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**From Sisterhood to Subversion: Female Radicalization, Recruitment Pathways, and Operational Roles in the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), 2015–2025**

**Usama Khan Hairan<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Undergraduate Student, Department of International Relations, University of Sargodha  
Email: [usamahairanir146@gmail.com](mailto:usamahairanir146@gmail.com)

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**Abstract**

Since its founding in 2015, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) has systematically drawn women into its operational and ideological fold, deploying gendered propaganda to exploit the political instability and social constraints that pervade the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. This paper examines the mechanisms, motivations, and roles through which ISKP recruits and utilises women, situating its analysis within the broader ideological framework inherited from the Islamic State (ISIS) core. Drawing on feminist security studies and the push-pull model of radicalization, the study employs a qualitative methodology that integrates peer-reviewed scholarship, think tank and institutional reports, open-source propaganda analysis, and documented case studies. The findings reveal that ISKP relies on multilingual digital campaigns, kinship networks, and the exploitation of gender grievances generated by Taliban-imposed restrictions to lure women into roles as educators, propagandists, fundraisers, and, in rare cases, operatives. The paper further demonstrates that ISKP's adaptation of ISIS's gender doctrine to South Asian cultural and political conditions reflects a deliberate and evolving strategy. Spanning the period from 2015 to 2025, the analysis contributes to an underexplored dimension of ISKP scholarship and offers policy recommendations for counterterrorism practitioners and regional policymakers.

**Keywords:** ISKP, female recruitment, gendered radicalization, feminist security theory, push-pull model, counterterrorism, Afghanistan-Pakistan, ISIS ideology

**1. Introduction**

Among the many analytical blind spots in terrorism studies, perhaps none is more consequential than the persistent underestimation of women's involvement in jihadist organisations. The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), established in January 2015 as the South and Central Asian affiliate of the Islamic State (ISIS), has since its inception engaged women as deliberate participants in its ideological and operational architecture. What distinguishes ISKP from comparable regional insurgencies is not merely its territorial ambitions or operational reach, but its comparatively sophisticated approach to gender as a recruitment and mobilisation tool.

The broader ISIS phenomenon introduced the academic and policy communities to the reality that women travel thousands of miles to join militant organisations, manage domestic and logistical functions within caliphate structures, and occasionally participate in violence (Bloom, 2011; Winter, 2015). ISKP has inherited and adapted these practices for a region defined by acute patriarchy, protracted conflict, economic marginalisation, and, since August 2021, the return of Taliban rule with its sweeping restrictions on women's rights. The alignment of these structural conditions with ISKP's ideological messaging creates a

recruitment environment that is, paradoxically, both constrained and fertile.

This paper investigates how ISKP recruits women, what roles it assigns them, and how both the mechanisms and motivations for female participation have evolved over a decade of the organisation's existence. It argues that understanding ISKP's gendered strategies is not a peripheral scholarly concern but a prerequisite for effective counterterrorism policy in a region that remains central to global security.

The analysis proceeds through an examination of the existing scholarly literature, a theoretical grounding in feminist security studies and radicalization theory, a qualitative methodology, and an analytical discussion supported by empirical case studies. The paper concludes with policy recommendations addressed to regional governments, international organisations, and counterterrorism practitioners.

## **2. Research Questions**

This study is organised around two primary research questions, each of which admits of several subsidiary enquiries:

RQ1: What factors contribute to the recruitment of women by ISKP, and how do these vary across cultural and national contexts?

RQ2: How have women's roles within ISKP evolved since the organisation's founding in 2015?

Subsidiary questions include: To what extent has ISKP's gender policy been shaped by the ISIS core doctrine embodied in the Al-Khanssaa Brigade manifesto? How do post-2021 Taliban restrictions on women's rights intersect with ISKP's recruitment narratives? What limitations do existing counterterrorism approaches exhibit in addressing the female dimension of ISKP's operations? These questions guide the literature review, theoretical framework, and analytical sections that follow.

## **3. Literature Review**

### **3.1 Women and Terrorism: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations**

The academic literature on women's involvement in terrorism has grown substantially since the early 2000s, yet it remains characterised by certain persistent lacunae. Bloom's foundational work on female suicide bombers established that women's participation in political violence cannot be reduced to coercion or psychological abnormality, but rather reflects a range of ideological, social, and personal motivations comparable in complexity to those of male combatants (Bloom, 2011). Sjoberg and Gentry extended this argument by demonstrating that mainstream terrorism scholarship habitually frames women terrorists through one of three reductive narratives: as mothers acting to protect family, as monsters defying nature, or as whores driven by sexual obsession (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). These narratives deny women agency and obscure the structural conditions that give rise to female militancy.

The ISIS phenomenon prompted a renewed wave of scholarship on women in jihadist organisations. Winter's analysis of the Al-Khanssaa Brigade manifesto revealed that ISIS developed a detailed and internally coherent gender ideology, one that assigned women primary roles as wives, mothers, and domestic sustainers of the caliphate while simultaneously invoking limited operational roles under conditions of necessity (Winter, 2015). Klausen's examination of social media networks demonstrated that Western women were recruited partly through online platforms that offered community, identity, and purpose to individuals experiencing social alienation (Klausen, 2015). Speckhard and Yayla's defector interviews confirmed that for many women, the initial draw was romantic or familial rather than purely ideological, though ideology subsequently became internalised (Speckhard & Yayla, 2015).

### **3.2 ISKP-Specific Scholarship**

Scholarship specifically focused on ISKP remains comparatively sparse, and literature addressing

women's roles within the organisation is sparser still. Jadoon and Mines's comprehensive study of ISKP's strategic evolution provides the most systematic account of the group's recruitment patterns, noting that women were integrated into the organisation's support infrastructure from its earliest phases, with Pashto and Dari propaganda materials targeting female audiences in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces (Jadoon & Mines, 2020). Giustozzi's work on ISKP's ideological and organisational evolution situates the group's gender dynamics within the broader context of Salafi-jihadist competition in South Asia, arguing that ISKP's relatively permissive attitude toward female participation compared to the Taliban constitutes a deliberate point of ideological differentiation (Giustozzi, 2018).

Basit's analysis of ISKP's presence in Pakistan highlights the role of economic vulnerability and sectarian grievance in drawing Pakistani women toward IS-affiliated networks, identifying organisations such as the Al-Hudda Foundation as conduits for radicalisation among educated, middle-class women (Basit, 2020). The Royal United Services Institute's (RUSI) 2023 whitehall report on the role of gender in Taliban and IS-K recruitment, based on thirty-four in-depth semi-structured interviews, represents the most methodologically rigorous recent contribution to this field, confirming that ISKP actively exploits the Taliban's gender-repressive policies to position itself as an alternative source of agency and purpose for disillusioned Afghan women (RUSI, 2023).

### **3.3 Online Radicalisation and Propaganda**

The digital dimension of ISKP's recruitment has received increasing analytical attention following the group's launch of the English-language Voice of Khorasan magazine in January 2022 through its Al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production. Riccardo Valle's work on ISKP's propaganda apparatus documents the group's sophisticated multilingual output, which spans Pashto, Dari, Urdu, and English, and which is specifically calibrated to reach women through narratives of sisterhood, piety, and purposeful domesticity (Valle, 2021). The CREST Research Centre's 2023 study on ISKP's online recruitment of Afghan university students, while primarily focused on male students, identifies dynamics of grievance, identity, and belonging that are directly applicable to female recruitment (CREST, 2023).

The Jamestown Foundation's analysis of Voice of Khorasan's editorial content confirms that the magazine frequently addresses gender, positioning ISKP's version of Islamic womanhood as superior to both the Taliban's oppressive model and the West's allegedly decadent norms (Jamestown Foundation, 2022). ICCT's 2026 analysis, reviewing four years of Voice of Khorasan, characterises the Al-Azaim Foundation as the most sophisticated multilingual propaganda outfit of any IS affiliate, one that has demonstrably transformed ISKP from a localised insurgency into a globally networked threat (ICCT, 2026).

### **3.4 Research Gaps**

Despite these contributions, the literature exhibits notable gaps. Primary data from ISKP-affiliated women remains almost entirely unavailable, given security constraints and the difficulties of accessing conflict zones. Comparative analyses that situate ISKP's gender dynamics alongside those of ISIS-core, the Taliban, or other regional jihadist organisations are similarly rare. The intersection of gender with ethnicity, class, and educational background in ISKP radicalisation pathways has received almost no systematic attention. And the long-term trajectories of ISKP-affiliated women, including repatriation challenges such as those encountered by the Kerala returnees, remain largely undocumented. This paper aims to address these gaps, at least partially, through a synthesis of the available secondary literature and case study analysis.

## **4. Theoretical Framework**

### **4.1 Feminist Security Studies**

Feminist security studies, as articulated by Sjoberg, Tickner, and others, offers an indispensable analytical lens for examining women's involvement in political violence. The approach challenges the

gender-blind assumptions embedded in mainstream security theory and directs attention toward the ways in which patriarchal structures simultaneously constrain and radicalise women (Sjoberg, 2013). Within this framework, ISKP's recruitment strategies may be understood as a form of ideological instrumentalisation: the group exploits the very patriarchal conditions that limit women's autonomy in order to offer a vision of purpose and belonging that, however illusory, resonates with genuine structural frustrations.

Crucially, feminist security theory insists on recognising women as agents rather than merely victims. As Sjoberg and Gentry demonstrate, the reduction of female militants to passive instruments or coerced subordinates distorts our understanding of their motivations and thereby weakens our capacity to design effective countermeasures (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). ISKP's propaganda appears aware of this dynamic: it consistently frames women's participation in language of active choice, spiritual merit, and purposeful contribution, even as the roles assigned remain largely subordinate and domestic.

#### 4.2 The Push-Pull Model of Radicalization

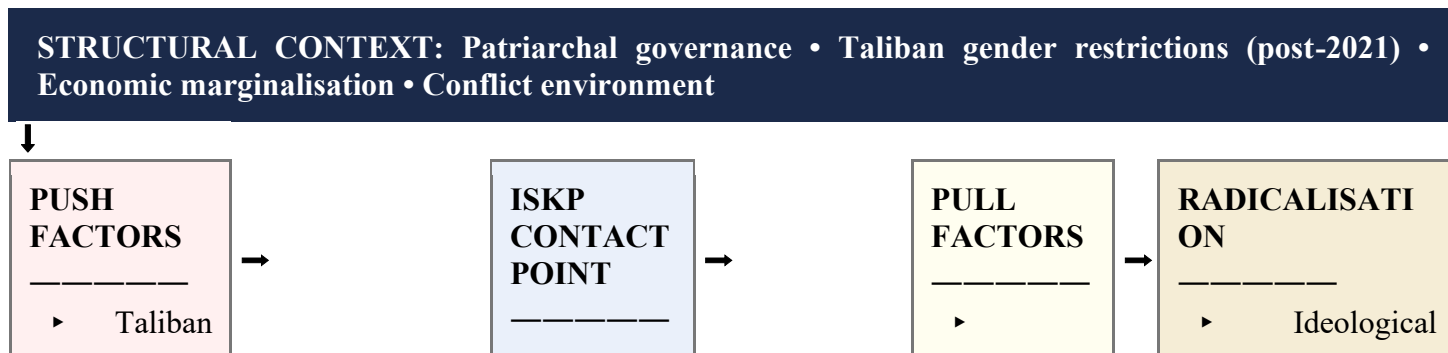
The push-pull model, developed by Horgan and others within the radicalization literature, posits that individuals are driven toward extremist organisations by a combination of push factors, which generate dissatisfaction with existing conditions, and pull factors, which make the target organisation appear attractive (Horgan, 2008). This framework maps with considerable precision onto ISKP's female recruitment dynamics in the Afghanistan-Pakistan context.

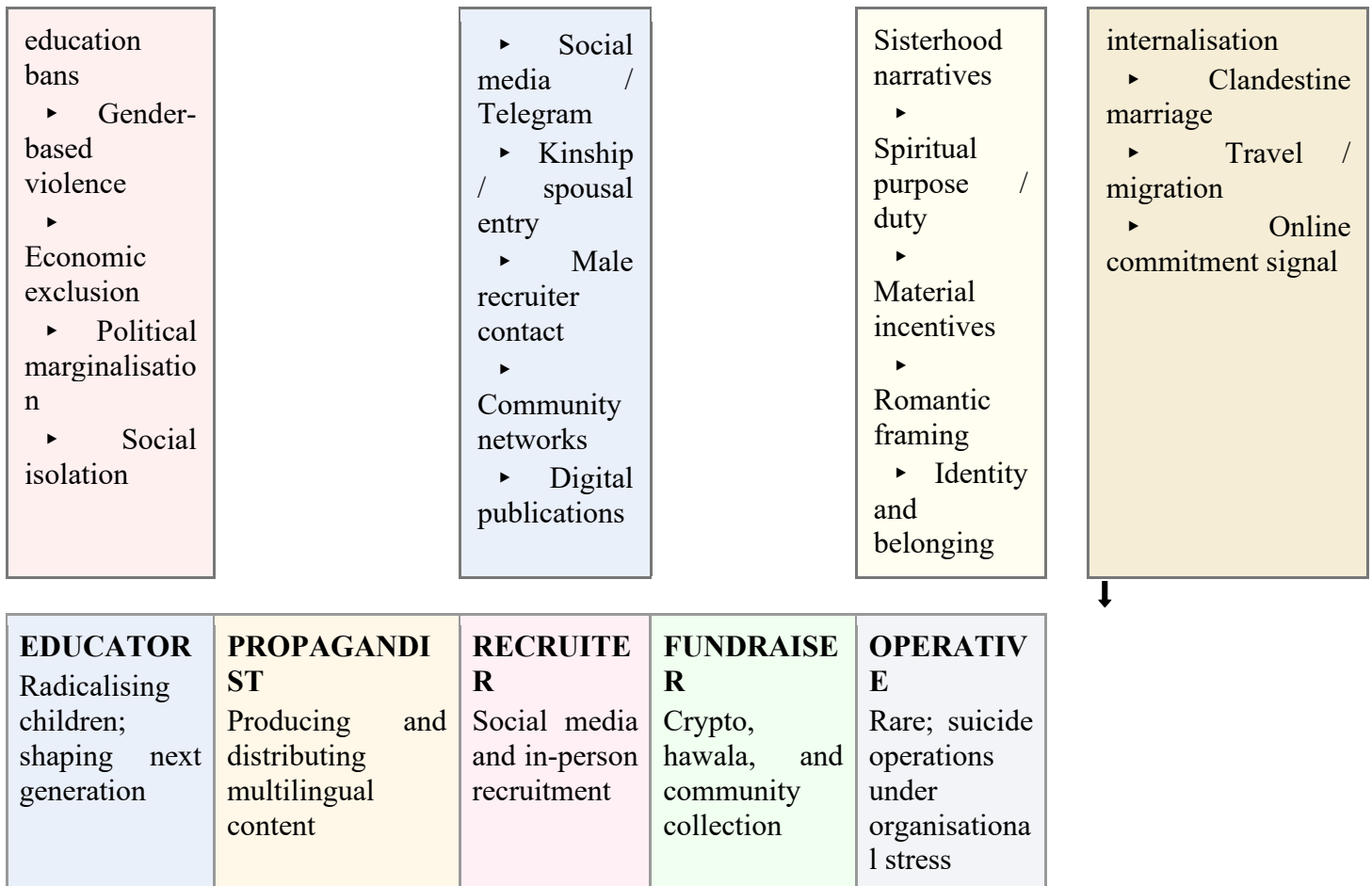
Push factors observable in the region include the Taliban's systematic erasure of women's educational and employment rights since 2021, the persistence of poverty and gender-based violence, the absence of legitimate channels for political participation, and the social isolation experienced by women in conservative communities. Pull factors include ISKP's ideological framing of jihad as a spiritual duty that elevates women, the promise of sisterhood and belonging within the organisation, the material incentives offered through stipends and provision, and the romantic narratives of heroic masculinity and pious femininity that ISKP's propaganda disseminates through digital platforms.

#### 4.3 Integrating the Frameworks

The explanatory power of this paper rests on the integration of these two theoretical approaches. Feminist security theory reveals the structural and gendered conditions that render women susceptible to ISKP's overtures, while the push-pull model provides a more granular account of the individual motivational pathways through which radicalisation proceeds. Together, they illuminate why ISKP's gender-targeted propaganda resonates where it does, how the organisation calibrates its messaging to exploit specific vulnerabilities, and why the roles assigned to women within the organisation, though predominantly subordinate, carry ideological weight that conventional counterterrorism analyses have tended to underestimate.

**Figure 1: ISKP Female Radicalisation Pathway — Integrated Theoretical Model**





←—— Feminist Security Theory: Structural Analysis (Sjoberg, 2013; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007) →

Note. Figure developed by the author based on the integrated application of feminist security theory (Sjoberg, 2013; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007) and the push-pull model of radicalisation (Horgan, 2008) to empirical evidence on ISKP female recruitment drawn from RUSI (2023), Afghan Witness (2022), GNET (2025), and Jadoon and Mines (2020). Arrows indicate directional relationships; role categories are not mutually exclusive.

## 5. Research Methodology

### 5.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research questions, the absence of reliable quantitative data on ISKP's female membership, and the interpretive demands of analysing ideological and propagandistic materials. The methodology follows the conventions of document analysis combined with case study research, allowing for the triangulation of findings across multiple sources and contexts.

### 5.2 Data Sources

The study draws on four categories of data. The first category comprises peer-reviewed academic literature in the fields of terrorism studies, gender and security studies, and regional security, sourced from databases including JSTOR, Taylor and Francis Online, SAGE Journals, and Google Scholar. The second

category includes reports and analyses from reputable think tanks and research institutions, among them RUSI, the Jamestown Foundation, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), CREST Research Centre, the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), and Afghan Witness. The third category encompasses reports from international organisations including the United Nations, UN Women, and the European Union Agency for Asylum. The fourth category consists of credible journalistic reporting from outlets including Reuters, Dawn, The Hindu, and BBC News.

Propaganda materials produced by ISKP, including issues of Voice of Khorasan magazine published by the Al-Azaim Foundation, are treated as primary sources for the analysis of the group's gender ideology and recruitment messaging. These materials are not reproduced or amplified but are analysed as objects of critical scholarly inquiry.

### **5.3 Sampling and Case Selection**

Case studies were selected using a purposive sampling strategy guided by two criteria: analytical representativeness, meaning that cases should illustrate the range of recruitment pathways and organisational roles identified in the literature, and evidential quality, meaning that cases should be grounded in verifiable and cross-referenced reporting. Four case studies were identified as meeting both criteria: the Kerala women recruited through spousal networks between 2016 and 2018, the Noreen Leghari case as an illustration of digital radicalisation in Pakistan, ISKP's post-2021 recruitment of urban Afghan women exploiting Taliban-generated grievances, and ISKP's Central Asian and international fundraising networks involving women.

### **5.4 Ethical Considerations**

The research addresses a topic with significant implications for the safety and dignity of the individuals involved. All case study subjects are discussed using only information that is already in the public domain and reported in credible journalistic and scholarly sources. No attempt has been made to identify or contact individuals associated with ISKP. The analysis maintains strict analytical neutrality, engaging critically with ISKP's ideology without legitimising or amplifying its claims. Sources are cited with full bibliographic details to enable verification.

### **5.5 Limitations**

The most significant limitation of this study is the near-total absence of primary data from ISKP-affiliated women themselves. Security constraints, the inaccessibility of conflict zones, and the legal and ethical complexities of engaging with current or former members of a designated terrorist organisation make primary fieldwork effectively impossible for most researchers. This limitation is partly offset by the RUSI study's interview data and by journalistic accounts, but the paper acknowledges that its conclusions rest on secondary and tertiary evidence and should be read with appropriate epistemic caution. A further limitation is the possibility that ISKP's propaganda materials, which form a significant portion of the evidential base, are designed to mislead as well as to recruit, and should not be taken at face value as descriptions of the organisation's actual internal arrangements.

## **6. Historical Context: ISKP's Gendered Evolution, 2015-2025**

### **6.1 Founding and Early Recruitment (2015-2016)**

ISKP emerged from a coalition of defectors from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban, and smaller jihadist factions who swore allegiance to the Islamic State following the latter's rapid territorial gains in Syria and Iraq. Formally announced in January 2015 under the command of Hafiz Saeed Khan, the organisation initially concentrated its recruitment efforts on male fighters, but women were drawn into its orbit from the earliest period, primarily through family and kinship networks (Jadoon & Mines, 2020;

Giustozzi, 2018).

Propaganda materials produced in Pashto and Dari during this phase drew explicitly on the Al-Khanssaa Brigade manifesto, which ISIS had published in 2015 and which outlined a detailed vision of womanhood compatible with jihadist participation: early marriage, child-rearing, domestic management, and occasional participation in defensive or logistical operations (Winter, 2015). In Pakistan, women connected to IS-affiliated networks were identified in fundraising and recruitment roles as early as 2015, with the Al-Hudda Foundation in particular serving as a vehicle for radicalising middle-class and upper-middle-class women in urban centres including Karachi (Gul, 2015; Basit, 2020).

## **6.2 Expansion and Diversification (2016-2020)**

Despite the killing of Hafiz Saeed Khan in a US airstrike in 2016 and sustained military pressure from US, Afghan, and Pakistani forces, ISKP demonstrated considerable organisational resilience, expanding its operations to include urban settings and university campuses. During this period, the group's recruitment of women became more sophisticated, shifting from exclusively kinship-based pathways toward the exploitation of digital platforms. The Kerala case crystallises this transition: between 2016 and 2018, four women from Kerala, identified as Nimisha Noushad (Fathima Isa), Sonia Sebastian (Ayisha), Reffeala, and Merrin Jacob (Mariyam), followed their husbands to ISKP-controlled territory in Afghanistan. Sonia Sebastian subsequently conducted secret recruitment classes, making the case a rare documented example of a woman serving as an active ISKP recruiter (The Hindu, 2021, 2022).

At the same time, a 2017 case from Pakistan demonstrated the growing significance of online radicalisation. Noreen Leghari, a second-year medical student at Liaquat University in Hyderabad, disappeared from her home in February 2017 after being radicalised through prolonged contact with a male recruiter on Facebook and other social media platforms. She subsequently married her recruiter, Ali Tariq, travelled to Syria for training, and returned to Pakistan where she was arrested in Lahore in April 2017 while allegedly planning a suicide bombing at a church on Easter Sunday (RSIS, 2017; Refworld, 2017; Dawn, 2017). The case disrupted the prevailing assumption, particularly strong in Pakistani public discourse, that female radicalization is primarily a product of madrassa networks or socioeconomic deprivation: Leghari came from an educated, professional family and was herself a high-achieving student.

## **6.3 Pressure and Adaptation (2018-2021)**

By 2019, sustained counterterrorism operations had reduced ISKP's fighter strength to between 1,500 and 2,200 personnel, and the group had been pushed out of much of the territory it had held in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces. In response, ISKP increasingly decentralised its structure, shifting toward covert urban cells and intensifying its digital presence. Women's roles in this reconfigured organisation may have become proportionally more significant, as the group placed greater emphasis on propaganda production, fundraising, and community influence operations that do not require physical mobility in conflict zones. A female suicide bombing in Kabul in 2019, attributed to ISKP, provided rare evidence of women's participation in direct operational roles during this period (Reuters, 2019).

## **6.4 Post-Taliban Revival and Global Ambition (2021-2025)**

The Taliban's seizure of power in August 2021 and the subsequent withdrawal of US and NATO forces transformed the operating environment for ISKP in ways that the organisation moved rapidly to exploit. By 2022, ISKP had reportedly rebuilt its fighter strength to between 4,000 and 6,000 personnel. The Taliban's sweeping restrictions on women, including bans on secondary and higher education, prohibitions on employment in most sectors, and severe curtailment of freedom of movement, created precisely the conditions of frustration and exclusion that ISKP's propaganda was calibrated to exploit. A December 2022 ISKP publication directly called on foreign women to travel to Afghanistan to join the organisation,

consciously echoing the ISIS strategy of persuading women to migrate to Syria and Iraq between 2013 and 2019 (RUSI, 2023; Afghan Witness, 2022).

ISKP's international reach expanded further during this period. The Al-Azaim Foundation's launch of the English-language Voice of Khorasan magazine in January 2022 signalled the organisation's determination to address audiences well beyond the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, and the magazine's content has periodically included material specifically targeting women, including critiques of Western gender norms designed to appeal to Muslim women in diaspora communities (Jamestown Foundation, 2022; ICCT, 2026). Women in Central Asia and Russia were identified as participants in ISKP's cryptocurrency fundraising networks, with one documented network raising approximately \$7,500 through TRC20 digital wallets between June 2024 and January 2025 (GNET, 2025).

## **7. Analytical Discussion**

### **7.1 Recruitment Mechanisms**

The mechanisms through which ISKP recruits women may be organised into five broad categories, each of which is operative to varying degrees across different national and social contexts.

#### **7.1.1 Digital and Social Media Recruitment**

Telegram has become the primary platform for ISKP's recruitment of women, hosting channels that distribute Voice of Khorasan and related materials in Pashto, Dari, Urdu, and English. The organisation's digital strategy is notably sophisticated for a regional insurgency, drawing on the expertise of the Al-Azaim Foundation, which ICCT characterises as arguably the most advanced multilingual propaganda apparatus of any IS affiliate (ICCT, 2026). The Noreen Leghari case illustrates both the effectiveness and the distinctive character of social media recruitment: her radicalisation was effected not through religious institutions or peer networks but through sustained online contact with a single male recruiter, suggesting that ISKP's digital outreach could, under the right conditions, penetrate even professionally and educationally successful women with no prior connection to extremist networks (RSIS, 2017).

Importantly, ISKP's propaganda tends to address women differently from men. While materials targeting male recruits emphasise martial glory, brotherhood, and territorial conquest, materials targeting women foreground themes of piety, sisterhood, purposeful domesticity, and the spiritual superiority of life under Sharia compared to both the Taliban's oppressive order and the West's alleged moral decadence (Jamestown Foundation, 2022; Afghan Witness, 2022). This bifurcated messaging strategy reflects an awareness of the gendered dimensions of the recruitment challenge.

#### **7.1.2 Kinship and Spousal Networks**

Family ties remain among the most reliable vectors for female recruitment, both within ISKP and in jihadist organisations more broadly. Wilson's analysis of female recruitment dynamics in IS documents the systematic use of male relatives to recruit women in contexts where women's social mobility is severely constrained, arguing that kinship networks allow recruiters to bypass the social gatekeeping mechanisms that might otherwise impede recruitment (Wilson, 2018). ISKP mirrors this strategy, and the Kerala case provides its most documented illustration: the four women whose cases have been extensively reported in Indian media did not arrive at ISKP membership through independent ideological conviction but were drawn in through their marriages (The Hindu, 2021). Their subsequent radicalisation and, in Sonia Sebastian's case, active participation in recruitment activities, suggests that initial kinship-based entry does not preclude deep ideological commitment over time.

#### **7.1.3 Exploitation of Gender Grievances**

ISKP's most strategically distinctive recruitment mechanism in the post-2021 period is the deliberate

exploitation of Afghan women's justified grievances against the Taliban. RUSI's 2023 research confirms that the denial of women's agency under Taliban rule is being weaponised by ISKP to attract recruits, with the organisation's propaganda positioning it as an alternative that offers women a form of participation, however limited and subordinated to male authority, that the Taliban explicitly denies (RUSI, 2023). The irony of this dynamic is considerable: ISKP offers women a sense of agency while ultimately reproducing the same patriarchal structures against which that agency is defined. Feminist security theory illuminates this contradiction by revealing how patriarchal systems can simultaneously generate and channel women's resistance.

The December 2022 ISKP publication inviting foreign women to Afghanistan, which RUSI identifies as a deliberate attempt to replicate ISIS's migration strategy, illustrates the organisation's awareness of the propaganda opportunity created by Taliban policies. Whether this invitation has translated into substantial actual migration is uncertain, and RUSI's analysis suggests that the very different conditions in Afghanistan compared to ISIS's peak Syrian territory make large-scale migration unlikely. Nevertheless, the propaganda dimension of the invitation is real: it serves to position ISKP as more hospitable to women than the Taliban, which is a comparative advantage of some ideological significance.

#### 7.1.4 Economic Incentives

Material incentives may be particularly significant in contexts of acute economic deprivation, and the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, characterised by high levels of poverty, unemployment, and gender-based economic exclusion, provides precisely such a context. Giustozzi's analysis of ISKP's recruitment strategies notes the organisation's use of stipends and provision to attract supporters among economically marginalised populations (Giustozzi, 2018). For women who lack access to employment or economic independence under Taliban governance, ISKP's material offerings could represent a genuinely significant pull factor, independent of ideological conviction.

#### 7.1.5 Ideological Framing and Religious Identity

For a subset of recruits, ideological conviction appears to be a primary rather than secondary motivation. ISKP's positioning of itself as the authentic defender of pure Salafi-jihadist Islam, in contrast to the Taliban's allegedly corrupt and nationalist deviation from true Islamic governance, carries genuine resonance among women who have internalised Salafi religious frameworks and who evaluate political violence through a theological rather than a political or economic lens. Brooks's analysis identifies religious duty as a significant driver of female radicalisation, and the accounts of women who have left testaments or made statements before committing acts of violence suggest that ideological commitment can be deeply held and resistant to conventional deradicalisation approaches (Brooks, 2016).

### 7.2 Women's Roles in ISKP: An Empirical Overview

Women's participation in ISKP may be organised across a spectrum of roles ranging from domestic support to active operational involvement, though the distribution is heavily weighted toward the former. The following table summarises the primary role categories identified in the literature:

**Table 2: Women's Roles within ISKP**

Role	Description	Evidence / Example	Source
Educator / Indoctrinator	Teaching children and peers jihadist ideology; shaping the next generation of recruits	IS-K propaganda frames women as educators of 'future Caliphate soldiers'	Afghan Witness (2022); RUSI (2023)

Propagandist	Creating, translating, and disseminating content via Telegram and print magazines	Al-Azaim Foundation content production; multilingual Voice of Khorasan materials	Jadoon & Mines (2020); Jamestown Foundation (2022)
Recruiter	Using personal networks and social media to bring in new members	Sonia Sebastian (Ayisha) conducted secret recruitment classes in Kerala network	The Hindu (2022)
Fundraiser	Collecting funds through cryptocurrency, hawala networks, and community appeals	Central Asian and Russian women raised \$7,500 via TRC20 wallets (2024-2025)	GNET (2025)
Domestic Supporter	Providing moral, logistical, and familial support to male fighters; early marriage	Al-Khanssaa-derived ISKP framing of women as wives and mothers of jihadists	Winter (2015); Giustozzi (2018)
Operational Combat	Rare participation in suicide bombings or logistical operations	2019 Kabul female suicide bombing; reported Moscow Crocus Hall logistics role	Reuters (2019); Bloom (2011)

Note: Role classifications are drawn from Afghan Witness (2022), RUSI (2023), GNET (2025), Reuters (2019), The Hindu (2021, 2022), and Winter (2015).

The educator and propagandist roles carry significance disproportionate to their apparent distance from operational violence. As the RUSI research notes, women's role in radicalising children may constitute what IS-K expert Amira Jadoon describes as a 'significant but underappreciated contribution' to the organisation's long-term sustainability: children are more receptive to their mothers' ideological formation than to male authority figures, making women central to ISKP's intergenerational reproduction of jihadist identity (RUSI, 2023).

The fundraising dimension has attracted growing attention following the documentation of cryptocurrency-based networks involving women in Central Asia and Russia. The GNET analysis of these networks suggests that financial participation provides women with a form of organisational belonging that is not contingent on physical mobility or proximity to active conflict zones, making it a particularly effective mechanism for extending ISKP's reach into diaspora communities and relatively stable countries (GNET, 2025).

Direct operational roles, while documented, remain exceptional. The 2019 Kabul suicide bombing attributed to an ISKP female operative and the reported involvement of women in logistical aspects of the 2024 Moscow Crocus City Hall attack suggest that operational deployment of women, while uncommon, is not categorically ruled out by ISKP's gender ideology. Cook and Vale's research on ISIS women more broadly suggests that women may be directed toward suicide operations under conditions of organisational stress, when the costs of using male fighters are prohibitively high (Cook & Vale, 2022).

### 7.3 The ISIS Ideological Inheritance

A distinctive feature of ISKP's gender strategy is the degree to which it has been consciously shaped by the ISIS core's doctrinal production on women. The Al-Khanssaa Brigade manifesto, published in 2015, represents the most systematic articulation of IS ideology on gender, arguing that women's primary role is domestic and reproductive but acknowledging operational participation in circumstances of necessity (Winter, 2015). ISKP's propaganda materials closely mirror this framework while adapting its idiom to the Pashtun and broader South Asian cultural context: the language of family honour, marital duty, and motherhood as jihad resonates differently in Nangarhar than in Mosul, and ISKP's propagandists appear to have made the necessary calibrations.

**Table 3: Comparative Gender Ideology — ISIS Core, ISKP, and the Afghan Taliban**

Dimension	ISIS Core (2013-2019)	ISKP (2015-2025)	Afghan Taliban (2021-Present)
<b>Primary gender doctrine source</b>	Al-Khanssaa Brigade Manifesto (2015)	Al-Khanssaa framework adapted to Pashtun and South Asian cultural idiom	Deobandi jurisprudence; no formal gender manifesto
<b>Primary role assigned to women</b>	Wife, mother, domestic sustainer of the caliphate	Wife, mother, educator of 'future caliphate soldiers'; propagandist	Wife and mother confined to domestic sphere; no public role
<b>Women's education stance</b>	Home-based religious instruction; girls' schools in controlled territory	Selective promotion of religious literacy; used for radicalisation	Ban on secondary and higher education for women (post-2021)
<b>Women in operational roles</b>	Permitted under necessity (Al-Khanssaa); documented female police units	Exceptional; documented in suicide bombings and logistics only	Strictly prohibited; no operational role permitted
<b>Recruitment of women</b>	Active global recruitment via social media; hijra (migration) strategy	Active multilingual recruitment; exploitation of Taliban gender grievances	No active female recruitment; women's roles entirely passive
<b>Digital propaganda targeting women</b>	Dedicated publications (Rumiyah, Dabiq) with female-targeted content	Voice of Khorasan (Al-Azaim); Pashto, Dari, Urdu, and English content	Minimal; no formal media targeting women
<b>Ideological differentiation strategy</b>	Positioned as superior to all existing Muslim-majority states	Positioned as superior to Taliban; exploits Taliban repression of women	Positioned as legitimate Islamic emirate; does not compete for women
<b>Women's</b>	Documented in Europe	Documented;	Not applicable; women

<b>fundraising roles</b>	and North Africa via informal networks	cryptocurrency and hawala networks in Central Asia (2024-25)	excluded from financial public life
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Note. Comparative data synthesised from Winter (2015), Giustozzi (2018), RUSI (2023), Afghan Witness (2022), ICCT (2026), Human Rights Watch (2024), and Jadoon and Mines (2020). Taliban data reflects post-August 2021 policies. ISKP data reflects documented practices across the 2015-2025 period.

The post-2021 period has seen some evidence of ISKP moving beyond the strictest Al-Khanssaa framework toward a somewhat more active framing of women's roles, possibly in response to the propaganda opportunity created by Taliban restrictions. The December 2022 call for foreign women to migrate to Afghanistan adopts a more assertive tone than the ISIS core's domestic emphasis, suggesting a degree of doctrinal evolution driven by competitive and contextual pressures rather than theological principle. Whether this represents a lasting shift in ISKP's gender ideology or a tactical messaging adjustment remains to be established.

## 8. Case Studies

**Table 4: Comparative Case Study Matrix — ISKP Female Involvement, 2016-2025**

Case	Primary Recruitment Pathway	Nationality / Region	Role within ISKP	Outcome	Source
<b>Kerala Women (2016-2019)</b>	Kinship / spousal networks; digital reinforcement	India (Kerala)	Domestic support; Sonia Sebastian: active recruiter	Detained (2019); India declined repatriation (2021)	The Hindu (2021, 2022); Brooks (2016)
<b>Noreen Leghari (2017)</b>	Social media / digital (Facebook; prolonged recruiter contact)	Pakistan (Hyderabad / Lahore)	Prospective operative; planned suicide bombing	Arrested Lahore, April 2017; mission disrupted	RSIS (2017); Dawn (2017)
<b>Post-2021 Afghan Urban Women</b>	Gender grievance exploitation; Taliban-generated push factors	Afghanistan (urban centres)	Propaganda audience; potential domestic recruits	Ongoing; RUSI (2023) confirms active targeting	RUSI (2023); Afghan Witness (2022); UN Women (2024)
<b>Central Asian Fundraising Networks (2024-25)</b>	Ideological networks; cryptocurrency platforms	Central Asia / Russia	Fundraiser; financial logistics operator	Networks documented; \$7,500 raised; ongoing activity	GNET / Thakkar (2025a, 2025b)

Note. Cases selected using purposive sampling criteria of analytical representativeness and evidential quality (see Section 5.3). Outcome data reflects most recent publicly available reporting as of 2025.

### **8.1 The Kerala Women: Kinship Networks and Transnational Recruitment**

The recruitment of four women from Kerala into ISKP's ranks between 2016 and 2018 constitutes one of the most thoroughly documented cases of IS-affiliated female recruitment from South Asia and offers important insights into the role of kinship networks and digital platforms in transnational radicalisation. The four women, whose cases were extensively reported in Indian media and addressed in national security proceedings, were Nimisha Noushad, Sonia Sebastian, Reffeala, and Merrin Jacob. Each travelled to Afghanistan with their husbands, all of whom were affiliated with ISKP. They were detained by Afghan authorities in 2019 and, as of 2021, India had indicated it would not permit their return (The Hindu, 2021).

Sonia Sebastian's case is particularly noteworthy because she is documented not merely as a passive accompaniment to her husband but as an active recruiter who conducted classes for other women (The Hindu, 2022). Her trajectory illustrates a pattern that the literature more broadly confirms: kinship-based entry into the organisation, followed by ideological deepening and eventual operational participation in non-combat roles. Brooks's warning that female returnees, with their networks and residual ideological commitments, may constitute an underappreciated security risk is directly applicable to this case (Brooks, 2016).

The Kerala case also highlights the challenge of repatriation and deradicalisation for ISKP-affiliated women. The Indian government's refusal to allow return reflects an understandable security concern but may also foreclose the possibility of rehabilitation and information-gathering that could serve counterterrorism objectives. Comparative analysis with European approaches to IS returnees suggests that blanket exclusion, while politically expedient, is not always strategically optimal.

### **8.2 Noreen Leghari: Digital Radicalisation and the Educated Recruit**

The case of Noreen Leghari, arrested in Lahore in April 2017 after planning a suicide attack on a church, challenges several of the most common assumptions about female radicalisation in Pakistan. Leghari came from an educated, professional family: her father was a university professor, and she herself was a high-achieving second-year medical student at Liaquat University in Hyderabad. She showed no outward signs of radicalisation to her family or teachers, and her university's vice-chancellor confirmed that her radicalisation was effected entirely through prolonged social media contact with a male recruiter, with whom she subsequently contracted a clandestine marriage (RSIS, 2017; Dawn, 2017).

The Leghari case offers several analytical lessons. It suggests that ISKP-affiliated networks in Pakistan have developed effective digital recruitment methodologies that can penetrate relatively protected social environments, targeting women whose educational attainment and family background might conventionally be expected to constitute protective factors against radicalisation. It also illustrates the particular vulnerability created by the intersection of romantic aspiration and ideological messaging: Leghari's recruiter appears to have engaged her both romantically and ideologically, creating a personal investment in the cause that may have been more durable than purely ideological conviction (RSIS, 2017). Speckhard and Yayla's finding that romantic motivation is common among female IS recruits even when ideological commitment subsequently deepens is consistent with this reading (Speckhard & Yayla, 2015).

The case should not, however, be read as wholly representative of Pakistani female radicalisation dynamics. Other documented cases involve women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and more direct connections to established jihadist networks. The spectrum of radicalisation pathways in Pakistan appears to be broad, encompassing both the educated urban professional and the economically marginalised woman in conservative communities.

### **8.3 Post-2021 Afghanistan: Gender Grievance as Recruitment Lever**

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 and the subsequent systematic dismantling of women's rights in Afghanistan has created what may prove to be ISKP's most significant long-term recruitment opportunity. UN Women's 2024 Afghanistan Gender Index documents a comprehensive deterioration in women's status across health, education, employment, and personal security, noting that nearly thirty per cent of Afghan girls under eighteen were married in 2023, including ten per cent under fifteen (UN Women, 2024; UN Women, 2021). ISKP's propaganda apparatus has been quick to position the organisation as a response to these conditions, offering women a form of participation, however circumscribed, that the Taliban explicitly denies.

The RUSI 2023 report provides the most systematic evidence of this dynamic, confirming through interview research that IS-K is 'notable in the Afghan context for seeking to appeal directly to women and girls' and that the organisation has been actively positioning itself as an alternative to Taliban governance among frustrated urban women (RUSI, 2023). The report's recommendation that policymakers specifically track and counter gendered IS-K propaganda in local languages reflects a recognition that this recruitment vector is real and growing.

The limits of this dynamic should also be noted. ISKP's offer of agency to Afghan women is fundamentally paradoxical: the organisation's own gender ideology, as expressed in the Al-Khanssaa-derived framework, ultimately assigns women to subordinate domestic and reproductive roles. Women who join ISKP in response to Taliban oppression may find themselves in an environment that differs from the Taliban's in degree rather than in kind. Whether this contradiction reduces ISKP's appeal over time, or whether the initial ideological investment forecloses rational reassessment, is a question that the available evidence does not yet allow us to answer with confidence.

### **8.4 Cryptocurrency Fundraising Networks in Central Asia**

A more recent and somewhat understudied dimension of women's involvement in ISKP is their participation in the organisation's financial networks. GNET's 2025 analysis documents the operation of cryptocurrency-based fundraising networks in which women from Central Asia and Russia played active roles, raising funds that were transferred to ISKP through TRC20 digital wallets. The networks documented in the report raised approximately \$7,500 between June 2024 and January 2025 and \$3,000 between September 2024 and January 2025, sums that, while modest in absolute terms, are significant as indicators of organisational sophistication and geographical reach (GNET, 2025).

The involvement of women in ISKP's financial infrastructure carries implications beyond the immediate monetary amounts. It demonstrates that ISKP has successfully developed mechanisms for female participation that are not contingent on physical mobility or proximity to active conflict, extending the organisation's reach into diaspora communities in countries with relatively well-developed legal and security environments. It also suggests that the conventional counterterrorism focus on the Afghanistan-Pakistan operational theatre may miss important dimensions of ISKP's global network.

## **9. Findings**

The analysis presented in this paper generates six principal findings, each of which has implications for both scholarly understanding and policy practice.

First, ISKP's recruitment of women is systematic and deliberate rather than incidental, reflecting a conscious adaptation of ISIS core gender doctrine to the specific cultural, political, and digital landscape of South and Central Asia. The organisation's propaganda apparatus devotes significant resources to addressing female audiences, and its messaging strategy is calibrated with notable sophistication to the gendered dimensions of its target populations' experiences.

Second, the mechanisms of female recruitment are diverse and context-dependent. Digital and social

media recruitment appears to be particularly significant for educated, urban women in Pakistan and India, while kinship networks remain dominant in more conservative rural environments in Afghanistan. Economic incentives are likely a significant factor in Central Asia, where financial vulnerability intersects with ideological openness.

Third, the Taliban's post-2021 restriction of women's rights has created conditions that are objectively favourable to ISKP's recruitment. The exploitation of gender grievance is ISKP's most strategically innovative recruitment mechanism in the current period, and it is likely to remain effective as long as Taliban gender policies remain unchanged.

Fourth, women's roles within ISKP are predominantly supportive and domestic, consistent with the Al-Khanssaa ideological framework, but include a meaningful propagandist, educator, and fundraiser dimension that carries disproportionate long-term significance for the organisation's sustainability and reach. The educator role, in particular, may be central to ISKP's intergenerational reproduction of jihadist identity.

Fifth, direct operational roles for women remain exceptional but are not categorically excluded by ISKP's ideology, and there is documentary evidence of female participation in suicide bombings and logistical operations under conditions of organisational stress.

Sixth, existing counterterrorism approaches in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region have consistently underweighted the female dimension of ISKP's operations, creating analytical blind spots that limit the effectiveness of both prevention and deradicalisation efforts. This shortcoming is particularly pronounced in digital environments, where ISKP's gendered propaganda circulates largely without effective counter-messaging in the relevant local languages.

## 10. Conclusion

The gendered dimension of ISKP's recruitment and operations is neither peripheral nor exceptional: it is embedded in the organisation's ideological architecture and adapted with considerable care to the structural conditions of its operating environment. Women in ISKP are not simply victims of male coercion, as mainstream narratives tend to imply, nor are they merely appendages to male fighters. They are, in varying degrees and through diverse pathways, agents whose motivations range from genuine ideological conviction to romantic aspiration, economic calculation, familial loyalty, and the pursuit of belonging in contexts where legitimate alternatives are scarce.

The post-2021 period has, if anything, intensified these dynamics. Taliban governance in Afghanistan has created both a supply of grievances that ISKP is positioned to exploit and a competitive landscape in which ISKP's comparatively permissive attitude toward female participation constitutes a genuine point of ideological differentiation. The organisation's digital infrastructure, centred on the Al-Azaim Foundation's multilingual output, has extended its reach far beyond the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, drawing women from Central Asia, South Asia, Turkey, and potentially Western diaspora communities into its orbit.

This paper has argued that understanding these dynamics requires an analytical framework that integrates feminist security theory's structural analysis with the push-pull model's attention to individual motivational pathways. Neither framework alone is adequate to the complexity of the phenomenon. Together, they illuminate how ISKP weaponises the very patriarchal structures that constrain women's lives, offering a vision of purposeful participation that, however illusory, resonates with genuine structural frustrations.

Much remains unknown. Primary accounts from ISKP-affiliated women are almost entirely unavailable. The long-term trajectories of women who have joined and, in some cases, left the organisation are largely undocumented. The intersection of gender with class, ethnicity, and educational background in ISKP radicalisation pathways has received insufficient systematic attention. These gaps should be

understood not as reasons for analytical paralysis but as invitations to further research, including the ethnographic and interview-based work that the field currently lacks.

## 11. Policy Recommendations

**Table 5: Policy Recommendation Matrix — Addressing ISKP's Female Recruitment and Operations**

Recommendation Area	Specific Required	Action	Primary Responsible Actors	Priority Level	Evidence Base
<b>11.1 Gender-Sensitive CT Frameworks</b>	Develop gender-disaggregated frameworks for female recruitment, propaganda, and organisational roles	gender-analytical tracking ISKP roles	CT agencies: Afghanistan, Pakistan, India; Five Eyes partners; UNOCT	<b>HIGH Immediate</b> —	RUSI (2023); Jadoon & Mines (2020)
<b>11.2 Digital Counter-Messaging</b>	Commission Pashto, Dari, Urdu, and English counter-narratives addressing ISKP's gender-specific propaganda themes (Taliban-ISKP contrast; romanticisation of jihadist life)		Government communications agencies; civil society; tech platforms (Telegram)	<b>HIGH Short-term (0-12 months)</b> —	ICCT (2026); Jamestown Foundation (2022)
<b>11.3 Structural Drivers</b>	Prioritise women's access to education and employment in Afghanistan and Pakistan as explicit counterterrorism investments; link development programming to CT strategy		International donors (UN, World Bank, bilateral); national governments	<b>MEDIUM Medium-term (1-3 years)</b> —	UN Women (2024); Giustozzi (2018); Horgan (2008)
<b>11.4 Deradicalisation and Repatriation</b>	Develop evidence-based, gender-sensitive deradicalisation frameworks; establish regional cooperation mechanisms for consistent and humane management of ISKP-affiliated returnees		National governments; regional organisations (SCO, SAARC); UNODC; ICCT	<b>MEDIUM Short-to-medium term</b> —	RUSI (2023); Brooks (2016); Cook & Vale (2022)

<b>11.5 Primary Research Capacity</b>	Fund ethnographic and interview-based research on ISKP female membership; commission longitudinal studies on returnee trajectories; integrate gender disaggregation into all ISKP monitoring datasets	Research councils; academic institutions; think tanks (RUSI, ICCT, GNET)	<b>MEDIUM Ongoing</b> —	CREST (2023); Speckhard & Yayla (2015)
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Note. Priority levels reflect urgency of implementation based on current threat dynamics documented in RUSI (2023) and ICCT (2026). 'CT' = Counterterrorism. 'UNOCT' = United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism. 'UNODC' = United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

### 11.1 Gender-Sensitive Counterterrorism Frameworks

Counterterrorism agencies in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and relevant international partners should develop gender-disaggregated analytical frameworks that specifically track and assess female recruitment patterns, propaganda targeting women, and the organisational roles of ISKP-affiliated women. The persistent failure to attend to the female dimension of jihadist organisations is analytically costly and operationally limiting. RUSI's 2023 recommendation that online propaganda monitoring in local languages include an explicit gender component should be treated as a minimum standard rather than an aspirational goal.

### 11.2 Digital Counter-Messaging

Coordinated efforts to develop credible counter-narratives to ISKP's gender-targeted propaganda, in Pashto, Dari, Urdu, and English, should be prioritised by both government agencies and civil society organisations. Counter-messaging should address the specific themes that ISKP exploits: the contrast between its ideology and the Taliban's gender repression, the romanticised portrayal of life within the organisation, and the framing of jihadist participation as a form of spiritual empowerment. Counter-narratives that rely solely on general deradicalisation messaging are unlikely to be effective against specifically gendered recruitment content.

### 11.3 Addressing Structural Drivers

Long-term counter-radicalisation efforts must address the structural conditions that generate susceptibility to ISKP's recruitment appeals. Access to education and legitimate employment for women in Afghanistan and Pakistan would reduce both the push factors that generate dissatisfaction and the pull factors that make ISKP's promises of purpose and belonging resonant. International donors and development organisations should explicitly prioritise gender equality programming as a component of counterterrorism strategy, recognising that these are not separate agendas but deeply interconnected ones.

### 11.4 Deradicalisation and Repatriation

The cases of IS-affiliated women seeking repatriation, including the Kerala women, highlight the need for evidence-based, gender-sensitive deradicalisation frameworks that can distinguish between genuine disengagement, strategic dissimulation, and ongoing ideological commitment. Blanket exclusion policies, while politically straightforward, may forgo valuable intelligence and foreclose rehabilitation opportunities. Regional cooperation between Afghanistan's neighbours, facilitated by international organisations, is needed

to develop consistent and humane approaches to the management of returnees.

### 11.5 Academic and Policy Research

Governments and research institutions should invest in the development of primary research capacity on ISKP's female membership, including support for ethnographic and interview-based studies that can generate the kind of first-person data that secondary sources cannot provide. The RUSI model of combining in-depth interviews with policy-relevant analysis offers one productive approach. Research agendas should specifically address the intersection of gender with class, ethnicity, and educational background in ISKP radicalisation, and should include longitudinal studies of returnees' post-disengagement trajectories.

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