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2017

Nair, T., & Chong, A. (2017). Radicalisation of the Female Worker. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 157). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/85335>

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## Radicalisation of the Female Worker

*By Tamara Nair and Alan Chong*

### Synopsis

*Research on efforts to counter terrorist radicalisation has been fixated with the male bomber. However, recent cases show that women are also radicalised and tempted to embrace terrorist causes for a variety of reasons. This has serious ramifications for the efforts of government and society to safeguard the population from terror threats and to preserve peace and security.*

### Commentary

MORE OFTEN than not, the suicide bomber was a male who volunteered to end his life so that his family could obtain permanent welfare benefits from a self-proclaimed liberation organisation. Just as plausible was the male who lost his moral and religious compass amidst a worldly global economy and chanced upon the prospect of providential redemption through an act of 'selfless terrorism' against 'infidels'. Several recent instances in Asia defy this frame of analysis.

Women are now reportedly also tempted to embrace terrorist causes for reasons of psychological displacement and the search for a sense of 'place' in dominant power structures. The case reported in the *New York Times* of Ms. Ayu (not her real name) in Hong Kong and the one of Ms. Syaikhah Izzah Zahrah Al Ansari in Singapore showcase the very real possibility that women are equally salient targets for radicalisation by the likes of ISIS, Al Qaeda and JI. Most recently, Indonesia sent to jail its first would-be female suicide bomber, Ms. Dian Yulia Novi. These women were lured by online propaganda primarily because the latter preyed upon their very fears as a marginalised individual. The significant point is the seeming irrelevance of gender.

### Away from Comfort Zone

The feminisation of migrant labour has come about as a result of a need to fulfil

'women's work' in receiving countries. This is especially true in household work and caring for the aged, disabled and the very young. The measly costing of women's 'unpaid work' and the outsourcing of such 'work' bring about issues of the low incomes earned by migrant domestic workers, and the value of women's work in the homes.

The occupation of the female domestic helper calls for special focus. The woman who applies for a position of a domestic helper outside her own country tends to be less educated than her male counterpart. Additionally, she carries with her the tragic stereotype of the defenceless female liable to be defrauded and taken advantage of by her employer.

Nevertheless, such domestic work is seen as respectable. The job mimic women's work back home such as care giving, cooking and cleaning. But the fact that these women also live in the homes of their employers and are privy to not only what is happening in the home but also the surrounding neighbourhoods is a cause for concern when we think in terms of potential radicalised behaviour. Even if they are not 'active' representatives of radicalised groups, there is the risk of them becoming a node in the global reach of terrorist organisations in exporting 'dangerous' ideas.

The [\*New York Times\*](#) report on Ms. Ayu stated that she was only a nominal Muslim while in Indonesia and became more fervent in her faith while working in Hong Kong. She was exposed to radicalised teachings through social media, often an outlet for her frustrations and loneliness. More recently, the two foreign domestic workers in Singapore who were repatriated to Indonesia were also radicalised through social media.

A 2016 report from the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism based in Malaysia addresses the issue of radicalisation of overseas foreign workers from the Philippines (the majority of whom are women) in the Middle East. The report highlights that the threat and susceptibility of these workers being radicalised and recruited in or near conflict zones are significant.

It mentions the arrest by Saudi authorities of an expatriate Syrian and his Filipino partner, Joy Ibana Balinang, for suspected involvement in terrorist acts in September 2015. Ms. Balinang is said to have run away from her employer's home 15 months earlier.

### **Motivation Beyond Religion**

These women probably have a fundamentally wrong awareness of their motives. They do not reveal the true 'struggles' between class and gender or the real state of affairs. The case of Ms. Syaikhah Izzah Zahrah Al Ansari, working as an infant care assistant at a preschool in Singapore, is instructive. Experts have come together to explain why she, and others like her, have been influenced by reasons like prospects of romance and romantic ideals of being married to a 'soldier of God' or being a 'martyr' to the cause.

In the case of Ms. Dian Yulia Novi, there is the possibility that she was influenced by her husband to consult radicalisation propaganda online while she was working as a domestic helper in Singapore.

We feel this line of analysis is inadequate. These women are in fact subject to various societal concepts and practices, exercising influence over them. They include: that of patriarchy, religion, historical outlooks derived from traditions, and societal preferences in terms of behaviour and cultural norms. Subjugation from different angles, at home and outside, force them to act upon these suppressing factors; in all likelihood, their actions are even unbeknownst to them.

The fact is these women 'resist' their fate from within such dominant power structures using techniques most available to them – in this case, their understanding of a faith as propagated by extremists, seemingly emulating what is essentially a male bastion of power. Yet they still stay within the mould of what is expected of them – daughter, wife, mother. The point is that a better understanding of these enveloping elements will facilitate a more enduring rehabilitation process.

### **Defending Women Against Radicalisation**

The general assumption that women are nurturing, forgiving, and patient beings best suited to ensure the well-being of families and society is misleading, as demonstrated by the increased security threats posed by radicalised females in this region and elsewhere.

While waiting for society at large to take a more enlightened approach, existing practices and policies need adaptation and modification. At the broader level, more attention must be applied to the realities of the lived experiences of women.

The UN Security Council (UNSC) explicitly recognises “that development, security, and human rights are mutually reinforcing and are vital to an effective and comprehensive approach to countering terrorism”. UNSC Resolution [2178 \(2014\)](#), which focuses on foreign terrorist fighters, encourages Member States to engage relevant local communities and non-governmental actors in developing strategies to counter the violent extremist narrative. This includes empowering women by fostering social cohesion and inclusiveness.

For the longer term, the imperative is to examine gender issues away from the traditional paradigm. To curb female radicalisation in the workforce, addressing gender-specific socio-economic plight will be an important step. For starters, understand that women in the workforce have unique and different ways of viewing the world and interpreting what is needed to make their lives and the lives of their families better.

Existing knowledge on radicalisation may find the link between extremist behaviour and inequalities rather tenuous. We agree, as long as those linkages are viewed through a particular lens. But once the blinkers are removed, links become apparent. This allows us a wider field of vision. Radicalisation through religion need not be the more attractive path out of socio-economic disenchantment.

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