



Op-ed

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‘Jihadi bride’ doesn’t fit: we need a new language for female militants

Tabloid sensationalism about Shamima Begum flattens important debates about how much agency these women have.

There are around 150 British women in the world who can be called “jihadi brides” – those who left places such as Luton, Birmingham and Burton upon Trent to migrate to the Islamic State and eventually marry its fighters – and Shamima Begum is one of the youngest. She assumed this status as a minor, and the use of the term “jihadi bride” by journalists and commentators to describe her is appalling, a heaping of further trauma on a groomed child.

Tabloid sensationalism flattens a complicated and necessary debate about agency: whether these women had any; and how much and the extent to which they should be held accountable for the spectacular violence Isis has inflicted, even if they were not directly involved and some of them were crushed by it, too. In trying to get to the bottom of these questions for a forthcoming book, I interviewed more than 20 Isis women.

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At the heart of this problem is female militancy itself: the historical and near-universal aversion across so many societies to viewing young women as capable of dreadful violence, and the incentives for powerful governments and militaries to downplay or amplify the nature of female militancy and its implications. One premise underlying the term “jihadi bride” is

that the debutante in question holds no valid political grievances, is indoctrinated into accepting grotesque violence as legitimate, and as “just” a wife plays a dangerous but marginal role in the working of the armed group to which she is wed rather than operationally affiliated. “In-house whores for Isis,” as one columnist memorably called them in 2015. The term also tilts toward characterising such women as civilian spouses of jihadist militants, akin to the German wives who held dinner parties for Nazi SS officers, rather than aspirant members who joined first and wed second, or at least concurrently.

There is a gentle infantilisation to almost any description of militancy that includes the word “bride”, so resonant and feminine. Its inclusion is almost antique, from a time when women had hysterics and doctors acting on behalf of the patriarchy had to pacify them with dubious sex therapies or lobotomies. But perhaps in the past this patronising view also served a social function: if militants’ wives were just wives, society could forgive them more easily and, once the fighting was over, they could serve as bridges back to some normalcy. Women could then try to explain what had overtaken their sons and husbands (as Osama bin Laden’s mother has done). As I wrote earlier this year, in Nigeria viewing women who voluntarily joined the Boko Haram insurgency as wives who didn’t commit violence has helped communities grudgingly tolerate their reintegration. Returnee men are often simply slaughtered.

But this inherited thinking has outlived its use, especially in light of the way militant groups themselves play on gender to recruit and swell their ranks. Ignoring women's agency in this process obscures our understanding of all the ways, meaningful, oblique and direct, that women lent their power and numbers to Isis. Women in the caliphate served as doctors and midwives, language instructors, recruiters and intelligence agents, and morality policewomen who tormented locals.

With the flow of Isis men and women out of the group's last patch of territory and the prospect of them returning to their countries of origin, there are loud voices now calling for the suspension of "jihadi bride". But sometimes these reflect social and political forces with their own agendas, such as Sajid Javid's early bid for the Tory leadership, which was signalled through the stripping of Begum's status as a British citizen. In the rush to bestow militant women agency, there is a tendency to blaze past any legal and investigative process and hold girls such as Begum just as accountable as those who beheaded civilians. The haste to make her indoctrinated, feeble responses to journalists' questions appear lucid and defining of her fate is reminiscent of the excesses of the post-9/11 period, when jihadists disappeared into the facility at Guantánamo Bay in a netherworld of lawless, indefinite detainment. Among those who directly suffered under Isis there is an understandable impatience with the attention such women receive, but among some voices from Syria and Iraq, the language about Begum is sometimes dehumanising, making her the focus for both justified rage at what transpired and a target for sectarian or ethnic hate.

Our need for new, measured and more forensic language to characterise female militancy and the agency that underpins it is now clear. Yet we must remain sensitive to the coercion and violence many female Isis members experienced themselves.

It is worth remembering that, after a certain point, it became virtually impossible to leave the caliphate. During the years I spent following the stories of female Isis members, I was in

touch with women, or families of women, who were repulsed by what they saw unfolding and tried to escape. Kadiza Sultana, one of the three original Bethnal Green girls, saw she had made a terrible mistake and worked with her family in London to plan her evacuation. She died in an airstrike on the building where she lived, before the collapse of the territorial caliphate gave her a chance to flee.

It is no disrespect to the victims of Isis to hear women such as Begum attempt to explain their motivations. Perhaps not immediately after having a baby, in a fetid IDP camp, but later, in a courtroom – or, better, in a transitional justice hearing, where she could be confronted with the stories of Yazidi women such as Nobel peace prize winner Nadia Murad, the victims of Isis who were faceless at the time, about whose suffering Begum was, and remains, chillingly incurious.

There are legal bases on which to assess criminal accountability, which require investigations and collection of evidence. But we are also struggling to understand, as a society encumbered by loaded terms such as "jihadi bride", how much blame to accord such women. This requires learning precisely what they did – and what might have been done to them.

The role of women in Isis is one of the most significant questions of the post-Arab spring period, the aftermath of a historic sweeping revolt that women often led and animated. The Syrian Isis woman who met Begum at the Syrian border that dark night in February 2015 and escorted her into Raqqa told me later how surprised she was by the Bethnal Green girls' submissiveness. The driver snapped at them to cover their hair properly, and they smilingly complied.

This woman, a bookish university student, a Hemingway reader who had gone from demonstrating against Bashar al-Assad to working for Isis at the behest of her family, couldn't understand what had brought these London girls to the hell that had become her country. They seemed bewitched. She herself was dissimulating each day, biding her time until she could just get out.