

Book review of ‘Gender, Religion, Extremism: Finding Women in Anti-Radicalization’, by Katherine E. Brown, Oxford University Press, 2020, £47.99 (Hardcover) (UK) 240 pp, ISBN: 9780190075699.

In recent years, gendered perspectives on terrorism and counterterrorism have arguably moved from the margins to a more mainstream position in both academic and policy circles. Still, despite increased attention there remains a tendency to equate gender solely with women and to focus on radicalised women as requiring some extra, and often sex-based, explanation for their engagement with extremist movements.

Katherine E. Brown’s *Gender, Religion and Extremism* answers both these critiques, offering a rich and deep analysis of how anti-radicalisation policies draw on and re-articulate gendered understandings of how and why people become involved with extremist movements. Comparing programmes designed to target Islamist extremism in five countries (the UK, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, the Netherlands, and Pakistan), Brown demonstrates how ideas about masculinity and femininity inform these programmes, how familiar stories about hyper-masculine men and victimised rescuable women are articulated through anti-radicalisation efforts, and how the gendered stereotypes on which they are built ultimately limit their impact.

Beginning with a discussion of the role of gender in global and regional efforts to address radicalisation, Brown moves on in chapter two to discuss the country contexts in detail, providing a brief but useful introduction for the more substantive analysis that follows. Drawing attention to the discursive slide from a focus on terrorist action to a broadly defined and amorphous ‘extremism,’ she notes that there is a coherence and consistency across countries and regional and global institutions that indicates the presence of an epistemic community: one that views the default terrorist threat as male and jihadist. The purpose of anti-radicalisation programmes, across states

and institutions, is to “bring redeemable others back to ‘civilization’” via a rescue mission that defines and affirms boundaries (57).

The role of genderings in this boundary work is the focus of the rest of the book and this is where Brown’s contribution really shines. She discusses how radicalisation theory is itself gendered in its understanding of the radical/radicalising subject as feminised and vulnerable (chapter three), how women are almost universally approached as presumptively ‘moderate’ through maternal logics (chapter four), and how maternalism and paternalism are deployed in the design and delivery of anti-radicalisation work (chapters five and six).

Brown’s intersectional approach allows a deeper appreciation of national gendered regimes and the role of religio-racialised and sect-based understandings of extremism. For example, her discussion of how bad mothering is blamed for young people’s radicalisation highlights how ideas about multicultural integration are central within Western contexts. The recent moral panic over so-called ‘jihadi brides’ in the British press is a case in point, with journalists suggesting (with little evidence) that schoolgirl defectors to Islamic State had been too sheltered by their over-protective Muslim families. Had they been allowed to act like ‘normal’ (Western) teenagers, this argument went, they might not have been seduced by IS’s promises. Brown notes that this explanation of radicalisation as a result of poor parenting is not found in Muslim-majority countries and is always tied to questions of multiculturalism and fears about the transmission of incompatible cultural values (125). Such insights demonstrate the value of intersectionality as a framework for analysis, and the importance of recognising how the dangerous Other in anti-radicalisation discourse is nationally specific, drawing on older constructions of threats to the national body politic (threats which are themselves gendered).

While variations in national approaches clearly exist, and speak to state-specific understandings of the dangerous ethnic, religious, or sect-based groups from which radicals emerge, the similarities of these programmes and the gendered logics on which they rest are striking. For example, the idea that mothers are responsible for their children's radicalisation, whether actively or accidentally, is one that spans geographical and cultural contexts, along with the understanding that male extremists emerge from the uneducated, simmering, and unruly rural poor or working-class. In each of the country case studies presented here we see radicalisation knowledge and anti-radicalisation policies built on stereotypes about men and women. Assumptions that women are naturally peaceful, 'groomed' into extremism, and that their (only) power in the private sphere (as mothers, wives, sisters) can be harnessed for state ends merge with assumptions that men's violence is natural and hypermasculine.

Brown argues that the anti-radicalisation policies across the five countries studied ultimately aim to embed loyalty to the state via transmission of the 'correct' way of living and believing, an approach that, ironically, replicates the ideologies of extremist groups (25). Instead of engaging with the real or perceived social, spiritual, and material goods that individuals gain through their involvement with extremist movements, the tendency is – across countries – to treat people as ignorant, naïve, and passive in their own radicalisation. And having infantilised these radicalised or radicalising subjects, the paternal state is required to step in to correct the wayward children and direct them towards the right way to behave (148). In chapter seven, Brown deals directly with the ways the discourses and logics of the 'War on Terror' continue to be articulated through anti-radicalisation programmes that position the chivalric state as a just warrior, protecting its citizens against both the feminised home-grown radical and the hypermasculine terrorist Other (178). Like all protection rackets,

however, the state is ultimately the source of a profoundly gendered (and racialised) insecurity: women are frequently *not* protected, their rights are securitised and instrumentalised and, as spending on security continues to rise, investment into social programmes, welfare, and women's aid decreases (185).

To the critiques of radicalisation raised throughout the book, Brown's answers are threefold: she highlights the need to encourage women's participation in anti-radicalisation work, the need to implement gender sensitive measures in all aspects of this work, and the need to protect women's rights as ends in themselves (207-8). Understanding the ultimate goal as peace, she highlights lessons to be learned from disarmament, disengagement, and reintegration (DDR) work as well as the value of centring a human rights framework that will enhance human, as well as state, security.

While her focus is on jihadist anti-radicalisation programmes, Brown does at times discuss the gendered dynamics of misogynist ideologies of far-right and 'Incel' extremists. Those seeking a detailed discussion of how anti-radicalisation programmes have pivoted to deal with these threats will not find it here, likely because such threats cannot easily be compared across the countries studied. For example, given that Western Incel movements represent reactionary responses to feminism, the emergence of similar movements in Saudi Arabia or Pakistan would likely incorporate culturally or nationally specific reactions to increased women's rights, and at present such backlashes often find expression through Islamist or jihadist movements that may or may not be viewed by the states in question as 'extremist'.

That said, there is much to recommend this book and readers of this journal will find plenty of interest within. Brown's focus on gender (rather than women) offers an important corrective to much work on this topic and answers longstanding feminist critiques of the tendency to approach politically violent women as aberrant objects of

often sexualised fascination. Similarly, her analysis of the 21st century security state as the paternalistic protection racket par excellence speaks to the need to keep sight of *whose* security is ensured through policies and programmes that aim to prevent radicalisation. And for those unconvinced by radicalisation theory's focus on individual vulnerabilities, the intersectional feminist analysis and the country comparisons offered here illustrate just how reliant these theories are on the production of gendered, racial, and religious Others.

What really stands out about this work, however, is Brown's deftness in drawing out and explaining the centrality of gender to the understanding and operationalisation of radicalisation and anti-radicalisation across the world. This is no easy task given the diversity of the case studies considered here, but the thoroughness and insight demonstrated throughout make this a wonderfully compelling and engaging book that will be essential reading for feminist and critical scholars of terrorism.

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