

# CYBER CHARM: LURING WOMEN TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM



Photo by Milena Mihaylova

In Washington State, a young Sunday school teacher living in a rural area was searching on the Internet to learn about the execution of James Foley, unable to fathom how anyone could use religion to justify such cruelty. She started engaging in an online conversation, posting questions and exchanging comments. In fact, a recruiter was slowly befriending her and grooming her for ISIS and was maintaining contact with her much more than anyone else in her life. She made plans to travel, but her family learned about her actions and intervened. She later recognized that the recruiter manipulated her loneliness and sense of conviction.

Women are critical targets for recruitment by violent extremist groups, such as the Islamic State. In the United States, women accounted for 10 out of 71 arrests relating to the Islamic State from March 2014 to March 2016. In contrast, there were 6 arrests of women out of 114 related to terrorism from 2008 to 2013.

No single factor leads to women's radicalization. Instead, there is a complex interplay of factors that may include personal factors such as bullying or a feeling of deep isolation, collective factors such as group pressure, group factors such as real or perceived discrimination, ideological factors that constitute a person's moral compass, and sociopolitical factors such as foreign policy. The reasons for joining are individual, making it imperative to develop a variety of prevention and intervention approaches

In the United States, radicalization and recruitment to violent extremist groups increasingly involve social media and other forms of technology, and recruiters use differentiated approaches to appeal to men and women. Social media amplifies the recruitment process and has become an important portal to reach a broad pool of potential recruits.

The Islamic State has the largest online effort of any terrorist group and has been highly adept at leveraging both traditional and social media, adapting culturally relevant marketing techniques, and creating sophisticated messaging for their target audiences. Social media permits real-time access to the conflict; instantaneous and broad dissemination of messages and information; and easy communication through open or encrypted messages to one another, openly or anonymously.

**In Mississippi, a 19-year-old female who was an honor student, cheerleader, and a member of her homecoming court was attending college when she joined ISIS. She and her fiancé made arrangements to travel to Syria but were stopped before boarding the international flight. She is the daughter of a school administrator and a police officer. She pled guilty and is now incarcerated.**

The recruitment clips use compelling themes and tend to use an “us” versus “them” and a “good” versus “evil” narrative. For example, videos may focus on Syrians and feature doctors assisting children, or highlight incidents of discrimination against Muslims and Islamophobia—showcasing political rhetoric and news stories, or they may portray the Khilafah (Caliphate) as state building to create a transnational utopia that realizes an inspired ideal, while also conveying that followers find a more meaningful self-identity and become an empowered part of something bigger than themselves.

**Three girls from Colorado aged 15 and 16 years attempted to travel to Syria and were apprehended in Germany. Because they were minors, Colorado’s attorney general opted not to prosecute them and instead worked with local grassroots and civil society networks to support their rehabilitation.**

The Islamic State has created very specific marketing techniques for young women that portray opportunities for empowerment, sisterhood, and marriage within a community that is committed to a greater cause. The messages of the Islamic State are designed to resonate especially with teenagers and young people in their early twenties who are searching to define themselves, develop a meaningful sense of identity, and contribute to an important cause. Women recruits do not fit one “type.”

**Typically, people who are attracted to a topic—whether it is political, religious, or ideological—begin to engage in cocooning behavior. This is when information online becomes increasingly tailored to the person’s search history and produces narrower and self-reinforcing results. The person may not even realize this is happening. One way to counter this effect is to bolster external interventions in local communities by working with clergy, women, coaches, and teachers who connect with young people.**

**—Sean Aday**

Director, Institute for Public Diplomacy & Global Communications, George Washington University

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Because of the breadth of the recruitment efforts and the variety of young women who are recruited, initiatives to disrupt recruitment and radicalization need to take a variety of forms.**

**Enable community-based interventions** to raise awareness, conduct resilience exercises, and provide briefings with families and local leaders, law enforcement, social workers, health professionals, educators, grassroots activists, and others who spend time with youth and can potentially catch warning signs. One good example is the *WORDE/BRAVE* program in Montgomery County, Maryland.

**Promote internet safety and teach parents** about new tools and encryption. Coach parents on watching for relevant behavior changes and available support resources. The website *netsmartz* has valuable information on internet safety.

**Mobilize community support** to women before or after they attempt to leave. Provide opportunities to feel integral and engaged in local society and promote alternatives to leaving, including peer-to-peer activities, services to protect them from harm, and options for engagement and support.

**Enhance initiatives** to involve women in countering violent extremism, integrating and amplifying their participation and leadership.

**Elevate defector stories**, championing those voices and bringing them to media outlets. *Use Your Brain* is an organization started by a woman to highlight defector stories. These are powerful messages about what life is really like within ISIS and other violent extremist groups. The most credible voice is the voice of someone who has actually been there.

**Ensure the CVE matrix and evaluations are gender sensitive** and can be disaggregated by gender to provide greater clarity on CVE activities and their impact. Improve measures for evaluating gains in areas like resilience, capacity building, social cohesion, and other factors that improve prevention but are hard to quantify.

**Leverage youth voices and engage millennials.** For example, *Peer to Peer Challenging Extremism* is an interagency, public-private partnership working with university students in the United States and around the world. The program started with 23 schools in 2015 and more than doubled in 2016. Students receive course credit for one semester and a small budget to come up with an online digital and social media campaign at their universities. Because students create the works, these campaigns are more effective in reaching and moving young generations in authentic and consequential ways.



A woman who escaped Islamic State militants and arrived at a refugee camp in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq. (Photo by Mauricio Lima for *The New York Times*)

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