

Women and terror

PROTON's member Professor Gary LaFree describes his investigation of the role of women in terrorism



One of PROTON's main goals is the development of robust Agent-Based-Model simulations able to provide policy makers with useful indications on the impact of possible counter-terrorism initiatives. One key ingredient for the realization of reliable simulations is the assessment of the involvement of women in terrorism and organised crime. This is one of the main tasks of PROTON's member Professor [Gary LaFree](#), Chair of the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Maryland (US) and former director of the [National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism \(START\)](#).

LaFree's work in the project consists of studying the emotional and cognitive determinants of terrorism involvement. His goal is to provide insights into the variables that are most important for predicting engagement in violent political extremism among individuals who have radicalized to a politically extremist cause.

Do women represent an important percentage of members of terrorist organisations?

GL: Not really, at least in the population of the United States, the country on which our data comes from. Based on that data, the percentage of women has been around 10% for the past several decades.

That seems like a low fraction. Does this low involvement lead to men and women playing different roles in terrorist activities?

GL: Yes, and especially in terms of leadership. For example, one of the most striking differences between men and women is with regard to whether they are seen by others as "leaders" or "followers" within the organization. Just think that women were about 2.5 times more likely to be seen as followers rather than leaders of terrorist organizations.

Do you think such low involvement level could be due to differences in the mechanisms attracting men and women to extremism activity?

GL: Although we found that men were significantly more likely than women to engage in violent actions, gender was no longer statistically significant when we controlled for other relevant variables. We shall bear in mind, however, that our failure to find a statistically significant gender difference in our models was due to the relatively small number of women in the dataset we considered.

The role and involvement of women is just part of your study on the factors making violent extremism attractive among people. What are the most interesting results you have found so far?

GL: There is a number of potentially useful lessons that can be driven from our exploratory analysis. For example, we found that stable employment appears to decrease the risk that individuals with extreme

views will engage in violent behaviour. This is because stable employment often leads to the development of positive social relationships and places demands on individuals' time and attention that can potentially depress extremist activities. Promoting sustained employment among at-risk individuals may be an effective counter-terrorism measure. Other results emerging from our investigation are that mental health conditions are linked to high propensities for violent behavior, and that individuals who engage in criminal behavior prior to their adoption of extremist beliefs are significantly more likely to attempt or commit acts of violence post-radicalization.