This is (not) a Man's World: Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalisation through the Lens of Women in a Sub-Urban Community

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Abstract

What causes radicalisation and violent extremism to emerge? Such a question has been the forefront of the world's political agenda as the sense of urgency surrounding terrorism continue to rise. Schools of research have been conducted to reveal social and psychological factors motivating individuals to adopt the ideologies related to violent extremism and radicalisation. However, comprehensive conclusions translatable to policy making are still lacking. In fact, to be able to effectively and expediently address the underlying issues, we must all stand on a common ground, namely, we must return to the starting point of each individual: the family. We must then consider a potential key actor in their pursuit of a potential solution: mothers. Therefore, the purpose of this explanatory study is to investigate mothers' perception on what causes violent extremism and what actions they should undertake to tackle the issue. A multiple-case study design was used. Eight randomly selected mothers whose children are in their adolescent within Babakan sub-urban area of Mataram city, West Nusa Tenggara, participated. Data were obtained from individual, digitally recorded face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The findings from this explanatory study suggest that the women had moderate knowledge towards violent extremism and radicalisation and aware of their critical roles in preventing their children from exposure to terrorism-related ideologies. Further, the study provides insights into how male domination tends to prevent the women to play the key roles in countering terrorism as, in local context, the issues related to this are sound rather masculine.

Keywords : Violent Extremism, Radicalisation, Women in Rural Communities, Male Domination

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Introduction

Young people in rural communities are just as much a target of radicalisation as those in the major cities. Countering violent extremism approach has gained attention in the political and academic spheres. More focus has been put into place on preventive strategies alongside direct responses to mitigate the hazardous effects of terrorism especially towards young people. Experts have examined the underlying psychological and social factors which motivate the terrorism suspects to adopt extremism, however, they have yet to reach conclusions translatable to policy makings. In fact, any effort in understanding extremism at this level will not lead to a tailored effective solution unless we move deeper to the sources of the issues (Byman, 2015). To be able to address this, people have to return to the very focal point of most individuals: the family.

There is a proverb saying that **"When you train a woman, you train an entire community".** While to date, studies have generally failed to put mothers in a key position to generate potential solutions in the issues of counter terrorism. The mothers are, in fact, well-placed in their strategic positioning within home as well as in their emotional bounding with the children. They have to be considered as key sources of information regarding any psychological and social landscape of young adults suspected to commit extremist movements and groups (Hughes et al., 2009). Particularly, a mother whose children are suspected to be radicalised could make sense of the children's journeys of coming-of-age and locating the kids' identity crisis occurring throughout their young adulthood period (Erikson, 1968). This is a good starting point for stakeholders to generate the best solution to tackle the problem. Meanwhile, as a group, apart from the social background, mothers hold valuable data and information on what would be the precursor of individuals' vulnerability to extremist influences. This result on the mothers' potential capacities to shed light on decisions and behaviour which are incomprehensible to those on the outside of their family circle.

Even further, mothers not only have a unique access to radicalised youths, they are also strategically put in serving as an intermediary between those who are, or are next to be, targeted and the radical influences (Thackeray, L. A. &Brook-Gordon, 2013). The mothers are the first to recognise and address the signs related to extremist influences –

anxiety, anger, and withdrawal – as in fact they are also the starting point of their children's building resilience in the years of the children's development (Erikson, 1968). These capacities, both responding and pre-empting to radical influences, lead the mothers become an essential part of an effective security paradigm. There is no doubt that the attributed roles of mothers as a primary carer of their children is not always easy. For many observers, both close observers and external ones, a child's behaviours can be equivocal.

In a study conducted by Luyckx and colleagues (2008), one noticeable finding was that the mothers being interviewed in the study was willing to prevent their young adult children from being involved in violent extremism. However, another finding in the same study revealed that their roles have been trivial due to their lack the confidence and skills to be effective in performing their role (Luyckx, 2008). This leads us to the questions as to how to equip mothers with tools and knowledge in succeeding their roles to prevent extremism ideologies? Building on the fact that adolescence is an intricate developmental stage affected by multiple social and psychological phenomena and events.

Apart for mothers being an essential part of the de-radicalisation, it is still premature to blame scholars in the field of violent extremism for failing to include mothers and their children's psychodynamics during the children's developmental milestone from adolescence to adulthood (West & King, 1987). This is mostly because the scholars' reliance on qualitative interviews and empirical research methods. Indeed, psycoanalysis is almost entirely neglected from the violent extremism research field (Weine et al., 2013). The same assertion was also shared by Seth Schwartz, a psychologist on adolescence, calling for a root-caused analysis of terror from psychodynamic perspective while he also criticizes his own field due to its paucity. Nowadays research in the field has been deemed to ignore the actual need for a more thorough – personalised and direct – intervention for those at risk of being radicalised (Schwartz, 2005). Hence, we need to put more emphasis on an individualised, youth-directed approach to be able to support the existing long-term and general solutions such as poverty eradication and the provision of access to education.

It has been known that every individual is influenced by their social contexts: aspirations, struggles, goals as well as reactions are largely affected by the environment in which they psychologically and emotionally developed. To examine the social and psychological factors, we should gain a clearer picture of the common influences and factors which cause young people to adopt radical ideologies, then, develop a targeted prevention measurement and strategies. However, to understand this complex nature of the influences, we need to examine it through different lenses (Schwartz, 2005). As an observer, we need to do so through listening and observing a community under the threat and learn about its culture, history, values, needs, social structures and many more, in order to precisely determine what the situation, and resilience, means to the community. Often, having significant insights into what has been surrounding the youngsters, mothers in fact are a great source in knowing how and why youth could join an extremist group. For example, it could be a disruption in the parent-child bond that can lead to the radicalisation. This kind of troubling relationship can also be a gate to explore an individual's psychological and emotional landscape, especially in the pre-violence phase. Sadly, this approach has generally been neglected in countering violent extremism initiatives.

Method

This study is a qualitative, a multiple case study design of eight randomly selected mothers whose children are in their adolescent within Babakan sub-urban area of Mataram city, West Nusa Tenggara. The study aims to illuminate the counter terrorism field rather than represent a wider population from a sample (Stake, 2005). It draws upon data from interviews conducted towards the mothers. The foundational research question is: Do they think, as mothers, they have a role in preventing extremist ideologies on the home front?

Entry point to the group of women in this study had to be carefully considered to carry out a successful interview. Potential participants were recruited prior to they had been approached by the research team. Interested mothers, 20 individuals, were gathered in a small group and discussions were held to explain the nature of our study. Once the team and the then research participants were on a common ground, the team started to interview, a one-on-one interview, with each willing participant. In the end, there were 8 mothers agreed to participate (Ritchie et

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al., 2013). Enabling the mothers to speak openly, it was then essential for the research team to establish trusts. In the Sasak community, terrorism-related issues are still considered taboo, hence, gathering data required the research team to break many social and cultural barriers.

The research site, Babakan sub-district, was chosen due to, firstly, its proximity to the capital city of Mataram as well as to Bertais area (a transit area between cities and provinces). The sub-district also offers access to heterogeneous, bound sample of Sasak native mothers, whose culture, identities, and roles were the subject of the larger study from which this data is drawn. The interviews were conducted from June-December 2019. The biographical data of the quoted participants appear in Table 1; all names are pseudonyms.

Table. 1. Participants' bibliographical information (at June 2019)

Name	Age	Biographical notes	Interviewed (Month, Year)
Aminah	*34*	Married; having 1 child (male, 16 years old); working as a cleaner in a private university in Mataram; graduated from high school.	June-September, 2019
Warni	*45*	Married; having 2 children (female 28 years old & male 21 years old); working part-time in a local NGO; having a diploma degree in business.	June, August & November, 2019
Rusmiati	*39*	Divorced; having 1 child (male 14 years old); working as a cleaner in a private university in Mataram	June & September, 2019
Ana	*35*	Married; having 1 child (14 year old boy); working full-time in a local NGO; holding a bachelor degree.	June-October, 2019

Rosita	*47*	Divorced; having 2 children (25 year old and 20 year old males); owning a small shop; graduated from high school.	August & September, 2019
Baiq* A	*39*	Married; having 3 children (17 year old twin boys & 12 year old girl); unemployed; graduated from high school.	June & July, 2019
Baiq* B	*37*	Married; having 2 children (14 year old boy and 11 year old girl); working full-time in a government office; having a diploma degree in accounting.	June-November, 2019
Baiq* C	*45*	Married; having 1 child (21 year old boy); owning a street vendor (warung); graduated from high school .	July, August & November, 2019

*Baiq is a first name given to a native Sasak woman coming from a noble family background

Results and Discussions

The final results are based on the 27 interviews conducted towards the eight participants. Overall, there was similar consensus among the participants regarding their role and position in combating violent extremism. The data also conveyed the participants' concerns that there will be a possibility and space of which their children being exposed to radical influences unless they step in. Apart from only having a moderate knowledge about terrorism and its culprits, the mothers showed confidence both in their ability to recognise any early warning signs if the children did, in fact, involved and in their ability to prevent their children to involve in radicalised movements and influences. Moreover, in many of the interviews, the mothers express

their concern that the society has been preventing them to be more involved as the forefront key players in tackling the terrorism issues.

What do mothers fear?

The mothers being interviewed believed that radicalisation and terrorism agendas are disseminated mainly through the internet, with social media being mentioned multiple times, radical religious leaders and television. The massive use of social media, with lack of control from parents, is placing youths to be confronted by radical exposure and messages through different angles. This is exacerbated by the mothers' lack of digital literacy. They assume that, if they were able to track their kids' online activities, the chance for their kids to be radicalised will be smaller. The mothers also feared that 'being in the second gender spectrum', they have lack of power to step in if they have to.

Because of their unique position, the mothers' insights on the initial source of radical influences are more likely to be distinctive and strong, compared to those on the outside. The information collected from mothers, moreover, is largely inaccessible to intelligence, local authorities, and other actors involved in radicalisation prevention. Therefore, mothers' perspectives on terrorism issues will help to elucidate the bigger picture of this problem. The picture that has been put in the periphery of violent extremism prevention (Fakih, 2013).

Whom do mothers trust?

It is undeniably true that preventive measurements are difficult to be put into place. With Indonesian long standing history of terrorism, the needs for support and professional advice have therefore been a predominant issue. Then, where do mothers position if they are to concern about their children's wellbeing and objected to be radicalised? What institutions do they seek for in providing support and guidance? Is terrorism always to be a masculine area where no space for women to be a key player in tackling the terrorism issue? Do women only prune to be radicalised but not being deemed as potential solutions?

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In the time where their adolescent children are mentally unstable, hence being an easy target, their family circle is clearly the mothers' primary source of support (Collins et al., 2000). Meanwhile, teachers have been chosen as a secondary circle of support for the mothers, apart from their community organisations (Rukun Tetangga, Kepala Dusun etc). Interestingly, when being asked about seeking helps from a religious leader, or a group of religious leaders, the majority of the responses was the leaders were considered as one of the last circle of source of support. This is is due to the religious leaders' stigma that it would be offensive to talk about terrorism with them as if the source of the radicalisation is a religion itself (Aslam, 2012).

What do mothers need?

Mothers are not the primary players, in the areas of both security policy and violent extremism research. As a consequence, we know little about their insights, capacities, roles and, most of all, their needs. How, in turn, do the mothers assess their own needs in this field? What types of support systems do they need to shield their children from any radical influences?

The mothers whose stories occur in this study considered increased knowledge about the warning signs of terrorism related influences to be the highest importance. They also need to break the patriarchal pyramid, to be considered as equal as men in being a primary actor to tackle some social challenges including the one in the area of violent extremism prevention (Satterthwaite, 2013).

Overall, the findings suggest that there has been an immediate call for a more inclusive approach to countering terrorism, specifically one which factors in the strategic position of mothers. Indeed, in terms of the prevention, we need mothers' voices to be brought to the table, enabling us to develop a new dimension of strategies (Brown, 2013). The gap in the existing research and security paradigm requires active engagement and involvement of the mothers.

Conclusion

It has been argued mothers have been pushed back from the frontline tasks to address threats such as violent extremism. In the absence of our ability to eradicate myriad

causes and sources of extremist influences, people's only option is to build resilience from within the family. Violent extremism has been categorised as a symptom of emotional deficits. Hence, addressing the internal forces causing someone to be vulnerable to terrorism ideologies such as lack of purpose and belonging, anger, and resentment requires support and attention from the closest, trusted willing individuals. Indeed, it calls for the involvement of civil society.

Mothers are essential starting point. The are, in their proximity, often the first to sign changes in their children's emotional deficits. Understanding this role, mothers could be a critical element of building resilience into the community they are in. Tapping into the mothers' potentials, in fact, is a cost-efficient security architecture as well as an effective approach. All in all, every mother has dual roles to play: (1) building resilience in the early years of their children developmental stage; and (2) signing any wrong doing and early signs of violent extremism. Building on their uniqueness, mothers deserve recognition and support. After all, when it comes to countering violent extremism, this is not only a man's world but everyone's.

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