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BEYOND STEREOTYPES: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN ASIAN TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

The participation of women in leadership roles within Asian terrorist activities is critically underexplored, often reduced to simplistic binaries of coercion or deviance. This article introduces a novel interdisciplinary framework that integrates trauma theory, social identity theory, feminist security studies, and relational leadership to transcend these stereotypes and enhance understanding of women's influence in extremist organizations. Utilizing a robust mixed-method qualitative design, the study combines Delphi consensus panels, expert interviews, comparative case studies of four ideologically diverse groups (LTTE, Abu Sayyaf, BRN, Aum Shinrikyo), and discourse analysis of 72 propaganda pieces, to triangulate complex psychosocial dynamics. Findings illuminate six interlinked psychosocial domains—ranging from trauma-based cognitive reframing to strategic gendered instrumentalization—that underpin women's leadership. This research challenges traditional male-centric models of radicalization by emphasizing the relational, emotional, and symbolic aspects of female power. Theoretically, it offers a context-sensitive model of female terrorist leadership, significantly contributing to both gender and security studies. In practice, the study advocates trauma-responsive deradicalization programs, gender-informed risk assessment tools, and culturally specific reintegration and Counter-Violent Extremism (CVE) approaches, underscoring the ineffectiveness of initiatives that overlook women's symbolic and relational authority.

Keywords: Female Terrorist Leadership, Trauma Theory, Social Identity, Relational Leadership, Gendered Radicalization

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Introduction

An increasingly interdisciplinary and more nuanced classificatory framework—one that is sensitive to, or aims to decode, the operations of women terrorists—is warranted to understand female involvement in terrorism more meaningfully, beyond stereotypes of the feminine. Over time, depictions of women's roles in terrorist movements have oscillated between two oversimplified poles: portraying them either as passive victims or as deviant, exotic monsters. These binary frameworks not only erase the complexity of motives and psychological pathways toward radicalization, but also fail to address the socio-political environments in which women gain and sustain leadership positions in violent extremist groups.

While academic recognition has increased, much research in this area remains relatively low in depth, and the literature often reduces women's roles to that of symbolic or operational tools (e.g., suicide bombers), failing to consider broader dimensions of leadership or their instrumental use in propaganda. It also tends to be Western-centric, frequently overlooking the cultural particularities and ideological configurations of non-Western extremist groups. Remarkably little research has focused on how women ascend to leadership—not merely participate—in terrorist hierarchies, especially within the diverse political, social, and cultural topographies that constitute Asia.

This study fills that gap, offering a holistic, interdisciplinary understanding of psychosocial antecedents, as well as organizational means, of female terrorist leadership in Asia. Based on trauma theory, social identity theory, feminist security studies, and relational leadership theory, it explores women's negotiating of identity, ideologies, and emotional labor to emerge on top of organizations like the LTTE (Sri Lanka), Abu Sayyaf (Philippines), BRN (Thailand), and Aum Shinrikyo (Japan).

In this article, the complex psychosocial pathways by which women move into and maintain leadership positions at the terrorist groups in Asia are discussed. It does so in settings characterized by poverty, marginalization, protracted conflict, and weak governance, where leadership opportunities emerge in both organizational and symbolic spaces. Although this paper deliberately focuses on Asia for context, the model designed here could be extended to test the construct across other areas, such as the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, or Western far-right movements. In contrast to past research that depicts gender as a "risk factor" or a "recruitment tool," this article provides a dynamic theoretical model that emphasizes gender as a relational, symbolic, and strategic layer of extremist leadership. Applying qualitative research methods (expert interviews, Delphi consensus, case study comparison, discourse analysis), the research project analyzes affective, ideological, and cultural scripts relevant to the agency and legitimacy of women in terrorist groups.

By emphasizing leadership rather than participation and by placing Asia at the centre rather than working within Western-centric assumptions, this research makes both conceptual and empirical contributions to feminist security studies and critical terrorism studies. It disrupts dominant narratives that marginalize or oversimplify women's roles in political violence and instead foregrounds the intersectional and context-dependent mechanisms via which women leaders emerge and operate in radicalized spaces.

Understanding women's advancement in terrorist hierarchies requires attention not only to large political structures, but also to intimate domains such as imagination, kinship, and cultural life. Women frequently fill both symbolic and practical leadership functions, recruiting, mentoring, interpreting doctrine, and serving as moral or spiritual ballast. These are places bound within broader social structures of violence, suppression, and patriarchal restraint. In these contexts, the extremist movements often offer women alternative pathways to empowerment, identity, and belonging, making them not anomalies but strategic players in complex radical ecosystems.

Literature Review

Scholarship on women in terrorism has evolved significantly over the past two decades, moving from portrayals of women as anomalies or coerced participants to more nuanced considerations of agency, symbolism, and recruitment. Prior work by scholars such as Bloom (2011), Ness (2005), and Sjoberg & Gentry (2007) questioned traditional discourse on women's involvement, revealing not only the strategic deployment of femininity, but also the propaganda value of female violence and the different motivations for women's participation. However, most of this literature is Western-biased or lacks leadership literature, focusing only on role analysis. Macfarlane (2024) discusses the rise of female suicide attackers in Indonesia, but notes that scholarship often overlooks women's ideological and relational roles within extremist networks. This calls for Asian-focused scholarship on women's leadership in violent movements — with, especially, non-violent, symbolic or pedagogical work that is often disregarded by prevailing lenses.

Equally significant, research regarding leadership in extremist groups highlights the structural and organisational factors that either facilitate or impede women's progress. Zedalis (2004) observes that female suicide bombers acquired symbolic capital but seldom formal authority, whereas Schalk (1994) emphasises the LTTE's distinctive institutionalisation of female military leadership via the Women's Front. However, the overall lack of systematic exploration into the relationship between group hierarchies, doctrinal priorities, and strategic imperatives affecting women is compounded by the presence of these specific cases. This gap indicates the necessity for further comparative analysis to amalgamate psychosocial factors with organisational design in the theorisation of women's leadership within extremist movements. Building on this growing body of research, Pearson & Winterbotham (2017) have focused on the ideological and psychosocial aspects of female radicalisation in Southeast Asia, making the case for the importance of cultural and emotional contexts. Pearson & Winterbotham (2017) emphasize a milieu-based framework, highlighting how familial, social, and environmental conditions shape female radicalization in Southeast Asia. However, their focus remains mainly on recruitment and operational support, rather than on sustained leadership. Extending this focus, Resnyansky et al. (2022) examined recruitment and radicalization processes in Southeast Asia, highlighting how communal and family-based narratives shape women's involvement in extremism. However, their analysis emphasizes entry and participation, rather than addressing how women attain and sustain positions of leadership within terrorist structures. Recent research by Thijssen et al. (2023) on gendered radicalization of prisoners in the Netherlands has shown that female suspects are more likely than their male counterparts to express paths through trauma, emotional detachment, and social relationality. This bolsters the call for more extended psychosocial frameworks and underscores the urgency of such investigations—such as the current one—into trauma-induced formation of leaders in non-Western societies.

Feminist security studies have provided the most persistent critique of male-centric counter-terrorism paradigms. Scholars such as Sjoberg & Gentry (2007) argue that women's bodies are fetishized or infantilized by both media and policy responses. To make the latter more complicated, however, the critiques, while valuable, may have little empirical grounding in non-Western contexts and have not engaged closely enough with the interplay of gender, ethnicity, class, and religion in decisions about the legitimacy of women's leadership. Intersectional perspectives argue that women's engagement in extremist movements cannot be understood solely through gender. Class, ethnicity, and religious identities often intersect to shape motivations and outcomes. Stenger (2024) illustrates this clearly in the context of women returnees, showing that gendered, racial, and religious assumptions deeply influence how rehabilitation and reintegration policies are designed and received. Extending this critique, Veronika (2024) demonstrates that Indonesian CT/PVE policies reproduce gender stereotypes, a finding that parallels Stenger's analysis of European contexts. This reinforces the need to

examine Asian cases beyond a single-axis framework of “women as victims or perpetrators.” This also aligns with intersectional feminist analyses, which focus on gender in women’s leadership and how it is reflected within broader cultural hierarchies. In Sri Lanka, Tamil nationalist narratives intersect with women’s wartime roles to confer symbolic authority; in Southern Thailand, Malay-Muslim traditions position elder women as moral anchors; in the Philippines, clan loyalty and religious piety confer legitimacy; and in Japan, millenarian religious movements provide alternative spiritual hierarchies for women. These examples illustrate that cultural archetypes and kinship networks are crucial. However, they must also be analysed in conjunction with intersecting identities such as caste, ethnicity, and socio-economic status to fully understand how female leadership is legitimized or constrained in extremist groups. This article supports such critiques and also builds on them by empirically analysing how gendered leadership operates at the operational, pedagogical, and symbolic levels within extremist groups.

Lastly, to broaden comparative grounding, insights from studies on women’s empowerment in other conflict-affected or patriarchal settings are highly relevant. By focusing on Kandahar University, Dyussenov et al. (2025) examine how organizational and cultural structures mediate women’s leadership in Afghan public administration. While their analysis is limited to state bureaucracies, these insights highlight the importance of cultural legitimacy in shaping women’s authority. This issue also resonates in the study of women’s leadership within non-state extremist groups. This comparative view illustrates how women’s leadership, whether in state bureaucracies or insurgent groups, is contingent on narratives about culture and socio-political contexts that shape the legitimacy of their actions.

Asian feminists and security scholars have examined the impacts of honour, shame, kinship, and communal obligations on women’s authority in non-Western cultures as a critique of Western assumptions. Including these ideas enriches our study by anchoring potential pathways in the cultural contexts that define leadership development rather than psychological or organisational ones.

Theoretical Foundations

To understand the rise and endurance of female leadership in terrorist organizations, an interdisciplinary theory is needed that combines the internal, psychological dimension of radicalization with the external, structural dimension. The article is informed by four related theoretical perspectives—trauma theory, social identity theory, feminist security theory, and relational leadership theory—and provides a comprehensive, multifaceted view of the pathways to leadership for women in violent extremist movements across Asia. Rather than relying on isolated perspectives, this study integrates these theories to explain female terrorist leadership dynamically.

1) Trauma Theory: Rooted in trauma and conflict studies, trauma theory focuses on the ways that subjects manage trauma amid unimaginable violence, death, and displacement. In the landscape of radicalization, trauma does not simply present as a predisposing factor; it can also amplify cognitive and moral templates. Malthaner (2017) argues that radicalization should be viewed not as a single event but as a relational and contextual process, consistent with the multi-method design of this study. That is the question this study applies trauma theory to: how the most personal of experiences (sexual violence, wartime mourning, political persecution) are recycled as ideological narratives, with victimhood often rewritten as moral edification and, in some cases, sanctioned violence. Trauma is thus not just addressed as a psychological wound but as a shaping factor in the development of leadership identity. Recent studies have reaffirmed the link between unprocessed trauma and violent political behaviour, particularly among women in protracted conflict zones, with trauma narratives often reframed as sources of legitimacy and ideological commitment in extremist propaganda.

2) **Social Identity Theory:** Originating in social psychology, the social identity theory sheds light on how people find meaning, self-esteem, and personal fulfilment in group membership. It stresses in-group solidarity and out-group hostility — both of which are also known to be high among extremist groups. The article draws from social identity theory to discuss how female terrorists in groups fashion an internal collective ideology, a frame of in-group moral superiority based on strictly drawing the line between the in- and out-groups, and leadership legitimacy through commitment, sacrifice, and performative solidarity. Female leaders, as the emotional lodestars of collective identity, tend to draw the mores line and insist on ideological purity. Recent research on identity fusion and women’s radicalization shows how emotional closeness and kin connections can facilitate deep embedment in extremist structures (Swann et al., 2009; Whitehouse, 2018; Pearson & Winterbothem, 2017), especially when ideological responsibilities are linked to community honour and sacrifice.

3) **Feminist Security Approaches:** Feminist security theory exposes gender biases hidden in popular anti-terrorism and security discourses. It resists a habit of portraying women either as helpless victims or as spectacular aberrations in the landscape of political violence. Instead, it centers gendered power relations, the symbolic use of femininity, and women's own roles in the making of violence. Through the lens of a feminist security analysis, this paper considers how terrorist organisations use and instrumentalise gendered roles to perpetuate operations and ideological coherence. It challenges, in the process, the structural assumptions that keep women out of leadership and strategic analyses.

4) **Relational and Affective Leadership:** Relational leadership theory shifts the focus away from hierarchical, coercive models of authority toward leadership grounded in empathy, emotional labour, spiritual counselling, and interpersonal inspiration. In terrorist groups, women generally wield power through relational capital rather than formal rank—as mentors, ideological teachers, nurturers, and moral teachers. This study employs relational leadership theory to highlight the affective dimensions of female authority, illustrating how women build trust, sustain group cohesion, and shape ideological narratives through interpersonal connection rather than force. Research on conflict and extremism highlights how soft power dynamics—including affective labour, symbolic empathy, and relational authority—often outlast formal hierarchy in sustaining long-term influence (Atran, 2011)

Criminology Theory

In addition to the psychological and gendered frameworks described above, the current study is also informed by criminological theory—social control theory. Dating back to Hirschi (1969), social control theory maintains that deviant behaviour is more likely when people possess weakened ties to formal social institutions such as family, school, or state government. In the Asian settings studied in this paper — in southern Thailand and Mindanao — weak governance, uneven law enforcement, and informal justice provide space for alternative social structures to develop and authority to be asserted.

Female leadership in terrorist organizations, then, may be due not just to ideology and trauma, but also to systemic absence: the lack of a state presence, institutional decay, and diminished social control. In these settings, relational leadership — grounded in kinship, “emotional work,” and symbolic authority — provides a complementary site of moral legitimacy and ideological consistency. By incorporating social control theory into this analysis, the paper not only adds a criminological dimension to political leadership studies but also highlights the convergence of structural governance weaknesses with psychosocial mechanisms that engender gendered leadership dynamics within violent extremism.

Integrative Model

Each of the four theoretical strands provides a distinct lens for analysing the emergence of female leadership in terrorist groups. Trauma theory explains how personal suffering can be transformed into moral capital. The social identity theory clarifies how ideological belonging

and group cohesion legitimise authority. Feminist security theory reveals how structural gender biases shape leadership opportunities and how femininity is symbolically weaponised. Relational leadership theory adds an interpersonal dimension, showing how women build influence through emotional mentorship, kinship, and trust. The integration of these perspectives allows for a holistic, multi-level understanding of leadership that is both psychologically grounded and socio-politically contextualised.

Taken together, these theoretical strands provide a layered analytical lens. Trauma creates the psychological rupture that predisposes radical engagement; social identity offers ideological belonging and leadership legitimacy; feminist security theory critiques the structural and symbolic dimensions of gendered participation; and relational leadership explains the emotional and moral mechanisms by which women sustain their authority. This integrated framework allows for a deeper understanding of the psychosocial and organizational forces that converge to produce and sustain female leadership in violent extremist settings. Figure 1 illustrates this theoretical synthesis, showing the dynamic interplay between trauma, identity, gendered power, and relational authority across the female leadership lifecycle in terrorism. While the integrative model demonstrates complementarity between the four theories, it also acknowledges productive tensions. Trauma theory emphasises the individual reconstruction of meaning after rupture, whereas social identity theory foregrounds collective belonging and ideological fusion. These may appear contradictory, but in extremist settings they are interdependent: personal trauma is often reinterpreted through group ideology, which in turn reinforces collective solidarity. Similarly, feminist security theory critiques structural gender bias, while relational leadership highlights interpersonal and emotional authority; in practice, these two dimensions converge as women transform structural exclusions into relational legitimacy. Recognising these intersections and tensions clarifies the causal sequence linking trauma, identity, symbolic legitimacy, and relational authority.

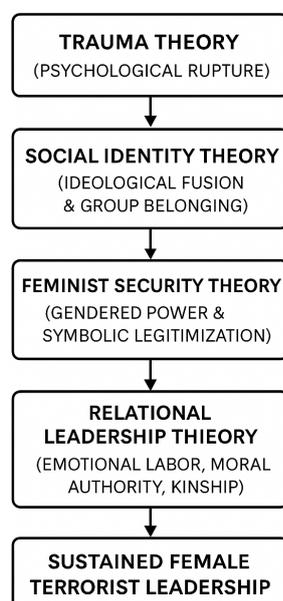


Figure 1 Theoretical integration of trauma, identity, gender, and relational power in the emergence and sustainability of female terrorist leadership

Methodology

This article adopts a mixed-methods qualitative methodology to explore the psychosocial characteristics and leadership trends of female terrorists in Asia. Due to the sensitive, high-risk, and covert nature of the phenomenon, the research strategy emphasizes triangulation,

expert validation, and context-sensitive interpretivism. The methods used include the Delphi technique, case study analysis, expert interviews, propaganda discourse analysis, and the synthesis of secondary data, selected to maximize theoretical saturation and empirical depth while maintaining ethical boundaries.

Research Paradigm and Justification

The study is grounded in a feminist-interpretivist paradigm, which centres on lived experience, situated knowledge, and the gendered construction of power. It rejects positivist assumptions of neutrality in terrorism research, particularly regarding female actors who are often marginalized or misrepresented. As a result, it aims to produce detailed context-laden insights into how trauma interacts with ideology and the methods of relational interaction shape female leadership in violent extremism.

Delphi Method (Three Rounds)

A Delphi panel of seven specialists, including scholars in terrorism studies, feminist security, political psychology, and Southeast Asian regional affairs, was formed. Experts were selected based on their publication history and hands-on experience in counterterrorism or regional affairs in South and Southeast Asia. The Delphi process was structured in three rounds. The resulting convergence on trauma, ideological indoctrination, and kinship is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Consensus Levels from Delphi Panel on Psychosocial Drivers of Female Terrorist Leadership

Theme	Round 1 (%)	Round 2 (%)	Round 3 (%)
Psychological Trauma	70	90	95
Ideological Indoctrination	65	85	90
Kinship Networks and Social Bonds	60	80	90
Relational and Affective Leadership	50	75	85

Round 1: An open-ended questionnaire was used to assess participants' baseline perceptions of the core psychosocial factors and enabling conditions for female leadership in terrorism. Trauma, ideology, relational dynamics, and recruitment were among the thematic issues addressed.

Round 2: The emergent themes were refined into structured statements, and experts rated their significance and relevance using a Likert scale (1-5). Thematic consensus and descriptive statistics were explored

Round 3: Final feedback was obtained to reconcile disagreements and confirm validity. A threshold of 70% agreement was used to confirm convergence.

Case Study Selection and Rationale

Four terrorist organizations were chosen as case studies for their geographical and ideological diversity, as well as documented evidence of female leadership. Table 2 summarizes the organization's core traits and its female leadership.

Table 2 Case Study Organizations: Region, Ideology, and Female Leadership Characteristics

Group	Region	Ideology	Female Leadership
LTTE	Sri Lanka	Ethno-nationalist	Structured, symbolic, and operational
Abu Sayyaf	Southern Philippines	Islamist	Tactical, pedagogical, inconsistent
BRN	Thailand	Separatist/Religious	Covert, emotional, kinship-based

Aum Shinrikyo	Japan	Millenarian cult	Charismatic, theological, hierarchical
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Expert Interviews

Ten in-depth interviews with regional academics, counter-terrorism practitioners, and civil society activists were also undertaken. These interviews yielded detailed information about the semantics of cultural scripts, the dynamics of emotions, and the tactics of informal leadership that were not identified in official records. To further increase credibility, two researchers independently coded the interviews and cross-validated the themes to achieve inter-rater reliability. Response bias was minimized by ensuring confidentiality and obtaining informed consent.

Propaganda and Discourse Analysis

A corpus of 72 propaganda texts, including martyrdom videos, manifestos, speeches, and recruitment materials, was analyzed using NVivo. Thematic discourse analysis underlined the presence of manifest content (e.g., keywords, such as “purity,” “sacrifice,” “divine duty”) and latent themes (e.g., emotional framing, symbolic legitimacy). This practice was crucial to our ability to understand how female leadership was discursively shaped, and how ideology was affectively embodied and performatively expressed. After coding was finished, inter-coder reliability was tested using 31 collaborative coding procedures and thematic convergence tests. We quantitatively verified inter-coder reliability using Cohen’s kappa coefficient, with a value of at least 0.80 as the criterion for thematic convergence. Kappa values ranged from 0.81 to 0.86 across rounds of coding and indicated a highly congruent level of agreement among coders, thereby contributing to the analytical evidence.

Secondary Data Analysis

Secondary data—reports from the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, regional think tanks, and peer-reviewed scholarship—were embedded within a systematic literature matrix to contextualise primary findings.

Ethical Considerations

This study received approval from the Khon Kaen University Institutional Review Board (IRB No.HE673578; IRB00012791, FWA00003418). All participants provided informed consent, and data storage complied with GDPR-equivalent data protection standards. Given the ethical limitations of direct access to female terrorists, methodological triangulation and expert substitution were used to preserve validity.

Findings

This study identifies six interrelated domains that characterize the psychosocial construction and sustainability of female leadership in terrorist organizations across Asia. These findings emerged from triangulated analysis of Delphi panel outputs, NVivo-coded expert interviews, and thematic discourse analysis of propaganda texts. Each domain is illustrated with rich, context-specific examples and linked to the theoretical dimensions outlined in the conceptual framework.

Table 3 Comparative Matrix of Psychosocial Dynamics in Female Terrorist Leadership

Group	Trauma Sources	Ideological Traits	Kinship Dynamics	Leadership Style
LTTE	War exposure, family loss	Martyrdom, national sacrifice	Familial and community ties	Symbolic maternal leadership

Abu Sayyaf	Violent conflict, marginalization	Religious duty, purity ideals	Community-based networks	Pedagogical, relational
BRN	Intergenerational violence	Cultural preservation, martyrdom	Kinship-based recruitment	Covert emotional leadership
Aum Shinrikyo	Psychological manipulation	Spiritual purity, charismatic leadership	Cult-like family structures	Charismatic, affective

Note: “Ideological Traits” is identifying “the belief-system and doctrinal components emphasised in leadership discourse”, while “Cultural Archetype” refers to the symbolic gendered roles — steeped in local traditions — used to legitimise the practice of leadership.

Trauma-Driven Cognitive Restructuring

In all four case studies, unprocessed trauma—especially grief, violent loss, and humiliation—operates as a psychological rupture that triggers moral and ideological transformation. This pattern is consistent with Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) trauma framework, which understands trauma as a shattering of core beliefs about the self and the world. However, rather than treating trauma solely as a deficit, the organizations examined here reframe it as a source of moral obligation. As a Southern Thai scholar explained in an interview, 'Many BRN women lost fathers or brothers in military raids. However, what is most striking is that their sermons do not dwell on pain—they make it a sort of divine obligation.' This reframing aligns with broader research on Chechen 'Black Widows,' where grief is redirected into a collective project of sacrifice (Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2006). Similarly, the LTTE institutionalized the 'Women’s Front' to channel personal loss into 'martial feminism' (Schalk, 1994). In these ways, female leaders mobilize narratives of suffering and guardianship—motherhood, honor, and protection—to convert trauma into a language of duty and prestige."

Identity Consolidation Through Ideological Saturation

Women in authoritative positions were characterized by high levels of ideological immersion, in which personal identity merged with the group's mission—an adaptation of Tajfel and Turner’s idea of identity fusion in closely integrated formations. This is one aspect of Tajfel and Turner’s identity fusion, in which the emotional agony of one participant converges with the ideological mission the group pursues, turning the horrors of one group into a collective's transcendence. Using NVivo to analyze the frequency of female-led propaganda by Aum Shinrikyo and Abu Sayyaf, I observed dominant lexical fields associated with sacrifice, purity, and a divine task.

The repeated use of an inclusive pronoun (“we alone are the chosen”) illustrates the deep collective identity absorption.

“Once they joined, they stopped seeing themselves as individuals. Their voice became the group’s voice.” - Delphi Panelist, Southeast Asia.

Such fusion reinforces ideological resilience and leadership legitimacy, primarily when women act as the custodians of a group's morality.

Gendered Leadership Strategies and Relational Capital

In contrast to the hierarchical or command-based leadership styles, the women leaders in BRN and Abu Sayyaf exerted influence through relational capital - emotional mentorship, kinship-based authority, and moral reassurance. In this context, the way women were supported was not only a source of internal strength but also shaped how women leaders responded to and worked with their environment.

This aligns with relational leadership theory, which argues that emotional mentorship and moral resonance often have a greater persuasive impact than formal command. Such a style of

leadership is consistent with the relational leadership framework, which promotes empathy, trust establishment, and emotional connection over rank. In the LTTE archives, women were called “mothers of the movement” and “daughters of the soil,” underscoring their role as symbolic, emotional, and cultural anchors, not army commanders.

Terrorist Organization Gender Instrumentalization Through Strategy

Terrorist groups employed women strategically to undermine expectations of security and maintain group legitimacy. As Bloom (2011) argues, the deployment of female bombers—such as the LTTE's 'Black Tigresses'—was often a calculated tactical move to exploit gendered stereotypes and penetrate security checkpoints that men could not. In Abu Sayyaf, women were similarly pushed into operational functions during times of legitimacy crisis to reframe the group's narrative through propaganda. However, this strategic utility often evolves into long-term leadership sustained by doctrinal expertise and digital adaptation. As a panelist at the Malaysian Delphi observed, 'One BRN leader kept her influence for over a decade—not by fighting, but by teaching Qur'anic lessons on Facebook that blended grief and resistance.' This aligns with recent findings by Macfarlane (2024), who notes that digital ecosystems now allow women to act as key ideologues and 'radicalise others' through online chat rooms, sustaining their influence long into the future. This trajectory—from tactical instrumentalization to digital sustainability—reflects the contextual nature of female leadership, which is both agentic and symbolic."

Cultural-Symbolic Legitimacy and Myth-Making

Women leaders were granted symbolic legitimacy through cultural archetypes—sacred mothers, village matriarchs, and spiritual redeemers. These roles were not departures from tradition but strategic extensions of legitimate gender identity. As an expert interviewee in Mindanao noted, 'They never called her a commander. However, when she spoke, people listened. She was the group's conscience. For example, rather than acting as frontline commanders, women often capitalize on the "gatekeeping roles of mothers" to facilitate radicalization within the family unit.

Such positioning reinforces feminist security theory's insight—as argued by Sjoberg & Gentry (2007)—that women are symbolically elevated in ways that reify rather than dismantle patriarchal codes. In Southeast Asian contexts, this is evident in the way women provide "ideological and emotional sustenance" to male fighters, positioning themselves as essential moral anchors rather than military leaders. These roles allow women to exercise power in deeply patriarchal systems by coordinating leadership with socially acceptable representations of femininity, effectively blurring the line between domestic support and political agency.

Leadership Sustainability Mechanisms

Long-term female leadership was sustained when groups institutionalized gender-inclusive structures—such as the LTTE's Women's Front or Aum Shinrikyo's doctrinal hierarchies—and when women held symbolic capital and emotional authority.

This is evident in Southeast Asia, where women sustain influence not necessarily through combat, but through "proselytising (dakwa) activities" and by providing "ideological and emotional sustenance" to the network via digital platforms. As one panelist at the Malaysian Delphi observed, one BRN leader kept her influence for over a decade—not by fighting, but by teaching Qur'anic lessons on Facebook that blended grief and resistance. This perseverance is an example of relational leadership, in which emotional authority and ideological coherence sustain power for the long term.

This interpretation is consistent with all four lines of theory:

- 1) Trauma theory helps illuminate how moral authority crystallizes through individual pain and ideological reconstruction.
- 2) Social identity theory illuminates how an individual internalizes group norms and therefore derives leadership legitimacy.

3) Feminist security theory exposes the strategic deployment of symbolic femaleness and gendered archetypes within violent campaigns.

4) Relational leadership theory shows how emotional authority, kinship, and mentorship act as force and coherence.

These findings also highlight the importance of digital spaces in sustaining leadership roles. As Macfarlane (2024) notes, women are now "at the helm of efforts to radicalise others" through social media chat rooms and encrypted apps. These digital ecosystems enable stories to spread that boost women's symbolic power and enable them to act as key ideologues even when they do not hold official military leadership roles.

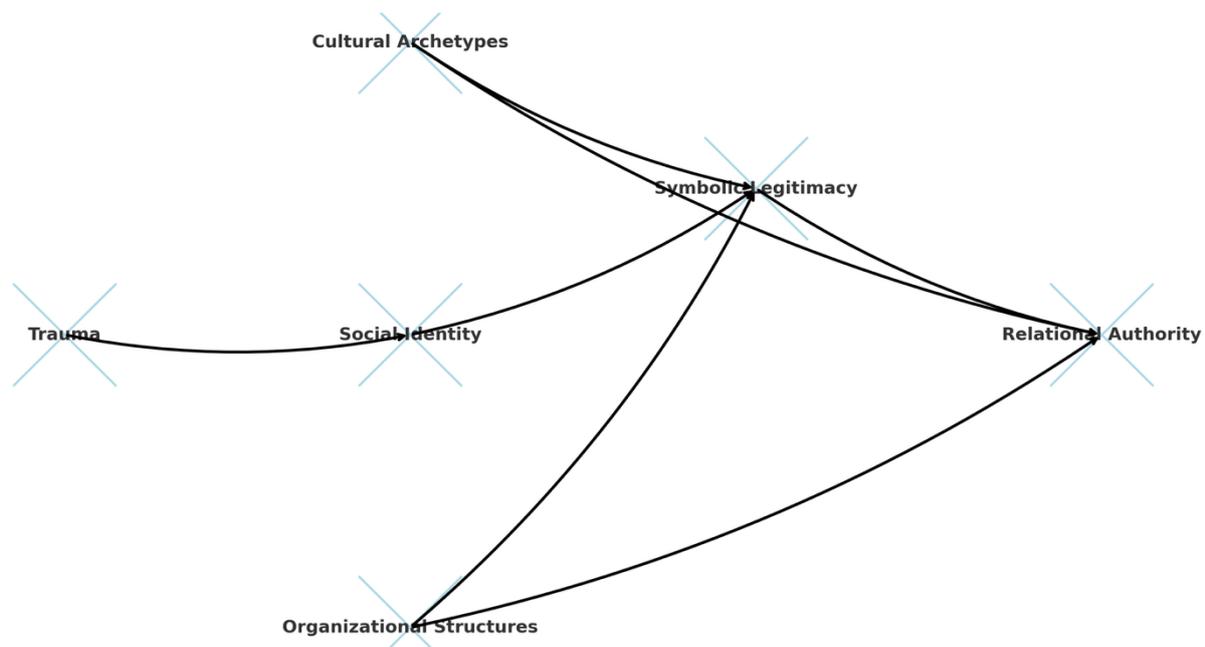


Figure 2 Flowchart of six leadership domains shaping female leadership in extremist groups

Figure 2 shows how the six areas that this study found, trauma, social identity, symbolic legitimacy, relational authority, cultural archetypes, and organisational structures, work together to create and keep open paths for women to become leaders in extremist groups. This visual model clarifies the sequential and intersecting nature of these domains.”

These findings also highlight the importance of digital spaces in sustaining leadership roles. In addition to traditional propaganda, modern online platforms such as Telegram channels, encrypted messaging apps, and diaspora social networks are becoming increasingly important for legitimizing female leadership. These digital ecosystems allow stories to spread that boost women's symbolic power, even when they do not have official leadership roles.

Cross-Case Comparative Insights

Inconsistent themes, however, were evident in the degree and form of female leadership in the different instances. LTTE institutionalized women’s military leadership; Aum Shinrikyo promoted women within theological hierarchies; Abu Syyaf used women tactically but inconsistently; and BRN stressed quiet, moral leadership among community networks. Their differences demonstrate how ideology, resource scarcity, cultural context, and structural demands shape and persist in the gendered leadership of violent formations. These dimensions are detailed in Table 4, illustrating how different psychosocial pathways to female leadership are activated by ideology, trauma, and relational roles. Whereas the LTTE institutionalised women's roles through formal military units, the BRN embeds leadership covertly within kinship structures. These divergences reflect how culture and belief systems shape both the visibility and function of women in violent extremism.

Table 4 Comparative Psychosocial Pathways to Female Terrorist Leadership

Dimension	LTTE	Abu Sayyaf	BRN	Aum Shinrikyo
Trauma Catalyst	War loss, state violence	Marginalisation, poverty	Family loss, discrimination	Psychological crisis, cult abuse
Ideology Type	Secular ethno-nationalist	Salafi-inspired Islamist	Malay-Muslim separatist	Apocalyptic millenarianism
Identity Fusion	Martyrdom = national duty	Religious sacrifice	Cultural purity, ancestral ties	Divine election, spiritual pain
Cultural Archetype	Warrior-mother	Quranic nurturer	Village matriarch	Ascetic prophetess
Leadership Modality	Militarised, symbolic	Pedagogical, maternal	Covert, kin-based	Charismatic, doctrinal
Relational Authority	Moderate	High	Very high	Moderate-High
Sustainability Mechanism	Formal units, propaganda	Religious legitimacy	Kinship and village education	Doctrinal charisma

These findings challenge universalized models of radicalization and emphasize the need to understand extremist women as psychologically complex, strategically valuable, and organizationally embedded agents—not anomalies or passive followers. Any counter-extremism program aiming to dislodge or reintegrate such leaders must first decode these nuanced leadership trajectories and the layered legitimacy they accrue.

A comparative reading of the LTTE, Abu Sayyaf, BRN, and Aum Shinrikyo reveals that while female leadership consistently emerged through trauma processing, ideological immersion, and relational capital, its form, visibility, and durability varied significantly based on organizational and cultural factors. These differences were shaped by five critical contextual dimensions: (1) ideological doctrine, (2) gender norms, (3) structural hierarchy, (4) operational needs, and (5) symbolic archetypes.

LTTE formally institutionalized the military and ideological roles of women through the “Women’s Front,” reflecting a secular revolutionary ideology that emphasized gender equality in its discourse and recruitment. Here, what had been valorized in trauma (e.g., martyrdom propaganda), and the taking of symbolic and combat leadership roles by women.

With Abu Sayyaf, women’s leadership was more situational and tactical. Conservative Islamic norms ascribed circumscribed roles, but they confined structural authority, not female roles for caregiving, teaching, or even suicide operations, as legitimacy crises built. Their functions emerged from a Quranic ethos and moral virtue rather than explicit command.

BRN demonstrated a highly developed form of embedded relational leadership based on kin connections, community trust, and covert moral authority. Women served as clerical educators and ideological middlewomen, with leadership arising from cultural deference to elder women in rural Malay-Muslim society. However, a system of rigid gender segregation ensured that these roles remained out of the public eye.

Aum Shinrikyo permitted doctrinal leadership through “spiritual merit,” thereby allowing women to exercise authority in interpreting the cult leader's visions. They were not officially ranked, but they derived their authority from esoteric religious functions. In the hierarchy, gender roles were fluid here, unlike the other groups, because of the group’s mystical theology.

Discussion

This study's findings offer a nuanced exploration of how women attain and remain leaders in terrorist organizations, thereby undermining existing theoretical and policy perspectives. Instead of depicting female terrorists as pathological, manipulated, or aberrant figures, an alternate story unfolds: Women are key strategic actors. Their authority is rooted in trauma transformation, ideological immersion, symbolic resonance, and relational influence. These contribute to more nuanced theories of leadership, identity, and gender in violent extremism.

Leadership Models

Importantly, these findings also cohere with extant scholarship on leadership styles among extremist groups. Previous studies (Schalk, 1994; Zedalis, 2004) have shown that organizational structures can either facilitate or limit women's leadership pathways. LTTE institutionalized female military leadership, while other groups, such as Abu Sayyaf, used more situational or symbolic approaches to women's leadership. This comparative framing highlights that female leadership is conditioned not only by psychosocial processes, but also by organisational design and strategic drivers.

Cultural and Intersectional Factors

Another insight connects to the cultural and intersectional dimensions of leadership legitimacy. The authority of women most often derives from cultural archetypes (mothers, teachers, spiritual anchors), but these roles are filtered through ethnicity, class, and religion. Tamil nationalism, Malay-Muslim kinship traditions, and clan-based legitimacy in the Philippines all influenced opportunities for women to lead. This emphasizes the critical role of intersectional research in understanding how multiple identities—gender, religion, and ethnicity—interact to facilitate or inhibit women's leadership in extremist contexts. Stenger (2024), for instance, shows how gendered, racial, and religious assumptions shape women's rehabilitation and reintegration, underscoring the necessity of intersectional approaches. Research by Dyussenov et al. (2025) on Afghan women in public administration demonstrates how they move within patriarchal institutional cultures to gain legitimacy from their leadership. Their findings align with this study by demonstrating how cultural frameworks and symbolic authority shape women's pathways to leadership, even though their analysis focuses on state bureaucracies. Such comparative insights highlight the notion that female authority in extremist groups, like that in formal institutions, is negotiated through culturally entrenched mechanisms of legitimacy.

Implications for Trauma Theory

This article introduces a perspective on trauma theory by highlighting how trauma goes beyond just leading to vulnerability and radicalization, but also serves as a basis for shaping leader identity in unique ways. In the cases of the LTTE and BRN groups, individual hardships arising from conflicts are often reinterpreted within contexts where suffering takes on communal moral importance. These stories do not just recount losses but elevate them to symbolic value. Speckhard & Akhmedova (2006), in their research findings, also mentioned the impact of trauma on Chechen suicide bombers; however, they mainly focused on viewing this shift as a personal psychological journey rather than examining the broader institutional implications of how trauma is perpetuated and endorsed through organizational narratives, as seen in the LTTE and BRN groups showcased in this study. This differs from the current research, which delves into how trauma is repeatedly reinforced within these organizations through discourse and gains societal validation. Similarly, Thijssen et al. (2023), when discussing trauma as a catalyst for radicalization in detention contexts, did not delve into its leadership-enhancing aspects—facets identified as pivotal in this research. Trauma is not something people endure quietly; it is transformed into a story of responsibility and strength, with strong beliefs behind it. This change can be seen in propaganda created by groups, where women's pain is not just recognized but celebrated as a symbol of loyalty to their nation or faith.

Implications for Social Identity Theory

This research contributes to, and at the same time complicates, social identity theory by exploring how women take in collective ideologies, often placing themselves within the group's moral universe in ways that feel deeply personal and embodied. Looking at Aum Shinrikyo and Abu Sayyaf, it is clear that this sense of belonging was not only tied to ideology but was also carried out through gendered roles and emotional engagement. Women in leadership positions operated less through formal hierarchies and more as emotional fulcrums—binding members through trust, empathy, and relational authority.

Such observations suggest current models of social identity theory may overlook key dimensions, particularly the performative and gendered aspects of group alignment. The notion of leadership here extends to emotional labor, a factor often marginalized in analyses of radical movements. Pearson & Winterbotham's (2017) study of Mong Muslim women under radicalising pressures illustrates a different pattern—these women did not use identity fusion to assert moral or spiritual dominance. This divergence sharpens the present analysis: for women in Aum Shinrikyo and Abu Sayyaf, ideological commitment appeared not only intellectual but bodily—woven into gestures, routines, and relationships.

Implications for Feminist Security Theory

The results strongly support criticisms of how gender perceptions and biases influence counterterrorism strategies. In the examination of all four instances studied here, women were often portrayed as morally impeccable beings, even as their perceived innocence was strategically leveraged. Their physical forms and personalities were fashioned, depicted, and utilized to preserve legitimacy and challenge security norms. Boost collective spirits in moments of turmoil. However, this utilization did not diminish their autonomy. In essence, their ability to act was influenced by the relationships and values of their cultural and ideological backgrounds. As a result, there is a feminist case for looking beyond the focus on autonomy and personal choice typical of liberal feminism when studying how women exercise their agency in conflict environments.

The discoveries also complicate discussions among feminists about the division of gender roles within groups. Some women may achieve power by adopting spiritual symbols; however, these very symbols can sometimes limit them to specific roles endorsed by ideology. For example, the practice of respect within organizations like BRN and Abu Sayyaf could enable women to take on leadership roles—but only within certain moral boundaries. This dilemma highlights the importance of examining strategic essentialism and understanding the compromises it entails for women navigating leadership roles in militarized environments.

Implications for Relational Leadership Theory

Relational leadership theory is extended in this study to apply to extremist environments. The research reveals that in organisations such as BRN and Abu Sayyaf, leadership is less about exerting formal authority and more about emotional management, kinship ties, and symbolic guidance. These forms of power have been predominantly neglected in terrorism, as their ideas of leadership tend to be hierarchical and male-coded and are quite often rigid and culturally insensitive. This evidence is consistent with the idea that relational authority is not only durable but also robust, as affective work contributes to maintaining both ideological coherence and effective operational discipline.

Areas of Scholarly Debate

The results of the current study may have important theoretical-methodological implications and raise issues that warrant further investigation. At the heart of these debates is the question of the function of cultural stereotypes: are these stories enabling women to become leaders or, rather, are they perpetuating the dominance of patriarchy by restricting women in authority to female gender roles? As one source observes, "Depending on context and the way people are reading your newspaper, you can find evidence for both explanations." As a result, this

polarised view has made it challenging to label women's leadership as either emancipatory or oppressive.

The report also demonstrates the built-in constraints of discourse analysis. While propagandist material can uncover ideological framing and symbolic systematisation, it does not necessarily reflect the everyday lives of female members, nor does it provide any space for resistance among them. To deepen our understanding of the construction and persistence of leader identities over time, future work might employ longitudinal ethnography or psychological profiles, for example. Such approaches might shed additional light on the inner dynamics of extremist groups and the trajectories of female leaders. Finally, whilst the study is sensitive to the nestedness of gender, identity, ethnicity, class, caste, and religion, gender as an axis of identity itself is an underexplored field. For example, little is known about how caste hierarchies in South Asia and ethnic divisions in Southeast Asia impact women's leadership opportunities in extremist groups. Future work grounded in an intersectional feminist perspective may help elucidate the structural conditions that affect the visibility, legitimacy, and authorisation of leadership practice in radicalisation for women, in relation to gender, in radicalised contexts.

Toward a New Understanding of Female Terrorist Leadership

Taken together, these results call for a re-analysis of leadership theories of extremism. Women in top positions are neither operational anomalies nor just recruitment tools. Instead, they are at the heart of trauma processing, ideological commitment, symbolic capital, and relational trust. One-dimensional theories or male-centric radicalisation models cannot adequately capture this complexity.

This study implies that, for policy in this area to be effective, it must be grounded in a trauma-informed, gender-sensitive, and relationally attuned approach. Programmes that fail to account for the specific (gendered) ways in which women build and sustain authority—through emotional role modelling, spiritual support, or symbolic affirmation—are likely to misinterpret the root causes of female radicalisation and overlook the barriers women face when seeking to exit these movements and reintegrate into society.

Policy Recommendations

Drawing on the findings of this study, this section outlines targeted policy recommendations to enhance counterterrorism and reintegration strategies through a trauma-informed, gender-sensitive, and context-specific lens. The recommendations are designed for use by national governments, security agencies, civil society actors, and multilateral organizations (UN Women, ASEAN, SAARC, UNODC).

1) Institutionalize Gender-Sensitive Risk Assessment Frameworks: Current risk assessment protocols are male-centric and overlook relational, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of female leadership. Recognizing covert forms of leadership such as moral guidance, ideological mentoring, and community authority is critical. To this end, authorities must formulate gender-disaggregated risk indicators that include trauma histories, symbolic status, and relational authority. Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) units need to be trained to recognize non-coercive forms of leadership, especially those found in some organizations, such as BRN and Abu Sayyaf. Furthermore, collaboration with international bodies such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is recommended to standardize culturally sensitive tools for gender-specific profiling of extremism.

2) Design Trauma-Informed, Ideologically-Aware Deradicalization Programs: However, women who lead in organizations can often deal with trauma with ideological scripts, and thus conventional deradicalizations, such as ideological confrontation, are not effective. Instead, interventions should work through emotional meaning-making and moral frameworks.

Deradicalization programs should therefore contain therapeutic modules that provide narrative reframing, nurturing post-traumatic growth, and spiritual mentorship.

Survivors of violent extremism can serve as peer mentors, providing relatable and credible guidance during the rehabilitation process. To ensure depth and contextual sensitivity, these initiatives should be designed collaboratively with psychologists, religious scholars, and trauma specialists, resulting in holistic, gender-responsive pathways to disengagement and recovery.

3) Develop Context-Specific Reintegration Blueprints: Cultural legitimacy mechanisms are neglected in reintegration interventions. This research confirms that successful reintegration must interface with existing local kinship, spiritual, and symbolic forms.

Table 5 Policy Recommendations: Focus Areas and Implementation Partners by Organization

Group	Focus Area	Implementation Partner
LTTE (Sri Lanka)	Transition female combatants into symbolic peacebuilders and community leaders.	Tamil women’s NGOs, ex-LTTE collectives
Abu Sayyaf (Philippines)	Empower former female militants as religious educators. Promote moral authority through religious education.	Bangsamoro Women Commission, Madrasas Mindanao NGOs
BRN (Thailand)	Reintegration through village and kinship-based roles	SBPAC, local imams, women’s councils
Aum Shinrikyo (Japan)	Long-term psychological reorientation and cult recovery	Public Security Intelligence Agency, cult exit NGOs

4) Mainstream Women in Peace and Security Sectors: Female officers are more effective at identifying and interacting with covert female leaders within kinship networks that operate through relationships. Augmenting gender representation in counter-violent extremism (CVE) and intelligence units not only enhances operational effectiveness but also fosters trust and cultural mediation in communities where radicalisation is a concern. In order to institutionalize these benefits, gender quotas must be implemented in security and intelligence services operating in conflict- and war-affected areas, where relational leadership is more likely. Furthermore, specialized training for female officers should incorporate courses on empathy, emotional intelligence, cultural mediation, and kinship-based conflict resolution. In addition, local mentorship programs linking senior women peacebuilders with female field officers could help develop a new generation of more socially attuned security professionals—practitioners who can address the gendered aspects of violent extremism from a standpoint of both sensitivity and legitimacy.

5) Disrupt Symbolic Legitimacy Through Cultural Counter-Narratives: As the examples here highlight, violent extremist groups commonly present and justify women as leaders through known symbols (e.g., the martyr or the liberator) that are part of a well-defined cultural canon or archetype. These symbolic grammars confer emotional and community authority on women, thus enabling them to lead without holding any official title. To combat these narratives, counter-scripts will have to be produced that are culturally relevant—scripts which also treat non-patriotic women as heroines. This means strategically working with religious leaders, intellectuals, and artists to create stories grounded in a region's particular cultural values. Religion-based schools and women’s colleges that include critical media literacy in their

education should aim to develop young women capable of deconstructing the violent symbols and manipulative ideological frameworks.

Furthermore, the production of local-language media content—such as videos, radio programmes, and drama series—that challenges myths of martyrdom and purity can disrupt the symbolic power of extremist archetypes and offer counter-strategies grounded in peacebuilding and civic leadership.

6) Launch Regional Early Warning and Intelligence-Sharing Platforms on Female Radicalization: Women in leadership positions in extremist groups emerge within informal structures tied by kinship, emotional leadership, and ideological education, rather than through formal positions and ranks. Such covert influences are frequently invisible to typical intelligence agencies. Gendered radicalisation requires an urgently needed, critical cross-border intelligence infrastructure. An ASEAN-South Asia Observatory on Gender and Extremism could enable real-time data and best-practice sharing, and comparative analysis across the region. Annual scenario-based planning exercises designed to identify the skills of female-led cells or relational leadership styles will also inform preventive strategies. The dissemination of gender-sensitive CVE policy briefs—oriented to the religious and cultural contexts of specific nations—would provide an added level of context-rootedness and operational effectiveness for prevention and intervention efforts.

7) Invest in Feminist-Informed Research and Innovation: Traditional extremism research currently does not account for intersectionality and methodological diversity. It is therefore crucial to invest in feminist-informed, psychosocial, and longitudinal research frameworks to address the increasingly nuanced experiences of female leadership in terrorist organizations. National governments should fund doctoral programs and postdoctoral fellowship positions in gender and violent extremism, thereby training a future cohort of scholars to interrogate these issues. Meanwhile, regional hubs ought to be instituted to foster cross-national learning with, for example, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, and the Philippines (and elsewhere), where country-specific insights can lend to more context-sensitive comparative comprehension. Furthermore, cooperation between academics and practitioners to create toolkits that operationalize trauma-informed and relational leadership theories into fieldwork practice is necessary to bridge the research-practice divide.

The findings have significant policy implications. The psychosocial dynamics of leadership must be considered when designing counter-terrorism initiatives that move beyond military and law enforcement approaches. Trauma-informed counseling, community-based interventions, and gender-sensitive reintegration programs are essential. Programs that acknowledge the relational authority of women—as mothers, teachers, or spiritual anchors—are likely to disrupt extremist narratives more effectively than those that use generic, homogeneous approaches.

Ethical Dilemmas

Research on women in extremist groups not only faces ethical dilemmas but also highlights a social issue that often lies at the root of radicalism. Researchers must balance the need to understand pathways to leadership with the risk of rehashing harmful stereotypes or inadvertently legitimizing extremist voices. Further, working with vulnerable people raises concerns about retraumatization, informed consent, and the potential misuse of sensitive information.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

A significant limitation of this study is the lack of direct engagement with current or former female leaders, which restricts insights into informal defiance and dissent within extremist networks. Future ethnographic or longitudinal work could capture changes in women's leadership roles and post-exit paths. In any high-risk environment, issues of researcher access and safety are inevitable. Alternative methods, such as web ethnography or virtual interviews,

may reduce such risks. Future studies should also involve local communities—NGOs, religious figures, and civil society organizations—to ensure that research and policy outcomes are culturally appropriate and effective.

Other appropriate theories—e.g., intersectional feminism, models of digital radicalization, or postcolonial security—were not sufficiently considered. The dynamics of female leaders in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, or Western far-right movements, for instance, may appear both similar to or distinct from these patterns.

To further elaborate on this line of inquiry, we propose several avenues for future research

1) Cross-Regional Comparative Studies: Cross-Regional Comparative Studies. Beyond this, to globalize theorization about gendered leadership in extremism, more regions could be included in this analysis (the Sahel, Central Asia, Western Europe, among others). Comparative frameworks could test whether trauma-identity relational pathways observed in Asia are replicated in ideologically and culturally distinct settings.

2) Longitudinal Psychological Profiling: The future studies could adopt a longitudinal design to trace how trauma, ideology, and leadership evolve in individual women. This would require the narrative methods, trauma inventories, and perhaps even psychological autopsies in post-conflict zones to map the arc from radicalization to leadership and, in some cases, to exit or disengagement.

3) Digital Pathways and Online Legitimacy: Digital spaces—including Telegram, WhatsApp, and female-targeted jihadi forums—are increasingly critical in shaping recruitment and leadership narratives. There is a need to analyse how online communities construct the gendered authority, replicate the relational mentorship, and disseminate trauma-aligned propaganda among women.

4) Post-Exit Leadership and Informal Authority: A vital but underexplored area concerns the afterlife of leadership: what happens when women disengage from terrorist groups? Do they carry on informal power in prison settings, refugee camps, or other diasporic communities? Are they recruited for peacebuilding, or are they stigmatized and silenced? Exploring post-exit trajectories might unlock new pathways of gendered power and resistance. Terrorist involvement, as Crenshaw (1991) notes, may be declining, but this does not necessarily mean ideological abandonment, particularly among those in leadership positions.

5) Intersectionality and Marginalized Identities: Future work should integrate an intersectional analysis of caste, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability. For example, are Dalit women or Rohingya women recruited and legitimized differently than elite or urban women in the same organizations? This could expose new patterns of exclusion, empowerment, and symbolic instrumentalization within violent networks.

6) Organizational Ethnographies and Gendered Infrastructure: Deep-dive, insider-based ethnographic work could shed light on how gendered leadership has been sustained and constrained by internal group norms, rituals, spiritual hierarchies, and operational roles. Knowledge of how terrorist groups systematize (or impede) female authority can be helpful to understand these groups' long-term adaptability and ideological flexibility.

7) Community Stakeholder Engagement: Future work should involve religious leaders, village elders, women's NGOs, and local civil society organizations in both research design and counter-extremism programming. In addition to increasing access and demonstrating cultural sensitivity, interventions are built on community legitimacy in this spirit. By integrating trauma-informed and gender-sensitive methods into local cultural paradigms, researchers and practitioners can navigate the ethical dilemmas that arise in high-risk settings and improve the long-term sustainability of reintegration strategies.

Conclusion

In order to accomplish this, this research has drawn attention not only to the psychosocial components of female leadership in extremist organizations but additionally to how these are influenced by the type of organizational leadership used, culture, intersectional issues, and different comparative settings, including Afghan women's experiences in public administration (Dyussenov et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings add to the case that women's power in extremism is both psychosocially constructed and culturally legitimized. This work has provided an innovative, cross-disciplinary examination of women's leadership in terrorism in Asia that subverts prevalent understandings of gender, agency, and violence. The study develops a theoretical framework for exploring how women become strategic actors in violent extremist organisations by juxtaposing trauma theory, social identity theory, feminist security studies, and relational leadership theory.

In contrast to previous research that tends to concentrate solely on participation values or symbolic representation, this investigation places leadership at the heart of a psychosocial, relational, and culturally mediated process. Embracing a qualitative methodology informed by Delphi panels, expert interviews, propaganda discourse analysis, and comparative case studies, the research demonstrates how trauma, ideological saturation, emotional authority, and cultural archetypes, *inter alia*, coalesce to shape and perpetuate women's positions in extremist hierarchies.

The study advances feminist security debates by illustrating how female leadership is often embedded in localized structures of meaning and identity rather than in formal ranks. It extends trauma and social identity frameworks by revealing how psychological rupture and group belonging fuel gendered leadership trajectories. It also contributes to the relational leadership theory by showing how women exercise soft power through kinship, mentorship, and moral anchoring within the militant networks.

At the policy level, the results highlight the critical importance of trauma-informed, gender-sensitive, and contextually nuanced interventions. Programs that ignore the relational and symbolic dimensions of female radicalization are unlikely to succeed. Reintegration efforts must address the affective and the ideological landscapes in which women operate, not just their operational behaviour.

Lastly, sustainable solutions for women's leadership in extremist movements necessitate locally rooted approaches. Collaboration with local religious authorities, village elders, women's NGOs, and civil society actors is not only vital for culturally appropriate interventions but also for embedding trauma-informed and gender-sensitive practices in everyday contexts. Integrating such community stakeholders into both research and policy design ensures that counter-extremism efforts move beyond abstract frameworks to tangible, locally legitimate forms of resilience.

More broadly, this study adds value to the global terrorism literature by contextualizing Asian contexts — areas that have previously suffered from a marginality in studies on gendered radicalization. The patterns identified here of symbolic leadership, covert authority, and ideological absorption provide important insights into women's participation in extremist movements in the Global South, as well as other global regions. Just as violent movements change, so too must the analytical models and policy frameworks we employ to challenge them. While this study centres on Asia, parallels can be drawn with contexts such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, where Matfess (2017) documents the complex roles women play as wives, warriors, and witnesses.

Future research should further investigate the intersection of identity — including caste, ethnicity, and religion — as these inform pathways to leadership, and in particular how online spaces are reshaping recruitment and legitimacy for women in extremism. Such complexity must be embraced for global counter-terrorism responses to become not only more effective,

but also more just and inclusive. Although oriented to Asia, the framework developed here can be adapted. It will be relevant in comparative analyses of leadership by women in Middle Eastern insurgencies, Sub-Saharan African groups, or Western far-right movements. Further, by extending the investigation cross-regionally, researchers can examine the broader applicability of the trauma-identity-symbolic-relational leadership nexus. The study's perspectives also reinforce the need for policies that adopt a trauma-informed, gender-sensitive, and culturally grounded approach.

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