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The Women of IS and Alienation

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Abstract

Throughout the prominence of the Islamic State (IS), the world became captivated by the stories of the women involved in this extremist organization. Many openly question why women from all over the world choose to join a group extremely violent towards women in the region and in their own ranks. This paper examines the women of IS and their reasons for interacting with the group. Through the lenses of Simone de Beauvoir's concept of 'male as subject and women as other' and the feminist viewpoints on alienation, the paper questions whether women actually are welcomed in the world. By exploring the various women of IS and their experiences before and after interacting with the group, this paper discovers that alienation is a theme throughout a woman's life. Thus, in conclusion, it is discovered that the women of IS make their decisions based on their desire to be included, but as second class citizens they will be alienated wherever they go.

Keywords: Simone de Beauvoir, defectiveness, masculine identity, frivolous

Alienation and Women: A Look into the Women of IS

Throughout the prominence of the Islamic State (IS), the world became captivated by the stories of the women involved in this extremist organization. Many openly question why women from all over the world choose to join a group extremely violent towards women in the region and in their own ranks. This paper examines the women of IS and their reasons for interacting with the group. Through the lenses of Simone de Beauvoir's concept of 'male as subject and women as other' and the feminist viewpoints on alienation, the paper questions whether women actually are welcomed in the world. By exploring the various women of IS and their experiences before and after interacting with the group, this paper discovers that alienation is a theme throughout a woman's life. Thus, in conclusion, it is discovered that the women of IS make their decisions based on their desire to be included, but as second class citizens they will be alienated wherever they go.

Women as Other

Aristotle's claim that 'the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities... we should regard female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness,' a quote featured in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, sets the tone for the how the world perceives women.¹ The absolute human

¹Purvis, Jennifer, "Hegelian Dimensions of The Second Sex: A Feminist Consideration," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, 1st ser., 13 (March 2003): 128-56.

type, one that is seen as normal and either in a positive or neutral light, is masculine.² Thus, humanity in essence is male. And not simply male, but the hegemonic masculine identity that is emphasized in cultures throughout the world. Hegemony, which “is about the winning and holding of power and the formation (and destruction) of social groups in that process,”³ is viewed through the lenses of values such as courage, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body among other characteristics.⁴ Therefore, the individuals (male) who hold those characteristics are the absolute human type and they create the norms in which everyone must follow to be socially acceptable.⁵ Naturally, through this process, men are seen as the subject and women are the ‘other,’ the inferior side of humanity. And the functioning of current society rests on this fact that half of the population is subordinate. Order in hegemonic society depends on this subordinate status of women, for if they (the other) remain suppressed, the men (the subject) can create culture in their own image, making the most mediocre individual a demigod compared to women.⁶ Therefore, a woman is only deemed worthwhile if she is useful to a man, consequently living a life for another individual and not for herself. “For a woman to be valuable, she must adhere to a set of standards and beliefs determined by society.”⁷ Designated by the hegemonic male, this set of standards essentially entails whatever is devalored in phallocracy, with characteristics that are described as frivolous, infantile, and irresponsible.⁸ So while women are technically free and autonomous, they find themselves living in a world where they are compelled to live the life as the ‘other.’⁹ Women, by giving up their own sense of identification for what someone else tells them to act and think like, will not be alienated from society, but will also no longer be self-identifying individual humans.¹⁰ But if women choose to live outside of their predetermined box, continuing their nonconformist actions, they face alienation from society and will often feel as though they do not belong to the whole.¹¹ In essence, as explained by Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*, “woman is enticed by two modes of alienation. Evidently to play at being a man will be for her a source of frustration; but to play at being a woman is also a delusion: to be a woman would mean to be the object.”¹²

The alienation of women forces one to ask the question - do women really belong in this world. Will they ever truly feel welcome? This question will be explored through the life of the women of IS. Specifically looking at the women who became a part of IS through their own volition, thus excluding those who were kidnapped or forced into slavery such as the Yazidi women, this paper looks at the life of the women who fight for IS, regional and western, and those who fight against the terrorist organization. By analyzing the various reasons these women chose to join IS, then what their life within or against the organization is like, one is able to see whether women ever escape the realities of alienation.

Non-Western Women of IS

Most of the world is focused on the Western transition of women into the life of an IS member, but the stories of the other women who choose this extremist lifestyle are often lost. Between 20,000-31,500 young Muslim women have joined the call for IS, and 90% of them are from the surrounding

²Ibid., 135.

³Donaldson, Mike, "What Is Hegemonic Masculinity?" *Theory and Society*, 5th ser., 22 (1993): 643-57.

⁴Donaldson, "What Is Hegemonic Masculinity?"

⁵Frankel, Anne, "Kept Down By the Man, Damn the Man: The Figurative and Literal Alienation of Women," *Stance* 5 (2012): 45-54.

⁶Purvis, "Hegelian Dimensions of The Second Sex: A Feminist Consideration," 139.

⁷Frankel, "Kept Down By the Man, Damn the Man," 49.

⁸Purvis, "Hegelian Dimensions of The Second Sex: A Feminist Consideration," 136.

⁹Ibid., 140.

¹⁰Fischer, Bernd, and Barbara S. Krasner, "Alienation of Persons and Tensions in Community: A Feminist Critique of Hegel's and Marx's Conceptions of Alienation," *The European Legacy* 2, no. 2 (1997): 283-89.

doi:10.1080/10848779708579728.

¹¹Fischer, "Alienation of Persons and Tensions in Community," 284.

¹²Butler, Judith, "Sex and Gender in Simone De Beauvoir's *Second Sex*," *Yale French Studies*, no. 72 (1986): 35-49.

doi:10.2307/2930225.

Middle Eastern region or non-Western countries, making these stories the most important to analyze.¹³ This calls to attention the unfortunate belief from media sources that these women are already 'corrupted' and thus easily persuaded to join IS. But often times these women's stories are simple - stories of alienation that lead them towards the call of extremism. Many of these women were living under a 'false Islam,' which featured administrations and interpretations of Islam that were labelled as barbaric and savage, such as Saudi Arabia.¹⁴ In these states, they were merely passive participants of Islam and were not even able to practice the true form of Islam. Others were fearful of the Western influence, which goes against the complementary roles for men and women featured in Islam and blurs the gender roles.¹⁵ To strong followers of Islam, the foundation of society is shaken when the gender roles are mixed, as women and men have natural abilities created within them that would be put in flux when there is change.¹⁶ And finally, these women are often in states of terror. Their lives are constantly at risk as the civil war rages in their neighborhood, and women are specifically targeted for sexual violence and rape. Regional and non-Western women needed somewhere to turn with the alienation of aggressive Islam, progressive society and looming civil war, and IS identified their needs and 'answered' them.

An ultimate goal of IS is to create a caliphate, rooted in Sharia Law and their region's ancient past.¹⁷ The group portrayed this caliphate strongly to the alienated regional women, declaring that this caliphate would participate in 'true Islam' and thus Islamic women could realise their Islam in the best and safest way possible.¹⁸ The caliphate would also be the 'right' place for women to be as they could be active participants in Islam, rather than passive observers. Women in IS are able to work within brigades, such as the Khansaa Brigade, giving them a chance to do more than just subsist, and an opportunity to partake in society parallel to their husband's work.¹⁹ These brigades assume policing duties and make sure the moral rules are followed, meaning that women play an important role in the enforcement and supervision of Islamic rules.²⁰ Women also actively recruit other young women online. Yet these established active roles are still completely separate from the men - their roles never weave together, thus follow one of the most important part of Islamic society to IS, the complementary gender roles. And finally, "since women perceive themselves to be threatened specifically at times of war (by Assad's forces), the region controlled by ISIS is seen as a safe haven for those who wish to follow Islam in its entirety or those who wish to live by Tawheed. Women looking for a safe shelter from rapists shows the masculine dimension of war" but IS claims to be a protection for these women.²¹ These women join IS with the goal to be accepted and welcomed, but does IS create this equal society they display for their recruits?

Once these women arrive in ISIS, they are subjected to a different form of alienation than before, which takes two forms. One where "militant women are becoming the flag-bearer of patriarchy under the veil of their subdued consciousness," alienating themselves from the world of women by working hard to be militant and equal to the men.²² And while functioning within the patriarchy as militants and active Islamic women, they are still second class. Their active duty roles of heading to war and sacrificing their lives can only happen if there are not enough men present and the imams give a fatwa for their participation, and other active female members are held within

¹³Chatterjee, Debangana, "Gendering ISIS and Mapping the Role of Women," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 3, no. 2 (June 2016): 201–18. doi:[10.1177/2347798916638214](https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798916638214).

¹⁴Yilmaz, Zehra, "Critique of ISIS' Women Policy," *Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 4, no. 2 (2017): 13-40. doi:[10.26513/toed.337980](https://doi.org/10.26513/toed.337980).

¹⁵Ibid., 24.

¹⁶Ibid., 24.

¹⁷"ISIS Fast Facts." CNN. May 01, 2019. Accessed May 08, 2019. <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/08/world/isis-fast-facts/index.html>.

¹⁸Yilmaz, "Critique of ISIS' Women Policy," 17.

¹⁹Moaveni, Azadeh. "ISIS Women and Enforcers in Syria Recount Collaboration, Anguish and Escape." *The New York Times*. November 21, 2015. Accessed May 08, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/world/middleeast/isis-wives-and-enforcers-in-syria-recount-collaboration-anguish-and-escape.html>.

²⁰Yilmaz, "Critique of ISIS' Women Policy," 27.

²¹Ibid., 22.

²²Chatterjee, "Gendering ISIS and Mapping the Role of Women," 202.

feminine spaces of morality and chastity.”²³ This is “complementarity” at work: it justifies segregation of the sexes while appearing to provide a ladder to leadership for ambitious young jihadi women.”²⁴ But the main role of the women of ISIS are to support their Jihadist husbands and help create and build the next generation of Muslims. Their lives are forfeited to the private sphere, second class citizens with their lives given to their husbands and their freedom severely limited.²⁵ Trying to escape the alienation from their homes, these women run to another form of alienation in the strict patriarchal society of IS.

Western Women

By even separating the terminology of regional and Western women, it shows the implicit bias and curiosity strewn across media landscapes: how can a ‘civilized’ woman fall into the clutches of an openly abusive and patriarchal society like IS. Inherently there is a belief that these women were seduced and lured by the propaganda of this extremist group, casting the women as victimized and apolitical.²⁶ But much like the regional and non-Western women, Western women make the conscious decision to join the Caliphate due to their alienation at home. About 5,000 Western have made the journey to Iraq and Syria because they are actively discriminated against. Islamophobia is on the rise globally, and many Muslims cannot peacefully pray or worship. French Muslim schoolgirls were excluded from school for wearing headscarves, and the Paris Opera refused to perform because the audience included a veiled woman who refused to leave despite possessing a valid ticket.²⁷ Muslims in the United Kingdom, in a 2006 study, maintained attitudes of alienation more than Muslims in other European countries.²⁸ And limitations on burqas in public have been enacted in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, among other nations.²⁹ These women feel that their religion, and in essence their identity, has been attacked by the place they call home. And the Western ideals of a genderless society, in which men and women interacted and were equal, did not follow their strict belief in complementary roles. The Western nations ask too much from them, ask them to give too much away in the name of integration, and these women turn to a place where they are accepted.

Much like the regional and non-Western women, Western women join IS for their promise of an active Islamic existence, their ability to be a part of female brigade and support their Jihadist husband. But even more important to them is that they can freely practice their religion without fear of discrimination or their safety. On her blog, Umm-Layth, a female recruiter for IS, explains that in IS territories, “Muslim women are not mocked for wearing Islamic clothing and instead receive nothing but ‘respect and honor.’”³⁰ The women within the caliphate are able to travel without having to show their face, and respect of the body was returned to the woman; they will no longer be humiliated by dressing in revealing clothes that was so prominent in Western culture, and, with the permission of God, the women were cleansed.³¹ Another prominent aspect of IS’ draw is their acceptance of foreign women in the first place. Their english-language publication Dabiq takes pains to show photographs of racially diverse fighters hailing from all over the world, underscoring that ethnicity

²³Yilmaz, “Critique of ISIS’ Women Policy,” 26-29.

²⁴Zakaria, Rafia. "Women and Islamic Militancy." *Dissent Magazine*. Winter 2015. Accessed May 08, 2019. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/why-women-choose-isis-islamic-militancy>.

²⁵Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers in Syria Recount Collaboration, Anguish and Escape."

²⁶Sjoberg, Laura. "Jihadi Brides and Female Volunteers: Reading the Islamic State's War to See Gender and Agency in Conflict Dynamics." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 35, no. 3 (May 2018): 296–311. doi:10.1177/0738894217695050.

²⁷Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy."

²⁸Goodman, Sara Wallace. "The Root Problem of Muslim Integration in Britain Is Alienation." *The Washington Post*. October 06, 2014. Accessed May 08, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/10/06/the-root-problem-of-muslim-integration-in-britain-is-alienation/?utm_term=.5a8d236f8f7d.

²⁹Samuel, Sigal. "Banning Muslim Veils Tends to Backfire-Why Do Countries Keep Doing It?" *The Atlantic*. August 03, 2018. Accessed May 08, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/denmark-burqa-veil-ban/566630/>.

³⁰Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy."

³¹Yilmaz, “Critique of ISIS’ Women Policy,” 25.

and nationality does not matter in their caliphate, but that they accept all forms of Islam.³² This interpretation, so distinctly different from other interpretations of Islam, brings a diversity to IS that attracts women who have been subjected to being other their entire lives. IS successfully recruits these women, helping them fly from all over the world to join their movement, but once these women arrive they are often shocked to find another form of alienation waiting for them.

Much like the other women of IS, Western women are subjected to second-class citizenship in the Caliphate. Their promised freedom of an active Islamic lifestyle is whittled down to fighting only when men are not available or moving within the designated feminine sphere. Although they are given more freedom of movement and perks than the regional women, their status in society is still based on their husband's status.³³ And as Muslim women, their whole identity is tied to being an individual that Muslim men can marry and have children with.³⁴ She is restricted to the framework of the family home and private life, and finds her nationalism in the confines of her designated roles. This translates into the phrase of the 'Jihad Bride,' where her duty is fulfilled as the wife and mother of Muslims.³⁵ Her individual identity as an active participant in society is essentially gone, and to fulfill her duty and avoid alienation she has to give up who she is and belong to someone else.

Fighters Against IS

Opposite of the women of IS are those who chose to fight against the extremist group. Much like the Western women who join IS, these fighters have been splashed across media all over the world, describing them as brave women taking up arms against the violent group destroying their homeland. Specifically, the Kurds have 7,000 volunteer soldiers who have joined the Women's Protection Unit, or YPJ, which is strongly associated with the PKK.³⁶ And when speaking to these women, it becomes clear why they chose to risk their lives and fight against IS. In the documentary *Her War*, these young warriors claim that they had nothing back home as women. Their society treated women as though they were slaves, with little say in their lives, not even able to leave their house.³⁷ In their culture, being a wife or daughter means they're not a person in their own right.³⁸ These young girls and women, with feelings of shame for standing on the sideline as men went out to fight their invaders, were alienated from society. Both as being a woman, and as being an individual who desired to take up arms.

The call of the YPJ spoke to each of these girls. Their path to honor, to victory and happiness, could be found among each other and on the battlefield. These women claim their agency, as opposed to stereotypical projection of their helplessness, committing themselves to the cause of revenge ideologically, politically, and socially.³⁹ Their entire purpose in life from the moment they join YPJ is to be a part of the fight to bring down IS. For this, they have shunned their life before and ran away from the dirt of society to defend their land.⁴⁰ In the YPJ, rather than shame and dishonor, they become a part of a cohesive unit that will accept you as you are. "The female soldiers experience a unique and close bond by living in close quarters, training and fighting together."⁴¹ This cohesion, this bond, welcomes them. But this comes at a sacrifice.

³²Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy."

³³Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers in Syria Recount Collaboration, Anguish and Escape."

³⁴Yilmaz, "Critique of ISIS' Women Policy," 18.

³⁵Yilmaz, "Critique of ISIS' Women Policy," 32.

³⁶NBCNews, "Meet the Kurdish Women Fighting ISIS in Syria." NBCNews.com. September 9, 2014. Accessed May 08, 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/slideshow/meet-kurdish-women-fighting-isis-syria-56016007>.

³⁷Documentary, RT. "Her War: Women Vs. ISIS. Inside the Training Camp of an All-Female Kurdish Battalion." *You Tube*, RT Documentary, 15 June 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EnWzbQ-qok.

³⁸Documentary, "Her War."

³⁹Chatterjee, "Gendering ISIS and Mapping the Role of Women," 208.

⁴⁰Documentary, "Her War."

⁴¹NBCNews, "Meet the Kurdish Women Fighting ISIS in Syria."

To be a part of the YPJ, women have to play at being a man. They acknowledge that they have to change their ways as female to survive in the patriarchal world of war. They cannot have the same feelings as before; they must be cold-hearted in battle and withhold from crying or showing those emotions.⁴² They become soldiers in the hegemonic masculine sense, thus alienating their feminine side to simply survive. In this sense, the YPJ state that they'll either become soldiers or perish,⁴³ that they'll either work within the masculine definition of what a soldier is or they will die on the battlefield. And, as policy of the PKK, a member of the YPJ cannot marry or she is no longer able to function as a soldier.⁴⁴ As though by becoming married she is once again a part of the society she worked so hard to leave, placing her identity and body in possession of the man she marries rather than herself. Despite leaving her home and alienating herself from the feminine aspects of self, once she is married none of that will matter and she will return to the unwelcoming society.

Conclusion

The women of IS paint a clear picture of the alienation of women in society. The concept of the 'other' is present prior to their interactions with the extremist group, influential in their decisions to either join or fight against, and then reoccurs while actively engaged with the extremist group. This answers the question that, in this world where the hegemonic man is the characteristic definition of a human, a woman does not truly belong. "The liberated woman must free herself from two shackles: first, the idea that to be independent she must be like men, and second, the socialization through which she becomes feminized. The first alienates her from her sexuality. The second makes her adverse to risking herself for her ideas/ideals."⁴⁵ In essence, no matter what decision a woman makes, she will be alienated from the world as a second class citizen. Thus, the women of IS choose their paths based on where they feel more accepted rather than completely whole.

⁴² Documentary, "Her War."

⁴³ Documentary, "Her War."

⁴⁴ Documentary, "Her War."

⁴⁵Bergoffen, Debra, "Simone de Beauvoir", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/beauvoir/>>.