

Title: EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORIES OF RADICALIZED FEMALES IN MONTREAL

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Research Question: “What circumstances make some females vulnerable to ISIS propaganda?” To understand this, we specifically considered the social-ecological environment which influences human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979):

1. What were the females’ educational experiences? (in the microsystem)
2. What were the females’ relationships with their peer group/family members? (in the mesosystem)
3. How did the females use social media and the internet? (in the exosystem)

Importance: Given that ISIS is known to have targeted women recruits to fulfill certain roles through the internet and social media, it is urgent to understand the trigger that propels women towards radicalization. Uniquely, this study obtained primary data on the experiences of the radicalized women through the voices of their close family members and peer group. These individuals, however, are suspicious of researchers and cannot easily trust people as they have been questioned by police and the media many times. Moreover, this study in Quebec sheds light on the issue of radicalization in a Francophone context.

Research Findings: Overall, the circumstances that radicalize are not different for males and females except that women face more restrictions (e.g. due to clothing). Three key findings were obtained in relation to each research sub-question:

1. Educational experiences are generally exclusionary for Muslims in Greater Montreal, especially for veiled women;
2. The radicalized women had experienced marginalization in school and also had strained relationships with their parents who in turn had problems between them;
3. Islamophobia in media was of greater concern to participants than recruiting material on social media.

Implications:

1. **Concrete efforts are needed on improving integration of cultural communities into the social institutions in Quebec society:** 1. The significant issue discussed by all participants in this study was the lack of inclusiveness felt by them in Quebec society as a “Quebecois/e” (assumed to be White/Christian/Francophone). 2. Urgent attention needs to be paid to the school environment and how teachers relate to students (the affective domain) who “do not belong”, rather than to the curriculum content itself (cognitive domain). 3. Students are concerned about specific issues that make their peers vulnerable towards extremist activities: confusion about their identity; a lack of self-esteem and a sense of belonging/feeling at home; and, a lack of open, critical dialogue regarding issues that concern many Muslim students. 4. There was an overwhelming feeling of Islamophobia in society at large, especially for young women who wear a veil to assert their Muslim identity. 5. This study is not a comparison with other parts of Canada where instances of racism/Islamophobia are also reported, but it may have implications for some provinces.
2. **Improvement in teacher education is urgent:** Participants asked that teachers consider and foster in their students more open-mindedness and honest communication, develop political consciousness among students, and equip them with critical thinking skills (so that students can even critique the credibility of a religious leader). At present, teachers tend to avoid controversial topics but they must be trained in dialogical methods to discuss issues that confuse students. It follows, therefore, that teachers must be supported by the school administration so that they do not fear reprisals.
3. **A combination of factors shape the process to radicalization for all extremists** and each female’s individual circumstances and thought processes make them more or less vulnerable to take this drastic step. As with males, a critical mind overall would be better able to judge the consequences of one’s actions. Education (which is proactive) should be used as a “soft tool” to complement “hard initiatives” (which are reactive) in order to have a holistic approach to CVE.