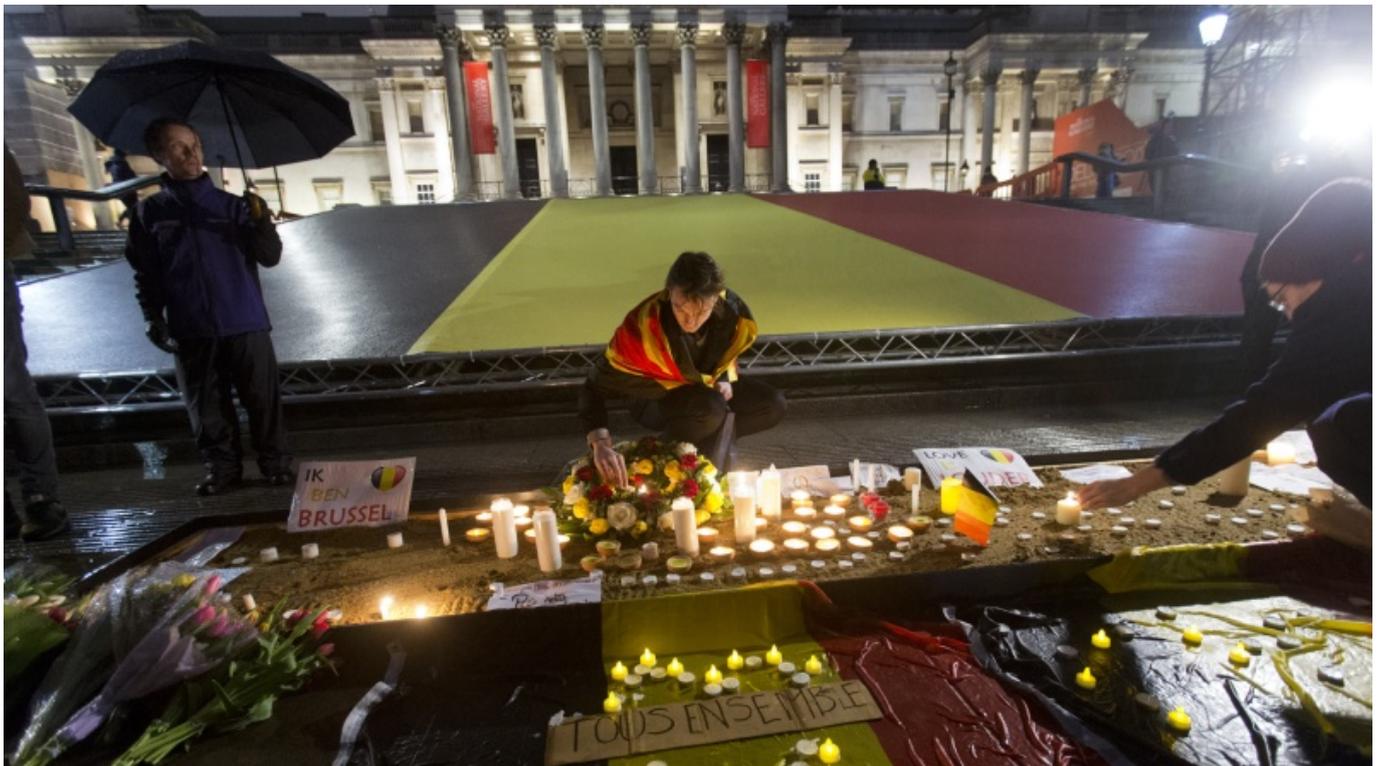


Women are key protagonists in the fight against radicalisation

Written by Beatriz Becerra Basterrechea and Gérard Deprez on 11 October 2016 in Opinion Opinion

Focusing on women in efforts to combat radicalisation objectively offers substantial benefits, write Beatriz Becerra Basterrechea and Gérard Deprez.



People leaving flowers and candles during a vigil in Trafalgar Square in London, to pay tribute to the victims of the terror attacks in Brussels, Belgium | *Photo credit: Press Association*

When Isis gained control of a swathe of Syria and Iraq, not only did they win a military victory and seize vast resources, they also acquired a place in which to make their nightmarish utopia a reality.

While they attempt to spread terror across the globe, they are revealing precisely what they want to inflict on us all. Their model for society is not a mere aspiration; it already exists. Ignorance or uncertainty can no longer be used as an excuse for failing to take action to defend ourselves against Isis.

Its propaganda invokes an overwhelmingly male world of threatening bearded jihadists who are armed to the teeth. But, as a totalitarian model for society, Isis needs, and uses, women. In rare cases they have been used as terrorists, but they are always exploited as slaves, wives and the mothers of children who must perpetuate the caliphate.

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This is because the cornerstone of its military apparatus are jihadi warriors, and a recruit or combatant cannot reach the rank of warrior unless he has a wife; or wives. If we cut off Isis' supply of women, then its paradise for fanatics crumbles.

Aside from their false beliefs, the message of Isis' propaganda for women is essentially the same as that for men: the same promises of an identity and a collective sense of belonging. The same blandishments of heroism and a starring role in a divine mission are made to young people from impoverished backgrounds who are frustrated at their lack of prospects and excluded from a society that promised them one thing and delivered something altogether different.

The propaganda designed to recruit young women also normally includes an invitation to break free from the cult of self-image, which for a great many European women and girls can be something akin to a prison sentence.

Of course this is all just a tissue of lies, and all Isis can offer women is slavery. For this reason, it is an immense failure of our politics when an educated young European woman leaves everything behind to travel to a terrorist-occupied region to be little more than a sex object without any rights, and lead a life which bears no relation to the values of equality, justice and freedom, while also aggravating the jihadist threat.

Radicalisation is a process, and processes are made up of phases, with their characteristics and warning signs. If we share knowledge of how the process unfolds, we can intervene, and the sooner we take action the sooner it can be stopped. We can also avoid it.

The fight against radicalisation in Europe is, therefore, two-fold in nature, with an operational counter-terrorism pillar and also a social and political commitment, which can only succeed if there is a joint effort, consensus and greater equality.

Greater social equity should enable countless young people to overcome the unbearable sense of exclusion. And greater gender equality, to detect and reject the siren call of an organisation that holds women in contempt.

Focusing our efforts to combat radicalisation on women objectively offers substantial benefits. In addition to what was stated above, their sisters, girlfriends and, above all, mothers, are often the last bulwark guarding against the radicalisation of young people.

The aim of any totalitarian or extremist sect or organisation is to sever the ties between the individual and society. And, in the overwhelming majority of cases of violent radicalisation, the mother is the final link.

This is the understanding of 'Mothers for Life', a group providing support and tools to those looking on with horror at the process of radicalisation of a loved one. Its founder, Christianne Boudreau, felt at first hand the progressive loss of her son, who ended up travelling to Syria, where he perished.

Its arguments are backed up by the findings of academic institutions such as the Quilliam Foundation or the German Institute on Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation Studies (GIRDS).

There is an academic basis, as well as initiatives and willingness from many people, to commit to this cause. But what is lacking is coordination and the institutional impetus to create a true European policy against radicalisation, that systematises, disseminates and replicates the success stories and shared experience of many individuals, organisations and municipalities.

This is the purpose of AWARE (Alliance of Women Against Radicalisation and Extremism), the first European network of women combating radicalisation with a common policy purpose. It raises awareness and shares experiences of success.

This digital platform, EUaware.eu, will serve as a hub and meeting point for any person, organisation, institution or media outlet wishing to help prevent radicalisation in Europe. With women as key protagonists in this crucial combat in which what is at stake is not only safety and life, but also the enduring survival of the rights and freedoms that we have established for ourselves.

About the author

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