



**KCSS**  
Kosovar Centre for Security Studies

# WOMEN IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM KOSOVO

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# **WOMEN IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

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January 2017  
Prishtina

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## TABLE OF CONTENT

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KEY FINDINGS .....	5
1. INTRODUCTION .....	7
2. METHODOLOGY .....	9
3. CONTEXT OF WOMEN RADICALIZATION IN KOSOVO .....	10
4. EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL FACTORS AND INFLUENCES .....	12
4.1. Ideological factors .....	15
4.2. Education & Employment .....	17
4.3. Family and other social conditions .....	18
5. RECRUITMENT (WOMEN AND CHILDREN).....	19
5.1. Women and girls who have migrated with their husbands/families .....	21
5.2. Life in Syria and Iraq for Kosovo Women .....	23
6. WOMEN AS PREVENTERS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM .....	26
7. CONCLUSIONS .....	28
8. RECOMMENDATIONS .....	29
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	31

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## KEY FINDINGS

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### Context

- Among more than 4,000 foreign fighters from Western Europe who have joined violent extremists organizations in Syria and Iraq, more than 700 are women.
- More than 40 women who have joined violent extremists groups in the conflicts of Syria and Iraq are from Kosovo. In comparative perspective of the region of the Western Balkans, this number is second only to Bosnia and Herzegovina from where 60 women are reported to have joined the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.
- One cannot speak of “Kosovo women foreign fighters” as a single category, since this report finds very diverse pathways taken by extremist and potentially extremist Kosovo women. First, there are married women who have joined the conflict on a voluntary basis – breaking the stereotype that portrays them as victims of their marriage and husbands. Second, there are cases of women who decided not to join the conflict even though they experienced pressure by their husbands or partners who participated in extremist organizations. Third, the report finds that there are also cases of women who were forced into joining the conflict of Syria and Iraq as a direct consequence of their dependency on their families and husbands.
- This research has also found cases of women returnees who continue to believe that their decision to join violent extremists organizations is just, interpreting it as an obligation that derives from Islamic scriptures.
- Accounts show that some women from Kosovo have also been actively recruiting other women to join the conflicts of Syria and Iraq.
- ISIS propaganda regards women as mothers who will raise the next generation of jihadis and mujahids and restricts their roles to domestic life, teaching and nursery in some cases.
- During their stay within ISIS (and possibly other extremist groups) held territory, women from Kosovo tend to keep to traditional gender roles and norms. They are not seen outside their houses and their duties are restricted to domestic life (mainly cooking, cleaning and taking care of their children).
- Kosovar women were not active participants in the violent extremists organizations. They were not allowed to neither participate in combat nor to carry weapons.

## External and Internal Factors

- There are a set of reasons that drive women from Kosovo to join the conflict of Syria and Iraq which generally include ideological factors, socio – economic factors and personal motives.
- Statistics show that women are discriminated against in almost every sphere of public life. When compared to men, women are underrepresented in all levels of institutions and decision making process. Unemployment is also higher among women.
- This societal-wide general discrimination is also reflected within the structures of Kosovo's Islamic Community (BIK) This research shows that representation of women within the BIK structures fares slightly better only in Prishtina, whereas other smaller towns and municipalities generally lack women inclusion within their structures.

### *Education, Social discrimination & Personal motives*

- This report cannot establish any direct link between the level of education or employment status and women who join the conflict of Syria and Iraq. For instance, there are women from Kosovo who have joined the conflict of Syria and Iraq, that were employed and have had a university degree at the time of departure. There are also those that have neither had a university degree nor were employed prior to departure.
- The report finds that another factor that has influenced women to join the conflict of Syria and Iraq on a voluntary basis is the feeling of being discriminated on religious grounds and the exclusion from institutions, particularly from the Kosovo Islamic Community (BIK)
- An important factor that has influenced women to join the conflict of Syria and Iraq is the propaganda by their own partners/husbands.
- Most of these women have experienced a traumatic event during their life (loss of a loved one, mainly one or both parents and other harmful events ) and they were married in a quite young age.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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Historically, women have been victims to a much greater degree than perpetrators of violence. The situation is gradually changing in the context of globalization and new security challenges. Recently, we have been witnessing an increase of women involvement in violent extremist organisations including participation in foreign conflicts. These organisations – often united around a common political or religious ideology – represents one of the many emerging complex threats to international peace and security. In order to create an effective response to this problem, it is initially important to depict why women increasingly join violent extremists organizations and what is their role within the groups.

Research and experience to date have shown that women can enable, support, be victims of, counteract and prevent violent extremism. Their roles and experiences are not monochromatic but rather diverse and shaped by context, community and history.<sup>1</sup> Women, albeit portrayed as passive agents, have been participating in recent terrorist organizations more frequently and in many different ways. Women have been participating in terrorist organizations as caretakers and care providers, they have been promoting violent extremist ideologies and have been recruiting other women to join violent extremist groups. Furthermore, there are sources implying that in some cases women have taken up weapons and are fighting in the ground.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this research is to shed light on the women from Kosovo who participate in violent extremists organizations and potential consequences deriving from their role. While the report will be solely focused on Kosovo, it will bring international knowledge in treating this phenomenon having in mind that Kosovo marks no general exception when compared to other countries. The goal is to particularly identify who these women are, why would they participate in these conflicts, and what is their role.

The report, among others, finds that there are a set of push and pull factors that drive women from Kosovo to join these organizations. These motives include ideological factors, socio – economical factors, personal motives and the lure by the recruiters.

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1 Women and Countering Violent Extremism, Summary Document and Analysis – 27.10.2014, Georgetown University & Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the UN, NY.

2 Burke.J. "Islamic militant groups' recruits likely to be well educated, study finds", The Guardian, 05/10/2016. Accessed on 24/10/2016 - [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/05/islamic-state-recruits-world-bank-study-education-boko-haram?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/05/islamic-state-recruits-world-bank-study-education-boko-haram?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)

Also see: Finn Church Aid. "New evidence: Neighbours, not Firebrand Imams, recruit Fighters to Boko Haram" 3.10.2016, Accessed at: <https://www.kirkonulkomaanapu.fi/en/latest-news/news/new-evidence-friends-not-firebrand-imams-recruit-fighters-to-boko-haram/>

While most of the women who have joined violent extremists organizations are seen as victims rather than perpetrators, it is also true that there are women who see joining the conflicts in Syria and Iraq as empowering. Having said that, various other findings show that violent extremist groups have been utilizing women for a range of activities including logistics, recruitment, political safeguarding, operations, combat and more recently suicide bombing<sup>3</sup>.

The profiles of Kosovo women who have joined the conflicts of Syria and Iraq vary, and there are different reasons behind their participation in the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. It is very difficult to treat these women as a special single category or profile as the reasons for their departure to the conflict of Syria and Iraq are different and depend on most cases in individual circumstances and social contexts. We cannot conclude firmly that the only factors which influence their decision to join the conflict of Syria and Iraq are socio-economic as we have seen cases of women who are well educated and well informed, despite the fact that some of these women have willingly and consciously decided to join these conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.

The structure of the report is as follows: the first part of the report begins by elaborating the general context of Kosovo women participation in conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. This part provides some descriptive statistics and puts into context the issue of women radicalization in Kosovo. Then the report attempts to offer explanation of some external and internal factors that have influenced Kosovo women radicalization and departure to the conflict. The report continues to discuss ways and methods of recruitment of women. It also offers a discussion regarding the Kosovo women daily lives in Syria and Iraq. Before it concludes, the report elaborates on how women can act as preventors of violent extremism. Lastly, the report provides conclusions and recommendations on how to proceed and tackle this issue from different perspectives and stakeholders.

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3 Cragin.K and Daly.S. "Women as Terrorists". Oxford, England,2009 in Saltman.E. & Melanie.S. "Till Martyrdom Do Us Part – Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon", Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015 pg.4

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## 2. METHODOLOGY

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For the purpose of this study we have approached this research by employing certain qualitative and quantitative methods - though it is largely based on qualitative approach. Literature review, desk research/documentation, in depth interviews and observation have been conducted.

Two in depth interviews with women who have joined the conflicts in Syria and Iraq were conducted. Moreover, one interview was conducted with a woman suspected of joining violent extremists organizations, and one interview was conducted with a woman whose husband has joined the conflict of Syria and Iraq. These interviews have been ongoing for a period of four months, between September 2016 and December 2016. In order to, firstly, identify the target of this research, KCSS has gathered and structured information from open sources such as various media outlets and different news portals. KCSS researcher met the interviewees more than one time.

Moreover, formal and informal interviews were conducted with different imams, representatives of different municipalities in Kosovo, representatives of the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, members of Kosovo's Police, representatives of the Kosovo's Islamic Community (BIK) and representatives of the women's department in the BIK. In total, seven interviews were conducted with representatives of the Muslim community in Kosovo and representatives of governmental institutions in local and central level.

Content analysis was extensively used. Multiple reports and academic articles have been analyzed with the main purpose of finding possible explanations to the radicalization phenomena of women in general. Furthermore, content analysis has been used to understand and analyze the causes of women radicalization in other countries such as Bosnia&Herzegovina, Serbia, Albania and Macedonia.

This research has a few limitations that need to be discussed. During our research we have faced some difficulties in getting access to persons who have returned from the conflict of Syria and Iraq. Even though the number of the interviews is quite solid, for the purposes of this study, we have not been granted access to prisons to conduct interviews because our request to do so was denied by the Ministry of Justice. Nonetheless, various reports, academic articles and other interviewees have provided sufficient information and data for the purpose of this report.

### 3. CONTEXT OF WOMEN RADICALIZATION IN KOSOVO

The number of foreign fighters from Western countries who have joined various extremist groups in Syria and Iraq until 2016 is estimated to be more than 4,000 of which there are more than 700 women.<sup>4</sup>

According to several reports on Western Balkans countries more than 900 people have joined the conflicts of Syria and Iraq.<sup>5</sup> These fighters are mainly from countries like Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia. There are around 300 citizens in total who have joined the conflict of Syria and Iraq from Kosovo between 2012 and early 2016, of which 44 are women or 14% comparing with the total number of Foreign Fighters from Kosovo. There are also 27 are children from Kosovo.<sup>6</sup> In Bosnia and Herzegovina it is estimated that there are 188 men, 60 women or 18 % comparing to the total number of FF and 81 children joining the conflicts of Syria and Iraq.<sup>7</sup> There are 110 people joining the conflicts of Syria and Iraq from Macedonia, of which 3 or 2.7% are women and only 3 have taken their immediate families to Syria.<sup>8</sup> From Albania it is estimated that there are 150 FF out of which up to 29 are women or 19 % comparing to the total number of FF from Albania. From Serbia it is estimated that there are around 50 participants in the conflict of Syria/Iraq out of which 10 are women or 20% of the total number. Number of women who have joined the conflict of Syria/Iraq from the region of the WB is presented in the table 1. below. This table serves to compare the number of women who have joined the conflicts of Syria and Iraq.

4 International Centre for Counter – Terrorism. “*The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union. Profiles, Threats & Policies*”, April 2016 pg.4. Accessed in: [https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report\\_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU\\_1-April-2016\\_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf](https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf)

5 Azinovic.M. & Muhamet.J. “The new lure of the Syrian War – The Foreign Fighters’ Bosnian contingent” Atlantic Initiative, April 2016 pg.11 &

Selimi. K. & Filip. S. “Assessment of Macedonia Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism, View From Civil Society” Analytica, 2016. [http://www.analyticamk.org/images/Files/extremism-en-updated-FINAL-web\\_ceb98.pdf](http://www.analyticamk.org/images/Files/extremism-en-updated-FINAL-web_ceb98.pdf) pg.10 &

6 Fatos Makolli Interview, 27.09.2016 Accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JvhLcriZHmM>

7 The new lure of the Syrian War, the Bosnian contingent 2016 pg.11

8 Selimi. K. & Filip. S. “Assessment of Macedonia Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism, View From Civil Society” Analytica, 2016 pg.10 [http://www.analyticamk.org/images/Files/extremism-en-updated-FINAL-web\\_ceb98.pdf](http://www.analyticamk.org/images/Files/extremism-en-updated-FINAL-web_ceb98.pdf)

Countries in WB	General population	Number of Muslim Population	Number of women participants in conflict of Syria/Iraq	Percentage of women participants in the conflict of Syria/Iraq, compared to the total number of participants in the conflict of Syria/Iraq
Albania	2,774,000	2,601,000 <sup>9</sup>	13-29 <sup>10</sup>	19%
Bosnia & Herzegovina	3,871,000	1,564,000 <sup>11</sup>	60 <sup>12</sup>	18%
Kosovo	1,824,000	1,660,598 <sup>13</sup>	44 <sup>14</sup>	14%
Macedonia	2,107,000	713,000 <sup>15</sup>	3 <sup>16</sup>	2,7%
Serbia	7,164,000	280,000 <sup>17</sup>	10 <sup>18</sup>	20 %

**Table 1. Number of women participants from the region of WB in the conflict of Syria/Iraq<sup>19</sup>**

According to Kosovo Police (KP), only 7 women have returned from the conflict of Syria/Iraq to Kosovo<sup>20</sup>, and only one of them has charges raised against her and is waiting for her sentence. The six women remain largely isolated, without any support from state

- 9 Muslim Population by Country Accessed at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/table-muslim-population-by-country/>
- 10 Spahiu.E. "Foreign Fighters, Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania and the Western Balkans" pg.57 - 87 2015 Accessed in: [http://www.filipejdus.com/Public/Uploads/Attach/jurekovic\\_and\\_ejdus\\_2016\\_violent\\_extremism\\_579f5bba2729b.pdf](http://www.filipejdus.com/Public/Uploads/Attach/jurekovic_and_ejdus_2016_violent_extremism_579f5bba2729b.pdf)
- 11 Ibid
- 12 Atlantic Initiative "The New Lure of the Syrian War – The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent" 2016
- 13 Gazeta Tema "Regjistrimi I popullsisë, 96% të kosovareve janë myslimane" Accessed at: <http://www.gazetatema.net/web/2012/02/09/regjistrimi-i-popullsisë-96-e-kosovareve-jane-muslimane/>
- 14 Fatos Makolli Interview at Rubikon, 27.09.2016 Accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JvhLcziZHaM>
- 15 Muslim Population by Country <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/table-muslim-population-by-country/>
- 16 Analytica "Assesment of Macedonian's Efforts in Countering Violent Extremism, View from Civil Society" 2016
- 17 Muslim Population by Country <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/table-muslim-population-by-country/>
- 18 BIRN "Balkan Jihadists, The Radicalisation and Recruitment of Fighters in Syria and Iraq", 2016 Accessed at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/file/show/Balkan-Jihadists.pdf>
- 19 KCSS researchers have attempted to find more statistics with regard to other countries in Europe, however this was not possible as we could not find credible sources on other countries.
- 20 Fatos Makolli Interview Rubikon, 27.09.2016 Accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JvhLcziZHaM>

or local institutions.<sup>21</sup> Some of them have been forced to re-marry after returning to Kosovo. Statistics show that the highest number of women from the region of Western Balkans (WB) per Muslim population is from Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia and Serbia. As per capita, the highest number of women who have joined the conflict of Syria and Iraq from the region of WB is from Kosovo, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Based on the interviews and other reports, the analysis shows that there are similar causes and consequences between Western Balkan women who have joined the conflicts of Syria and Iraq. Findings from the recent report from Atlantic Initiative (2016) note that women from Bosnia join the conflict of Syria and Iraq pushed by ideological and socio – economic factors similar to those of Kosovo.<sup>22</sup> For instance, many of these women are pushed by their husbands to join the conflict, some of them migrated to find a partner and marry in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, similarities are noted especially during their stay in Syria/Iraq. Based on the report by the Atlantic Initiative and interviews with Kosovar women who have participated in the conflict, Bosnian women are limited to domestic life and they do not actively participate in conflicts of Syria and Iraq.

KCSS has tried to find more information regarding the behavior of women from Macedonia, Albania, and Serbia during their stay in Syria but this was not possible due to lack of access to credible information. The interviews in Kosovo, however, show that women from Kosovo have stayed in groups mainly with other women from Albania due to language similarities. The linguistic similarities, some of our findings show, have also allowed for some Kosovo and Albanian men and women participants of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, to marry each other while in Syria and Iraq. Such is the case of Lavdrim Muhaxherri who has married a woman from Albania whose previous husband died in combat.<sup>23</sup>

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## 4. EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL FACTORS AND INFLUENCES

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Recognizing the different pathways, influences and processes that push an individual to join extremist ideologies and networks is crucial to develop proper mechanisms not only to prevent radicalization, but also for the very process of de-radicalisation.

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21 Observation from KCSS interviews

22 Atlantic Initiative "The New Lure of Syrian War, The Bosnian Contingent" 2016

23 Interview with A.L. 4/10/2016

Therefore, this section analyses the external and internal factors that influence women from Kosovo to join the conflicts of Syria and Iraq. To discuss these factors, this report first presents a typology of Kosovo women, participants of violent extremism, since our findings show that there is no “one type” of women who have joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq. As such, our findings show that on the one hand there are Kosovo women who have joined the conflict on a voluntary basis, having different motives and goals to do so, while on the other hand there are those that have been compelled into joining these conflicts involuntarily.

Previous research has pointed out that women increasingly participate in terrorism in patriarchal societies compared to women living in less patriarchal social systems.<sup>24</sup> Kosovo still accedes more to a patriarchal form of society (generally prevalent in the region) as the current position of women is highly unequal to men.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, women are generally portrayed and seen as victims and their role is diminished to domestic life. Such a view is specifically featured in the readily available explanations given with regards to the cases of the women who decided to join the conflict of Syria and Iraq.

Our research, however, reveals that we need to move beyond these simplistic assertions about a “one type” of women or “single causal” assertions about women’s participation in these conflicts. The findings of this research show that first, there are women who joined the conflict on a voluntary basis while being married – breaking the stereotype that they are somehow victims of their marriage and husbands. For example, ‘Arta’<sup>26</sup> was aware of the events in Syria/Iraq as her husband had already traveled there before. However, they decided both to join the conflict of Syria and Iraq and traveled together for a second time. Arta says “my decision to go to Syria/Iraq was one of the best decisions I have ever made.”<sup>27</sup>

Another case of women who voluntarily decided to join violent extremist groups such as ISIS, was the case of Nora, who decided to be the third wife of her “husband”. Moreover, the family of Nora couldn’t accept the marriage with her husband because they knew that he was married already two times before. Nora had decided that she wanted to be the bride of a ‘jihadists’ and she would only get married in the so called ‘Islamic State’.<sup>28</sup> According to Zeri, Nora explains that she knows who Lavdrim Muhaxheri is and what he has done, nevertheless she claims that what Muhaxheri has done is not something evil or a crime but he is rather a good person.<sup>29</sup>

24 Raghavan.S. & Balasubramanian.V. “Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups: Progression or Regression?”, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, 2014. 15(2) pg.207

25 Ibid

26 Names of the women who joined the conflict of Syria/Iraq are fictional as the interviewees themselves requested that their identity remain private.

27 Interview with A.L. 4/10/2016

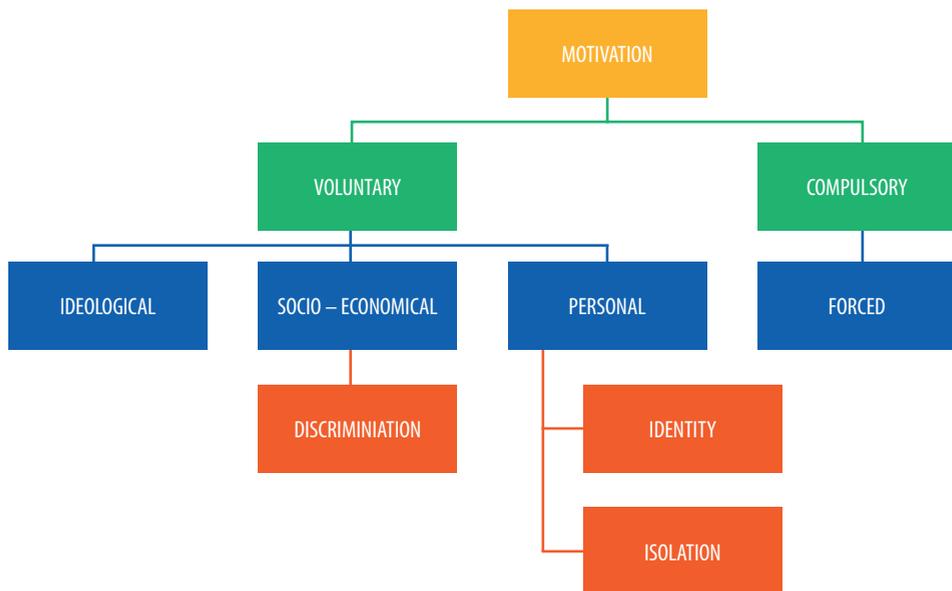
28 “Ne ISIS per t’u martuar” 19/11/2015 <http://zeri.info/aktuale/62789/ne-isis-per-t-u-martuar/>

29 “Ne ISIS per t’u martuar” 19/11/2015 <http://zeri.info/aktuale/62789/ne-isis-per-t-u-martuar/>

Second, there are cases of women who decided not to join the conflict even though they experienced pressure from their husbands or partners who participated in extremist organizations.<sup>30</sup> As is the case of 'Rita' who despite her husbands persistence, decided not to travel to the conflict zone of Syria and Iraq.

Third, the report finds that there are cases of women who were forced into joining the conflict of Syria and Iraq as a direct consequence of dependency to their families and husbands.

In order to understand this better we have graphically presented the typology of Kosovo women participants in the conflict of Syria and Iraq in the Figure 1. Below, which further includes the drivers behind each category's participation in the conflict – drivers which we discuss in subsequent sections



**Figure 1. Typology and drives behind Kosovo women's participation in violent extremism**

Accordingly, not only can we speak about different types of women participating in conflict (voluntary and compulsory), but there are also different motivations and influences driving each of these types to join violent extremist groups. As the graph above shows, there are very complex push and pull factors that drive women towards

30 Interview with S.C. 05/11/2016

violent extremists organizations such as: Ideological factors, socio – economical, personal factors (identity and isolation).

We can also not ignore the fact that there are several women who have been forced by their husbands or other members of their families to join the conflict of Syria/ Iraq. This can be explained mainly due to economical dependency by their husbands as these women are unemployed and do not have support neither from their own families or society in general. For instance, according to the newspaper Zeri ‘Suzana’ were unemployed prior to joining the conflict of Syria and Iraq. Moreover, ‘Suzana’ had only finished high school and did not attend university classes.<sup>31</sup> Thus, giving clear signs of economical dependency on her husband.

#### 4.1. Ideological factors

Undoubtedly, many women have played a prominent role in protecting Islam and Islamic communities in the course of history. Female participation in *jihad* originated with the Prophet’s spouses serving as ‘behind – the scenes’ sources of council and support in his *jihadi* struggle against his Meccan enemies<sup>32</sup>. It therefore did not involve them in combat operations. Some Islamists scholars have argued for women’s participation in an indirect or passive capacity – to provide support for male *jihadis* and to produce the next generation of *jihadis*.<sup>33</sup>

There have been numerous articles highlighting and discussing how women are portrayed in Islam in general. When discussing this matter with representatives from the Women’s department at the Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK), they claim that in Islam women are regarded highly and with much respect. According to the representatives of the Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK), women have the right to inheritance, a practice that has not been appreciated in the Albanian society in general due to the Kanun.<sup>34</sup> Such comparisons are consistently made with the purpose of stressing that there are no gender divisions in the Quran when it comes to enforcing Islamic principles.<sup>35</sup> According to this line of thought, “women should receive education and work if necessary”.<sup>36</sup>

31 “Grate nga Kosova ne krye te kampeve te ISIS-it” 26/01/2016 <http://zeri.info/aktuale/73479/grate-nga-kosova-ne-krye-te-kampeve-te-isis-it-foto/>

32 Saikal.A. “Women and Jihad: Combating Violent Extremism and Developing New Approaches to Conflict Resolution in the Greater Middle East”, Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, Vol.36, No.3, 2016. Pg.316

33 Ibid

34 Kanun refers to the traditional unwritten law and social norms respected by the Albanian communities in the highlands of Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and Macedonia

35 Interview with representative of the women’s department of the Islamic Association of Kosovo (30/09/2016)

36 Ibid

However, different scholars have been questioning whether women are presented equally opposite to men in Islamic scriptures. For instance, the historian David Landes declared that Muslim societies accord women an inferior place and that this is clearly related to attitudes cultivated in Islam.<sup>37</sup> According to him, in courts of law the testimony of women is weighted less than that of men.<sup>38</sup> The unequal position of women in Islamic scriptures is also shown in the verse 34 of chapter 4 titled al – Nisa (The Women) which declares that men are superior to women and which is interpreted by some to give the husband the right to apply corporal punishment to unruly wives.<sup>39</sup>

When the representatives of the BIK were asked if according to Islamic practices women are allowed to participate in a conflict or in *jihad*, the answer was a definitive no. However, the general consent is that even though women are not allowed to participate directly in combat they have historically aided fighters in conflict by providing medical assistance and care, housekeeping duties (cooking, cleaning etc).<sup>40</sup>

Some of our interviewees declared that when the fight began between the different extremist groups in Syria and Iraq, a number of foreign fighters from Kosovo have been killed while in combat.<sup>41</sup> According to them, their wives were forcibly pushed into marrying other jihadists. The reasons why some of these women agreed to remarry with other jihadists is because they were threatened by the leaders of the extremists groups. Some of the threats included leaving them to starve unless they do what they are told, and in cases where they fell ill they were not allowed to visit the doctor or buy medication. This seems to be as a strategy of the extremists organizations to force some of these women into marriage, forty days after their husbands have died.<sup>42</sup>

According to our interviews with BIK, it appears that they are treating women who have participated in the conflict to Syria and Iraq as victims. A Mitrovica based imam explains that it was the mentality from our past which shows that “the wife should be where the husband is”. From his view some of the women are lured by the big houses and the propaganda about practicing life under Islamic law. Another factor which he added is that “they are more prone to be sensitive” as women, therefore, they were told that when they cook or care for jihadist they will have a reward from Allah.<sup>43</sup>

The debates from the representatives of state institutions in Kosovo regarding women’s participation in conflict is usually treated from the perspective of women

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37 Masoud.T. & Amaney.J. & Elizabeth.N. “Using the Quran to Empower Arab Women? Theory and Experimental Evidence from Egypt”, Comparative Political Studies, 2016. Vol.49(12), pg.1555-1598

38 Ibid pg.1561

39 Ibid

40 Interview with representative of women’s department of the Islamic Association of Kosovo (30/09/2016)

41 Interview with I.L. in prison 28/06/2016 & Interview with A.L. 4/10/2016

42 Interview with I.L. in prison 28/06/2016 & Interview with A.L. 4/10/2016

43 Interview with imam Enis Rama 09.11.2016 Mitrovica

being a victim of the lack of prosperity, poor education, or having them forced by their husbands. However, one of the Kosovo women who participated on conflict to Syria and Iraq during the interview, argued that she was not forced by her husband to join the conflict, and that simply it was her wish to join the conflict of Syria and Iraq. She claimed that she dreamt of joining and living in the Islamic State.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the mother of a young Kosovo women who is still in Syria and Iraq, lamented that despite efforts to bring her daughter back in Kosovo, even after her husband died in conflict there, she refused and chose the life in Syria.<sup>45</sup> Here we are dealing with women who were educated, and despite the loss of their husbands, they acted against the efforts to bring them back to Kosovo. Furthermore, 'Arta' who came back explains that some of the women which she met there from Kosovo seem to be happy in Syria prior the conflict between extremists groups had begun.<sup>46</sup>

Women who are joining violent extremist organizations such as ISIS, are not only rejecting a culture from the West but they are also embracing a new worldview. They hope to contribute to ISIS society governed by a strict interpretation of Sharia Law. Women who join the violent extremist organization of ISIS are told that they have an instrumental role to play in this new society, and that this role is based on their religious duty to do so. Most women who have joined violent extremist organizations are convinced that it was their mandatory duty to join these conflicts. Within this radicalization process, women, as much as men, have a strong belief in the afterlife, and fulfilling this perceived religious duty is seen as key into securing their place in heaven.<sup>47</sup>

## 4.2. Education & Employment

While it cannot be assumed that all citizens who have joined the conflicts of Syria and Iraq share the same socio – economic circumstances, it is clear that a specific socio – economic profile is dominant among the people who have joined violent extremist organizations. For instance, all of the women that KCSS has interviewed have finished their high school and at least one year of their university degree. However, all of them without exception have not worked prior to joining the conflicts of Syria/Iraq and continue to not work now that they have returned to Kosovo.

This can be illustrated by the case of one of the women who has traveled to Syria/Iraq together with her husband to join the extremist organization of ISIS – who stated that her living and social conditions immediately improved while in Syria as there was

44 Interview with A.L 4/10/2016

45 Interview with K.LL 02/12/2016 (Mother of a women already in Syria/Iraq)

46 Interview with A.L 15/12/2016

47 Saltman.E.& Melanie.S. "Till Martyrdom Do Us Part- Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon" Institute for Strategic Dialogue, January 2015 pg.15

a functioning welfare program.<sup>48</sup> When in Syria they received a house to live in and enjoyed, what one of them said, a “happy life”.<sup>49</sup> Back in Kosovo, she is unemployed and only supports her family through social welfare. She lives in poor conditions together with six other members of her husband’s family none of whom are employed. Together with her family, they are isolated from their community and live in poverty. If we put the socio-economic aspects in conjunction with other push and pull factors, one can observe that they do not necessarily play a direct role in pushing women to join the violent extremist organizations. These factors, can, however, be used as a strong justification when these women engage in mental comparisons of life in Kosovo with their life, and dedication, when joining ISIS governing areas or other similar groups.

### 4.3. Family and other social conditions

In the case of extremist groups, women are undermined and their basic human rights are restricted. Many of the extremist groups call for women and men to turn back to ‘traditional’ and ‘natural’ roles<sup>50</sup>. This is shown more prominently in the case of ISIS – the “Women’s Manifesto of the Al-Khansa brigade” requests that Muslim women have a duty to leave the ‘Western way of living’ where women have taken the role of men and calls upon men to return to the ‘true nature of men’.<sup>51</sup> Women, according to this document, are supposed to be wives and good mothers of the next generation of lions<sup>52</sup>.

#### Social discrimination

The report finds that another factor that has influenced women to join the conflict of Syria and Iraq on a voluntary basis is the feeling of being discriminated on religious grounds, and the exclusion from institutions. For example, one of the interviewees stated that she does not believe that her rights as a young Muslim women are being respected since she laments that she was not allowed to attend a public high school while wearing a hijab.<sup>53</sup>

While the experience of discrimination alone, does not turn someone into a supporter of violent extremism, it does serve to fuel feelings of isolation within a larger community and a sense of distance from the culture or society one lives in. This, in essence leaves

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48 Interview with A.L. 15/12/2016

49 Interview with A.L. 15/12/2016

50 “Women Preventing Violent Extremism – Charting a New Course”, United States Institute of Peace, 2016 pg.8

51 Winter.Ch. Translation of “Women of the Islamic State – A Manifesto on women by the Al – Khansaa Brigade”, 2015

52 Ibid

53 Interview with S.K. 05/11/2016

an individual more vulnerable to extremist narratives, whose propaganda is mainly focused in creating a sense of belonging.

The statistics from the Kosovo Security Barometer (2016) show that women who are practitioners of Islam show more trust towards religious institutions<sup>54</sup> with 62% of women trusting more religious institutions than 51% of men; whilst few or very little have had contact with BIK. For instance, 67 % of women say that they have never had contact with BIK compared to 52% of men.<sup>55</sup> In one hand, these statistics show that BIK has not advocated to incorporate more women into their structures firstly, but also to advocate on behalf of muslim women's rights.

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## 5. RECRUITMENT (WOMEN AND CHILDREN)

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An important aspect of radicalization of women is the recruitment process to organizations promoting violent extremist ideologies. Recruitment of violent extremists groups such as ISIS is highly sophisticated and done through a gender perspective. Women and girls are recruited in a different manner compared to the recruitment of men and boys<sup>56</sup>. This process is tailor made for and directed to women and girls who are in a more vulnerable position than others. What this means is that ISIS recruiters mainly target young Muslim women in the Western countries through social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Ask.fm, etc.). Also, more often than not, these young women are seduced with promises of marriage with jihadists, the promise of belonging to a community and sisterhood and are being told that they are fulfilling the ultimate duty as a Muslim young women.<sup>57</sup> This report, however, does not find anything specific in regards to some special recruitment directed towards women in Kosovo.

When analyzing the case of Kosovo and the phenomenon of violent extremism, a pattern can be noted – most of the women that have migrated to Syria and Iraq have done so accompanied by their husbands and families. This is more noted in the case of

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54 "The citizens' views against violent extremism and radicalization in Kosovo" [http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Raporti\\_final\\_CVE-Barometri\\_969038.pdf](http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Raporti_final_CVE-Barometri_969038.pdf)

55 "The citizens' views against violent extremism and radicalization in Kosovo" [http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Raporti\\_final\\_CVE-Barometri\\_969038.pdf](http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Raporti_final_CVE-Barometri_969038.pdf)

56 Caliphate Calling: How Islamic State appeals to women 28/02/2015 <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21645206-how-islamic-state-appeals-women-caliphate-calling>

57 Ibid & <http://english.aawsat.com/2016/10/article55359989/isis-recruitment-western-arab-women> & <http://news.sky.com/story/what-became-of-bethnal-green-girls-lured-to-syria-to-join-is-10532801>

Kosovo than other countries in Western Europe such as France, Belgium etc.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, it is very important to analyze why families together decide to join the conflict of Syria and Iraq and what can we learn from different cases of family radicalization.

Another aspect which is very important related to recruitment are the children of Kosovo who are victims of their fathers or mothers taking part in conflict in Syria and Iraq. Our findings show that there are 27 children from Kosovo currently in Syria and Iraq. There are instances of male participants who have taken only their children to Syria and Iraq, often without informing their wives – the mothers of their children. For example, in 2014 there was a case when one man decided to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq and took his son with him. His wife remained unaware of her husband's undertaking. Three months of investigation and efforts by various state authorities brought the eight year old child back. At the time, there were conflicting reports about the boy's father fate; some said he had been killed, while other said that he was alive. The case highlighted several problems: first, that there was a lack of coordination between the Intelligence Agency of Kosovo with other institutions involved in the matter. Second, after the boy returned, the entire family of boy was being threatened and the case was not handled rightly.

It is noted that not all male participants in the conflict of Syria and Iraq have migrated there together with their wives and children. There have been several cases where the wives have declined to travel with their husbands and instead have chosen to stay in Kosovo. Such is the case 'Rita' whose husband, a radicalized person, had decided to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq and attempted to convince her to join him. However, regardless of this fact, she strongly rejected her husband's wish, and currently lives in a village in Kosovo at her parents' house. 'Rita' was very young when she started a relationship with him; they were together throughout their university studies. In their third and final year, however, her then to be husband began to be radicalized. She claims that he started to visit very often a mosque in Gjilan<sup>59</sup>, during the same period when imam Zekirija Qazimi was still active (he is already sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment on recruitment on terrorism and hate speech charges)<sup>60</sup>. During this time, he started to express great feeling of empathy for the civilians in Syria and Iraq and kept saying that it is every Muslim's obligation and duty to help them. He then left his wife and son to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

Before parting to Syria and Iraq 'Rita' told us that 'Arben' insisted on her wearing a *hijab* as she was an unveiled woman. 'Rita' denied firmly. In the first months after his departure to Syria and Iraq they kept contact and 'Arben' invited her to join him

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58 Saltman Marie & Ross Frennet "Female Radicalisation to ISIS and the role of women in CVE" pg.142-169 in Fink.N. & Sara.Z. & Rafia. B. "A man's world, Exploring the roles of women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism" 2016 pg.149

59 Interview with R.T. 28/09/2016

60 Denohet ish-imami Zekirija Qazimi 20/05/2016 <http://kallxo.com/denohet-zeqirja-qazimi/>

in Syria and Iraq. She refused and when we asked why she did not want to migrate there she responded by saying that “I knew something was not right there”, and then she continued to explain that ‘Arben’ requested again that she wears a *hijab* after he returns to Kosovo. That was the last time she spoke to him on the phone, three years ago. ‘Rita’ told us she has received news that ‘Arben’ has been killed or captured by Assad forces on June 2015.

This case is quite interesting as this ‘Rita’ does not represent the stereotype of a woman victim of her husband’s coercion. She is unemployed and refuses to continue her education. After she received news of ‘Arbens’ departure to Syria/Iraq she was hospitalized and continues to show signs of depression. ‘Rita’ is tremendously disappointed by her husband’s actions and quite tired from the prejudices of her neighbors and other people in the village where she lives together with her parents and her son now.

“My son is everything I have now, and I only want to provide him with a better life” she says, almost in tears.<sup>61</sup> ‘Rita’ father, a 70 year old man, cannot endure her daughter’s suffering, because even though she refused to follow her husband to Syria and Iraq she feels she is being punished by her community for the mere fact of having been the wife of a person that decided to fight in Syria and Iraq. ‘Rita’ together with her family are being marginalized and disenfranchised by their neighbors and other people in the village as they do not want anything to do with them.

## 5.1. Women and girls who have migrated with their husbands/families

None of the women from Kosovo have migrated to Syria and Iraq alone but accompanied by their husbands and families<sup>62</sup>. As this is the situation in Kosovo, one can argue that the propaganda of violent extremist groups such as ISIS does not work in the same way with the women of Kosovo as it does with women from other parts of the world.

Firstly, there are numerous videos online targeted to women but they are mainly in English, targeting women living in Western countries, mainly Great Britain.<sup>63</sup> In the case of Kosovo, KCSS researchers could not find propaganda videos that target specifically women from Kosovo or other Albanian speaking areas through propaganda tailored

61 Interview with R.T. 28/09/2016

62 Fatos Makolli Interview on Rubikon 27/09/2016, Accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JvhLcriZHaM>

63 “Foreign women in Syria! Face the Truth New” Accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQUJGB6zJKs> & “Nje femer nga britania ne lufte ne Siri” Accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUQeOq16n-Q>

in the Albanian language. This is contrary to several propaganda videos done by men targeting other men in the Albanian language.<sup>64</sup>

It is inherently difficult to describe women who are migrating to Syria and Iraq with one single profile. Each has a different background and story to tell and there are different push and pull factors that drove these women and girls to migrate to Syria and Iraq. However, some general characteristics can be noted among the women participants to the conflict of Syria and Iraq: (i) young; (ii) lack of information about the conflict in Syria and Iraq; (iii) married at a young age (around twenties); (iv) began practicing religion very recently prior to joining the conflict (the process was quick) (v) experienced a traumatic event (loss of a loved one or other personal event) earlier in their life.

'Arta' is one of the women who has traveled to foreign conflicts in Syria and Iraq. She is 26 years old, her father died when she was only 8 while she lost her mother when she was 18 years old. After her parent's death, her brothers looked after her. While she was living with her brothers she did not have any financial difficulties. She was enrolled in the university, and her family was pushing her to finish her studies; however, she quit when she was on her third year of her studies. She speaks fluent English.

Her family did not like I.L. for their brother in law, because they didn't see him as a good match for their sister. When asked if her husband (who has been a participant in the conflict in Syria and Iraq) has pushed her in any way to migrate together in the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, she said that she was not coerced to go to Syria and she decided herself to join him and migrate together. She continues to say that Islam obliges her to do so, and thus "if you practice Islam you feel good when you help people and it is your religious duty to do so".<sup>65</sup> Her family was not informed on her decision to migrate to Syria and Iraq, instead they were deceived and told that she, together with her husband, were migrating to France in search of a better life.

Moreover, the recruitment process in this case was done through her husband and not directly from ISIS propaganda. At the time of the interview, she was not regretful of her decision to join the conflict of Syria and Iraq. She emphasized the fact that if the conflict would not have started she would prefer to continue living in Syria. During the interview she was crying for her Somalian friend whom she considered to be her sister. 'Arta' stresses that she is not in contact with her and she has no information if her friend is still alive or not.<sup>66</sup>

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64 "Thirja per xhihad" Accessed at [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=thirja%20per%20xhihad%20%20shqip%20](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=thirja%20per%20xhihad%20%20shqip%20)

65 Interview with A.L. 15/12/2016

66 Ibid

However, when KCSS researchers asked her if she still supports ISIS her answer was: “definitely yes”. People who potentially are radicalized do not believe in the current system in Kosovo or elsewhere in the West and wish to live under an Islamic rule/Sharia law. This case portrays the fact that the state institutions in Kosovo should focus on de-radicalization process and that these programs should be tailor made for each case. KCSS researchers note that ‘Arta’ continues to be radicalized; however, the fact that she has agreed to discuss with the researchers from KCSS is a first good sign on the possibility of some of these cases to be more meaningfully engaged with the other part of society which could lead to her re-integration and acceptance of the social norms outside ISIS’s context.

‘Arta’ is a very peculiar case as it only confirms the view that women are not only victims of but very often join willingly violent extremists groups. For instance, ‘Arta’ can be considered a well educated person who does not come from a poor socio-economic background. What seems to be the strongest factor that has contributed to her radicalization is her marriage or union with her partner who was already a radicalized person and believed in extremists ideologies.

Recruitment is one of the most important aspects of radicalization, especially for women. Violent extremist organizations have proven to have very efficient recruitment mechanisms especially targeting western women, as they are constantly being reminded that in the territory of the so – called Islamic State they will not be looked upon as “sexual objects” but rather valued as mothers who are capable of raising the next generation of Muslims. This is not prevalent in the case of Kosovar women, as potential recruiters may be aware of a different mindset regarding women in Kosovo’s context compared to that in the West. Rather than creating special recruitment materials – with online propaganda, the already radicalized men who have some sort of a relationship to women became one of the main “recruiters” or in this case facilitators of these women’s travel to Syria and Iraq.

## 5.2. Life in Syria and Iraq for Kosovo Women

Women from Kosovo, while living in ISIS held territory tend to keep to traditional gender roles and norms. They were not seen outside their houses and their duties were restricted to domestic life (mainly cooking, cleaning and taking care of their children)<sup>67</sup>. Kosovar women largely stayed together mainly due to the fact that they spoke the same language. Married women stayed with their husbands and were

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67 Taken from the interviews with A.L. (04/10/2016) and N.P. (08/10/2016)

separated from single women who lived in other houses, called *maqqa*<sup>68</sup>, until they receive a marriage offer<sup>69</sup>. This has been described in several different accounts and many women noted this. Even though these women lead predominantly domestic lives, their domestic roles are glorified; they view their roles not limiting but rather as spiritually righteous ones.<sup>70</sup>

However, our interviewees were very careful to emphasize that these houses did not represent in any way military camps or any of the likes, as previously pointed out that women under IS rule cannot hold combat positions or participate in *'jihad'* directly. Women migrants were not allowed to carry weapons as participants in combat in any form or manner.<sup>71</sup> While one can find several online videos of women holding weapons and even shooting in some cases, our interviewees said that if women there [in Syria/Iraq] had weapons they were used for protection.<sup>72</sup> Women in these conflict zones are seen merely as mothers and wives of jihadists who "will raise the next generation of mujahids"<sup>73,74</sup>. Moreover, the informants confirmed that "they [women] were not permitted to even visit the camps where the foreign fighters were training for combat".<sup>75</sup>

Some reports in the local media citing sources from "security sector"<sup>76</sup> in Kosovo have spoken about the existence of "camps" that are led by some Kosovo women foreign fighters. Despite an in-depth research to trace the existence of such camps through our interviews with various women directly involved in conflict and those in security sector, we could not verify the existence of or leadership position of Kosovo women in such "camps". We believe the term "camps" remains vague, as one cannot know if it refers to the living compounds mentioned above, or some conventional military camps. Based on the interviews conducted with women migrants to conflict of Syria and Iraq but also while consulting the literature (including ISIS publications directed to

68 Saltman & Ross, 2016 pg.151

"Life for women in IS held territory is the same every day. Women cook, gather together and talk, and the men go to fight in battles. There are no camps for women, camps are only open to men and women are not allowed to enter. We had weapons, but they were only for our safety, not that we have fought or that we participated in the conflict."

Interview with A.L., (04/10/2016)

69 Ibid.

70 Fink.N. & Sara.Z. & Rafia. B. "A Man's World" 2016

71 Ibid & "Till Martyrdom Do us Part" Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015. Pg.14

72 Taken from interview with A.L. (04/10/2016)

73 "The Fitrah of Mankind – And the Near- Extinction of the Western Woman" Dabiq Magazine, 2015 edition pg.23

74 Winter.Ch. Translation of "Women of the Islamic State – A Manifesto on women by the Al – Khanssaa Brigade", 2015 pg.17-18

75 Taken from the interview with A.L. (04/10/2016)

76 "Grate nga Kosova ne krye te kampeve te ISIS-it" 26/01/2016 <http://zeri.info/aktuale/73479/grate-nga-kosova-ne-krye-te-kampeve-te-isis-it-foto/>

women and for women) it is evident that women in Syria and Iraq do not have the right to hold any leadership positions. Besides claim to establish the rule of the Sharia Law, ISIS has gone one step further and has consolidated a type of women police named the Al – Khanssaa Brigade.<sup>77</sup> Their main role is to ensure that women are dressed properly and are acting properly and in accordance with the Law established by ISIS. The publication of the so called “Women of the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study” gives clear instructions and describes the role of women in IS held territory. The English translations say that “women must stay behind closed doors and leave the house only in exceptional circumstances.”<sup>78</sup> It continues to argue that the “fundamental function” of a woman is to be in her house with her husband and children, while adding that women may be allowed to leave the house in very exceptional circumstances – to wage *jihad* only and only then when there are no men available, to study religion, and that female doctors and teachers are permitted to leave their premises only when keeping strictly to the ISIS interpreted Sharia guidelines.<sup>79</sup>

The role and responsibility of women are further retortiated in the online magazine that ISIS publishes monthly. The Dabiq Magazine which has been published online and targets mainly the “West” promotes similar values. In their last edition it published an article specifically targeted to women where the ‘proper’ way of life was being described.

According to present evidence, it is highly doubtful that women in general, and especially those from Kosovo, are leading any of these so called “camps”. Even if and when some women participates in the Al-Khanssaa brigade, this is not part of armed wing of ISIS fighting any battles, thus they do not partake in direct combat operations. Women who partake in the brigade are only allowed to ensure that the law is being properly respected. This is different when you compare ISIS with other extremist groups such as Boko Haram for example or even Al – Qaeda/Al – Nusra where women have been known to participate in terrorist actions such as suicide bombings. This report cannot rule out the possibility of having Kosovo women participating in some violent acts, though with the available evidence so far, this report rejects such a hypotheses.

77 “Female jihadis publish guide to life under Islamic State” 05/02/2015

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/05/jihadist-girl-marry-liberation-failed-islamic-state>

78 Winter.Ch. Translation of “Women of the Islamic State – A Manifesto on women by the Al – Khanssaa Brigade”, 2015

79 Winter.Ch. Translation of “Women of the Islamic State – A Manifesto on women by the Al – Khanssaa Brigade”, 2015

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## 6. WOMEN AS PREVENTERS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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Women have been long overlooked when discussing prevention and de-radicalization efforts. Recent studies suggest that women have a strong role to play especially in prevention in generally<sup>80</sup> including in Kosovo. Women without Borders, an organization based in Austria, conducted a study in 2013, in Pakistan, Israel, Palestine, Northern Ireland and Nigeria to test the hypothesis that mothers are often more connected to their families and communities and therefore it is essential to recognize that they have an important part to play in prevention efforts. The study confirmed the hypothesis, as it found that mothers have a continuous presence in their children's lives, with deeply rooted connections and an understanding of push and pull factors: of what excites them, upsets them, and what might seduce them into a community of violence.<sup>81</sup> The same study found that mothers specifically feared several individual and social characteristics as risk factors: 1. A desire for revenge, 2. Community Instability, 3. Vulnerability to peer pressure, 4. Trauma and/or loss and 5. Self Isolation<sup>82</sup>; factors that not rarely can be noted within people who are in the phase of radicalization or believe in violent extremist ideologies.

When we discuss women as preventors of violent extremism, another successful engagement of women in prevention of violent extremism, is the case of the women who created "Mothers for Life", a network of women who have lost their children to jihadi battle groups.<sup>83</sup> These women or mothers are very active to raise awareness and support the parents. It is the second time that these women on Mother's Day – the world's only international association of mothers who have lost their children as so called "foreign fighters", 'Mothers for Life' have published an open letter to the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The letter shares their feelings of their lost children, their roles on prevention and that these women encourage all the parents around the world to ask for help and support and to speak out the truth.

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80 "Can Mothers Challenge Extremism? Mothers' perceptions and attitudes of radicalization and violent extremism" Women without Borders, 2015

81 Ibid

82 Ibid pg.4

83 "There was nobody to help me stop my son joining ISIS" 02/05/2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/02/joining-isis-foreign-jihadis-syria-deradicalisation>

Almost one year ago we spoke about our feelings regarding you – our sons and daughters – who have been killed in Syria and Iraq or are being called to join a war that is not yours. Instead of answering our questions, we have been scorned, mocked and attacked by those claiming to uphold the values and traditions of Islam and those who hate Islam. In attacking us they found alliance. Representatives of the so called 'Islamic State' called us ridiculous and dismissed the pain we felt about losing you.<sup>84</sup>

The role of parents, and mother specifically was emphasized by one of our interviewees as well. Albert Berisha a returned exforeign fighter from Syria and Iraq to Kosovo told us his experience; Albert explains how his mother had played the most important role in his decision to return to Kosovo:

I was in Syria when we celebrated Eid and I received a phone call from my mother. She was wishing me a Happy Eid and that was the moment I decided to return to Kosovo because I missed my mother. Her voice reminded me of the love that my mother has for me and the sacrifice she had to endure during mine and my siblings upbringing. I knew that she would be very disappointed by my decision and that I had to do everything I can to return to Kosovo, for her sake.<sup>85</sup>

In the case of Kosovo women or mothers of foreign fighters are marginalized by society. When KCSS met some of them they refused to talk about their children. Compared to other countries, such as the UK or Germany, Kosovo still does not see any role that mothers can play in preventing violent extremism. Institutions of Kosovo should empower these women, should give them the support because these women can share their experiences about their children and can be very helpful in relation to other parents and young women who can be potentially radicalized.

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84 Mothers for Life: <http://girds.org/mothersforlife>

85 Interview with Albert Berisha 12/01/2017

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## 7. CONCLUSIONS

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This report concludes:

1. There is no “one type” of Kosovo women who have joined the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Some of them have joined voluntarily – driven by different motives, while others have been compelled to do so. Moreover, the report finds that empowering young women, and especially mothers, in all aspects of social and public life is crucial to diminish radicalization of women that leads to violent extremism.
2. Portraying women solely as victims of violent extremists organizations is incorrect and obstructive as the report finds that there women who have not only willingly joined the violent extremists organization but have helped in the recruitment, or convincing, process of other women as well.
3. Although these women may have joined violent extremist organizations with the intention of supporting the so called ‘jihad’, their role is quite restricted as ISIS for example does not allow women to partake in combat, and provides very little public space for women. Women’s activity is restricted to domestic life and they are valued solely as mothers who will raise the next generation of ‘lions’.
4. While education and other socio – economic factors do play a role in the radicalization process, however these factors are not the main cause of violent extremism. What seems to be more important than these [level of education & socio – economic factors] are individual traits such as the need to prove oneself and past traumatic experience (loss of a loved one or other events).
5. The base of radicalization is non – conformism. People who are radicalized and have joined violent extremist groups are not satisfied with the current system (social or political) and wish to change it. They choose to channel their non – conformist feelings by joining violent extremist groups.
6. During the period of data collection for this report, it was noted that women are excluded and not represented by any organization that deals with gender equality. Women are not represented by civil society organizations and by BIK. However, this is not the case in all municipalities in Kosovo but it is more noted in smaller municipalities.

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this report KCSS has the following recommendations:

### **To the Government of Kosovo:**

1. In a global discourse the role of women in prevention and de-radicalization process has a crucial place. This is noted especially in societies where mothers have an important role in the children's lives. The government of Kosovo should empower the role of women in general and mothers specifically to prevent violent extremism. This can be done by different activities at the local level to engage these women in all levels of decision – making processes.
2. Women from Kosovo who have returned from the conflicts of Syria and Iraq are isolated and do not partake in rehabilitation and reintegration processes. Therefore, KCSS recommends that these women should be included in these programs that are also part of the Strategy for preventing violent extremism and radicalization that leads to terrorism 2015 – 2020.<sup>86</sup>
3. These programs should be tailor made for each case of women who has returned from the conflict of Syria and Iraq and they should focus on the personal needs of each woman who has returned to Kosovo from the conflicts of Syria and Iraq. This has shown to be successful in other countries who have enforced such de-radicalization programs.
4. Families should be included in de-radicalization programs because they are prejudged by the community and excluded from the institutions.

### **To the BIK:**

1. The BIK should provide more space to women who wish to be active within this institution, and empower them based on its traditional practices and Constitution.
2. The BIK should be more proactive in fighting discrimination against Muslim women religious practitioners in Kosovo.

86 "STRATEGJIA PËR PARANDALIMIN E EKSTREMIZMIT TË DHUNSHËM DHE RADIKALIZMIT QË SHPIE NË TERRORIZËM 2015 - 2020" [http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGJIA\\_parandalim\\_-\\_SHQIP.pdf](http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGJIA_parandalim_-_SHQIP.pdf)

3. The department of women of the BIK – Kosovo Women BIK should be supported more from the representatives of the Islamic community.
4. Only when practitioner Muslim women are empowered within the BIK and the Islamic community in general and in each municipality, women will be able to contribute to preventing measures on violent extremism. This should be enforced because women will be able to receive information and lectures directly from the BIK and will not be relying in their husbands or other members of their families lectures on Islam.

***To the Civil Society Organizations:***

1. The work of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) organizations should not only be focused in Prishtina, but it should expand to more rural areas of Kosovo as well.
2. CSOs that deal with gender equality should focus on creating programs that empower the role of mothers especially in rural areas, as through our research it was noted that mothers play a very important role in prevention and de – radicalization process. Their role is especially important in recognizing first signs of radicalization such as: isolation, change of behavior, trauma, how children spend their free time etc.
3. These organizations should focus in empowering the role of women in rural areas, where most of the population of Kosovo resides. These organizations should serve as a platform where women feel safe to express their opinions not only about violent extremism but also regarding other concerns that they might have.
4. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Kosovo should have more cooperation with the Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK) especially in a local level and with the women’s department inside BIK.
5. CSOs should encourage programs of de-radicalization that provide the necessary conditions for women who have been involved in the conflicts of Syria and Iraq to discuss freely about their experience. Moreover, CSOs should not be bias towards women who have been in conflicts of Syria and Iraq.

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