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ARGUMENT

What ISIS Women Want

Western women who join the Islamic State aren't victims who've been groomed or seduced by men. They're committed jihadis in their own right.

BY **SIMON COTTEE**

MAY 17, 2016



What do Western women who join Islamic State want? One prominent theory is what these women “really” want is to get laid. Another is that they don’t know what they “really” want, because what they want has been decided for them by male jihadi “groomers.” Both theories are meant to resolve a seeming paradox: How can any woman who enjoys democratic rights and equality before the law join or support a group which actively promotes her own oppression? But both are misconceived. Indeed, they say

more about the gendered assumptions of those who proffer them than about the women they are trying to explain.

The idea that Western Islamic State “fangirls” — as they are often derogatively called — “just wanna have fun” (to paraphrase Cindy Lauper) is the thesis of, among others, Shazia Mirza, a British comedian whose latest show is called “The Kardashians Made Me Do It.” The show’s title references a comment made by one of the sisters of the **three East London schoolgirls** who absconded to Syria in February 2015. “She used to watch *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* and stuff like that, so there was nothing that indicated that she was radicalized in any way — not at home,” Sahima Begum **said** about her missing sister, Shamima. This gives Mirza’s show its central theme, which is that the Western girls who join the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, share the same banal and all-too-human concerns as their non-jihadi Western peers —including, and especially, when it comes to love. Mirza’s argument is that the Islamic State, for teens like Begum, is just another teenage crush. Indeed, the Islamic State, she suggests, is like a **boy band** — only with guns.

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“I’m not being frivolous,” Mirza said in a recent **TV interview**, “but, these ISIS men, as barbaric as they are, you have to admit, they are hot. They’re macho; they’re hairy; they’ve got guns. And these girls think, ‘These are a bit of all right.’ What they’ve done is sold their mother’s jewelry and bought a one-way ticket to Syria for some halal meat.” Or as Mirza **phrased** it in her 2015 Edinburgh show, referring to the three East London runaways: “They think they’ve gone on a Club 18-30 holiday to Ibiza.... They’re not religious; they’re horny.”

This is funny — and Mirza, after all, is a comedian. But it isn’t serious as a commentary on the motives of the Western women who have joined, or aspire to join, the Islamic State. Yet many news organizations have taken up the idea as though it were. Earlier this year, for example, CNN ran a **news story** titled “ISIS using ‘jihotties’ to recruit brides for fighters.” This was only slightly more cretinous than a BBC Newsnight **report** from March 2015 proclaiming, “Attractive jihadists can lure UK girls to extremism.”

Another way of not taking Islamic State “fangirls” seriously is to suggest that they have been “groomed” over the Internet by shadowy, charismatic men into believing that the Islamic State is the solution to all their problems. In March 2015, Hayley Richardson **wrote** in *Newsweek* that militant fighters “are using similar online grooming tactics to paedophiles to lure western girls to their cause.” Sara Khan, the founder and co-director of the anti-extremism NGO Inspire, echoed this. “Just like child abusers groom their victims online and persuade them to leave their homes and meet them,” she **claimed** in the *Independent*, “male jihadists contact women through social media and online chatrooms, and build trust with them over time.”

This is a gendered reading of radicalization: Young men are not “groomed” by charismatic women who prey on their emotional weaknesses and naivety. Only women are groomed. Only women lack the necessary agency and political engagement to *want* to support or join the Islamic State. Mirza’s reading of women’s radicalization is similarly patronizing, but it at least puts women on an equal footing with male Islamic

State jihadis, who, presumably, from within her one-dimensional worldview, also want to get laid.

The problem with the grooming narrative is that it seriously misrepresents women's radicalization as an essentially passive process and obscures, as **numerous studies show**, the striking degree to which young women themselves are actively involved in recruiting like-minded "sisters" to the cause. It also presents an unreal picture in which women and young girls are somehow "targeted" and then seduced by online recruiters, drastically overestimating the recruiter's powers of selection and persuasion. Everything we know about **radicalization** suggests **otherwise**: that potential recruits actively seek out the message and the messenger (and that the decisive facilitator in radicalization is typically not an anonymous predatory online recruiter, but a trusted friend or family member).

* * *

Over the past year, I have spent an unhealthy amount of time tracking the social media activities of Western English-speaking female Islamic State supporters as part of a wider research project on the subculture of Western jihadism. (Most of their accounts have since been shut down.) And what these women — or at least the more brazen and vocal among them — want they have made abundantly clear. Far from being slaves to their sexual desires or victims of the predatory machinations of men, many Western women join or aspire to join the Islamic State because they *want* to — because the Islamic State, unlike the secular liberal democracies in which they live, makes sense to them and reflects their fundamental moral and political convictions. What they want is to live in a properly authentic Islamic state in which Islamic law — sharia — is fully implemented. Specifically, they want to live under the "caliphate," which, they believe, it is their divine duty to support. What they do *not* want is to live in the West, for a multitude of reasons. They do not want freedom, as understood by classical liberal scholars as **negative**

freedom — the freedom to do what you want, so long as you don't harm others. And they do not want feminism. They want *submission*: to God's will and his divine law.

Consider, for example, **Umm Muthanna**, a 22-year-old British woman and former university student who left for Syria earlier last year. In a flurry of tweets, posted in November 2014, just months before she left Britain, Umm Muthanna **recorded** an incident in one of her university lectures. It provides fascinating insight into the anti-feminist mindset of the Western women who leave to join the Islamic State:

Today's lecture was on Feminism.... Then on came the seminar.... Subhan'Allah the tutor started discussing gender differences and roles in society. Fine, I will listen and make notes but does not mean I accept your constricted ideologies. Short time after, the tutor asks a question... "Raise your hand if you are a feminist". I wanted to burst out with laughter, which my niqab helped contain. Result?... Majority of the women, 18/20 put their hands up. I sat there whilst everybody glanced at me! Haha, I felt proud, but pity for their souls.... Then, here it where it gets interesting. The tutor asked, so those who are not feminists, explain why. Everybody turned to me basically.... And I said clearly, Islam has given all my rights to me as a woman and I feel liberated, I feel content and equal in society and all. I explained to them, how both men and women have rights in Islam, given us to in the Qu'raan, (at this point everybody was screwing). I explained to them not everything which a man can do, a woman can also compete with and try do. It's to do with biology. I explained how this western society has made you think in a certain way, pressurised you to feel weak and always thirsty to make money. Pressurised you to compete with men, when in reality if you knew your place as a woman, if there was Shari'ah implementation, you would not be complaining like you are now. I said all this and basically everybody tried refuting me. These feminists are deluded!

The big taboos for many of these women, as for all religious fundamentalists, are related to sex and gender equality. Peer inside their online lives, and it becomes clear that this is a major animating concern. They cannot abide free mixing of the sexes, which they condemn as a “disease.” They cannot even abide the idea of revealing their eyes, let alone face, in their Twitter profile photos, since this would imperil their sexual modesty — and hence impugn their devotion to God. And they explicitly warn “brothers” not to “DM [direct message]” them. The Islamic State appeals to these women, not, as Mirza insists, because it has a bountiful supply of “halal meat,” but because it perfectly coheres with their militantly conservative notions of sex and gender. Hence, they support the Islamic State not despite, but *because of*, its aggressively patriarchal worldview.

Scott Atran, an anthropologist at Oxford University and France’s National Center for Scientific Research, in his current [research](#), describes these women as “post-feminist and post-adolescent.” He writes, “They are tired of a seemingly endless, genderless, culturally indistinct coming of age. The Islamic State and al Qaeda provide clear red lines: Men are men, and women are women.” Which is to say that men are warriors and women are mothers, whose primary duty, as Umm Muthanna put it in one tweet, is “to raise the next generation of lions in Islamic State.” “My GOAL,” she declared, “is to have lots of sons & send them off all feesabillilah [“in the cause of Allah”] ... under the Islamic State.” The hashtag attached to this tweet was #RealWomanGoals. This does not mean, as Atran and other [researchers](#) have made clear, that female Islamic State members or supporters are disapproving of violence. On the contrary, many seek to justify and even to encourage it. Umm Osama, for example, who is an online friend of Umm Muthanna, recently felt brave enough to issue an incitement for suicide attacks, reminding brothers of their heavenly rewards on achieving martyrdom. “To brothers,” she tweeted, “when you get so excited hoping for 7ooris” — that is, wide-eyed damsels, or female companions — “remember this n say ‘Mahraha adDugma’ (u can do it).”

These women's greatest anxieties are related to *dunya*, or the material world, which they condemn as corrupt and polluting. This is why the niqab is so symbolically important: It acts as a protective shield against worldly poison and vice. As Andrew Sullivan perceptively **observed**, describing the logic of fundamentalism, "Sin begets sin. The sin of others can corrupt you as well." Hence the appeal of the caliphate: a state in which sin is violently punished and constantly purged from the public body.

Yet, for all their efforts to escape the polluting stain of the material world, these women are irrevocably marked by it. They enjoy its technologies and blandishments. And, for all their efforts to Islamize their inner and outer selves, there is, as Mirza so humorously shows, an inner Kardashian in these women that coexists uneasily with their righteous selves. They record the minutiae of their daily lives, posting selfies of their latest niqab styles or photos of food they have prepared. They share their admiration for the latest "banging" *nasheed*, an a cappella hymn. They warn sisters to beware of "spies" and give shoutouts to their imprisoned sisters. One female Islamic State supporter, who uses the Twitter handle "OumDujana," even lets us inside her bedroom. It is a fascinating spectacle. In a 9-second recording she uploaded, we are shown what appear to be numerous collections of **hadiths**, an intricately pimped-out shrine to the Islamic State, and several boxes of Nike trainers. This woman, unlike the **Islam for Dummies** wannabe jihadis, plainly knows her religion. But she also likes her Nike trainers, though not as much as her iPhone 6.

Who is Oum Dujana? She is based in London and may have been born in Belgium or France. She is young — 22, she says — and of North African heritage. Like many female Islamic State supporters, she is precocious, and her tweets show a lively intelligence and active political engagement. (Her account has since been shut down.) She appears to be intensely religious. In one tweet, she makes a reference to being under “heavy obbo,” or observation, and in another refers to a police raid on her house. She also alludes to a husband in a warzone, perhaps Syria, Libya, or Iraq. Either she has tried to leave for Islamic State-controlled territory or she is married to an Islamic State fighter — or both. Regardless, she seems deeply committed to the caliphate ideal and to the Islamic State. It is impossible to know how she acquired that commitment. But infantilizing this woman as a vulnerable child or sexualizing her as a repressed Muslim is unlikely to cast much light on this.

No one is more sensitive to this disparagement than the women themselves. “Idiots that are tweeting this trend,” tweeted Umm Waqqas, a Seattle-based Islamic State online recruiter who was **exposed** by Britain’s Channel 4 News last year, “should realize that NO SISTER leaves the comfort of their homes just to marry some man.” She was referring to the hashtag **#jihadibrides**. “They cant fathom the reality,” she immediately added, “that muslims from all ages are leaving to live in a REAL muslim country & to live under the shades of Sharia.” Or as Oum Dujana more succinctly put it last month, “CNN said we [gonna] marry #Jihotties LOOOL.”

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