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Indonesian Women and Terrorism: An Analysis of Historical and Contemporary Trends

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Abstract

From 2016 to 2021, women attempted to or perpetrated suicide attacks in Indonesia. These attacks were committed by them as individuals or in family units, who were affiliated to the Islamic State. These incidents marked the first occurrence of suicide attacks carried out by women in Indonesia. Current scholarship and policy analysis of female terrorism attributed to the Islamic State or proxy groups is still catching up with the implications of trends emerging from women’s actions as suicide attackers in Indonesia and worldwide. Primarily, scholarly and policy analyses of female terrorism focus on the individual woman engaged in violence, whereas women who support terrorist groups—as ideologues, wives, and online activists—are given a secondary analytical focus. This creates conceptual limitations in understanding women’s pathways to violence, which can encompass violent and supportive roles within the social world in which they operate. Using Indonesia as a case study, this article advances a framework to account for the mobilisation of different identities to commit violence across personal and political linkages. In examining historical and current developments in Indonesia, this article illustrates that women as supporters or actors of violence, while largely conforming to traditional gender ideology and roles, are driven by both personal and political considerations.

Keywords

female terrorism; gender; Indonesia; Islamic State; suicide attacks; terrorism

1. Introduction

From 2016 onwards, Indonesia witnessed a series of attempted or perpetrated suicide attacks carried out by individual female terrorists or in family units. This included Zakiah Aini, who on 31 March 2021, entered

Indonesia's National Police headquarters in Jakarta with a gun that she fired several times. She was killed without injuring any law enforcement officials. The National Police Chief General Listyo Sigit Prabowo described her as a "lone wolf." According to officials, Aini's social media activity indicated her allegiance to the Islamic State (IS), and evidence obtained by law enforcement indicates that she was radicalised through social media. In her *wasiat* (Islamic will) left for her family, she justified her actions by stating:

I love you mama so much. But Allah loves his servant more, so Zakiah has entered this path as per the example of the messenger of Allah to save Zakiah and with the permission of Allah to make intercession for you and our family in the afterlife. (Oktavia, 2021)

The *wasiat* Aini left is one of few clues that give insight into her motivation and reasoning for committing violent jihad. It signifies her conviction that these actions will bring rewards to both herself and her family in the afterlife. However, Aini's case stands apart from typical patterns of female terrorism in Indonesia. She acted as an isolated actor, who operated outside of any social connection, including wedlock, and independently committed a suicide attack.

Suicide attacks are terrorist acts where an individual intentionally carries out a destructive act, often resulting in their death with the primary aim of causing harm to others to achieve a political and ideological objective. The rise of female suicide attackers in Indonesia and globally is attributed to the IS's policy to allow women to commit violence in front-line roles (Gan et al., 2019; Munasinghe et al., 2017). This hypothesis goes some way in explaining Indonesia's experience of female suicide attacks; however, there are limitations to it given that, between 2016 and 2021, only five suicide attacks have occurred, and one was attempted. Indonesian women have long supported extremist groups, both before the rise of the IS and after. They are at the forefront of efforts to radicalise online and in strategic marriages that are vital to the renewal of jihadi networks. Current scholarship and policy analysis of female terrorism attributed to IS or proxy groups is still catching up with the implications of trends emerging from women's actions as suicide attackers in Indonesia and worldwide. Mostly, research and policy analysis of female terrorism is limited by a narrow conceptual focus on the individual woman, who perpetrates the act of violence (Bloom, 2005; Munasinghe et al., 2017). In effect, this creates a distinction between women who commit violence and women who support it, as ideologues, wives, and online activists. Women in support roles are often assumed to lack political affiliation with the extremist group.

Focusing exclusively on the women who engage in violent acts imposes conceptual limitations in understanding a woman's pathways to violence, which often encompasses supportive and violent roles within the social world in which they operate. In Indonesia, the example of suicide attacks is important but represents a minority of cases within a broader context of female involvement in violent jihadi groups, in both historical and contemporary times. The evidence suggests that women's involvement in either violent or supportive roles will persist, to some extent, in aligning with a traditional gender division of labour, in accordance with jihadi ideology. However, this does not mean that women's lives are separate from the political workings of the ideology and aims of their movement. To account for this political possibility, this article advances a framework to account for women's involvement in violence across a spectrum of roles, as supporters, enablers, and perpetrators. This world of violence is structured by both personal and political factors in which women can mobilise different social identities as mothers, daughters, and wives.

This article proceeds in the following way. Section 2 introduces the theoretical and conceptual framework. Section 3 provides a brief overview of key extremist groups and developments in Indonesia. Sections 4 outlines and analyses historical and contemporary trends and linkages. Section 5 focuses on IS driven activity and the implications of female suicide attacks.

2. Conceptualising Women in Violence

This article defines terrorism as the actions taken by an individual or group to create fear and violence within a community, by intentionally using violence to achieve the political aim of intimidating civilians and the government (Davis, 2017; Jackson, 2007).

Scholarship on female terrorism gained momentum in the 1980s as female-led suicide attacks occurred in places like Israel–Palestine, Lebanon, and Sri Lanka (Bloom, 2005; Davis, 2017). From 1985 to 2010, women committed 257 suicide attacks (Bloom, 2005). However, attempts to integrate the female terrorist within mainstream studies on terrorism and political violence and in popular media accounts frequently lack a nuanced examination of their actions and identity within a socio-political context. In analysis of women's participation in political violence, commonly gendered stereotypes are mobilised to emphasise women's personal reasons for committing violence, such as being raped or avenging their dead husband (Bloom, 2005, 2011). The effect of this as Brunner (2007, p. 963) explains is: “[A focus on] personal grievance depoliticizes suicide bombing and separates it from political contexts such as occupation or civil war in which families and individuals are affected by personal tragedies that do not occur in peacetime.”

The focus on women's personal decision-making has theoretical and empirical consequences to position them as “non-agents,” without the ability to make rational choices (as observed in Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). A gendered analytical distinction is made between men and women who commit violence. While a man's participation in conflict or political violence is linked to political objectives, a woman who commits violence is seen to transgress normal feminine roles. Thus, their violent behaviour is considered exceptional and/or deviant (see Banks, 2019; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007).

The study of female terrorism is linked in important ways to a broader feminist academic project of locating women as significant actors in political violence and conflict, whose identity and agency challenge simplistic stereotypes of their victimhood (Allison, 2009; Macfarlane, 2023; Moser & Clark, 2001). This approach seeks to understand gendered norms and roles in shaping opportunities, resources, and identities in conflict and political violence (Phelan, 2021; True & Eddyono, 2021). An important theoretical insight is women as actors, who make choices to support and perpetrate violence through “deliberate participation” (Gowrinathan, 2021, p. 10) and who can be guided by political affiliation and aspirations within a group (Allison, 2009). Thus, women's political agency is attached to their identity as a combatant or a fighter in challenging gendered norms through their role in a group committing conflict or political violence (Manchanda, 2004). However, there exist analytical limitations when addressing the “political” of women's actions in supportive roles. As Parashar (2009, pp. 250–252) suggests, analysis of women's actions as supporters or participants in violence needs to account for an interconnection between personal and political worlds. In other words, the measurement of a woman's political engagement should not solely be measured by her overt, tangible political participation or violent action. Women's political engagement and affiliation with a movement is possible even as mothers, wives, and/or daughters.

This perspective is important when examining the role of women in violent jihadi groups. Women's supportive roles in jihadi groups is highly regarded and respected in historical Islamic warfare practices that go back through history (Lahoud, 2014). Historically, some women, who are known as *mujahidaat* (female fighters), fought key battles, but, more importantly, records demonstrate that jihadi groups attached significant value to women's roles as mothers, propagandists, messengers, and wives. These roles are crucial to the survival and sustenance of such organisations. It is crucial to avoid romanticising or implying that women can attain gender equality by supporting terrorist groups. However, simplistic narratives, such as those portraying women solely as manipulated as illustrated in the Western media's depiction of IS brides (Sjoberg, 2018), overlook the nuanced nature of women's actions and agency in such contexts.

A way forward is to incorporate a broader understanding of the "political" that accounts for everyday acts in different political and social fields and across the private and public realm of women's lives. Through this connection emerges different political possibilities and forms of agency. There exists scalability in their potential to exercise agency, which ranges from being limited to more overt forms, like committing violence. Forms of violence and the participation of individuals in violence are enmeshed in people's everyday existence—a "descent into the ordinary" (Das, 2006). Thus, across this personal/political divide exists a more fluid understanding of violence, where the potential for women to support and/or commit violence can occur from different standpoints, as supporters, enablers, and/or perpetrators.

3. Background to Indonesian Terrorism

To contextualise women's involvement in terrorism, this section provides a brief overview of different phases of militant jihadism. Indonesia's history of militant jihadism (for an overview see Feillard & Madinier, 2011) commenced with Darul Islam (DI), which emerged during the National Revolution (1945–1949) to expel the Dutch colonisers. Led by Sekarmadji Kartosoewirjo, the movement aimed to establish an Islamic state in opposition to the newly democratic, secular nation. The Islamic State of Indonesia (Negara Islam Indonesia) was proclaimed on 7 August 1949 in West Java, and a series of rebellions occurred in South Sulawesi and Aceh (van Dijk, 1981). The DI insurgency was defeated by the state in 1962, but clashes between activists and the Indonesian state occurred with the revival of DI throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Solahudin, 2013; Temby, 2010). While not a terrorist organisation per se, the aims of the movement in establishing an Islamic state and the networks built provided an important platform for the emergence of contemporary terrorist movements. DI is, therefore, credited with giving rise to "a homegrown concept of jihadism" (Osman, 2010, p. 160) that "constitutes the core of militant Islam" (Jones, 2010). DI's jihadi ideology shared common features with Salafi jihadism (which would not arrive in Indonesia until many years after DI). DI's ideology included designating a government apostate for not implementing Islamic law, and enforcing Sharia law by force, if necessary (Solahudin, 2013).

The emergence of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), led by Abdullah Sungkar from the 1980s onwards, led to the establishment of a terror network connected to the global Salafi jihadist movement. Indonesian fighters travelled to Afghanistan at the call of Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, the Palestinian theologian, who in the 1980s, issued a fatwa for defensive jihad during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979–1989). Sungkar, who founded JI with Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, aimed to create a movement that could bridge traditional and radical Islam (Temby, 2010). Ba'asyir preached a literalist interpretation of the Quran and publicly denounced liberalism and the Pancasila state model (Franklin, 2014). He capitalised on the 1980s revival of DI to

leverage its institutional and ideological foundation to create JI. JI sought to establish a pan-Islamic state in Southeast Asia and became the main organisation responsible for terrorist activities throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Operating as a loose regional network, JI is linked to dozens of deadly attacks across Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia from 1999 to the early 2000s (International Crisis Group, 2002).

Indonesia's third wave of terrorism commenced in 2014 when Ba'asyir pledged allegiance to IS. As an organisation that espouses a violent Salafi religious-political ideology to establish a global Islamic caliphate, IS significantly drove terrorist activity worldwide from 2014 to 2019 (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2022), including in Indonesia. Some of these groups affiliated with IS in Indonesia include Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), which is one of the largest terrorist networks that established itself by using old networks and structures from groups like Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid (Satria, 2022, p. 12). Another example is the East Indonesia Mujahideen (MIT) in Poso, Sulawesi. The creation of MIT, led by Abu Wardah (alias Santoso) was framed by grievances stemming from inter-communal violence between Christians and Muslims between 1997 and 2001 (McRae, 2013). In time, the group's agenda coalesced into an IS affiliate jihadi agenda, where MIT became the military wing of Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid. The influence of IS has significantly impacted the national security landscape and law enforcement responses. Overall, terrorism threats are driven by factors like the return of foreign fighters and the ongoing threat of radicalisation that is supported by social media and other digital forums (Duriesmith, 2018; Johnston et al., 2020). Authorities, therefore, deal with a shifting security landscape, which is complicated by terrorist actors that have different sub-motivations and agendas (Jones, 2011).

4. Historical and Contemporary Linkages

Indonesian women's role in terrorism, particularly in earlier iterations of militant activity and terrorism, is largely marginalised in academic scholarship. In historical examples like DI and JI, this is partly explained by the secretive nature of the organisations, resulting from a strict gendered ideological adherence to women's roles in the private world of the family, where women were not permitted to commit violence. As Blackburn (2008, p. 92) explains, this is consistent with a "scripturalist" approach to radical Islam that clearly places men into the "public" sphere and women in the "private," based on a gendered division of labour. However, although women were forbidden from committing violence, they were actively involved in supporting group ideology and propagation through support of the home life and education efforts.

From the 1980s onwards, women were recruited to DI as it shifted into a new form of Muslim activism that was more secretive and "less overtly confrontational towards the secular state" (Temby, 2010, p. 27). DI's engagement with women was distinct from earlier practices evident throughout the 1950s and 1960s. As noted in Robinson's (1983) research, rebel fighters in DI/Tentara Islam in South Sulawesi subjected local women to forced marriages with rebel fighters. During DI's second iteration and revival, women became the backbone of ideological and religious teaching within the family and were active in cultural campaigns around dress standards (like the *jilbabisation* campaign, a type of religious headscarf), education, and charity work. This included setting up small study circles known as *usroh* that were inspired by the organisational approach of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Key female leaders infiltrated other Islamic study groups in schools and universities to promote religious ideological efforts (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 2017, p. 4). These activities carried out by women provided the social foundation for supporting the broader political goal of creating an IS. As Nuraniyah (2018, p. 893) explains: "DI believed that [the] Islamic

revolution should start from the family unit, by instilling Islamic values early on, then Islamising the society, and finally the state.”

Similarly, in JI women’s domestic roles were reinforced. This was specifically outlined in the *Handbook of Womanhood* produced by the Al-Mukmin School, which explicitly prohibited women from fighting. In it, women’s roles were defined as “a daughter who has to obey her father, as a wife who has to obey her husband, and as a mother who is responsible for her children’s well-being and education” (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 2017, p. 5). Despite an emphasis on women’s domestic roles, women were permitted to teach throughout JI’s network of schools and act as propagandists (Nasir, 2019). Strategic marriages between JI fighters and women were used to consolidate relations that strengthened networks and loyalty (Osman, 2010). Women, who underwent these marriages, typically received religious training at the hands of their husbands and were heavily indoctrinated (Abas, 2005). As White (2009) suggests, analysis of these marriages needs to account for different levels of agency exercised by wives, including knowledge of their husband’s actions, and varying degrees of political commitment and affiliation. In some cases, women actively sought out marriage with a fighter (*mujahid*). One example is Munfiatun Al Fitri, who as Noordin Top’s second wife, allegedly told a friend that she wanted to marry a *mujahid*. She became his second wife while he was on the run (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 2020, p. 16). She was given a 27 month sentence for the crime of hiding her husband’s whereabouts from authorities, by illegally changing his name on wedding documents. Similarly, Putri Munawaroh, who lost her first husband in her efforts to help hide Top, re-married another extremist in Ambon (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 2020, p. 16). This is a pattern that is observable in the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict’s (2020) report where women convicted of terrorist offences often colluded with their husbands and/or re-married an extremist in the event of their first husband’s death (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 2020, pp. 16–21).

In contrast, Paridah Abas, the third wife of Mukhlas (Ali Ghufron), the mastermind of the Bali bombing, declared her ignorance of her husband’s intent to commit violence. In her memoir, she recalls being shocked about his involvement. Their oldest child, Asma’a penned the following poem:

Father, now you aren’t by my side, but you will always be in my heart, your name I will remember, your smile I will always imagine in my eyes, your face I will always imagine in my memory, father, I am proud to be your child. (Abas, 2005, as cited in Saputro, 2010, p. 2013)

The family’s love of Mukhlas is a common theme in Abas’ memoir, *Orang Bilang, Ayah Teroris*. But while, she explains that she was ignorant of the extent of violence planned by her husband, she subsequently indicated her belief in the religious rewards of her husband being martyred (Abas, 2005).

More recently, Azca and Putri’s research on MIT wives demonstrates that women’s decision to marry MIT fighters over time was motivated by ideological reasoning to support the organisation. Thus, while marriage served a more practical purpose in the initial recruitment of women to MIT, over time, some women actively sought out marriage to support the violent, political agenda of MIT (Azca & Putri, 2024, p. 6). The narratives of the wives profiled by Azca and Putri illustrate that women’s lives exist fluidly between non-violence and violence. One of their research participants explained that while most women were dedicated to wifely duties to MIT fighters, sometimes these boundaries were challenged, as illustrated by one women’s description of an Indonesian police and military operation against MIT:

I wore a bomb vest. We stayed almost a year in Napu [a mountainous area in the western part of Poso regency], and more than five thousand [Operation] Tinombala troops raided us. At night, when we thought the condition had been safe; we were preparing for dinner and Maghrib prayer. But suddenly, the Tinombala troops came. We were in a shootout. (Azca & Putri, 2024, p. 8)

5. IS and Female Terrorism

Contemporary female involvement in terrorist activity demonstrates a continuation of previous patterns of support that are evident in DI and JI. Women's support role for IS or affiliate groups remains consistent in education and ideological efforts but via a different medium of online technology, including social media. Indonesian women are at the helm of efforts to radicalise others and to provide continual moral support to the men who are fighting (Arianti & Yasin, 2016; Johnston et al., 2020). This is demonstrated through their social media activity, including chat rooms, Facebook, Telegram, and other applications, which provide a means for women to not only more efficiently send out messages to relevant networks, but to extensively reach audiences as targets for radicalisation (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 2017). Women continue to actively support IS goals through the online space through proselytising (*dakwa*) activities and rallying other women to provide ideological and emotional sustenance to male relatives, particularly husbands (Johnston et al., 2020; Lahoud, 2014).

In Indonesia, the most significant change is the advent of female suicide attacks, which occurred from 2016 onwards and is evidenced in Table 1 below.

Before this, no woman had committed or attempted to commit a suicide attack in Indonesia. Indeed, analysis of Indonesian women in local IS based groups notes that, increasingly, women are more involved in traditional "men's" roles, like bomb-making, and suicide attacks (Marcoes, 2018; Rahmah, 2020). The examples of female suicide attacks can partly be attributed to the influence of IS, as is reflected in worldwide trends. In 2017, the report *Global Extremist Monitor* reported that 181 female militants conducted 100 suicide assaults, which represents a fundamental change in women's roles in Islamic extremist groups, with most of this activity occurring in sub-Saharan Africa (Munasinghe et al., 2017, p. 15). While IS has never outright stated that women should commit suicide attacks, their position appears to support or bless the actions of female terrorists (Lahoud, 2014, p. 783). However, in examples worldwide, there are important variations in terms of women being forced to undertake a suicide attack or exercising some agency and choice. For example, human rights groups have documented Boko Haram's (an Islamist jihadist organisation based in northeastern Nigeria) forceful recruitment of women and children to commit suicide attacks (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015).

In Indonesia, it appears that women were more active in making the decision to commit violence. In 2016, one female operative attempted to blow herself up. She was a former migrant worker turned IS operative. Nuraniyah (2018) explains that the attempted and planned attacks represented a turning point as it was the first time that women had acted towards committing violence. Further, four women were arrested by the counter-terrorism agency Detachment 88 in 2016 because of evidence that they planned to commit a suicide attack, which surprised the general public (Hanifah, 2016). Nuraniyah's (2018) study on 25 Indonesian migrant women turned IS operatives found that their radicalisation process was prompted by a religious-seeking journey and a failure to find religious congruence with other Islamic religious groups. She states they were:

Table 1. List of perpetrated or attempted suicide attacks committed by women in Indonesia from 2016–2021.

Date of attack	Name of perpetrator	Organisation	Details of attack	Outcome
11/12/2016	Dian Yulia Novi	IS	(Attempted) to blow up presidential guards with a rice cooker; arrested prior to the attack	Sentenced to a 7.5-year prison sentence
	Ika Puspita Sari	IS	A few days after Dian Yuli Novi's arrest, she was arrested for planning a suicide attack in Bali	Arrested by Densus 88 on 15/12/2016; sentenced to 4.5 years imprisonment
13/05/2018	Puji Kuswati (42 years old), husband Dita Oepriarto (46 years old), and four children aged eight, 12, 15, and 17	JAD	Father, mother, two teenage sons, 12-year-old and nine-year-old daughters involved in the suicide bombing of three churches in Surabaya	N/A, perpetrators killed in the attack
13/05/2018	Puspitasari (47 years old), husband (Anton Febrianto), and four children aged 10, 11, 15, and 17	JAD	The bomb exploded prematurely killing the two parents and four children in their apartment; this bomb was also planned to be used in coordinated attacks with the Kuswati family on the same day	N/A, perpetrators killed in the attack
14/05/2018	Parents and three children (no names available)	JAD	Attacked the police station in Surabaya in a suicide bombing on motorbikes; the eight-year-old daughter survived the blast; co-ordinated with the Kuswati family attack the day prior	N/A, all killed except an eight-year-old child
31/01/2021	Zakiah Aini	IS	Opened fire on Indonesian National Police headquarters in Jakarta	Shot dead in attack
28/03/2021	Husband and wife (no names available)	JAD	Church bombings in Makassar, South Sulawesi; no deaths apart from the two perpetrators	N/A, killed during the attack

Prompted by a mix of personal crises and political grievances, the women in this study embark on a religious seeking, actively experimenting with different Islamic interpretations and groups—both online and face to face—before making a conscious decision to join IS. (Nuraniyah, 2018, p. 891)

Importantly, Nuraniyah's study demonstrates that women's path to committing violence culminated at the end of their religious seeking journey, which was a journey shaped by both personal and political grievances.

The female IS operatives profiled in Nuraniyah's research ostensibly fit with international analysis of women as individual actors, to the extent that they pursued individual religious-seeking journeys. However, the decision to commit to violence was framed within a social context of networks and marriage, in line with

jihadi ideology. Indeed, Schulze and Liow's (2019) study found that Indonesian terrorist actors are embedded in networks of social kinship. Similarly, Resnyansky et al. (2022) argue that a communal analytical framework helps to elucidate the social connections that frame women's actions. Therefore, while IS has influenced new pathways of violence, female suicide attackers largely conform to gendered expectations via marriage, and seeking permission from a male contact to commit violence.

This is illustrated by Dian Yulia Novia, who attempted to blow up the Presidential Palace in 2016. As a migrant worker in Taiwan, she became radicalised through online teachings on Facebook. During an interview with tvOneNews (2016), she revealed that her initial curiosity about jihadist content online eventually transformed into a conviction to commit violent jihad. Her future husband, Nur Solihin, an IS supporter from Bahrin Naim's network, drove efforts to radicalise her. She believed that conducting a suicide operation would guarantee her ill father access to heaven. Her interview provides further insight:

Interviewer: When did you develop the conviction to transport and detonate a bomb that would injure yourself and other people?

Dian: Since the time of my marriage, three months ago.

Interviewer: What did your husband tell you about the plan?

Dian: He told me that he would take care of everything [and instructed me] to focus on understanding the steps needed to complete [the operation].

Interviewer: Who gave the oath of allegiance?

Dian: My husband.

Interviewer: What was the method for taking the oath, if you can tell me?

Dian: It was a verbal method, [while] holding the hand of a *mahram* [close male relative]. My *mahram* was my husband. There, I gave the oath, and the text of the oath was dictated to me, like that. (tvOneNews, 2016)

Therefore, her marriage arrangement complied with the IS fatwa by obtaining permission from her husband to conduct any violent operation outside the home (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 2020). This reflects a conformity to social practices centred on her role as a wife in jihadi ideology.

6. Family Suicide Attacks

The occurrence of three whole-family suicide attacks represents a variation in female suicide attacks, as a communal act of violence. In 2018, three coordinated family suicide attacks in Surabaya took place, which were linked to JAD (see Table 1). One family bombed three churches, a second family attacked the police station using suicide vests, and a third family's bomb prematurely exploded in their apartment ("Indonesia: ISIS suicide bombers," 2018; Lamb, 2018). A separate suicide attack was carried out by a married couple, who were also affiliated with JAD. They detonated themselves at a cathedral in Makassar, South Sulawesi.

The involvement of family members in suicide attacks can be partly attributed to IS's recruitment focus on families in Iraq and Syria. As Jones explains, IS is a "family affair" (Jones, 2018). Although the initial aim of recruiting women and children along with male fighters was to build the family and social structures needed to establish a caliphate in Syria and Iraq, violence inevitably infiltrated the lives of women and children living there. For example, IS recruited and trained male children as "cubs of the caliphate," who were subjected to violent initiation processes (Anderson, 2016). IS family focus contrasts with the recruitment of individual male fighters from the 1980s onwards, when Indonesian men would typically travel to training grounds in Afghanistan and Pakistan set up by Al Qaeda without women and children. The pattern of IS's family recruitment is illustrated by an Indonesian schoolgirl named Nur Dhania, who convinced her family to move to Syria. She convinced them that the move was an opportunity to live in a utopian IS. A total of 25 family members moved over with her, but they soon realised that life was full of hardships under IS rule (Barker, 2019). As of 2024, it is estimated that around 689 Indonesian foreign fighters, including women and children, remain in limbo as the government refuses to repatriate them (Hussein & Intan, 2020).

The occurrence of a family suicide attack illustrates a transference from an individual to a collective commitment to violence. Indeed, analysts have observed the rise of family suicide attacks across the region for some time (Jones, 2011). This includes several Indonesian women who committed suicide attacks in the Philippines for the Abu Sayyaf Group, an IS affiliate militant group. This included Rezy Fantasya Rullie (Cici), the widow of a killed Abu Sayyaf Group member (Yaoren, 2021, pp. 4–5). The role of women in the Indonesian attacks warrants further attention, specifically the mothers, who were involved in the family suicide attacks. Existing research already outlines the gatekeeping roles of mothers in either supporting or hindering radicalisation of children in Islamic jihadi families. Mothers can help children move away from a pathway of radicalisation, or can provide an important conduit to family-based efforts to radicalise (Noor, 2018, 2022; Solomon, 2023). However, in general, there is a lack of scholarly attention to women's potential to commit violence as mothers, given that social norms concerning women's role to protect and nurture as mothers remain powerful across different social and policy contexts (Charlesworth, 2008). The examples of family suicide attacks suggest that the family became a site of politics that was intermingled with kinship, love, and care, where women acted in their capacity as wives and mothers to facilitate this commitment. Further, it is reported that the families who committed these attacks were radicalised in Islamic study groups (Lamb, 2018). Families were motivated by the reward for their sacrifice and did not want to leave each other and be stigmatised as a "terrorist family" (Noor, 2018).

However, it is worth qualifying that in the Indonesian example, these attacks were coordinated by the three families. It is hard to know if it is just a unique case or a trend that will develop. Analysis of JAD terrorist activities highlights that the role of a decentralised structure is used to facilitate new pathways of violence, which includes family suicide attacks (Yaoren, 2021). The chief ideologue of JAD, Aman Abdurrahman, who is on death row for his role in IS-inspired attacks, chastised members of JAD for using children in a series of suicide attacks from 2016 to 2018 (Ayuningtyas, 2022). He stated in a memorandum of defence at the South Jakarta District Court: "The incident (suicide bombing) of a mother leading her child in the churchyard cannot possibly arise from a person who understands Islamic teachings. It cannot possibly arise from a person who has a sound mind" ("Aman Abdurrahman sebut," 2018).

7. Conclusion

There remain a lot of hypothetical aspects in understanding future female terrorism trends in Indonesia. However, this article argues in the Indonesian context analytical consideration should be given both to suicide attacks and women's support roles. Focusing exclusively on the women who engage in violent acts imposes conceptual limitations in understanding a woman's pathways to violence, particularly in the context of Islamic jihadi groups. This requires tweaking theoretical approaches to women in violence to account for personal and political factors shaping their actions. Greater analytical attention should be given to the political possibility of women's engagement in violence, even if they are mothers, wives, and/or daughters.

The suicide attacks committed by women in Indonesia, as either individual actors or in family units, illustrate both continuities and important developments in terrorism. Some of these developments are seen worldwide, but other examples like whole-family suicide attacks are more concentrated in Indonesia and the Southeast Asia region. In an analysis of suicide attacks, while ostensibly women committed to an individual path of violence, their actions were framed within the social context of being a wife. They legitimised their actions through their marriage to conform to traditional gendered norms in Islamic jihadi practice. Similarly, family suicide attacks illustrate the potential for women to mobilise social identities as wives and mothers to commit the family to a pathway of violence. Thus, the identity of a female terrorist is multilayered and complex, which is shaped by her social surroundings and political affiliation.

The examples used in this article illustrate that different possibilities exist regarding agency, political expression, and ideological commitment. More studies in this area are required to understand the causes and motivations of this type of terrorism that accounts for women's complex affiliation to violence, through both a personal and political lens.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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