Violence As Empowerment: The Rise Of Female Suicide Bombers

A suicide bombing incident was reported in Tunisia's capital just last week, claiming the life of the bomber and injuring nine others, most of whom were police officers. The attack made headlines not only because it was the first suicide bombing incident in the country since 2015, but also because it was carried out by a woman.

A global trend

The first account of a female suicide bomber, according to Mia Bloom's journal article Suicide Bombers: A Global Trend was 17-year-old Lebanese Sana'a Mehaydali, who blew herself up in Israel in 1985, killing five Israeli soldiers. From there, incidents of female suicide bombings extended to other countries, from Sri Lanka and Turkey to Chechnya and Iraq. Between 1985 and 2006, Bloom explained that female suicide bombings represented about 15 percent of the total, which is equivalent to 220 women "dying for equality" coming from different parts of the world.

Attention to the role of women in violence and terrorism has become more pronounced in 2005, when a Belgian convert, Muriel Degauque, carried out a suicide bombing in Iraq. She was then known as the first European Muslim to stage an attack, which claimed the lives of five policemen and injured many others.

While women have already been reported to become easy prey for terrorist membership, as terrorist banks on their vulnerabilities, they are only often used to recruit other women and young people and are even presented as gifts for soldiers looking for someone to marry. ISIS offers men a full package of a salary and a wife for taking up arms.

Why do women become suicide bombers?

Bloom noted that there are differences between male and female suicide bombers. For men, motives for joining terrorist organizations range from revenge, escape, fame, and fighting for equality. Women suicide bombers are said to not only fight for political equality but also for gender equality.

"There is a difference between men and women suicide attackers: women consider combat as a way to escape the predestined life that is expected of them. When women become human bombs, their intent is to make a statement not only in the name of a country, a religion, a leader but also in the name of their gender," Bloom said, quoting Clara Beyler's Messengers of Death: Female Suicide Bombers.

Terrorist organizations have exploited women's call for gender equality. ISIS, for example, provides a narrative centered on breaking and reversing the wheel of gender discrimination in all spheres of life, from the private sphere of the home to the public sphere of the workplace, church, politics, science, among others.

Terrorist organizations have also observed that counter-terrorism measures were more tolerant of women as they are suspected at a lesser degree than men. Traditional gender roles see women as carers and nurturers and “likely to choose peaceful mechanisms for conflict resolution than men are—that women are inherently more disposed toward moderation, compromise, and tolerance in their attitudes toward international conflict.”

Nikita Malik, director of the Center on Radicalization and Terrorism (CRT) at the Henry Jackson Society, contributing for Forbes, added, “They [women] are enticed by the idea that they will be part of a tight-knit collective sisterhood that will provide them with support and friendship. This new life, in turn, is eventually used as a means to justify their radicalization and sacrifice—the latter including the form of taking their own lives.”

An alternative to violence

Women have been historically and statistically reported as victims of abuse. Often, they are discriminated against simply on the basis of being women, excluded in certain professions, paid lesser than their male counterparts and expected to only carry domestic roles. For Muslim women, this prejudice is exacerbated by Islamophobia and the rising hate crimes directed at them and other Muslims. These vulnerabilities, coupled with a host of other factors—a rough childhood, abusive partner, among others—make women easy targets for terrorist recruitment.

From playing key roles in the war, including giving birth to as many fighters to sustain the insurgency, women are now offered a violent solution packaged as an empowering act to further political and gender equality. And because they are less likely to be suspected, it will present grave challenges for the security forces and could even foster more violence on women of certain races and religions.

With this, Malik emphasized the importance of offering women an alternative to violence: “We can begin by emphasizing democratic and human-rights-based values, and empower women to play a more active role against extremism. But more than that, we must address the ideology espoused by many terrorist organizations head-on and prove it to be false. “

She added that the role of women in terrorism and extremism should be addressed. This approach will espouse the idea that violence does not empower women, nor does it empower anybody else.