

# Empowered by Extremes: Indonesian Women in Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) & Jemaah Ansharut Daulat (JAD)

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## Article Info

Received: 15-Nov-2025

Revised: 17-Nov-2025

Published: 6-Dec-2025

## Keywords

Indonesian Women, Jemaah Anshorut Daulat, Jemaah Islamiyah, Radicalization, Terrorism

## Abstract

This study examines the evolving roles of Indonesian women within terrorist networks, focusing on Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD). Using Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism model and Riyanta's shortcut to terrorism model, this study analyzes how women's radicalization progresses through both gradual psychological and ideological processes and accelerated digital exposure. Data were drawn from secondary sources, including academic articles and case studies of Indonesian female extremists. Findings indicate that women's participation has expanded from supportive domestic roles to operational involvement as recruiters, propagandists, financiers, and suicide bombers. Their radicalization is often facilitated by family and marital networks, religious study groups (pengajian), and online propaganda, reflecting both traditional pathways and modern digital acceleration. The study argues that women's involvement in terrorism represents a paradoxical form of empowerment, breaking gender norms while simultaneously reinforcing ideological subjugation. This phenomenon highlights the shifting gender dynamics within extremist movements and emphasizes the importance of gender-sensitive approaches in Indonesia's counter-radicalization and rehabilitation strategies.

## 1. Introduction

Gender and terrorism have long attracted scholarly attention, particularly regarding the evolving roles of women within extremist movements. Historically, radical groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah and Jemaah Ansharut Daulat have excluded women from being a combatant, and citing rulings that women may only travel when accompanied by their mahram, which resulting in the role of woman used as a peacebuilding function (Nasution, 2018; Ruiz Estrada et al., 2018). Yet as Achsin and Sanur said that there are more recent evidences that shows a marked shift where women now appear both as a victims and active combatant (Achsin, 2019; Sanur, 2018). Marriage and family networks function as an instrument for both radicalization and deradicalization. Jihadist leaders frequently arrange marriages to recruit new adherents and embedding radicalization within family bonds (Morse, 2019; Rauf et al., 2020). Within these circles, the wives often given a breadwinning role whilst the husband focused on jihad, and on some cases in the most extreme organization they even encourage women to participate directly in militant activities. This reflects women's growing capacities such as adopting traditional masculine roles (Onwudiwe, 2018). This trend challenges patriarchal norms and has extend Indonesian literature on female engagement in terrorist activities, be it from their motivations, recruitments, roles and the stigma that they face to both radicalization and deradicalization processes (Korstanje, 2018).

Empirical studies confirm a significant increase in Indonesian women's involvement in terrorism, especially following the rise of ISIS. Their participation mainly driven by interaction between individual agency and social structures, with motivation encompassing ideological conviction, sense of responsibilities, empowerment, adventure and identity that often amplified through sophisticated propaganda and information-manipulation techniques employed by extremist groups (Ulfa & Sugara, 2022; Wijaya, 2020). Women's function within these networks have expanded from supporting roles to an active combatants and suicide missions, earning them "high" risk ratings for motivation and ideology, and "medium" for their capabilities aspect (Sukabdi, 2021; Ulfa & Sugara, 2022; Veronika, 2024; Wijaya, 2020). Based on the paragraphs above, while the literature on women in terrorism has expanded in the past few years and is not absent, much of it treats jihadists actors broadly or focuses on ISIS, leaving important local dynamics underexplored. Even if the gap is not particularly wide, there remains a need for more context specific analyses that capture how Indonesian women engage with, and are positioned within early radical formations such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD). This study titled "Empowered by Extremes: Indonesian Women in Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) & Jemaah Ansharut Daulat (JAD)", seeks to offer that closer, context driven perspective by examining selected cases of female involvement through the framework of Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism and Riyanta's shortcut to terrorism.

## **2. Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative research method to describe women's involvement in terrorist networks in Indonesia such as JI and JAD. Secondary data will be drawn from various academic articles and media coverage of the phenomenon in Indonesia. Pathways to Radicalization as a concept will be used to explain how these women got radicalized in the first place.

## **3. Pathways to Radicalization**

Moghaddam (2005) conceptualizes terrorism as a psychological progression through six levels or "floors" that gradually narrow individual choices and their perceptions until violent extremism becomes perceived as legitimate. Each floor represents a distinct stage in how individuals interpret their circumstances and respond to perceived injustice, that could later explain why they became a terrorist. Moghaddam explain that at the ground floor, those individuals experience feelings of deprivation, injustice and blocked social mobility which pushes them to alienation but not yet action. Then, the first floor is marked by frustration over limited access to address grievances, leading to growing the sense of helplessness and exclusion. At second floor, those aggression becomes displaced towards out groups that seen as responsible for the perceived unfairness. Then the third floor or stage of moral engagement, involves those individuals to adopting ideological justification that reframe that the use of violence is morally legitimate. On the fourth floor, individuals have already internalized the group's or organization's radical view, developed categorical "us vs them" thinking, and formed strong emotional bonds that reinforce loyalty and conformity. Lastly on the fifth floor, represents the point at which those individuals overcome their natural inhibitions against violence, where they are rationalizing terrorist acts as a necessary and justifiable steps towards ideological goals.

This staircase model represent that terrorism doesn't occur from pathological tendencies, but from the cumulative psychological constriction experienced by ordinary individuals who perceive injustice and identity threats daily. In the context of Indonesian women involved in JI and JAD, this framework could be used as a useful lens to understand how grievances, perceived exclusion and ideological indoctrination can progress into deeper radicalization. Women's engagement in terrorism whether as a supporter, propagandists or an active combatants can be analyzed through these staircase model, revealing how social deprivation and moral justification interact to facilitate participation in terrorism. However, radicalization is not that easy to identify as Moghaddam's staircases. The reality is, individuals can bypass certain levels and reached the fifth floor directly. As Riyanta (2022) emphasized in their writing that in the present day, radicalization can absolutely be accelerated through the improvements of science and technology, like social media which also used and operated by various terrorist organizations.

Riyanta (2022) explain that through an analysis of Indonesian case studies, it demonstrates how social media, online propaganda and virtual communities could accelerate the process of radicalization without the necessity of physical involvement and direct recruitment in terrorist organizations. The internet, function as a space where individuals can encounter indoctrination materials, extremist narratives and even operational guidance that provides both ideological and emotional reinforcement. This framework

explain that radicalization is no longer needed to progress sequentially through group based stages. Instead, these individuals who are psychologically vulnerable, socially isolated, or seeking identity and sense of belonging can rapidly transition from recognizing grievances to embracing extremist ideologies and preparing for violence. Findings show that digital self radicalization has produced a new generation of extremist who are often not linked to formal networks but are ideologically committed to terrorist organizations such as ISIS. The amount of available online propagandas allows individuals to form a sense of belonging and purpose entirely within the virtual spaces, where the lines are blurred between ideological sympathy and active operational support. Riyanta identifies this as particularly significant in the Indonesian context, where self radicalized actors have conducted attacks inspired by transnational jihadist narratives. The rapid pace of ideological transformation and the absence of organizational gatekeeping allows these individuals to transition directly from exposure to extremist intent to violent action. As for Indonesian women who are linked to JI and JAD, this shortcut model elucidates how digital environments enable independent ideological engagement through online study groups, encrypted communications channels and propaganda. Viewed together, Moghaddam's staircase to terrorism and Riyanta's shortcut model provides a comprehensive analytical framework to understand the evolving nature of women's radicalization in Indonesia.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

Sukabdi explain that Jemaah Islamiyah doctrine broadly prohibits woman to have an active role in jihad. Instead, those women are encouraged to take on more traditional and passive roles (Sukabdi, 2021). Their contributions are seen in domestic roles or roles confined in the private sphere like as a daughter, wife and mother. However, on a smaller scale women are also exploited in a public sphere as a propagandists where they spread group ideologies, and recruit others. Baasyir as one of the founder of JI himself explain in one of his books about women's role as a daughter, wives, and mother whilst also emphasizing the importance of submission of women to men in their family. In addition to acting as recruiters for new members, women are also frequently targeted for organization membership (Toyibah, 2021). Women are usually targeted because they're perceived as the vulnerable ones in society, with various motives on why they actually join the group. Reasons like the absence of father played a huge role on why they are an easy target for terrorist recruiters, and woman who are financially and emotionally unstable are at higher risk of becoming radicalized (Simeon, 2019).

On the other side, JAD who is pro ISIS, took advantage for woman's role in their group as a female operatives (Mahmood, 2019). Amanah Nurish in World Terrorism Index 2024 report, said that ISIS' doctrine of women's involvement in jihad directly led to an increase in women's involvement in terrorist acts, including in Indonesia. The doctrine leveraged by ISIS revolves around the notion of gender equality in carrying out jihad (Research Center for Security and Violent Extremism, 2025). Indonesian recruiters commonly used a traditional network and modern tools to attract women, such as family network (through relatives) and pengajian. For example, the Surabaya church-bomber families has their weekly meeting in pengajian sponsored by a pro-ISIS (Schulze, 2018). There are many women willingly join the group out of ideology, while others are being groomed and pressured. Some of them including former migrant workers, sought a religious purpose and they ended up plotting attacks, be it individually or through the terrorist organization. As mentioned before, some of them marry jihadist and gradually embrace the cause. ISIS affiliated groups are training the fighters' wives to use weapons, which reflect a shift from purely passive role of women in terrorism such as recruitments towards recognizing women's strategic value (Macfarlane, 2024; Mahmood, 2019). JI and JAD both adopt traditional Islamist norms, and ISIS inspired narratives. JI often placed women in their domestic roles such as help spreading ideologies through homeschooling, charity, and dakwah programs (Macfarlane, 2024). Whilst JAD have been using Islamic law for the wives to always obey their husbands, ISIS through Brigade Al Khansaa which consist of policewomen deployed in Raqqa and even sent of those women to the frontlines in some areas (Anindya, 2017). That influenced the nuance of Indonesian terrorist organization such as JAD who is now pushing women to also support jihad physically as a combatants and promising heavenly rewards for the martyrs or for them who raised a devout children (Macfarlane, 2024; Yumitro et al., 2023).

From that explanation, Indonesian women serve in a variety of operational roles within their groups, ranging from logistical support to frontline attacks, concluded in the table below (Anindya, 2017; Macfarlane, 2024; Mahmood, 2019; Marzio, 2020; Schulze, 2018).

Table 1. The Wide Range of Indonesian Woman's Involvements in Terrorist Organization

Operational Role	Key Example
Financiers	<b>Arida Putri Maharani (JAD)</b> Manage funding for the presidential palace bombing. <b>Noralwizah Lee Abdullah (JI)</b> JI's treasurer.
Recruitment and Propaganda	<b>Tutin Sugiarti (JAD)</b> Radicalizing Puspitasari and Maharani. <b>Ika Puspitasari</b> Form her own IS-cell, recruit male IS Members.
Suicide Bombers and Gunwomen	<b>Dian Yulia Novi (JAD)</b> Suicide bombing plot in Presidential Palace 2016. <b>Puji Kuswati and family (JAD)</b> Coordinated Surabaya Church bombings 2018. <b>Ika Puspitasari</b> Suicide bombing plot on new year's eve in Bali. <b>Zakiah Aini (IS sympathizer)</b> Open fire at Jakarta Police HQ 2021. <b>Puspitasari (JAD)</b> Sidoarjo bombings 2018.
Ideological Enablers	<b>Puji Kuswati (JAD)</b> Indoctrinated her children as a martyr.

The table above shows several cases that pictured the wide range of Indonesian woman's involvements in terrorist organization, from fundraising until being the combatant herself. Overall, they're very multifunctional even though they don't serve in the frontlines like men, they act as proxy for their terrorist organizations such as raising and teaching children to be future jihadist. (Mahmood, 2019) said that, still, men will never agree to fight alongside with women in the frontlines. But instead women will be put as the suicide bombers, recruiters, propagandists, fundraiser, and as a last resort, to fight their enemies. Again, this shift reflects to a broader strategic adaptation by terrorist organizations for utilizing women in more operational capacities. Factors such as ideological indoctrination, personal grievances, socioeconomic pressure and propaganda influence can push women to be more active and took dangerous role within these networks. This transition underscore shifting from partial supportive hidden presence to a more visible role in terrorist activities. Although JI's doctrine officially restrict female to only participate in private terrorist act, in practice, like Noralwizah Lee Abdullah, subvert these constrains by serving as a treasurer, and some of those women became a recruiters. Both groups exploit family ties and pengajian to target vulnerable women, especially those who lacks of paternal guidance or facing economical problems which makes them an easy target. Women now occupy multipurpose roles in terrorist act, as a financiers, recruitments, propagandists, suicide bombers, and gunwomen. Moreover, ideological enablers at home like Puji Kuswati's indoctrination of her children to be a martyr also highlights how female militants play such a big role in nurturing future generations of jihadists.

Findings illustrate how Indonesian women who are doctrinally confined to domestic roles, are mobilized in the public sphere, from propaganda and recruitment, to logistic and direct action as a combatant. Rather than viewing women only as a passive followers or victims from terrorism, we have to acknowledge that female agency, though it happens under patriarchal and ideological boundaries, can also manifested through extremist engagement. At the lower stages of Moghaddam's staircase model, it emphasize the feeling of deprivation, social exclusion and injustice. Within JI and JAD, these elements are evident amongst Indonesian women who often joined terrorist groups through intimate relationship and family connections. As (Sari, 2025) identifies that women's involvement in terrorism is often shaped by the invitation of the closest person, lure of heaven, revenge and identity crisis. All of them is rooted from perceived moral imbalance and social disempowerment. Such emotional and psychological vulnerabilities resonate with the early stages of the staircase, where alienation precedes ideological commitment. Women like Munfiatun Al Fitri were relegated to supportive roles such as housing fugitives and assisting with logistics. Those passive roles reflected early radicalization through proximity to ideological actors (Santoso & Ginting, 2022). This finding is further supported by (Toyibah, 2021), that marriage and family lives are crucial factors in fostering the idea of violence in jihad can be justified. Their husband's affiliations with radical organization are a factor that makes woman potentially able to strengthen their networks within

terrorist groups. Their ties to radicalized partners or relatives embodied Moghaddam's concept of constrained agency in a context of constrained social mobility. For many women, emotional ties served as both a context for grievances and gateway into JI and JAD networks.

Next, as individual ascend in Moghaddam's staircase, moral disengagement manifests through ideological justification of violence. Both in JI and JAD, this transformation occurred as women began to perceive or think jihad as a legitimate path to redemption. (Santoso & Ginting, 2022) explain that after 2013, Indonesian women transitioned from passive supporters to active participants, marked by women being active in combatant roles such as suicide bombers, recruiters and propagandists. This evolution demonstrate the shift to the moral engagement stage, where the use of violence is reframed as a religious obligation rather than a deviation. The Surabaya bombings can be used as an example for this stage. Where according to (Schulze, 2018), Puji Kuswati participated as a suicide bomber alongside her husband and her own children. Those coordinated suicide attack symbolized both maternal devotion and theological conviction. This act reflects the integration of family loyalty with religious justification, a psychological alignment consistent with Moghaddam's third floor. The moral justification for the use of violence is reinforced by their organization's narrative of sacrifice and gaining an eternal reward, which women internalize as both obligation and an empowerment. The stages of moral engagement and the solidification of categorical thinking are also accelerated through black and white narratives, disseminated through homeschooling, pengajian, and also the existence of Al Khansaa Brigade plays part on establishing legitimacy for woman to do violence. Within JI itself, ideological teaching through pengajian (a religious study groups) serves as a medium for moral reframing. (Macfarlane, 2024) explains that such spaces not only transmit doctrine, but also create a sense of social belonging. The moral uplift of martyrdom, especially for women who perceive their lives as marginalized, offers sense of agency behind the guise of divine purpose.

At these upper level, Moghaddam's model depicts the transition from beliefs to action, when extreme ideologies has been fully internalized and violence begins to be perceived as rational or even necessary. Example like Zakiah Aini exemplify the pinnacle of this process. Her lone wolf attack on the National Police Headquarters in 2021 was accompanied by her will stating her loyalty to ISIS and her desire to "save" her family (Macfarlane, 2024). She categorized the government which include the national police as her enemy, considered permissible to be killed. The same circumstances also applicable to Puji Kuswati's suicide family bombings where this phenomenon shows how the internalization of binary ideology, "us vs them", combined with emotional ties and family values, could create a powerful psychological drive towards violence.

With the development of social media and traditional networks, these process as Moghaddam explained, is often shortened as Riyanta (2022) have explained. Now, the online environment are capable to create an illusion of spiritual community, fostering emotional reinforcement without physical interaction. As (Macfarlane, 2024), notes digital propaganda amplifies women's sense of belonging and purpose within the jihadist narratives. This digital ecosystem not only accelerates ideological commitment, but also empowering isolated individualism especially women to act independently of hierarchical structures. In JAD's modern recruitment landscape, social media functions as both indoctrination and operational infrastructure. (Santoso & Ginting, 2022) emphasize that women like Dian Yuliana Novi, as a former migrant worker who got radicalized online, absorbed jihadist ideology entirely through digital propaganda. It shows that woman can jump directly to Moghadam's fifth floor, as a shooter or suicide bomber like Dian Yulia Novi and Zakiah Aini, without the lengthy internalization process.

Viewed together, Moghaddam's staircase and Riyanta's shortcut models reveal a dual pathway for Indonesian women's radicalization. A lot of examples that follows the staircase's gradual progression through family influence, ideological education in pengajian, and moral adaptation. But also, there are a lot of examples too especially in this modern day that exemplifies Riyanta's shortcut to terrorism model where digital indoctrination and online sisterhood collapse multiple stages of radicalization into a single virtual experience. The convergence of these processes explains the evolution of women's role in terrorism in Indonesia, from supportive roles to operational role, from non combatans to combatans. Whether as suicide bombers, propagandists, recruiters, women in JI and JAD networks are not peripheral actors, but an integral parts shaped by a combination of psychological, ideological, and technological forces.

Within the framework of analyzing women's role in terrorist organizations, these findings also reveal a dual meaning. From a liberal feminist perspective, women's involvement in traditionally masculine roles

such as the suicide bombers, recruiters, propagandists, etc, breaks the boundaries of gender norms, but also at the same time demonstrates the transgressive power of the female subject. Having “pride” in this breakthrough is natural as it marks a rejection, or a shift of the rigid construction of domestic roles, which also leads to opening up new potential roles for woman. Yet that very “empowerment” carries a great dilemma, the more women who enters these violent roles in terrorist organization, the grater the threat to Indonesia’s national security because of more possibilities in bombings, shooting, recruits, and other destructive terrorist act.

## 5. Conclusion

Women’s participation in Indonesian terrorism networks like in Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) shows that their involvement not merely because of manipulation, but also a complex process that involve a psychological, social, ideology, and technological factors. Through Moghaddam’s and Riyanta’s model, this study found that women can experience radicalization gradually through family relationships and religious studies, or instantly through digital media and online propagandas. The shift in roles from supporters to perpetrators demonstrates a form of "pseudo-empowerment" in which women gain new space and roles, but within a restrictive ideological framework. This phenomenon underscores the importance of a gender sensitive approach to deradicalization and prevention, one that views women not only as victims but also as active actors who needed to be fully understood for more effective security and rehabilitation strategies.

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