

FEMALE RADICALISM: METHODS OF PREVENTION

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ABSTRACT

Global migrations of the final years of the 20th century have made large countries multi-cultural and multi-confessional. In the past, one confession dominated in the absolute majority of states; today this is a gradually disappearing phenomenon. In multi-cultural and multi-confessional societies, the number of religious trends and their popularity have acquired a special importance. Today, tolerant and peace-loving religious trends compete with radical trends for followers. Under the guise of the constitutional principle of freedom of conscience, radical and extremist ideas are spreading across states and among both genders.

The article discusses the problem of feminization of extremism in Central Asia and in the countries of the far and near

abroad. It also examines a variety of conditions and factors that lead to a considerable increase in the number of radicalized women; assesses the role of society and its traditional values, of sham religious organizations, as well as all sorts of NGOs in the spread of radical extremist ideas and discusses the experience of prevention of religious extremism and radical ideologies in different countries and de-radicalization of women.

Particular attention is paid to the problem of female extremism in Kazakhstan, the factors conducive to its rise under the conditions of the traditional lifestyle in the republic, and to prevention and rehabilitation efforts and the role of the state, NGOs and other public organizations in the process.

KEYWORDS: *female radicalism, extremism, terrorism, destructive religious trends, rehabilitation efforts, prevention of radicalism.*

Introduction

In the last decade, religious radicalism and extremism became a global problem: we are no longer shocked by information about terrorist acts perpetrated by religious radicals. Terrorism is a result of perverted understanding of spiritual and religious ideas by a huge number of people; it knows no national borders and has already become a threat to the international community.

Feminization of extremism, which is unfolding on the global scale, and the considerable number of radicalized women stir up concerns. Indeed, while in the past the word “extremist” suggested a male extremist, today it might mean a female extremist as well.

Methods of Studies

The research involved field studies, text analysis; study of recent publications as well as monographs, articles and books; interviews of officials of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kazakhstan, members of some non-traditional Islamic trends, heads of the Committee of Public Consent and of regional spiritual administrations; interviews (with the assistance of the local spiritual administration in Atyrau) of radical-minded women, wives of men who were serving prison terms for terrorism and a widow of the terrorist who had blown himself up in the course of a special forces operation in 2012 and was serving a prison term as a terrorist.

Statistics of the Committee of Public Consent of the RK Ministry of Social Development and the materials of relevant sociological polls were used.

The article is founded on the author's three-year long experience as an official of the Committee for Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Civil Society of the Republic of Kazakhstan (today the RK Ministry of Social Development).

Results of Studies

Radical religious trends are turning women into instruments of extremist crimes, the process that had been unfolding without much ado and protests from the public. Women left their homes to fight in Iraq or Syria of their own free will; this has also been happening in most of the post-Soviet republics, where the ranks of believers swelled with newcomers who pushed aside secular values before acquiring a religious culture, which made them especially susceptible to radical ideology.

Women from Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and neighboring states, as well as citizens of West European countries contribute to the steadily growing numbers (according to NGOs and public organizations in these countries) of extremist activists. According to Zhamal Frontbekkyzy, who heads the Mutakalim public movement in Kyrgyzstan, "in the last ten years, the number of women drawn into all sorts of religious extremist organizations has increased 20-fold. In 2015, the Ministry of the Interior of Kyrgyzstan halted the operations of a religious female extremist network in the republic's south. There were religious leaders—mushrifs; recruiters and accomplices, whose task was to seek out those who wanted to fight in Syria and to dispatch them there. The conscripted girls were offered a special training course. When interrogated, many of them confirmed that they were ready to sacrifice their lives to the 'cause of extremism.'" "Extremist structures were supported by 'certain associations, foundations and NGOs.' Some of them were officially engaged in religious education."¹

According to the Ministry of the Interior of the Russian Federation, up to 80% of members of extremist organizations in 2016 were young men and women between 14 and 20 and under 25-30.

According to the International Center for the Studies of Radicalization and Political Violence, about 500 citizens of Uzbekistan joined the fighters in Syria and Iraq; they are followed by Uzbek women despite the fact that they still face frustration and even tragedy.

More than 550 Muslim women from the West joined the terrorist ISIS group (banned in the Republic of Kazakhstan) and moved to Syria and Iraq. It has attracted more women than any other extremist group. The flow of information supplied by official structures of European countries, the United States, Australia and Canada about women detained in airports goes on unabated. On the

¹ I. Larin, "Ekstremizm v Kirgizii vse bolshe priobretaet zhenskoe litso," 8 February, 2018, available at [<https://www.ritmearasia.org/news--2018-02-08--34846>], 4 June, 2018.

strength of their posts in social networks, they are suspected of going to Syria or performing a hijra (*resettlement with an intention to freely profess their religion and perform religious rites*).

According to RBK Daily, EU special services have been instructed to closely follow the women suspected of any contacts with clandestine Islamist structures. The same publication has claimed that European security services have recently registered an unexpectedly big increase in the number of women involved in clandestine activities in Europe.²

The geography of female extremism is fairly wide; so far it is hard to say how many girls are involved; it is equally impossible to predict the future of those who are ready to follow the recruiters. What is behind this outburst and behind the girls' willingness to act in this manner?

There is a view in the West that these women merely want to demonstrate that they can do whatever men can. This cannot be accepted as an explanation, since none of the women even mention gender equality and their rights. As members of radical communities, they lose everything and are burdened with strict duties.³

According to experts, female extremism in Central Asia, Russia and some of the post-Soviet states is nurtured by social and economic problems and the low level of religious education. It should be said, however, that these are not more or less recent phenomena; they have been part of everyday life for a long time. The Communist regime, which existed in the region for over half a century, contributed to the process. It insisted on atheism as one of its informal cornerstones and, therefore, paid little, if any, attention to religious education.

The process of de-radicalization of women is a complex one; it is practically impossible to establish trusting relations with them. According to Askar Sabdin, a Kazakh expert in de-radicalization, he failed to return any of the victims of destructive ideologies (women in the first place) to traditional Islam. Not infrequently, their radicalization is rooted in purely female emotions; this means that de-radicalization requires the involvement of their partners.⁴

Ideologically rooted religious extremism differs from other crimes. This should be taken into account: founders and leaders of extremist trends are well-educated. The same can be said about those who write and edit their materials. The education level of target groups is irrelevant: these people should be susceptible to external influences.

Women are drawn to extremist activities through their personal contacts and on the strength of their dissatisfaction with their social status. Indeed, women are mostly involved in education and other professions that require intensive personal communication and that are poorly paid. This explains why they feel alienated from what they do; their material requirements add to the conflict between the internal and the external. Certain organizations or their members capitalize on this conflict: they accuse the state, national groups and other factors, and point to the way out of the trap. The victims do not realize that they are being pushed into another trap. They are convinced that they are free in their decision to quit their social milieu and the habitual lifestyle and embrace a different religion. Inspired by extremist ideology, female extremists are determined to avenge the injustices and degradation of their human dignity. Recruiters are experts in psychological manipulations, and rely on highly efficient methods: they know that their victims, who have no faith in the future and no personal strategies, are easily tempted by promises of bright future, adventures, salvation from the sinful world and paradise. Regrettably, many women choose extremism because of religious ignorance and psychological weaknesses.

² See: "Spetssluzhby ES obratili vnimanie na zhenshchin-islamistok," Pravoslavnoe informatsionnoe agentstvo "Russkaia linia", available at [<https://rusk.ru/newsdata.php?idar=177845>], 4 June, 2018.

³ See: D. Sabirova, "Tayny zhenskogo terrorizma. Interview with T. Dronzina, author of *Terrorizma zhenskiy lik*," available at [<http://islam.ru/content/analitics/48271>], 4 June, 2018.

⁴ From an interview with Askar Sabdin, Director of the Mysl Center for Applied Studies of Religion.

Today, social networks serve as the main recruiting base: disoriented and romantically minded young women cannot counter thousands of well-paid and well-trained provocateurs.

Many women embrace extremist ideology and even go to conflict zones to protest against the lack of rights in their families: nobody listens to them and they have no influence on their husbands. They were selected to look after their husbands and children and take orders from the male half of the family.⁵

Several fatwas issued to lure Muslim women to ISIS to support the fighting spirit of their brothers played an important role in the process. They promised them husbands, families and the chance to realize their Muslim identity as they understood it. Thirteen women from Tunisia were the first to respond to the call; they were followed by girls from Western and Arab countries. Gradually, the movement became an exodus. It should be said that sexual jihad is based on the fairly ambiguous Islamic concept of “mut’ah,” which is translated as temporary marriage. In fact, it has nothing in common with true Islam; it is practiced by followers of radical religious trends to justify their crimes. In any case, women become involved in this ambiguous phenomenon for different reasons and in different roles. We learn about the repercussions from the world media that describe violence, murders, trade in women and the fact that women were used as awards for the best fighters. In short, women were treated as cheap and easily replenished resource.

We should curtail the spread of extremist views that strongly affect the women left unprotected by society. To prevent female extremism, we should spread legal information among the younger generation of women so as to suppress their romantic ideas about extremism and create a strong immunity against radical ideologies.

Today, the countries that suffered more than others from these phenomena have rolled out wide-scale media, TV and Internet campaigns to prevent extremist recruiting. Clerics, officials, political scientists, journalists and social activists discuss the threat of religious extremism and terrorism in various TV programs. There are TV films and talk shows that tell the stories of women who left their homes for Iraq and Syria.

Prevention of Female Radicalism in Kazakhstan

Like many other countries, Kazakhstan is concerned with radicalization of women, traces of which could be detected despite the fairly stable religious situation. It should be said that the process of radicalization began in 2005 and was much more apparent in the country’s west than elsewhere. The terrorist acts in 2011 and 2012 in Atyrau, in 2011 and 2016 in Aktobe and in 2016 in Almaty can be described as the extreme outcrops of a destructive interpretation of religion. Since 2011, several hundreds of radicalized citizens of Kazakhstan, including women and children, have gone to Syria to join the fighters’ ranks.⁶

The gradually growing number of female victims of destructive ideology and radicalization is explained by several social and psychological factors, such as inadequate knowledge of laws and religion, low educational level and inadequate socialization. Many of those who practice destructive radical trends cannot read the Koran and other traditional religious literature without outside help; they know nothing about their civil rights and duties and refuse to find employment. They are closed to the world,

⁵ See: D. Sabirova, *op. cit.*

⁶ See: A. Bogatik, “‘Karavansarai’: V Kazakhstane obsuzhdaiut radikalizatsiu zhenshchin, available at [http://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2016/11/11/feature-01], 25 April, 2018.

their behavior can be described as asocial, they take orders from other people and demonstrate escapism; they stay away from social life, know next to nothing about the political situation in their countries. On the whole, practically all of them are strongly influenced by their closest circle. In fact, young girls have proven to be the most vulnerable part of the population, which succumbs to active online propaganda efforts of followers of pseudo-religious trends; it turned out that they knew next to nothing about religion, while their social status was highly unstable. The same can be said about their emotions; they were disorientated and psychologically dependent because of the strong pressure in their families.

Some of the women acquired radical religious views because of a keen awareness of social injustice, a lack of a better social future, no chance to realize their constitutional rights through secular institutions (*state structures, NGOs that focus on women's rights and employment assistance*). There were women who radicalized under the pressure of their radicalized husbands. Indeed, a husband who supports radical ideas strongly influences his wife. Under the Shari'a, the wife acquires religious knowledge from her husband, father or brother. As a rule, a married Muslim woman cannot contact male Muslim preachers, theologians or imams; she has no chance of receiving a good religious education. This is confirmed by the fact that the majority of wives of the detained and imprisoned extremists is, likewise, very radicalized and is convinced that their husbands fought for purity of religion.

For example, one of the interviewed women, who had lost husband and brother in the course of a special operation in 2012, while in a state of extreme psychological and emotional agitation, asked her teenager stepson to blast one of the law enforcement buildings and was convicted on a terrorism charge. Another woman, thanks to the efforts of her husband and brother, had fallen into the trap of the so-called sisters patronized by the "pseudo-Salafi brothers." After a while, her husband changed his religious convictions and left his radicalized wife with five children without means of subsistence. The woman adored the "brothers" who did not abandon her and, at the same time, was ready to abandon her radical convictions if her husband returned to the family.⁷

Kazakhstan is building up a system of preventive measures designed to improve the situation. With this aim in view, all faithful women are conventionally divided into several target groups according to the levels of their religiosity and radicalism, their range of interests, communication circle, employment and social status. This means that different approaches, different forms and methods of ideological work are used to work with each of the groups and to identify the higher-risk groups.

Out of three main target groups (*the "free" female jamaats, women in prisons and female jamaats in other countries*) the free female jamaats were the biggest.

Women related to one of the target groups are divided into three subgroups.

- The first of them consists of wives, widows, mothers, sisters and daughters of those who were convicted for religious extremism and terrorism. Much is done to study the conditions and causes that led the convicted to radicalization and to arrive at specific preventive measures.
- The second consists of women who suffered because of illegal "neke" marriages. This is the biggest group; some of its members were deprived of state protection because of the absence of necessary documents. Women with many children suffer even more. Having obtained a divorce from their husbands, these women are left alone to cope with their problems and conclude a neke marriage. The majority of young girls quit their educational establishments; this means that they have no qualifications and no chance to find good jobs.
- The third group consists of students of higher educational establishments, colleges and schools. They are mostly very young and highly religious girls who go to mosques and are sincerely interested in religion. They do not know enough about religion, they are making their first steps along this road and may fall into the nets of destructive religious trends. To

⁷ From an interview with women (Atyrau), victims of destructive ideology.

avoid this disastrous course, they are informed about the state religious policy, the real political situation in the country and provided with adequate religious literature.

The faithful women who serve their prison terms (there are 13 female prisons in the country⁸) can be divided into two subgroups.

- The first consists of women convicted for religious extremism and terrorism. Much is done to rehabilitate them through individual talks, adaptation and explanations of the true nature of Islam.
- The second subgroup includes women convicted for criminal offences; they only require general explanations.

The female jamaats abroad consist of wives, sisters and other close female relatives of Kazakhstani fighters, as well as young girls who study at theological institutes abroad. The former subgroup is under constant pressure of radical ideology and, therefore, can be used for different purposes including recruiting or even suicide bombers. This means that they should be approached under scrutiny of the law-and-order structures. There is no information about how many young girls from Kazakhstan study theology abroad, but the number is not large—hardly more than ten.

The above suggests that the younger part of the republic's population, under 29 years of age, is more or less responsive to the influences of destructive religious teachings. According to information supplied by the departments for religious affairs of the akimats of the regions and the cities of Astana and Almaty, in January 2018 there were 4,352 women members of destructive religious teachings, 2,450 of them belonged to 64 jamaats; there were also 108 leaders and activists among them.

In 2017, there were over 4,000 events that involved female audiences; 2,669 of them were individual and 834, group events. Over 400 women were rehabilitated.⁹

Preventive events and rehabilitation efforts are a difficult task, since these women have no permanent domicile address and no permanent employment, they are closed to the outside world for ideological reasons, they are suspicious and are afraid of their husbands.

Today, there are one republican and 249 regional information and education groups staffed with 3,000 people. They pay particular attention to different categories of the younger generation. In 2017, they organized over 23,000 events attended by 1,800,000 people.¹⁰ Much is being done in educational establishments. Informational and explanatory efforts are designed to prevent radicalization of women and achieve de-radicalization of those who fell victim to extremist propaganda.

State and private structures, industrial enterprises, and educational establishments of all levels are involved in the common effort of prevention of female radicalization.

- First, Kyz Zhibek clubs are functioning in top 10 higher educational establishments of Kazakhstan; they promote moral principles based on national traditions and adjusted to new realities. They inform young people, girls in the first place, about the fundamentals of Islam to shape religious consciousness in line with the traditions and cultural norms of secular societies.
- Second, scientific and practical conferences *The Role of Female Organizations in the Spiritual and Moral Education of the Younger Generation and Achieving Immunity to the Radical Religious Ideology* are held every year.

Since 2015, state structures that work in the sphere of religion have been organizing annual seminars for the heads and active members of female organizations, lecturers at the courses of ad-

⁸ According to information supplied by the Committee for Religions MDRGO RK in the first quarter 2018.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

vancing religious knowledge at the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kazakhstan and spiritual educational establishments and heads of the Kyz Zhibek clubs.

In most cases, social aid and other assistance are implemented in view of specific problems, such as employment, documents, places in kindergartens and schools, grants and benefits, etc.

Four hundred and fifty women received social and material assistance totaling approximately 8 million tenge: their lost documents were restored; they received enough money to supply their children with everything needed for the new school year, to buy foodstuffs, find employment, learn new skills, etc.

Here is a specific example: in one month, between 29 September, 2016 and 29 October, 2016, the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan efficiently responded to the series of terrorist acts in Aktobe in June 2016; it targeted its efforts individually at 341 women.

About 25% of the supporters of "pseudo-Salafism" were ready to change their views; about 16% of the women wanted to return to traditional Islam, yet could not do that because of their husbands' pressure. The rest of the women (about 59%) remained convinced that they were following the right religion and were prepared to return to traditional Islam if their husbands changed their religious ideas.

The Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kazakhstan is no less efficient in its efforts: in the first half of 2018, it organized about 1,500 different events that involved about 40,000 women.¹¹

Local mosques are involved in advancing the religious awareness of the population, including women, who are learning about the Islamic canons and about traditional and spiritual values.¹²

The Akniyet Rehabilitation Center is involved in social projects targeted at mothers, wives and other female relatives of male religious radicals.

Much is done to draw women and children into cultural and educational events, which are highly popular among the targeted audience. It is highly important to remove children from their everyday reality to enrich them with new and positive impressions.

In 2017, the women negatively affected by destructive religious trends could attend over 40 lectures; each of them was attended on average by 14 women who sided with Salafism of the taqfir type (a total of over 450 women were interested). Ten women who returned from Syria and Iraq were involved in rehabilitation programs in Astana. It should be said that their husbands, members of ISIS (an organization banned in Kazakhstan) were liquidated in so-called conflict zones.

The center does not limit its activities to propaganda and education—it helps women find jobs; it offers support to faithful women with material problems because their close relatives are either fighting in Syria or serve prison terms for their extremist and terrorist activities.¹³

The state should put greater efforts into consolidation of the institute of the family and teach women and, through them, the younger generation, to respect the traditional and contemporary spiritual and moral values.¹⁴

Conclusion

Female organizations can do a lot to prevent different forms of extremism. It is not enough to explain that extremism is dangerous and that extremists should be de-radicalized. Prevention begins

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Information supplied by councilor of the Supreme Mufti of Kazakhstan E. Ongarov in an interview.

¹³ From the interview with Director of the Akniyet Rehabilitation Center A. Shaumetov.

¹⁴ See: A. Bogatik, op. cit.

with shaping the spiritual foundations of society, consistent ideas and critical thinking in the younger generation.¹⁵

Female extremism is a specific phenomenon that requires specialized consultative services to help those women who fall victims of extremist ideas. The state should do more to overcome theological illiteracy in women. So far, high-quality religious education is limited to men. The regions with grave social and economic problems should receive more attention. Education and employment, economic potential and social activity are the best preventive measures. The family, society and the state should unite their efforts in opposition to extremism.

¹⁵ See: A. Abdirasilkyzy, How important is the role which female organizations can play in extremism prevention? Portal of the Central Mosque of Pavlodar, available in Russian at [<http://mazhab.kz/ru/statii/raznoe/naskolko-vajnuyu-rol-mogut-sygrat-jenskie-organizatsii-v-voprosah-profilaktiki-ekstremizma-774/>], 4 June, 2018.