-cogs of women when it comes to militancy, particularly within ISIS, who is eliciting works on the role of women in terrorism. Of course, since JFT is a relatively new theory to base discourses on, there is yet to be a more structured and constructive analysis that adequately accounts for the relation between Jihad feminism and female subjugation in the operations of the ISIS. This however does go far enough to say that jihadi feminism has further "subverted" Muslim women to roles within the ISIS as a way of sustaining IS's operations and existence. Jihad feminism is an ideology, a strong social movement, with a particular kind of awareness. As an ideology, Jihadi Feminism joins the list of all other feminist ideologies that signifies and tries to cement the universal dignity of all Muslim women and aims to see that the global standard of Muslims become respected, acknowledged and reaffirmed in the male-dominated scene of terrorism. This is similar to other feminist ideologies that aim at reforming the dominance of patriarchal influences in all aspects of life. By joining the ISIS, jihad feminist strives to emancipate, liberate and assert their equality to men. As a social movement, jihad feminism intends to bring about a particular end, which is to challenge the ISIS operation and governance where male dominancy is a reality. As a particular awareness, jihad feminism seeks to talk to the Muslim women in a language that is their own. It is only by recognising the basic setup in the Muslim world that one will come to realise the misconception of male dominancy as alluded by Western feminist, which is why jihad feminism suggests that Muslim women go back to Quranic and Hadith interpretations and find in them how the Western models of interpreting women subjugation are based on a misguided understanding of principles that guide the coalescence of religion with equality of women to men in the Muslim communities.

In Bangladesh, female radicalisation was treated as a secondary concern compared to male participation in extremism. Radicalisation and extremism were gendered concerns in Bangladesh, and only men were the bearers of that flag. But now, due to the changing narratives, terrorist organizations are concentrating on participation of women to fight for their cause. And this development is evident from the amount of cases regarding female extremists are on the rise. This is not a sign of progress in any sense, as promoting violence is regressive. Despite challenging gendered norms and trying to find their own niches in an otherwise male domain,

these women are still being used to serve the purposes thought out by men, are fighting the fight started by men and are promoting violence invoked by men.

Women in extremism are a ploy to use women to further the interests of patriarchal societies while giving them the assurance that they are contributing to social change. Hence, their needs to be further studies done on the discourse of terrorism, not by following the traditional methods, but by taking the contemporary measures, and women need to be involved more as a subject of these studies. Women's participation and evolution in terrorism and anticipating future trajectory of female extremism needs to be a concern featured more often in research. Because having women involved in violence has always been historically graver and will bear way more concerning outcomes than what we see today.

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