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UNDERSTANDING THE KEY DRIVERS OF FEMALE INVOLVEMENT IN TERRORISM: A CASE STUDY OF NEO-JAMAAT-UL-MUJAHIDEEN BANGLADESH (NEO-JMB) AND LIBERATION TIGERS OF TAMIL ELAM (LTTE)

Abstract

The participation of female militants in terrorism has generated curiosity as well as challenges in academia and policy making because of prevalent perceptions of women's nature and place in the society. Understanding the dynamic variables behind women's participation in various terrorist organisations is essential, given the growing presence of them in these groups. Such involvement raises severe concern for security agencies, as, in general, women turn out to be less suspected and hold the capacity to breach conventional security procedures. Notable studies by academics and practitioners on female militancy demonstrate that there is an interplay of many ideological and motivational variables that promote such involvement. In the South Asian context, which has historically been a problematic area due to insurgency and terrorist movements, this study tries to analyse the important characteristics crucial to women joining terrorist organisations. The research uses two case studies from South Asia that represent somewhat comparable socio-cultural backgrounds to investigate the drivers of female involvement in militancy, Neo-Jamaat-Ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (Neo-JMB) in Bangladesh and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka. The paper evaluates the factors contributing to female terrorism participation by contrasting the two terrorist groups using a qualitative research methodology.

Keywords: Terrorism, Female Militancy, Radicalisation, Neo-JMB, LTTE

1. Background

Given the longstanding history of terrorism, participation of women in terrorist organisations is not an uncommon phenomenon. A woman from the anarchist group Narodnaya Volya named Vera Zasulich was the first person to be convicted in a court for the crime of terrorism during the first wave of terrorism.[1] Women have played various roles in different outfits throughout the history of violence, such as managing the finances, recruiting militants, gathering intelligence, and engaging in active operations.[2] Since women are less vulnerable and have easier access to critical locations than men, there has been a growing

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[1] Mia Bloom, "Women and Terrorism", accessed October 09, 2022,
https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-124.
[2] R Kim Cragin and Sara A Dally, *Women as Terrorists Mothers, Recruiters and Martyrs* (California: ABC CL, 2009), 6.

trend of using them as suicide bombers.[3] Women's participation in terrorist organisations has always been complicated to explain due to the persistent idea that they are sensitive and usually the victims of conflict and violence. It was a common conception that women simply do not fit the conventional role in the realm of terrorism. As per traditional knowledge, the phenomenon of militancy is primarily intertwined with the concept of masculinity, and women engaging in terrorist acts do it for personal reasons rather than ideological causes.[4] Such claims remain obsolete due to the growing instances of female militancy. It is important to point out that there has been a significant rise in the number of women joining terrorist groups recently. Women have played significant roles in these organisations throughout history, from the earliest wave of terrorist organisations like Narodnaya Volya to Shining Path, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC), Baader-Meinhof Gang, Italian Reg Brigades, and Basque Liberation Movement.[5] Even though South Asia's socio-cultural construct is incompatible with the idea of female participation in militant groups, several South Asian groups have involved women in active roles. [6]

An in-depth investigation is necessary to assess the severity of this phenomenon and explain the reasons for their conviction, involvement, and responsibilities in it. To develop an efficient counter-terrorism approach, it is critical to understand the dynamics of female engagement in diverse terrorist organisations. In contrast to the extensive studies on organisations like Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan/Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), Black Widow, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State, there is comparably little study on women's involvement in terrorist organisations in South Asia, except for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Apart from a recent study by Parvez and Hastings, there are not many research works on the involvement of female militants in terrorist groups in Bangladesh.[7] Concern over women's participation in organisations like Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) has been developing over the past few years. Particularly following the 2016 Holey Artisan terrorist attack in Dhaka, a substantial number of women were detained for participating in the Neo-JMB, a new faction of the earlier group.[8] There is a dearth of studies describing how women join terrorist organisations and the various motivational elements that influence this conduct.

Therefore, the purpose of the study is directed to investigating the question-what are the motivations and factors that work for their decision to join such

[3] Cragin and Dally, *Women as Terrorists Mothers*, 18.

[4] Tanya Narozhna, "Women and Militancy in South Asia," in *Terrorism, Security and Development in South Asia,* eds. M Raymond Izarali and Dalbir Ahlawat, (London: Routledge, 2021), 233-250.

[5] Caron E Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, "Gendering of Women's Terrorism," in *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, eds. Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 57-82.

[6] Swati Parashar, "The Sacred and the Sacrilegious: Exploring Women's 'Politics' and 'Agency' in Radical Religious Movements in South Asia," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 11, no. 3-4 (2010): 435-455, 10.1080/14690764.2010.546117.

[7] Saimum Parvez and Justin V Hastings, "Understanding the Role of Digital Media in Female Participation in Terrorism: The Case of Bangladesh," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* (2022), 10.1080/09592318.2022.2109371.

[8] Deepak Acharjee, "Lawmen concerned over 'rising number of women militants," *The Independent*, December 25, 2016, https://www.theindependentbd.com/home/printnews/73780.

groups? The paper takes up a case study approach to explore the concern in the context of South Asian terrorist organisations that incorporated female participation.

While defining terrorism, it is imperative to mention that it has not been possible to develop a consistent and universal definition for terrorism up to now. A consensus on definition of terrorism is yet to be reached due to its delicate nature and significant socio-political ramifications. According to the UK Terrorism Act 2006, terrorism is defined as any activity that uses violence or intimidation against an individual or asset in order to persuade governments, or intergovernmental organisations to advance particular political, ideological, or religious objectives.[9] According to Hoffman, terrorism is defined as violence or threat of violence with long-term psychological effects committed by any non-state actor to achieve a political goal.[10] Besides, Schmid described terrorism as a process of repetitive violence that transmits a message to a broader audience and can be carried out by state and non-state actors.[11] These definitions overlap in the following aspects— terrorism is defined as a strategy that: a) targets the general people; b) incorporates violence or the threat of violence; c) is motivated by political scheming, ideology, or religion; and d) communicates with a larger audience outside the victims.

Based on these definitions, the Neo-JMB and the LTTE in Sri Lanka were chosen as two distinct organisations to investigate and analyse the driving factors of female participation in terrorist groups. Although JMB has multiple factions based on their ideology, the Neo-JMB works separately and has recently been one of the more active groups in Bangladesh. Neo-JMB is ideologically and functionally distinct from its predecessor and far more radicalised. They repeatedly declared affiliation to the Islamic State/Daesh and continued their fight to establish a global caliphate. The primary feature of Neo-JMB has been their use of technology and exploitation of social media to draw the attention of recruits all over the country, regardless of socio-economic strata and gender. Unlike the hierarchical organisational structure of the previous group, the Neo-JMB is rather fluid and promotes the "lone wolf" attack strategy.[12] Adopting such an approach provided them leverage to function even after the massive anti-terrorism campaign by law enforcement agencies.

The objective of the article is to understand the drivers behind female participation in terrorist organisations in South Asia; therefore, two different terrorist organisations have been chosen for that purpose. The selection of ideologically similar organisations has been carefully avoided to identify the diverse range of motivations and experiences of women while joining different terrorist groups. Bangladeshi and Tamilian societies practice patriarchy and

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[9] Home office, United Kingdom, *The Terrorism Act,* London, 2006. Retrieved from The Terrorism Act 2006 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).

[10] Bruce Hoffman, *Inside terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[11] Alex Peter Schmid and Albert J Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature* (Amsterdam: Transaction Books, 1988), 28.

[12] S Binod Kumar Singh, "Bangladesh: Neo-JMB and Lingering Threat- Analysis," *Eurasia Review*, September 8, 2020, https://www.eurasiareview.com/08092020-bangladesh-neo-jmb-and-lingering-threat-analysis/.

demonstrate stereotypical behavioural patterns to various degrees. Hence, the socio-cultural condition of both groups is constant to evaluate and compare the motivations of women joining terrorist groups.

The article is organised into several sections for discussion. The first section is the introduction with a focus on the research question. The second section covers the review of the existing literature on the specific phenomenon. The third section includes the methodology and the fourth section puts the theoretical framework of the study. The fifth section explores the major findings from the thematic analysis of the data about the mentioned terrorist organisations and the sixth section conducts a discussion on the drivers for female militants' participation in terrorist groups. The last section is the concluding remarks.

2.   Literature Review

This might be challenging to visualise women playing the role of terrorists or those motivated by violence due to the long-standing perception of women as gentle, sensitive, and caring.[13] The assumption that women should uphold feminine qualities devoid of violence and conflict is sustained by the everlasting patriarchal system. Society represents men as the aggressors, while women are typically regarded as the victims.[14] This may explain why women have historically been underrepresented in mainstream terrorist research. However, there have been recent developments in the current study on female militancy. Cragin and Dally provided examples of the active participation of women in many terrorist organisations—it includes Al-Aqsa Martyr Brigades, Al-Qaeda, separatist groups in Chechnya, Hamas, Basque Liberation Movement, Japanese Red Army, Baader-Meinhof Gang, Sandinista Liberation Front, Italian Red Brigade, and the LTTE.[15] Islam referenced George-Abeyie who projected that women would become more involved in terrorist organisations over time and would play a variety of responsibilities.[16] He listed seven factors as prerequisites for women to participate more dynamically—belonging to a disadvantaged community; being deprived of political or economic participation; being motivated by outside actors; having a command structure to instruct the violence against an adversary, and living in a society with precarious democracy.[17] Several theories attempt to explain why women engage in violence as a cover for any form of physical or psychosocial weakness, but such views continue to be disputed and controversial. People join terrorist organisations for several reasons—these may be personal, socio-political, or ideological motives in a broader sense. According to Jacques and Taylor, women may be more likely than men to join terrorist organisations due to personal motivations. These can include feelings of estrangement, grief, loss of a family

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[13] Gentry and Sjoberg, "Gendering of Women's Terrorism."

[14] Kim Jordan and Myriam Denov, "Birds of Freedom? Perspectives on Female Emancipation and Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 9, no.1 (2007): 42-62.

[15] Cragin and Dally, *Women as Terrorists Mothers*.

[16] Rumana Islam, "Gender and Terrorism: The ISIS Phenomenon" in *Human Rights & Terrorism*, eds. Mizanur Rahman and Rahmat Ullah (Empowerment through Law of the Common People: Dhaka, 2015).

[17] Margaret Gonzalez-Perez, *Women and Terrorism Female Activity in Domestic and International Terror Groups* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 15.

member, or trauma, and they can serve as strong motivation for choosing extreme courses of action. One of the primary drivers for Chechen women to join the struggle against the Russian army was the desire for vengeance.[18] Similar statements might be made about female LTTE operators or Palestinian militants. Gowrinathan demonstrated in her research how sexual assault, stigma, and individual experiences drove women to join the fight for LTTE.[19] A few socio-cultural elements have also contributed to the perception of sacrifice and further glorification of it. Women in the rigid context of South Asia are expected to protect their honour, given the male-dominated societal and religious institutions. Sexual violence and rape are seen as a humiliation to the victim and her family.

In the context of Bangladesh, a substantial number of Neo-JMB recruits demonstrated various kinds of personal motives as grounds for joining the terrorist outfits.[20] In many circumstances, women's networks and affiliations to their families also help them join terrorist organisations. Sometimes, the recruitment process is carried out via interpersonal network of friends and family, as is the case with JMB and neo-JMB in Bangladesh. Similar recruitment trends have been noted in transnational groups like Al-Qaeda. In addition, a study on the Islamic State demonstrated that women are capable of maintaining a comparatively stronger network than males. Therefore, they are viewed as excellent recruiters by jihadist organisations.[21]

One of the most prevalent motives for women to join terrorist organisations has been the ideological urge to serve the purpose. In the case of LTTE, one significant motivation for the female militants was establishing an independent Tamil state.[22] In Bangladesh, religion has played a significant role as an ideology and philosophy that galvanises their support and motivates them to commit acts of violence. In addition, individuals belonging to disadvantaged communities are vulnerable to becoming radicalised and opting for violence. These reasons are common across militant organisations around the world. Years of marginalisation and political violence created a ground for approving radical perspectives for numerous Palestinian militant groups. Similarly, political or economic repression drove many women to join organisations like the LTTE, the Naxalites in India, or the People's Liberation Army in Nepal.[23]

According to a European Parliamentary Research Service report, there are further motivational elements for women to join terrorist organisations, including

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[18] Karen Jacques and Paul J. Taylor, "Myths and Realities of Female-Perpetrated Terrorism," *Law and Human Behaviour* 37, no.1 (2013): 35-44, 10.1037/h0093992.
[19] Nimmi Gowrinathan, "The Committed Female Fighter: the Political Identities of Tamil Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 19, no. 3 (2017): 327-341, 10.1080/14616742.2017.1299369.
[20] Mohsina Nazneen, "Growing Trend of Female Jihadism in Bangladesh," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9, no. 8 (2017): 7-11.
[21] Jamille Bigio and Rachel Vogelstein, "Women and Terrorism Hidden Threats, Forgotten Partners" Council on Foreign Relations, Discussion paper, accessed November 22, 2021. https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/Discussion_Paper_Bigio_Vogelstein_Terrorism_OR.pdf.
[22] Miranda Alison, "In the War Front We Never Think that We are Women," in *Women, Gender and Terrorism*, eds. Laura Sjoberg and Caron E Jentry (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 131-158.
[23] Alison, "In the War Front."

gender-based discrimination and injustice.[24] Such factors might respond to the structural discrimination and inequality women encounter in the broader community. Also, it paves the way for them to find freedom from these limitations and forge a new identity. Women joining terrorist outfits is a nonlinear occurrence as it is significantly influenced by the organisational structure, ideology, and pattern of adaption by the terrorist groups as well.

3. Methodology

Answering the research question requires looking into the details of female militants' recruitment in the organisations. Therefore, the research has been conducted using a qualitative approach based on case studies, which allows the researcher to understand and investigate the details and reach a conclusion. Two different organisations from South Asia have been chosen to realise the broader motivations of female militants participating in terrorism. Neo-JMB, an offshoot of a leading terrorist group JMB in Bangladesh, is a religiously motivated organisation. On the other hand, LTTE in Sri Lanka had been an ethnonationalist group seeking self-determination for the Tamil population. The deployment of violent tactics and series of suicide bombings prompted the United States (US) and 32 other countries to designate the group as a terrorist organisation.[25] This is crucial to mention that different narratives prevail over the labelling of organisations as terrorists, which repeatedly stir the problems and controversies revolving around the definition and designation of the term "terrorism"; designation of the LTTE as a terrorist group is not out of that controversy.[26] But in order to conduct the study, this paper takes the core facets of terrorism into consideration from the definitions provided earlier in the discussion. Also, ideologically two different organisations have been chosen to compare and comprehend the wider motivations of women joining militancy regardless of their ideological standpoint in the South Asian context.

The researcher has largely used secondary data from related books, articles, newspaper reports, and open-source literature from government bodies and think tanks. Apart from secondary sources, an in-depth interview with an expert from academia was conducted for the study as a primary source. The participant was selected on the basis of expertise and experience of research in the specific area of terrorism studies in Bangladesh. It helped the researcher to gain information and insightful analysis of the issue. A semi-structured questionnaire was prepared to conduct the interview. Data were processed and analysed using the thematic analysis approach. Initially, a set of codes were generated, which were organised under broader themes. Thus, thematic analysis was pertinent for a thorough

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[24] Anita Orav, Rosamund Shreeves and Anja Radjenovic, "Radicalization and Counter Radicalization: A Gender Perspective," *European Parliamentary Research Service*, 2018, accessed November 20, 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/EPRS-Briefing-581955-Radicalization-gender-perspective-rev-FINAL.pdf.

[25] Tasha Manoranjan, "Beaten but not Broken: Tamil Women in Sri Lanka," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2010): 139-147; US Department of State, "Foreign Terrorist Organisations," accessed September 10, 2022. https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organisations/.

[26] Nadarajah Suthaharan, and Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah, "Liberation Struggle or Terrorism? The Politics of Naming the LTTE," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005): 87-100.

examination of the question, comparing the data sources, both primary and secondary, and advancing to a more comprehensive argument. Given the limited time available in the pandemic crisis, the study's primary problem was the absence of data from former terrorists and law enforcement institutions.

4. Theoretical Framework

The problem of terrorism has been extensively studied, and many experts have proposed different hypotheses as to why certain people end up becoming terrorists or what drives them to embrace violent extremism. Identifying a single cause as the primary driving force behind being a terrorist is challenging. Instead, a number of perspectives prefer to characterise the whole process of recruitment and engagement as a complex one. Instead of settling for a simple causal explanation, Taylor and Horgan explicitly identified terrorism as a process; within a certain political landscape, it entails a range of personal and social aspects.[27] McCauley and Moskalenko's referred to the process of radicalisation as Pyramid Model. The growth of violent extremism involves a number of variables that operate at the individual, group, and mass levels. These elements are crucial in shifting the majority of sympathisers and supporters up the pyramid from the base to the higher stages.[28] The Staircase Model of Moghaddam also ascribes the radicalisation process to ascend through every floor of a five-storied structure. Here, passing through each floor is defined by different psychological mechanisms. Each floor's residents undergo a different level of the transformation process, and the topmost floor represents the induction stage of the new members into violent groups.[29]

Among many theories, the one that will explain the radicalisation and indoctrination of violence has been provided by Hafez and Mullins, it is known as the "Puzzle Metaphor". According to their theory, several factors, including "grievances", "networks", "ideologies", and relevant "environment and supporting structures" combine to nurture extremism and promote the use of violence. "Grievances" encompass any sort of exclusion that causes a strong feeling of alienation from the society at large. The avenue of extremist ideas is eventually opened up by such despair and experience of humiliation, which also incorporates any form of personal loss or frustration. The term "network" refers to the current ties (like family, friends, and social groups) that are important in the spread of extremist views among one another. As a result, people socialise within a bubble of similar-minded people and eventually open up more chances for recruitment into violent extremism. Additionally, "ideologies" designates a body of views that calls for alterations to the current order. In certain circumstances, specific ideological beliefs contextualise individual or group grievances and generate anger towards an opponent. Certain situation also ignites the motivation for sacrifice or

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[27] Maxwell Taylor and John Horgan, "A Conceptual Framework for Addressing Psychological Process in the Development of the Terrorist," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 4 (2006): 585-601, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550600897413.
[28] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008): 415-433, 10.1080/09546550802073367.
[29] Fathali M Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration," *American Psychologist* 60, no. 2 (2005): 161-169, 10.1037/0003-066X.60.2.161.

martyrdom in the name of revolution. The phrase "environment and supporting structure" refers, most crucially, to the several conditions that can speed up the process of radicalism or work as a catalyst. The environment can be real or digital, such as prisons, training facilities, or media platforms, where a person's beliefs steadily grow stronger.[30] Most of these puzzle pieces relate to one another and, depending on the situation, may operate in opposite ways.

The article investigates the causes of women engaging in terrorist activities. The mobilisation of women by extremist groups is a multi-causal process that can be explained through the puzzle theory. Their commitment and the group's recruitment practices determine their participation. The supporting networks, which are thought to influence women to pursue violent extremism, will also be explored.

5.   Findings

This section incorporates the findings on the drivers of female militants participating in the terrorist organisations, Neo-JMB and LTTE. About one-third of the fighters in the LTTE were women, making it one of the organisations in South Asia that mobilised a large number of female militants.[31] In contrast, JMB, in its early years, used to limit female activities to supporting roles. Over the years, the group has evolved and its fraction Neo-JMB has included broader participation of their female operators. Women from different socio-economic strata have recently been radicalised and recruited into this group at an alarming rate.

5.1 *Case 1: Neo-JMB*

JMB only included women as supporting characters during the first wave of terrorism in Bangladesh, aiding their male peers in committing acts of terrorism, disseminating radical ideologies, and instructing their offspring and families. The spouses of the JMB members led the "sister branch," a devoted division of women that was founded by the JMB leadership.[32] Religion-based terrorist groups mostly have stringent views on women's direct involvement in the organisation; instead, they encourage female counterparts to play specific roles in disseminating radical ideology, caring for the children and helping their husbands carry out jihad.[33] The Neo-JMB movement signalled a significant shift with growing female involvement. It incorporated ideas from the Islamic State, which urges women to participate in their fight for a Sharia-based society in Bangladesh and become a part of the global caliphate. Additionally, as a result of anti-terrorism initiatives in Bangladesh, many male militants were arrested, prompting the organisation to

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[30] Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 11 (2015): 958-975, 10.1080/1057610X.2015.1051375.

[31] Alison, "In the War Front."

[32] Animesh Roul, "The Shifting Narrative of Women's Role in Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh's Islamic Jihad," *Terrorism Monitor* 16, no. 22 (2018): 7-9.

[33] Katharina Von Knop, "The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda's Women," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no.5 (2007): 397–414, 10.1080/10576100701258585.

adopt more female militants. It offered the group practical benefits and somewhat reduced the manpower deficiency.[34]

Women are recruited into Neo-JMB for a variety of reasons. Firstly, irrespective of gender, ideological commitment plays a prominent part in motivating people to join terrorist organisations. Bangladeshi women are joining terrorist groups out of a conviction to be devout Muslims waging jihad to redeem the ummah (followers) around the world and build an Islamic state (caliphate). Women may be motivated by their male family members, as generally, this has been the most common pattern of female recruitment in JMB. Women, who have ties to the JMB leadership's family or network, became radicalised and gradually encouraged to engage in terrorist activity. In many instances, the tradition of unquestioning loyalty to the husband and family as the woman's guardians obligated her to obey them. Due to religious and societal customs, such a tradition has been prevalent in society.[35] Lately, well-educated women from wealthy families are also joining the group, indicating a major transformation in the pattern of female recruitment. There were students from private universities and medical colleges among the female terrorists detained by security agencies in the years following the Holey Artisan attack.[36]

An expert in terrorism studies illustrated, "Increasingly, after the Holey Artisan attack, the recruitment story is not entirely linear. Women are not entirely dependent on their male partners or families, rather, they are joining the terrorist groups on their own will through the women's agency."[37] Such a tendency supports the idea that women's agency or their empowerment serves as a primary motivator for engagement in terrorist outfits. In contrast to the earlier pattern of joining terrorist organisations through family members or husbands, women now choose to do so independently. Instead of falling behind and living as a submissive group, these women are propelled by the quest for a stronger identity and goal in life. There are controversies regarding the misleading sense of empowerment that women have when they join terrorist organisations, particularly those that are motivated by strict religious/ideological doctrine. However, it serves as a powerful motivator for women to join terrorist groups. Furthermore, they get sympathetic to the ideology of the group as a result of the glorification and glamourisation of jihad and violent acts.

Apart from the ideological ground, specific events in their lives can boost their likelihood of joining terrorist organisations or speed up the recruitment process; these are known as the triggering variables. Personal tragedy, the demise of family members, failed relationships, despair, and sexual or domestic abuse could garner sympathy for extremist groups.[38] Due to these circumstances, women are more

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[34] Nazneen, "Growing Trend of Female Jihadism in Bangladesh."
[35] Shafi M Mostofa, "Key Drivers of Female Radicalization in Bangladesh", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12, no. 4 (2020): 27-31; Nazneen, "Growing Trend of Female Jihadism."
[36] Roul, "The Shifting Narrative of Women's Role."
[37] Interview with author on November 08, 2021.
[38] Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies, Conference Report on "Prevention of Violent Extremism from a Gender perspective," Dhaka, accessed November 17, 2021. https://bipss.org.bd/bipss-conference-report/.

likely to be vulnerable to recruitment by organisations like Neo-JMB. "Triggering events creates the cognitive opening making her more affiliated to the religious practices with a literal interpretation, which leads her to the recruitment phase."[39] Due to these factors, it becomes easier for the recruiters to entice female participants into their network. The importance of social media must be mentioned while describing the Neo-JMB hiring process. Out of 167 million people in the heavily populated nation, there are 130 million regular internet users.[40] With the help of social media, it has become much simpler to persuade people to adopt extreme religious and political viewpoints. As a result, the media not only helps to inspire women but also acts as a platform for recruiting new members for Neo-JMB. The recruitment process extensively involves using Facebook, WhatsApp, and encrypted apps like Threema and Telegram.[41] Thus, social media has proven to be the link that connects potential militants and recruiters in a community that is largely reserved like Bangladesh.[42] Parvez and Hastings demonstrated in a recent study that in the case of Bangladesh digital media has been playing a crucial role behind the participation of women in militancy due to their increasing socialisation and connectivity in cyberspace. Using a life-cycle approach, they depicted how female terrorists use digital media in every phase of their terrorist activities, most importantly, to involve and engage. It has been easier to exploit social media and reach out to women from different backgrounds.[43]

Women actively participate in Neo-JMB as recruiting agents, fundraisers, chat group moderators, translators of extremist literature into Bengali, and suicide attackers, even though suicide attacks involving women are extremely rare.[44] Humaira Jakir Nanvi was arrested in April 2018 for her role in a suicide attack that was thwarted the year before. She had been serving as the Neo- JMB's recruiter and chief fundraiser.[45] In the case of Bangladesh, when compared to their male counterparts, women participate in violent operations at a lower rate.

5.2 *Case 2: LTTE*

LTTE has been one of the largest militant groups that actively mobilised female fighters in every significant division of the organisation. From the 1980s, the group adopted a unique approach to female participation in the patriarchal socio-cultural setting of South Asia. The Black Tigers, a squad of LTTE female fighters, swore their devotion to the organisation. They effectively continued their campaign of suicide strikes until the surrender of the group in 2009.[46] The LTTE operated throughout the decades of hostilities with the goal of creating a separate homeland for Tamils in Sri Lanka. As a result, the LTTE fighters' primary

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[39] Interview with author on November 08, 2021.
[40] "Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission", accessed December 06, 2021. http://www.btrc.gov.bd/content/internet-subscribers-bangladesh-october-2021.
[41] Roul, "The Shifting Narrative of Women's Role."
[42] Interview with author on November 08, 2021.
[43] Parvez and Hastings, "Understanding the Role of Digital Media."
[44] Nazneen, "Growing Trend of Female Jihadism in Bangladesh."
[45] Md Esaraf Hossain, "Neo-JMB Still a Great Threat", *Daily Sun*, April 09, 2018, https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/300910/2018/04/09/NeoJMB-still-a-great-threat-.
[46] Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005).

motivations in many cases had been their wish for autonomy and intention to break away from the existing polity. It served as a powerful incentive for the Tamil women to devote themselves to the cause of the organisation. Due to a shortfall of men, the LTTE began recruiting women in the initial stages, primarily those previously engaged in activism.[47] Women without history of activism or political involvement were recruited in the group later, either voluntarily or coercively.

State-backed discrimination and violence against the Tamils played a vital role in garnishing support for the organisation even though there were many other aspects to the recruitment of female militants in LTTE. The LTTE members, regardless of their gender, were morally committed as a result of the misery brought on by systemic poverty, hardship and injustice. The majority of the fighters observed the violence and suffering of their community and were largely influenced by this. Besides, personal experience, loss of family members and displacement led the Tamil women to join the LTTE.[48]

Besides, women who suffered from sexual harassment would have the propensity to join the group to some extent.[49] Like many other conflicts and civil wars, sexual violence against women as a tool of weakening the morale of opposition was largely used in Sri Lankan civil war. The UN special rapporteur Radhika Coomaraswamy stated in this context that rape or mutilation of women in conflict violates the cohesion and spiritual core of the communal identity.[50] Apart from that, a report by Human Rights Watch in 2013 documented detailed accounts of sexual assault and rape by the Sri Lankan army.[51] In the overly militarised society, sexual violence ranged from raids in civilian areas to gang rape at check posts in the affected area.[52] Amid such a crisis, the patriarchal structure of society contributed to the estrangement of the women who were survivors of sexual assault by security forces during the conflict. In the South Asian social context, sexual assault is considered to be a violation of women's dignity and honour. According to Hellmann-Rajanayagam, "the alleged sexual impurity and loss of chastity were the only factors considered important, not the violation of the physical integrity."[53] Numerous women took up arms to liberate the homeland and themselves owing to the feeling of shame and disrespect they encountered in the community. Their honour and status in that particular community would be restored by joining the struggle and making sacrifices for the Elam. On the other hand, some voluntary participation was documented in the organisation due to the

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[47] Jordan and Denov, "Birds of Freedom?"
[48] Alisa Stack-O'Connor, "Lions, Tigers, and Freedom Birds: How and Why the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam Employs Women", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 1 (2007): 43-63, 10.1080/09546550601054642.
[49] Gowrinathan, "The Committed Female Fighter."
[50] Manoranjan, "Beaten but not Broken."
[51] Human Rights Watch, "We Will Teach You a Lesson: Sexual Violence against Tamils by Sri Lankan Security Forces", accessed September 09, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/02/26/sri-lanka-rape-tamil-detainees.
[52] Gowrinathan, "The Committed Female Fighter."
[53] Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, "Female Warriors, Martyrs and Suicide Attackers: Women in the LTTE," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 34, no. 1 (2008): 1-25.

dread of being sexually assaulted.[54] Being a group member gave them a sense of empowerment and protection. Therefore, one of the main driving forces behind female fighters in the LTTE used to be the sense of empowerment and the quest for a new purpose in life. The convergence of empowerment, patriotic purpose, and admiration for martyrdom created the conditions for more women to join the organisation. Conversations with former fighters revealed a different reality, despite the organisation's frequent statements of its liberal approach and commitment to gender parity. To some extent, the LTTE's culture and activity reinforced the conventional gendered norms that already existed. According to Jordan and Denov, while females may benefit from more egalitarian relations within the LTTE than traditional Tamil society, women's empowerment is made possible through the adoption of masculine behaviours instead of consciously attempting to "feminise" the military subculture.[55]

As a terrorist organisation, the integration of the narratives on women's equality by LTTE strengthened their basis for recruiting female fighters. Israelsen referred to such strategies as highly effective and a precursor to increasing manpower in terrorist groups.[56] There are instances that after 2002 for many women and underage girls it became a way to do something adventurous and cool or escaping a family condition.[57]

In addition, a substantial number of young women were motivated to enrol in the organisation through revolutionary narratives and propagandist write-ups. They were consistently inspired to register for the cause of liberation as Tamil women through the organisational level communication campaigns, most importantly, their leader Prabhakaran's charismatic speeches and appeal.[58] In the early stages of the conflict, there have also been incidents of forced recruitment. Furthermore, the lauded spontaneous involvement of female combatants is still controversial. Since individuals' experience in a hostile environment cannot be dissociated from their decisions to engage in violent or suicidal behaviour, it poses a question mark to the much acclaimed "voluntary decision."[59] Therefore, the decision made by the bulk of the female militants in the LTTE can be called into question since, given the socio-political climate at the time, joining the militant group was the only realistic choice for Tamil women. Female militants were undoubtedly served in practically every capacity, including recruiters, support personnel, and battlefield combatants. But this is imperative to note that except for special women's regiments, female militants did not hold any major leadership positions inside the organisation.

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[54] Alison, "In the War Front We Never Think."
[55] Jordan and Denov, "Birds of Freedom?"
[56] Shelli Israelsen, "Why Now? Timing Rebel Recruitment of Female Combatants," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 43, no. 2 (2020): 123-144, 10.1080/1057610X.2018.1445500.
[57] Hellmann-Rajanayagam, "Female Warriors, Martyrs and Suicide Attackers."
[58] Erin Alexander, "Women of War: The Female Fighters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," *Cornell International Affairs Review* 7, no. 2 (2014).
[59] Richard Maclure and Myriam Denov, "I Didn't Want to Die So I Joined Them: Structuration and the Process of Becoming Boy Soldiers in Sierra Leone," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 1 (2006):119-135, 10.1080/09546550500384801.

6.   Discussion

Joining a terrorist organisation is not dependent on a single factor; instead, several variables contribute to such involvement, according to the paper's key findings. Furthermore, the recruitment and involvement of female terrorists are multifaceted and intricate. The findings largely comply with the puzzle theory provided by Hafez and Mullens, how multiple causes intertwine and lay the ground for indoctrination in extreme ideologies for women. Although the research includes two separate case studies from South Asia, the main inferences from these groups were similar in many ways.

For both groups, the Neo-JMB and the LTTE, ideological conviction is a key factor in the case of female engagement. Ideological motivation is typically accompanied by a sense of honour and the ability to give their lives more purpose. The concepts of spiritual and existential worth profoundly influence women; especially in South Asian socio-cultural settings, most women face multiple barriers on the way to develop themselves compared to the males. Also, in the patriarchal set up they are treated as the inferior race which is generally followed by many-fold restrictions. Due to institutional discrimination against women and their subservient status according to traditional societal norms, prospects of involvement in terrorist organisations provide them with options to upgrade their ordinary lives. Also, they consider it as a chance to redeem themselves as empowered warriors who would achieve glory even in death. Most importantly, participation in militant groups breaches the traditional power structure of the society even though for a short period. This phenomenon was primarily evident in the cases of female LTTE militants. Tamil women conceived it as an opportunity to break down the tradition of restricted gender responsibilities and introduce themselves rather as active agent in society by joining LTTE. As a result, around one-third of the LTTE fighters were comprised of women by 2001.[60] Moreover, in LTTE female fighters had robust participation in different roles alongside male fighters. Early on, JMB did not exhibit these patterns of significant female involvement, but somehow the recent spate of militancy in Bangladesh illustrates a significant shift. Despite the recent changes and advancements, as per social and religious custom, to some extent, women are supposed to be restricted from the public sphere in Bangladesh. Previously the structure of the terrorist organisations largely upheld the concept of masculinity in the case of leadership, membership and participation. Currently, women have been playing a crucial role in recruitment (especially online), financing and assisting the terrorist activities in Bangladesh. Hence, the agency of women has been significant in the engagement of female militants in terrorism. Besides, the glamourisation of terrorist acts in the name of sacrifice might inspire young women to join those groups.

Besides, personal experiences like death or imprisonment of family members/husband, personal loss or a feeling of isolation broadly impact the possibility of involvement in terrorist activities. In the case of women, the trauma from sexual violence or harassment may act as an important factor that creates the

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[60] Gonzalez-Perez, *Women and Terrorism Female Activity*.

ground for the indoctrination of extremist ideas—this can be applied to the case of LTTE. Recruiting agents from terrorist groups exploit such situations, facilitating the cognitive opening for extreme ideologies. In the rigid socio-cultural context of South Asia, the culture of victim-shaming is prominent which is a push factor for women to get aligned with violent movements. Joining the organisations might serve as the only opportunity to redeem themselves. Though LTTE had explicitly promoted gender equality narratives for a period and showed significant participation of women in the group, their stand remains dubious.

Potential targets are largely motivated by the propaganda, socialisation process, and media, digital media in the case of Neo-JMB. In recent times social media serves as an active ground for the recruitment process that benefits these terrorist groups to increase manpower and maintains liaison with the transnational terrorist groups or sponsors. In Bangladesh, social media is largely responsible for the recruitment and indoctrination of jihadist ideology in women.[61] In the case of LTTE, extensive propaganda campaigns by the members and leaders were useful to attract female recruits from the likely targets. Besides, pre-existing networks or family connections serve as an important factor in the case of JMB and Neo-JMB female operators but this was not a common pattern of recruitment for LTTE.

Table 01: Summary of the Key Findings Comparing Both the Cases

Factors determining the possibility of participation in militant organisations	Neo-JMB	LTTE
Ideological conviction	Evident, ideology stemming from religious beliefs	Strongly existed, nationalist-separatist ideology
Personal experience	Less evident, but personal experiences may push women towards the cognitive opening	Strongly existed; mostly as a consequence of state-led discriminatory policies and campaigns
Inferior status in the mainstream society	Strongly exists	Strongly existed
Familial tie	Evident in many cases	Not common
Media/digital media/propaganda	Strongly exists, the digital space/social media serves as a significant driver	Evident
Glamourisation of violence	Evident	Evident

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[61] Parvez and Hastings, "Understanding the Role of Digital Media."

The organisational perspective reinforces these factors in the whole process of female involvement in terrorism. Given that terrorist groups are rational actors, their strategies evolve. The first and second waves of terrorism did witness women's involvement, but it was after the 1970s when the extensive participation of female militants began to receive greater coverage. Valentine Moghadam distinguished between two forms of militant groups—the first one calls for greater participation of women and portrays women as a symbol of emancipation. The second kind rather perceives women as a part of their tradition and highly controls their involvement in organisational activities. Generally, socialist or anarchist militant outfits well-accommodate female participants compared to the strict right-aligned groups based on racial or religious superiority.[62] They often hold and practice restrictions on incorporation of greater female participation in the organisation. Neo-JMB in its primary phase did not allow women as active participant. Even in the case of LTTE, female involvement was far restricted and controlled in the early 1980s. As the findings show, due to the counter-terrorism crackdowns by the government agencies, many militants had to face detention or death. Consequently, to increase manpower as well as function amidst the adverse environment the trend of recruiting women in such organisations became quite familiar. Terrorist groups have largely benefited from involving female militants in frontline operations by finding loopholes in standard security measures of the opponent and pursuing critical targets. Women are less susceptible to being a security threat compared to their male counterparts. In most cases, these organisations extract such advantages by recruiting them. Moreover, female militants draw extensive media attention as their role contradicts the existing gender stereotypes. Terrorist groups have started recruiting more women as their involvement in suicide bombings and offensive duties effectively convey a sense of terror and attract attention from the broader audience.

7. Conclusion

The paper sought to understand the factors behind female militants' decisions to join terrorist organisations, particularly in South Asia. According to the body of literature and informed opinion, many elements combinedly determine why some women engage in violent militant groups. Analysing and comparing the two different examples from South Asia, it became evident that the ideological, socio-political and personal contributing factors for the involvement of female militants were quite similar in both cases. Along with ideological causes, the desire to empower themselves in the rigid socio-cultural structure shaped the process of signing up for such causes. Though empowerment through participating in militancy is largely controversial, there is no scope to deny its influence. Terrorist organisations have been adapting and including an increasing number of female militants. LTTE was defeated in 2009 but the example it set by employing female fighters in almost every sector of the organisation was largely followed by other groups. Even though the extreme religious ideologies exclude women's participation in many cases, the terrorist groups based on those ideologies are now

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[62] Parashar, "The Sacred and the Sacrilegious."

adopting different views authorising the participation of women.[63] Since the number of terrorist acts carried out by female militants has been growing, in-depth research with empirical evidence is necessary to comprehend the issue and devise suitable context-specific counterstrategies to cope with this. There is scope for further research based on primary data to understand the scenario of female participation in different circumstances.