

Why the U.S. Should Gender Its Counterterrorism Strategy

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A woman and child seek care from a USAID-funded mobile women's-health work team in Tewala Village, Iraq. (USAID, Debbi Morello)

THE U.S. MILITARY should address gender issues when designing counterterrorism strategies aimed at winning hearts and minds. As governments and development organizations around the world have already discovered, the “gendering” of policies, programs, and activities can improve the effectiveness of long-term strategies. Unfortunately, terrorist organizations are also discovering the benefits of selectively forgetting gender prejudices and abandoning traditional assumptions. During the first quarter of 2008, there were seven women suicide bombers in Iraq compared to only six in all of 2007.¹ And in January 2008, British authorities warned of an increasing threat from radicalized Muslim women.²

There is a direct link between the perception of economic inequity and violence. Economic disparity leads to feelings of dissatisfaction, inferiority, and alienation. As unemployment rates in many areas of the world fail to improve, discontent among those who feel deprived or economically exploited creates an environment ripe for ideological exploitation. Sociological research suggests that when economic disparity aligns with existing social cleavages (alienation based on religion, politics, race, ethnicity, caste, or region), the ensuing resentment kindles rancor, extremism, and militancy. In such circumstances, people become vulnerable to terrorist recruitment. What is typically overlooked in this societal dynamic is the relationship among gender, socioeconomic inequity, resentment, and alienation.

Attractions of Extremism

Dr. Meir Litvak of Tel Aviv University claims that Islamic terrorists are “exploiting the personal frustrations and grievances of ... [disadvantaged] women for their own political goals, while they continue to limit the role of women in other aspects of life.”³ These terrorists capitalize on the feeling of inferiority and the limited choices that undeveloped societies often foist upon women.

A society that offers most women little opportunity to employ their intellectual talents arouses in them great frustration and an urgent need to

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prove their usefulness to society.” Such women, especially in impoverished communities, often feel that they can only achieve equality in death. For them, the primary attraction to terrorist organizations is the opportunity for heroic self-sacrifice and martyrdom.⁵

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A woman who succumbs to this attraction invests in fantasies of moral worth, deriving imaginary justification from her extremist coterie and reciprocating with her support. As fanatics (of both sexes) always have, she clings to dogma and a menacing enmity to lift her from dire mediocrity to an elevated identity. In extremism, her exclusionary hatred becomes the vessel of her self-worth. The oppressive weight of economic disadvantage, alienation, and cultural inferiority vanishes in an aura of imagined noble purpose.

The more deeply pronounced a woman's sense of alienation and helplessness, the more it feeds her need for noble purpose with a tragic internal consistency. The more inferior she feels, the more she requires validation from her male extremist manipulators. In submission to self-sacrifice, she finds self-respect. She may turn to devotedly indoctrinating the next generation with her religiously sanctified rancor, encouraging in her children perhaps a fate of glorious self-immolation, or she may aggrandize herself further by fulfilling her sacrificial fantasy in a murderous spasm of spiritually fulfilling violence.

Tellingly, one of the most controversial groups in Britain, Hizb u-Tahrir, has asserted that it doesn't need to practice terroristic tactics if it can radicalize women: "Hizb u-Tahrir's goal is to promote a global Islam, cleansed of all ethnic or cultural traditions. And women are an essential tool."⁶ Women adherents will ensure that their extremist ideology continues into future generations. As bewildered functionaries of an exploitative misogynistic ideology, women indeed are merely tragic tools.

Improving the economic lot of women in societies vulnerable to terrorist influence could help ameliorate their sense of low self-worth and their resentment, and thereby possibly dull their attraction to extremism and terrorism. During stability operations, the military should take measures to encourage women to act in their own economic self-interest, helping them to avoid succumbing to the seductive psychological allures of extremism and terrorism.

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Lessons from Women and Development

Poverty afflicts women and children disproportionately. The majority of the world's poor are women and their children. According to the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID's) Office of Women in Development-

- 70 percent of the people living in poverty around the world are women and children.
- Two-thirds of the 876 million illiterate adults worldwide are women.
- Two-thirds of the 125 million school-aged children who do not attend school worldwide are girls, and girls who do go to school are less likely to complete school than boys are.
- More than three-quarters of the world's 27 million refugees are women and children.
- Every day, 1,600 women (mostly poor) die needlessly during pregnancy and childbirth.⁷

Societal effects of economic inequity. Women are less likely to receive health care and education in poor countries. Lacking as well any rights to property, business ownership, or credit, they tend to be the most marginalized group within such societies. Women earn less money than their male counterparts do, and if they are single parents, they tend to suffer the vicious cycle of poverty more.⁸

Although gender disparity appears to harm women the most, studies have shown that "the full costs of gender inequality ultimately harm everyone."⁹ Gender inequality directly and indirectly limits overall economic growth. When societies marginalize women, the community as a whole loses essentially 50 percent of its possible productivity. In backward areas of the world, gender and poverty create mutually reinforcing barriers to socioeconomic development. Educational attainment and the future financial status of children are much more likely to reflect those of the mother than the father. According to the World Bank, "Mothers' illiteracy and lack of schooling directly disadvantage their young children. Low schooling translates into poor quality of care for children and then higher infant and child mortality and malnutrition."¹⁰



At Samagan School, Afghanistan, girls of all ages returned eagerly to school in 2006. USAID-supported educational programs renovated classrooms and provided new textbooks and supplies.

Investing in women. When women are educated, there is a high probability that their children will be educated. In addition, educated women tend to meet their families' nutrition and health needs. As Stephen C. Smith and Michael Todaro have found, "Increasing women's education not only increases their productivity on the farm and in the factory but also results in greater labor force participation, later marriage, lower fertility, and greatly improved child health and nutrition."¹¹ In fact, "studies from around the developing world consistently show that expanding basic education for girls earns among the very highest rates of return of any investment—much larger, for example, than most public infrastructure projects."¹² As if that weren't enough, World Bank and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) studies indicate that projects targeting women realize higher returns on investment than any other developmental program.

Integrating women into a nation's growth process helps ensure that investments in human capital are more likely to pass to future generations. Human capital—the knowledge and skill resident in the population of an economy—is perhaps the most important prerequisite for sustainable growth, education, and enhanced economic status. Women are critical to a country's ability to achieve its long-term development objectives.¹³ "Research findings suggest that countries that take steps to increase women's access to education, health care, employment, and credit, thereby narrowing the differences between men and women in terms of access to economic opportunities, increase their pace of economic development and reduce poverty."¹⁴ In sum, the way a society treats its women is directly related to its political viability and its moral and economic potential.

Mainstreaming gender. According to development experts, women are the most important agents in a nation's development process. Their natural role as the first-in-line caretakers and teachers of children make them so. Accordingly, in many parts of the world today, enlightened countries leverage women's roles to spur development. A 2005 World Bank study of Uganda suggests that the country could gain as much as two percent in annual GDP growth by eliminating gender inequality.¹⁵ A 2001 World Bank study showed a correlation between the increased influence of women in public life and a lower level of corruption within the government. This correlation suggests that women pursuing economic parity have a moral influence that affects rule of law and good governance.¹⁶

Women have always mattered in human development, even when largely relegated to semi-slave status as domestic laborers. They were crucial to the survival of America's colonies because they shaped communal life and economic development. In the West today, the level of female involvement in commerce, politics, higher education, and the professions is striking given the relatively small numbers of women active in those areas. (Even in progressive Western societies, gender norms dictate that women and girls take primary responsibility for household maintenance and care activities—the legacy, in developed nations, of their slave-like status).

In the past, when leaders in developed and developing countries pondered ways to boost growth, reduce inequality, and improve living standards,

the last thing on their minds was empowering women. ' Now, they are beginning to understand how gender differences in behaviors and roles can have significant macroeconomic consequences. Public policies have different effects on men and women, and these differences may lead to unintended outcomes. Thus, "economists are now taking a much stronger interest in how gender affects aggregate income as well as key components of overall economic demand, focusing on household decision making."¹⁸ Since the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, systematic examination of the impact budget programs and policies have on women (the "mainstreaming" of gender into government policies) has gained prominence:

Mainstreaming [does not mean] to analyze only programs that are specifically targeted to females or to produce a separate "women's" budget. Rather, it is intended to examine the gender effects of all government programs and policies. For instance, cutting back on clean water spending may disproportionately harm women and girls because they typically bear the time and physical burden of providing clean water to households when it is not readily available. Just as reducing a tax credit for child-care expenses may disproportionately burden women, who are responsible for the greater share of child-rearing activities [sic].¹⁹

Empowering women through microfinance. The microfinance industry is leading the move to leverage the economic power of women in the poorest parts of the world. Bestowal of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize on Dr. Mohammad Yunus, founder of Bangladesh's Grameen Bank and a champion of microfinance, attests to the efficacy of developing micro-credit into an effective tool for fighting poverty. Dr. Yunus revolutionized the microfinance sector by lending primarily to women—the heart of the Grameen Bank's winning strategy. Experience has shown that women tend to pay back loans at a higher rate than men do. In addition, women tend to help the whole community when they have access to micro loans. The Grameen bank has concluded that "annual household consumption expenditure increases 18 taka for every additional 100 taka borrowed by women from credit programs, compared with just 11 taka for men."²⁰

Why the Military Should Care

Terrorists are recruiting women as a pragmatic move to regain the strategic advantage.²¹ In an increasingly tighter security environment, female recruitment is a logical next step, since society and security forces at large view women as less likely to be violent (even though history warns against such complacency). According to Jessica Stern, a lecturer on terrorism at Harvard University, "The perception that women are less prone to violence, the Islamic dress code, and the reluctance to carry out body searches on Muslim women [make] them the 'perfect demographic' for terrorists."²² Put simply, it is easier for female terrorists to get through security checkpoints.

Fighting vertical transmission. As aforementioned, even if women do not participate directly in terrorist activities, they often support their men's militancy by nurturing families committed to violent extremism.²³ Since women in most societies are traditionally responsible for passing on the cultural expectations of their communities to their children, women become vehicles for transmitting norms of violence, radicalism, and martyrdom. Cultural transmission theorists refer to this dynamic as "vertical transmission."²⁴ Women perform this function in societies as "the vanguard of social transformation."²⁵ Individuals and societies continuously reshape, repackage, and reuse cultural traits. As first caregivers and teachers, women serve as a key node for influencing and spreading cultural traits to the next generation. Historically, military conflicts needed women's support for sustainability, and today that phenomenon applies to terrorists/terrorism and insurgents/insurgency.²⁶

To affect the collective mindset of a community, counterinsurgents and counterterrorism measures should address this critical node of influence. According to Narmin Othman, Iraq's acting minister for women's affairs, there are as many as two million widows in Iraq today.²⁷ These women should be the prime target population for organized economic assistance during stability operations. Not only are women the primary transmitters of cultural traits, but as the past has shown, they can also serve as an important force in conflict mitigation and reconciliation.²⁸ Thus, military planners should war game the different effects actions have on men and women in the same way they currently war-game second- and third-order effects.

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Iraqi widows wait to receive aid distributed by the al-Sadr office in Shula neighborhood of northwestern Baghdad, Iraq, 1 October 2007. The al-Sadr office donated food to victims of sectarian violence.

Gendering doctrine. The Army's Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, stresses the importance of civil considerations during mission analysis.²⁹ However, the FM's social structure section should explicitly recommend gender consideration as one of the items planners address. It pertains to roughly 50 percent of the local populace and is the most likely category of civil considerations to be neglected.³⁰

For example, if a unit is planning to dig a well for a community, planners should consider how the distance between the well and the community might affect women and girls. If the well is too far away, the girls will spend more time fetching water, which may encroach on other productive activities such as attending school. Similarly, if women and girls are the primary providers of water for the households in a community, then unit information operations activities near and en route to water wells must be sensitive to their needs in order to be effective.

Leveraging USAID

The Percy Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act, signed into law in 1973, requires that gender issues be incorporated into the government's overall development efforts. Since then, USAID has been integrating gender concerns throughout its portfolio in the developing world. Women received 63 percent of the micro-loans issued through USAID-supported programs in 2004.³¹ In the past three decades, the agency has gained tremendous insight into the significant roles women play in developing societies. Its office of Women in Development (WID) testifies to the great attention USAID is paying to the role of gender in nation building.

By collaborating with USAID and using WID's expertise on gender integration as part of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy, the military can more effectively address the negative socioeconomic conditions that make areas ripe for terrorist exploitation.

The recent trend of increasing women suicide bombers from Chechnya to Gaza and to Iraq may be just the tip of the iceberg. It is likely an indicator of the underlying current of increased radicalization of women. Since women naturally hold the critical node for passing down cultural norms and beliefs in societies, they serve as the proliferators of radical and militant ideology for future generations. Therefore, long-term countermeasures and counterterrorism strategy must seriously consider the affects of gender to be effective. **MR**

NOTES

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