

Intersectionality and Jihadism: Understanding the Movement of Georgian Women to Syria and Iraq

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June 6, 2020

Introduction

The advent and expansion of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), as well as the conflict in Syria, saw the participation of multiple rebel and jihadist groups operating in Syria and Iraq.¹ People from the world over journeyed to join ISIS or other jihadist groups in this area.² Though in gross numbers, the number of Georgians that left for Syria and Iraq starting from the onset of the Syrian civil war, was not overwhelming, the small size of Georgia's population renders this a significant exodus.³ The foreign fighter recruitment rate relative to Georgia's Muslim population is the second highest when compared with the rest of the Post-Soviet states.⁴

ISIS used the active recruitment of women as a strategic tool to expand their membership and garner increased media attention and coverage.⁵ While women provided a clear asset for fulfilling their aims, how ISIS advertised membership to be of benefit to women, is less straightforward. It is important to investigate why women chose to leave their own countries and align themselves with ISIS, or other jihadist groups because these groups often promote values that are antithetical to rights enshrined in international treaties, for example, allowing child marriage.⁶ The disregard of human rights has manifested in extreme violence against women in areas captured by ISIS. Women in these areas who were defined as unbelievers were subsequently subjected to torture, execution, mistreatment while imprisoned, and sexual slavery.⁷ Female members of ISIS also had to adhere to strict behavioural rules.⁸ Women leaving peaceful countries for Syria and Iraq put themselves at elevated bodily risk both in travelling into or through conflict zones, and once under

1. Bennett Clifford, "Georgian Foreign Fighter Deaths In Syria And Iraq: What Can They Tell Us About Foreign Fighter Mobilization And Recruitment?", *Caucasus Survey* 6, no. 1 (2017): 62, 66, 70.

2. Daniel Milton and Brian Dodwell, "Jihadi Brides? Examining a Female Guesthouse Registry from the Islamic State's Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 5 (2018): 19-22.

3. Clifford, "Georgian Foreign Fighter Deaths," 62.

4. Clifford, "Georgian Foreign Fighter Deaths," 62.

5. Amanda Spencer, "The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State," *Journal of strategic Security* 9, no. 3 (2016): 78.

6. Rangita de Silva de Alwis, "Child Marriage and the Law: Legislative Reform Initiative – Paper Series," *United Nations Children's Fund*, (2007): 3-23.

7. Anita Perešin, "Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 3 (2015): 21.

8. Anita Perešin, "Fatal Attraction," 21.

the auspices of ISIS or other groups. Even if the choice was seemingly taken freely, it is crucial to understand why some women traded life in their own country for a situation in which certain of their freedoms and rights in terms of dress, freedom of movement, and professional opportunities were curbed.⁹ Though the list of opportunities afforded women within ISIS or other groups is more varied than often perceived, the options remain dominated by domestic roles such as cooking, cleaning, satisfying the sexual desires of male members of the group, and bearing and caring for children.¹⁰ It is crucial to understand the dynamics of power and oppression in the countries and regions from which women leave in order to fully understand their choices and experiences.

How it comes to pass that the appeal held by a woman's own community is outweighed by an alternative with significant personal risk is crucial to understand. The accounts put forth within or by news outlets, popular culture, and some academic sources tend to lack nuance when writing about women's reasons for committing violence or aligning themselves with jihadist groups. Such accounts often sexualize the account of violence by women or attribute limited agency to female perpetrators.¹¹ Additionally, these accounts often minimize women's influence within violent groups.¹² Though women comprised a minority of people who left their countries of citizenship to join ISIS, their reasons should be analysed through a gendered lens to comprehensively understand how societal factors may contribute to women's motivations to participate.¹³

The specific study of women is necessary to understand what draws them to, or deters them from, terrorist groups. Studying women who join jihadist groups is important in its own right but may also help to shed light on which factors keep women from joining in as high numbers as men.

9. Anita Perešin, "Fatal Attraction," 28-29.

10. Lere Amusan, Adebawale Idowu Adeyeye, and Samuel Oyewole, "Women as Agents of Terror: Women Resources and Gender Discourse in Terrorism and Insurgency," *Politikon* 46, no. 3 (2019): 354; Anita Perešin, "Fatal Attraction," 29.

11. Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, "Reduced to Bad Sex: Narratives of Violent Women from the Bible to the War on Terror," *International Relations* 22, no. 1 (2008): 6.

12. Spencer, "The Hidden Face of Terrorism," 74.

13. Erika Lorenzana Del Villar, "Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation to Global Jihad in the Islamic State," (review article), *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 2 (2019): 412.

This knowledge in turn could inform better policy on preventing departures of both women and men, and in dealing with returnees.

Applying an intersectional feminist lens can aid in building an explanation with greater nuance. It allows for a thorough interrogation of the experiences of women before departing their home countries and contributes to an understanding of the power dynamics at play that may have influenced their decision. If no oppression, or perceived oppression, exists within a community, it seems less likely that people would exit in favour of going somewhere that offered no greater freedom or benefits. Applying an intersectional lens may help to reveal patterns within a community that are largely unseen but may add to a woman's choice to leave it and join a jihadist group.

Intersectionality in This Context

The concept of intersectionality elucidates how people may experience multiple factors that work in dynamic ways to weave a tapestry of oppression within their life. The concept was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw and encapsulates "how each individual and group occupies a social position within interlocking structures of oppression."¹⁴ Additionally, it uncloaks how existing paradigms may function to normalize systems of knowledge, politics, and social structures that perpetuate marginalisation.¹⁵ The theory is feminist and situated within the broad scope of Critical Race Theory. It strives to reveal the "often hidden dynamics . . . in order to transform them" with the aim of positive social change.¹⁶ These are crucial dynamics to understand in a phenomenon such as that of this report because:

Studies in numerous states across many years have found measures of gender equality such as increased women's rights, female labor force participation, cultural attitudes to gender equality, average years of education, and representation in forms of governance to be

14. Hill Collins quoted in Gloria Holguín Cuádriz and Lynet Uttal "Intersectionality and In-depth Interviews: Methodological Strategies for Analyzing Race, Class, and Gender," *Race, Gender & Class* 6, no. 3 (1999): 159.

15. Devon W. Carbado et al., "Intersectionality: Mapping the Movements of a Theory," *Du Bois Review* 10, no. 2 (2013): 311.

16. Carbado, et al., "Intersectionality: Mapping the Movements," 311-312.

negatively related to terrorism and conflict.¹⁷

With this in mind, this paper will use the concept of intersectionality as a tool to analyse the factors that lead women to leave their home country to join jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. The main factors at play in this analysis will be gender, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status.

In the case of women leaving their own countries to join ISIS or other jihadist groups, it is important to dissect what systems of oppression and the limitations or discrimination faced by women in their home countries in order to understand how this may contribute to their willingness to depart. Even though on a macro level some of the countries that women left from were more favourable for women than ISIS- controlled Syria or Iraq, the daily realities of women do not always reflect the overall status of women in their country. It appears that some women who may have joined ISIS have strong regional affiliations, as they identified a sub-region within a country as their country of origin.¹⁸ This indicates the possibility that regional realities would perhaps be a more accurate measure of the status of women in some cases. Applying an intersectional lens allows local factors to be put in the context of larger systems in order to better understand the situation for specific groups of women.

The Women Who Left Georgia

There remain significant gaps in knowledge relating to specific statistics on women who left Georgia for Syria and Iraq. Some details on individuals and numbers are known, but they make for piecemeal coverage of the overall picture. Of the exodus from Georgia a minority of those who left were women. Adult women reportedly constituted 23% of ISIS affiliates from the region of Eastern Europe, including countries of the Balkans and Caucasus.¹⁹ Pokalova states that Elmira Suleymanova

17. Cyndi Banks, "Introduction: Women, Gender, and Terrorism: Gendering Terrorism," *Women & Criminal Justice* 29, no. 4-5 (2019): 185.

18. Milton and Dodwell, "Jihadi Brides?," 19.

19. Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State," *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation* (2018): 4.

and Diana Gharibova departed from their homes in Karajala in the Telavi region.²⁰ Additionally, several girls and women left from the Pankisi Gorge for Syria.²¹ The Pankisi Valley area saw a disproportionate exodus of foreign fighters when compared with the rest of Georgia. Clifford states that: "In total, 17% of the sampled fighters originated from regions outside of the Pankisi Valley, and 28% are not ethnically Kist."²² Kvakhadze identifies seventeen women from Georgia who left for Syria and Iraq.²³ There may be additional women who left but the top-end estimate for this is difficult to ascertain. The true number is difficult to pin down and clarify due to issues with records, and variation in definitions used by various organisations and governments. Numbers alone, however, are not the only measure of a phenomenon's importance. It is, "the quality of the analysis and the extent to which we uncover meaning and processes germane to the qualitative endeavor, not the size of the sample or the presence of comparative categories, that produces theoretically relevant issues and explanations."²⁴ It is therefore, crucial to unravel and analyse cases where women leave their own countries, even if they do so in relatively small numbers. Fully probing this issue is extremely important as the result of women's choices may be injury or death for them, and if they are mothers, their children.

Ratelle and Broers, as well as Pokalova identify "waves" of foreign fighters leaving Georgia.²⁵ Cecire, situates the first wave from the onset of the Syrian Civil War until 2013. This wave had ethno-nationalist origins and those associated with it were often affiliated with the Caucasus Emirate (Imarat Kavkaz).²⁶ Other groups that fighters joined included Jeish al-Muhajirinwal-Ansar, Junud al-

20. Elena Pokalova, "Georgia, Terrorism, and Foreign Fighters," *Special Operations Journal* 4, no.2 (2018): 149.

21. Pokalova, "Georgia, Terrorism," 149.

22. Clifford, "Georgian Foreign Fighter Deaths," 68.

23. Aleksandre Kvakhadze, "Women from Georgia in the Syrian and Iraqi Conflicts," Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (2018): 5.

24. Gloria Holguín Cuádriz and Lynet Uttal, "Intersectionality and In-depth Interviews," 166.

25. Michael Cecire, "Same sides of different coins: contrasting militant activism between Georgian fighters in Syria and Ukraine," *Caucasus Survey* 4, no.3 (2016): 282-293; Jean-François Ratelle and Laurence Broers, "Introduction: researching networked insurgencies and foreign fighters in Eurasia," *Caucasus Survey* 4, no. 3 (2016); 189-191; Pokalova, "Georgia, Terrorism," 154-157.

26. Cecire, "Same sides of different," 283.

Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ajudat al Kavkaz.²⁷ Many of these fighters were older than those in the second wave and had previous military experience.²⁸ Those in the second wave tended to be younger and were more likely to join ISIS.²⁹ Pokalova places most of the women who left Georgia in the second wave.³⁰

The exact definition of a foreign fighter remains somewhat contested. Pokalova defines foreign fighters as: “individuals who leave their countries of origin or residence and travel to join a conflict or support a conflict elsewhere. This definition includes women traveling to assume supportive roles”.³¹ Her definition has been chosen here as it best encapsulates a holistic understanding of how supportive roles are integral to military success. The roles that women have filled within ISIS include members of the Al-Khansaa brigade, propagandists, recruiters, wives, mothers, and skilled workers.³² The Al-Khansaa brigade’s activities focus on enforcing morality and include intelligence operations, recruitment, management of slaves, and law enforcement.³³

Kvakhadze states that only some of these posts have actually been held by women from the Caucasus (including Georgia).³⁴ The four areas where women from the Caucasus have been confirmed to have participated are: supportive roles (domestic tasks and care work), propaganda and information dissemination, suicide bombing, and recruitment.³⁵ It should be noted that the only instance of a suicide bombing carried out by a woman from the Caucasus that Kvakhadze mentions was Diana Ramazanova from Dagestan (and the bombing was carried out in Turkey), and therefore no Georgian women have been confirmed in such a role.³⁶ Kvakhadze states that a possible fifth role was in security and combat roles such as part of the Al-Khansaa Brigade. However no Georgian

27. Clifford, “Georgian Foreign Fighter Deaths,” 66.

28. Pokalova, “Georgia, Terrorism,” 154-155.

29. Cecire, “Same sides of different,” 283.

30. Pokalova, “Georgia, Terrorism,” 156.

31. Pokalova, “Georgia, Terrorism,” 148.

32. Spencer, “The Hidden Face of Terrorism,” 80-88.

33. Spencer, “The Hidden Face of Terrorism,” 803-84.

34. Aleksandre Kvakhadze, “Gender and Jihad: Women from the Caucasus in the Syrian Conflict,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no.2 (2020): 74-75.

35. Kvakhadze, “Gender and Jihad,” 2020, 74.

36. Kvakhadze, “Gender and Jihad,” 74.

women are known to have participated in this category.³⁷ There is still the possibility that they may have participated in security and combat roles, or that the attraction of these roles formed part of the appeal for women when considering leaving their own country. Indeed, some women did join ISIS with aspiration to participate in combat themselves.³⁸

Motivation for Leaving

The causal mechanisms for why each woman chose to leave her home for Syria or Iraq are varied and analysing patterns should lead to an increased understanding of the plethora of experiences that may have sculpted a woman's choice. However, due to feasibility issues, and in the name of brevity, this report cannot go into detail about each individual case. Indeed, there is a dearth in available information that would make such an analysis impossible. Though it is important to examine the phenomenon of women leaving their countries to join jihadist groups and to compare and contrast between different situations, it should not be assumed that reasons cited by women in one instance will necessarily apply in another. One of the major weaknesses in accounts of why women join terrorist organizations is a persistent lack of nuance and recognition of situation-specific variation.

Kvakhadze describes several motivating factors identified for women who left Georgia, with family and marriage relationships surfacing most prevalently within the interviews.³⁹ He cites Mia's Bloom's assertion that community relationships and respect can be key aspects of women's choices to join terrorist groups.⁴⁰ The women in some cases where familial and romantic relationships played a role left willingly, while in others they were coerced.⁴¹

37. Kvakhadze, "Gender and Jihad," 74.

38. Nancy A. Youssef and Shane Harris, "The Women Who Secretly Keep ISIS Running," *The Daily Beast* (2015).

39. Kvakhadze, "Gender and Jihad," 72.

40. Mia Bloom, cited in Kvakhadze, "Gender and Jihad," 72.

41. Kvakhadze, "Gender and Jihad," 72.

Kvakhadze also identified prestige and religious conviction as other motivating elements. Additionally, and crucially for this analysis, domestic violence or problems in the home were shown to be a fourth agent in inspiring women to go to Syria and Iraq.⁴² Amashukeli, in a report on foreign fighter youth from the Pankisi Gorge, reports sentiments of marginalization, injustice, and discrimination against Muslims based on their religion as playing a role in this phenomenon.⁴³

Amashukeli also discusses several other causal mechanisms that are identified in the literature or were brought up in interviews in the Pankisi Gorge. Firstly, a strand of motivations relates to ideology and religion, both perceived discrimination against Muslims and the decreasing adherence to, and influence of, Sufi Islam compared with Salafi Islam within certain communities.⁴⁴ National identity and a perception that certain conflicts in the Middle East were a continuation of conflicts between Chechens and Russia that had yet to be resolved also played a role.⁴⁵ Conditions of life, including poor financial situations, or a lack of educational and professional opportunities were also mentioned.⁴⁶ Lastly, personal grievances and the presence of recruitment and mobilization spaces in Pankisi were recognized as having precipitated some cases of youth leaving.⁴⁷ These factors were not identified according to gender but were elements that promoted the phenomenon generally. The relationship between these factors are interwoven and should not be understood as discrete factors but rather as strands in a tapestry.⁴⁸

Putting it All Together

The reasoning behind women's choices to leave can be analysed through the lens of intersectionality to fully understand how power dynamics and oppressive social realities give rise to

42. Kvakhadze, "Gender and Jihad," 73.

43. Mariam Amashukeli, "Understanding Why Youth Fight in the Middle East," Centre for Social Sciences (2019): 3.

44. Amashukeli, "Understanding Why Youth Fight," 17.

45. Amashukeli, "Understanding Why Youth Fight," 17.

46. Amashukeli, "Understanding Why Youth Fight," 17.

47. Amashukeli, "Understanding Why Youth Fight," 17.

48. Kvakhadze, "Gender and Jihad," 73.

women's decisions. Women's motivations may not be wholly different from men's but rather, gendered structures may shape their decisions.⁴⁹ Even though the subject of this paper is Georgian women, a gendered lens could likewise be applied to understand the "various gendered complexities" that mould the decisions and identities of both men and women terrorists.⁵⁰ This paper is confined to a discussion of women as, at least in the Georgian context, they garner little attention. However, a similar analysis of terrorists who are men has the potential to advance a deeper and more nuanced understanding of terrorist actions generally.

In applying an intersectional lens to understanding women's choices to leave Georgia, it is important to consider causal factors together. Intersectionality is helpful in understanding the dynamics of a social situation and the interactions between various constituent parts of a social environment that are inextricably interwoven.⁵¹ Therefore, it is crucial to look at this situation and the ways that these various motivational factors may have worked in concert to precipitate a specific course of action.

Marriage and family relationships, noted as a recurrent motivation for leaving, provides a good analytical starting point. The importance of this factor could indicate a possible lack of opportunities for women outside of the family. Amashukeli noted that poverty and a lack of professional opportunities were identified by certain members of the Pankisi Woman's Council and Kist mothers as factors leading to youth leaving Pankisi.⁵² As previously mentioned domestic violence also pushed some women to go.⁵³ When considered together with the women-specific motivation of going to Syria or Iraq due to marriage, it becomes clear that these three motivations can be understood together. When women lack opportunities for growth outside of their marriage and family obligations, it would be a formidable challenge for a woman to muster the wherewithal not to

49. Del Villar, "Women in Modern Terrorism," 412.

50. Del Villar, "Women in Modern Terrorism," 412.

51. Amanda Burgess-Proctor, "Intersections of Race, Class, Gender, and Crime: Future Directions for Feminist Criminology," *Feminist Criminology* 1, no. 1 (2006): 31.

52. Amashukeli, "Understanding Why Youth Fight," 18.

53. Kvakhadze, "Gender and Jihad," 73.

go where her husband does, even if leaving was not her preferred course of action. With local opportunities lacking, in addition to the fact that on a global scale, women often encounter fewer quality job opportunities, are paid less, and are often treated worse, the situation paints an austere picture for women.⁵⁴ In cases of domestic violence, women's lack of opportunities outside the home and poor prospects for financial independence may make a dramatic step, such as relocating to Syria or Iraq, more appealing than it would be otherwise.

Adding to this complex situation, in some regions of Georgia, for example Pankisi, youth of both genders spoke of "injustice, marginalization, provocation and religion-based discrimination of Muslims."⁵⁵ The local dynamics, in which women face few opportunities, should be seen in the broader context of (at least perceived) ethnic and religious discrimination which may function to deepen further the oppression and challenges facing Muslim Georgian women. Additionally, Sophie Zviadadze records that some Muslim Georgians, living in Adjara, stated that Georgian identity is at times equated with being Christian. This has led to feelings of exclusion due to their religion.⁵⁶ The combination of perceived discrimination due to ethnicity or religion and oppressive structural factors such as political and economic marginalization, create a fertile environment for radicalization.⁵⁷

The identification of prestige and religious conviction as a factor is interesting as the prestige under question appears actually to be men's prestige. Kvakhadze reports that a woman married to mujahedeen or who became the widow of a martyr held a certain prestige in the community. This reveals the paucity of opportunities for women from some of these communities to garner prestige themselves. This could be due to any combination of their gender, ethnic group, religion, and or socio-economic situation. The "prestige" motivation holds in common with the "marriage and family

54. "The gender gap in employment: What's holding women back?" International Labour Organization Info Stories (2017): <https://www.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Employment/barriers-women#intro>.

55. Amashukeli, "Understanding Why Youth Fight," 3.

56. Sophie Zviadadze, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being Muslim and Georgian: Religious Transformation and Questions of Identity among Adjara's Muslim Georgians," *Region: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia* 7, no. 1 (2018): 35.

57. Elizabeth Pearson and Emily Winterbotham, "Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation: A Milieu Approach," *The RUSI Journal* 162, no.3 (2017): 63.

relationship” motivation the fact that both signal a dependence on a man for one’s identity and societal role. Both motivations actually put women in relation to men. This could signal research produced from a limited worldview. However, since Kvakhadze gathered the information about motivations directly from community members, this seems unlikely. Instead, it seems likely that this indicates social situations in which women are afforded limited opportunities and in which their ability to act is regulated by men.

Furthermore, some Salafi Muslim residents of Pankisi communities felt they were being unfairly associated with ISIS and terrorism. This is exemplified by the killing of Temirlan Machalikashvili who is believed to have been innocent by Pankisi Gorge inhabitants.⁵⁸ They felt that there was tension between Salafi and Sufi communities in the Pankisi Gorge, complicated by the fact that Salafi leaders do not feel they hold legitimacy in the eyes of the Georgian Government.⁵⁹ Due to tensions within Pankisi communities, as well as between some Muslim Georgians and the wider Georgian community, this could mean that women are hesitant to seek opportunities beyond their communities. Intersectional factors of ethnic origin, religion, gender, and socio-economic situation are clearly at play in the lives of many Georgian women. This reality is likely to contribute to both overt and unobtrusive situations of oppression for Georgian women, limiting their experience beyond the home and in communities other than their own, and affording them an identity based mainly in relation to men. These dynamics provide situations that may leave them few alternatives to leaving with their husbands, or in other cases, provide a fertile ground for the call of jihadism. In such a case, women face a suboptimal reality where neither of their options offer a meaningful break from grim realities.

Some of the motivations, for example those related to national identity, ideology, or religious conviction may at first seem not to have much to do with gender and oppressive norms and

58. Dimitri Avaliani; Agnieszka Zielonka; David Pipia, “Alarm bells ring for Pankisi gorge – the echo of the Syrian war reaches Georgia,” *Jam News* (2018).

59. Amashukeli, “Understanding Why Youth Fight,” 20.

structures. However, the intersectional factors that underlie the lives of these women combine and reinforce these other factors. A woman may see the conflicts in Syria and Iraq as a continuation of Chechen conflicts with Russia. However, this alone may not be adequate in pushing her to leave. In combination with other factors, such as a lack of opportunities and discrimination related to gender and ethnicity, it may tip the balance in favour of moving to Syria or Iraq.

Conclusion

This report advocates looking at the issue of women from Georgia leaving their country to join jihadist movements in Syria and Iraq through an intersectional lens. Such an approach strives to build an understanding of how the “[l]ocal function of gender norms affects enabling factors of radicalisation.”⁶⁰ Additionally it considers how other intersecting elements, such as ethnicity, socio-economic class, and religion may be involved. These factors are at play in different capacities for different groups. It is fruitful to look at the different motivations individually, together, and in their local context. This exercise abets complex analyses of the processes leading to women joining jihadist movements. Hopefully in doing so it will shed additional light on effective ways to support women before jihadist groups offer them alternatives.

60. Pearson and Winterbotham, “Women, Gender and Daesh,” 67.

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