Article

Indonesian Female Migrant Workers and Violent Extremism: Thoughts, Trends and Women's Empowerment

Rosita Tandos*

UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Indonesia

Abstract

This study aims to examine the level of violent extremism among former Indonesian Female Migrant Domestic Workers (FMDWs) and explore the factors contributing to their vulnerability to radicalization, including ideological influence, social dynamics, and digital exposure. The research involved 100 former Indonesian FMDWs residing in Indramayu District, West Java. Among them, 58 had worked in Middle Eastern countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar) and 42 in Southeast Asia (Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia). Data were collected using a mixed-method approach, combining closed and open-ended survey questions. Instrument validity was ensured through expert review and preliminary trials. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic qualitative analysis to identify patterns of exposure and engagement with extremist narratives. The findings reveal that while most respondents reject violent extremism and terrorist acts, some showed vulnerability due to isolation, unmoderated religious exposure via social media, and limited access to support systems. A small number admitted encountering radical teachings or invitations to join hardline groups. The study highlights the importance of gender-sensitive counter-extremism strategies and emphasizes the critical role of empowering women in preventing violent extremism.

Keywords
domestic workers, female migrant, violent extremism, women's empowerment

*Corresponding author
Kec. Ciputat Tim., Kota Tangerang Selatan, Banten
Email
rositandos18@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by global instability, violent extremism has emerged as a critical concern for governments, researchers, and civil society actors alike. No longer confined to specific regions or ideologies, it has manifested in diverse forms ranging from politically motivated insurgencies to religious terrorism, drawing in participants from various backgrounds-including women (Haleem & Masood, 2023). This shifting dynamic calls for a nuanced understanding of the factors that lead individuals, especially women, to become active agents in such movements (Tschakert & Neef, 2022). The role of women in violent extremism (VEm) is a complex and evolving phenomenon that challenges traditional assumptions about gender and conflict (Donnelly, 2021). Once perceived solely as victims or passive supporters, women are increasingly visible as perpetrators, recruiters, and ideological influencers in extremist networks. This transformation has prompted renewed scholarly and policy interest in gender-specific pathways to radicalization, particularly within religiously framed extremist movements such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

Violent extremism's intersection with gender justice highlights stark differences in the treatment and perception of women across regions (Tomaro, 2025). While some societies like Tunisia have adopted progressive interpretations of Islamic law, extremist ideologies continue to exploit conservative gender norms to reinforce women's subjugation. In countries like Indonesia, women are not only subjected to radical indoctrination but also utilized as strategic assets in terror networks, sometimes even engaging in suicide bombings alongside their children. These developments underline the need for a deeper investigation into the sociological and theological drivers that push women into extremist roles (Shahreen & Mostofa, 2024).

Numerous studies have explored women's involvement in violent extremism from various disciplinary angles, including terrorism studies, sociology, and international development. Research conducted by Aldoughli, (2024); Tossell et al., (2022) highlights the diverse motivations behind women's participation—ranging from personal trauma and the pursuit of honor to ideological commitment and familial loyalty. Historical accounts, such as those documented by Moghadam, (2023), further reveal women's participation in early Islamic military campaigns, adding depth to contemporary analyses. In addition, Rasoulikolamaki & Kaur, (2023) emphasizes the role of social media in amplifying female voices within extremist propaganda, particularly in ISIS-related contexts. Schmuck et al., (2023) examines the media framing of female terrorists and its influence on public perception and policy responses. Furthermore, Firester, (2023)provide an empirical review of female suicide bombers across different regions, offering comparative insights into motivations, operational roles, and recruitment strategies. These interdisciplinary contributions highlight both the complexity and the urgency of understanding female agency in extremist violence.

These studies collectively present a spectrum of female agency within extremist movements, from Mujahidaat of early Islam to modern-day suicide bombers like Sana Mekhaidali (Santos-Joswig, 2024). They also emphasize how extremist ideologies exploit women's reproductive and domestic roles to indoctrinate future generations. In Indonesia, case studies such as the 2018 Surabaya bombings have triggered academic debates about familial radicalization and the mobilization of women as both participants and enablers in terror cells (Sriwahyuni, 2023). Despite this body of literature, there remains a significant gap concerning the intersection between violent extremism and the lived realities of transnational domestic workers—an often-overlooked demographic in counterterrorism studies.

This study offers a novel lens by focusing on the unique position of transnational domestic workers as potential actors within violent extremism. Unlike previous research that centers on women within established local communities or war-torn regions, this study investigates how isolation, exploitati-

on, and religious discourse in host countries may create fertile ground for radicalization among migrant women (Rowa, 2023). By exploring this under-researched intersection, the study contributes fresh insights into the gendered dimensions of extremism in a globalized world.

The choice to investigate the involvement of female transnational domestic workers in violent extremism is rooted in the need to bridge the knowledge gap between gendered labor migration and radicalization processes (Rowa, 2023). These women often operate on the periphery of both their home and host societies, making them uniquely vulnerable to ideological manipulation and emotional coercion. Understanding their experiences is crucial to developing inclusive and culturally sensitive strategies for preventing violent extremism.

In summary, the global rise of violent extremism demands a more comprehensive approach to understanding women's roles beyond traditional narratives. While existing literature has advanced our knowledge of female involvement in extremism, it largely overlooks migrant women operating in transnational contexts. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the social and theological influences that draw transnational domestic workers into extremist ideologies and actions. By doing so, it introduces a critical perspective into current P/CVE efforts, emphasizing the importance of gender, migration, and family dynamics in designing holistic counter-extremism strategies (Simpson & Holdaway, 2023). Ultimately, empowering women within these contexts may not only curb the spread of extremist ideologies but also foster long-term societal resilience.

METHOD

This study employed a brief survey involving one hundred (n=100) former Indonesian Female Migrant Domestic Workers (FMDWs) currently residing in the Indramayu District of West Java Province (Tandos, 2022). Data were collected using a combination of closed and open-ended questions to explore their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives related to violent extremism during their time working abroad.

Of the 100 participants, 58 had worked in Middle Eastern countries (specifically Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar), while 42 had worked in Southeast Asian countries (including Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia).(Aniwan et al., 2022) Although the numbers appear to sum to 100, it is important to clarify that 4 respondents had experience working in both regions and are thus counted in both categories for comparative analysis (Asma Khan & Arokkiaraj, 2021). Their insights provide a more nuanced understanding of the similarities and differences in exposure to radical influences across regions.

While these women may not directly represent involvement in extremist acts, their testimonies offer valuable reflections on ideological exposure, recruitment patterns, and social vulnerability in the contexts where they worked (Clark-Ginsberg et al., 2024). Respondents shared experiences that include varying degrees of proximity to employers and religious communities, both online and offline. Some women reported being invited to religious gatherings or receiving online messages from preachers promoting radical ideologies. These accounts are particularly relevant given their roles as isolated workers often relying on digital platforms for social and religious engagement, which may increase susceptibility to extremist narratives (Amit & Kafy, 2022).

This study explores the lives of transnational domestic workers in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, focusing on how they communicate with one another and with their families back home. By examining the impact of these interactions, the research aims to understand how such communication may influence their exposure to violent extremism (Williams & Tzani, 2024). The study delves into how social media, face-to-face interactions, and religious teachings shape the attitudes and behaviors of migrant workers, potentially affecting their susceptibility to radical ideologies (Cuevas & Dawson, 2021). This comparison high-

lights the complex dynamics between their social connections, media consumption, and the potential risk of radicalization in an increasingly globalized world. For further clarification, see Figure 1.
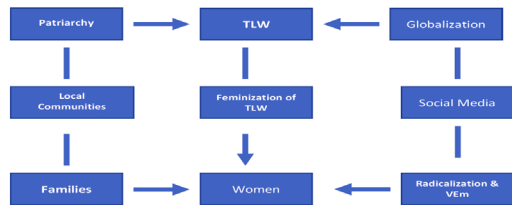

Figure 1. The Interconnectivity of Policy, Systems, and Globalization

The diagram illustrates the complex dynamics that influence women's involvement in violent extremism through the feminization pathway of Terrorism Linked to Women (TLW). Patriarchy and local communities shape social structures that assign women specific roles within the family, which can, in turn, affect their engagement in TLW. Globalization and social media accelerate the spread of extremist narratives and ideologies, facilitating the process of radicalization and violent extremism (VEm). In this context, the feminization of TLW becomes a convergence point of social pressure, family roles, and digital exposure, ultimately driving some women to engage in extremism based on identity, ideology, or the influence of their social and global environment.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study explored the experiences and perspectives of female migrant domestic workers (FMDWs) across various Southeast Asian destinations, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, the UAE, and Malaysia. These countries were chosen due to their popularity as destinations for migrant workers and their policies regarding social interaction and communication.

The Role of Technology and Social Support in the Lives of FMDWs

A significant finding was the prevalence of cell phone usage among FMDWs, with 80% of respondents using their phones to maintain contact with their families. This finding corroborates previous studies, which suggest that staying connected with family and friends positively impacts psychological well-being, especially during challenging periods in foreign environments (Pazil et al., 2023; Peleg & Peleg, 2025; Potts et al., 2023; Tandos, 2022). The ability to maintain these connections provides comfort and a sense of emotional stability, which is crucial for workers who often face isolation in non-Muslim countries. This is particularly relevant for Indonesian Muslim workers, who may experience alienation from their faith communities. The study highlights that family support can serve as an important coping mechanism, offering comfort in the face of adversity (Huang et al., 2023; Stapley et al., 2023).

Another key finding was the limited yet significant role of social media among respondents. Approximately 13% of participants used their phones to access social media platforms for news and updates. This finding aligns with literature suggesting that access to the internet and social media can serve as both a tool for empowerment and a potential avenue for radicalization (Akram & Nasar, 2023; Marwick et al., 2022). In particular, FMDWs in Hong Kong have been known to use social media for religious empowerment, helping them increase their awareness of their rights. Some participants also reported engaging in dakwah activities, particularly in social settings like Victoria Park in Hong Kong, where FMDWs gather on Sundays. These social gatherings, while fostering community and religious learning, can also serve as entry points for radical ideologies, as indicated by the involvement of more hardline religious groups.

When asked about their involvement in organizations and the effect of social media, 21 (twenty one) participants, mostly from Taiwan, acknowledged that they participated in groups where they learned about Islam, including reciting the Qur'an and attending halaqah (Islamic study sessions) and social activities. However, when asked how these organizations and social media

influenced them, only a few women (5 participants) admitted that their involvement had affected their understanding of radicalism and violent extremism. One participant stated, *"Now we have to be more cautious in using social media because we can be influenced by it… or by what the ustadz (religious teacher) teaches us, even though what he says might not always be true."* Another participant mentioned, *"I was invited to meet at the mosque and was tempted to join a radical group with the promise of a better life."*

Furthermore, the study found that workers in Taiwan and Hong Kong are allowed to use cell phones and socialize during weekends, which likely explains why these countries have become popular destinations for migrant workers, along with the UAE and Malaysia. The survey also showed that responses to statements about violent extremism, such as insulting other religions, mocking the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), desecrating sacred texts and religious symbols, and engaging in violent acts like destroying places of worship or labeling religious people as terrorists, were overwhelmingly negative. Most respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with such statements. However, when asked about their commitment to Islam, the respondents overwhelmingly agreed or strongly agreed with a statement indicating a willingness to make sacrifices for their religion, suggesting that while they reject violent extremism, they are committed to defending their faith, especially in cases of self-defense.

In conclusion, the participants did not support violent extremism unless it was in the context of self-defense for religious or personal reasons. This underscores the need for policies and programs focused on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) to consider the psychological well-being and social stability of communities, particularly women's groups. The following section will explore the challenges faced by women's organizations, families, and communities, and will discuss how several countries, including Indonesia, have successfully incorporated gender and community perspectives into their P/CVE strategies.

Developing Future Works for the Women

As previously discussed, a group of women migrant domestic workers (FMDWs) examined inequality and injustice in their life experiences, focusing on discrimination, exploitation, and violations of rights that lead to poverty, limited access to education and healthcare, and the perpetuation of patriarchal systems. These harsh conditions create fertile ground for women to be recruited into violent extremism (VE) groups and become active members.

By applying their unique perspectives to address potential security threats, women can play a crucial role in preventing and countering violent extremism (VEm) and terrorism. Women's leadership in civil society organizations is an important ally in combating violence. In particular, women-led civil society groups are key partners in efforts to reduce violence (Diprose, 2023; Nieto-Valdivieso, 2022). More organizations should incorporate gender perspectives when analyzing and developing models to empower women involved in or affected by VE and terrorism.

Many countries have enacted laws and strategies to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE), particularly those heavily impacted by terrorist organizations that harm both individuals and nations. These strategies respond to trends in VE in both Muslim-majority and minority Muslim countries.

In Indonesia, addressing radicalism and extremism became one of President Joko Widodo's priorities for his second term (2019-2024). Several ministries, including those of Politics, Law, and Security, Religious Affairs, and the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT), have been working on P/CVE efforts (Anindya, 2024). With a focus on prevention, prosecution, and de-radicalization, BNPT employs both hard and soft measures to combat radicalism and terrorism.

BNPT's P/CVE initiatives include re-

search, media campaigns, youth programs, women's participation, education, and da'wah (Islamic teachings). These programs are particularly active in provinces identified as "red zones of radicalism" (West Java, East Java, East Kalimantan, Gorontalo, and Lampung). An additional program called "P/CVE goes to campus" has been implemented as well.

The women's program is a newer approach to addressing the role of women in contemporary violent extremism. In 2019, BNPT launched the "Women as Agents of Peace" program, which involved women from social and religious organizations in training sessions across 32 provinces. This program aimed to enhance community engagement, particularly among women, to raise awareness about radicalism and terrorism. Many participants found the program beneficial and recommended its continuation. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022) led to a national budget refocus, affecting several programs, including P/CVE for women (Oando, 2022). However, after the pandemic, efforts to integrate women and family-oriented programs have continued. The Director of Prevention at BNPT mentioned that, in 2024, a variety of programs aimed at strengthening family institutions and emphasizing women's roles would be developed further.

BNPT has recently launched the SMART (Smart, Resilient, and Mentally Healthy) program, focusing on women, children, and adolescents. This program, starting in 2024, will be rolled out across all 34 provinces, with a goal of engaging 3,400 participants—50 mothers and 50 children per activity. The program's objectives are to strengthen nationalism, increase pride in Indonesia, promote awareness of the country's diversity, improve communication skills within families, and build mutual respect and trust.

To combat violent extremism and terrorism effectively, social inclusion, youth empowerment, and citizenship engagement must be prioritized (Waele, 2016). Empowering communities to counter radicalization can help them address these challenges more efficiently. Countries with strong civil societies, like Singapore, have been more successful in implementing counter-de-radicalization programs than those with weaker civil societies (S. Khan et al., 2021).

Adopting a community-driven approach in P/CVE programs, focusing on assets and strengths rather than problems and deficits, is crucial for ensuring participation and improving effectiveness. A study in Melbourne and Sydney found top-down models to be ineffective and suggested that programs should focus on grassroots solutions. A bottom-up approach requires more community engagement and support to enhance cooperation between communities, policy institutions, and other stakeholders.

In counter-terrorism research and practice, the community should be a central focus. The U.S. government recognizes the detrimental effects of violent extremism and is working to address the issue. The UK applies two approaches—community-targeted and community-focused—to involve communities as both targets of state policies and active participants in delivering outcomes (Kiss et al., 2022).

Strengthening local communities is essential for promoting peace and harmony. Programs should adopt a strengths-based perspective, focusing on the resources and skills within communities to enhance P/CVE initiatives. For instance, Belgium's "Bounce Resilience Tools" project, launched in 2015, improves community resilience by raising awareness among youth and their social environments (Carmen et al., 2022).

After the March 2019 mosque attacks in New Zealand, a strong display of unity between the government and communities helped ensure safety and solidarity, showing how different societal elements can work together to prevent radical extremism. International cooperation is also crucial, as the impact of violent extremism is far-reaching, leading to population displacement, economic decline, social breakdown, and fatalities. The Global Terrorism Index (2021) reported nearly 15,000 deaths from terrorism in 2020.(Wojciechowski, 2022)

Collaboration between governments,

law enforcement, and civil society organizations is necessary for better intelligence sharing and the successful implementation of counterterrorism strategies. Events such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum in 2021 aim to promote international cooperation and improve counterterrorism efforts. The lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic have also shown the value of virtual seminars, conferences, and talks to connect people, enhance P/CVE, and build global partnerships.

Finally, this study emphasizes that prevention and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts are more effective when led by influential actors, particularly women and girls. These initiatives focus on community engagement to reduce female involvement in terrorism while addressing the rehabilitation and reintegration of female foreign terrorist fighters. By empowering women to challenge radicalization in their families and communities, these efforts are key to fostering safer environments.

In conclusion, increasing community participation is crucial for the success of P/CVE programs. Community-based interventions ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of such initiatives, fostering trust, peace, and tolerance. Empowering women to play an active role in these efforts further strengthens these outcomes.

However, the study found that while social media and religious gatherings provided opportunities for some FMDWs to learn more about Islam, they did not universally contribute to radicalization. Only a small number of participants (5 out of 21) admitted that their involvement in such groups had influenced their understanding of radicalism and violent extremism. One participant expressed caution about the influence of religious leaders and social media, acknowledging the potential for misinterpretation or manipulation of religious teachings. Another shared their experience of being invited to join a radical group, illustrating the vulnerability of FMDWs to such influences. This finding reflects the complex relationship between social media, religious identity, and extremism, unders-

coring the need for critical engagement with both online and offline religious communities.

When it came to views on violent extremism, the study found that the majority of respondents rejected extremist behaviors, such as insulting other religions, mocking religious figures, desecrating sacred texts, or engaging in violent acts. This aligns with findings from previous research that suggests FMDWs, despite their vulnerable positions, do not generally support violent extremism (Anam et al., 2022). However, when asked about their commitment to Islam, most participants expressed a strong willingness to make sacrifices for their faith, particularly in self-defense situations. This finding echoes the literature that emphasizes the importance of self-defense as a contextual justification for violence in some ideological circles (Funk, 2021). While the participants did not condone violent extremism, they emphasized the importance of defending their faith, illustrating the nuanced positions that many hold regarding violence.

In response to the research questions, the study confirms that while FMDWs face significant challenges, including isolation, discrimination, and exploitation, they do not universally adopt extremist ideologies. Instead, they seek emotional support through family connections and community-based religious activities. The study also affirms the role of social media as both a positive and negative influence, depending on the context in which it is used. The findings suggest that interventions aimed at preventing violent extremism should address the psychological needs of migrant workers while considering the potential risks associated with online platforms.

Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of integrating gender perspectives into P/CVE strategies. Women's organizations have a pivotal role to play in countering violent extremism and promoting peace. By empowering women, particularly those involved in or affected by violent extremism, societies can mitigate the factors that contribute to radicalization (Haugstvedt, 2022; Zych & Nasaescu, 2022). This can be

achieved through leadership training, community engagement, and the establishment of support networks that help women resist radical ideologies and participate in peacebuilding efforts.

Several countries, including Indonesia, have recognized the importance of gender in their P/CVE strategies. In Indonesia, for example, the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) has launched programs focused on women's participation in countering violent extremism. The "Women as Agents of Peace" program, launched in 2019, aims to engage women in raising awareness about radicalism and terrorism, particularly through training sessions in 32 provinces. While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted some of these initiatives, efforts to integrate women and family-oriented programs continue. The newly launched SMART program, which focuses on women, children, and adolescents, reflects a growing recognition of the role that women can play in preventing radicalization (Prajanti et al., (2024).

Furthermore, this study underscores the importance of community-driven approaches in P/CVE programs. Evidence suggests that top-down interventions are less effective than those that engage communities at the grassroots level. A community-driven approach, focusing on local assets and strengths, is essential for ensuring participation and increasing the effectiveness of P/CVE initiatives (Yusuf, 2024). Programs that prioritize youth empowerment, social inclusion, and citizenship engagement are particularly important in combating violent extremism and promoting peace (Ayaz Khan et al., 2023).

In conclusion, while FMDWs may be vulnerable to radical influences, the majority reject violent extremism. Social media and religious gatherings offer opportunities for empowerment but also pose risks. The study suggests that P/CVE programs must consider the psychological and social well-being of migrant workers, integrate gender perspectives, and engage communities at the grassroots level. Empowering women to take an active role in these efforts is essential for fostering safer, more resilient communities.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights several important and interesting findings regarding the potential vulnerability of former Indonesian Female Migrant Domestic Workers (FMDWs) to violent extremism. One key insight is that although the majority of respondents firmly reject extremist ideologies and violent acts, a small number demonstrated susceptibility due to exposure to radical narratives through religious gatherings or social media platforms. Another noteworthy finding is the shift in extremist recruitment patterns—from women being passive supporters or replacements for detained male family members to becoming active participants, even as suicide bombers. This shift signals the evolving role of women in violent extremism, which now mirrors that of their male counterparts.

The strength of this research lies in its exploration of a relatively under-researched and marginalized population—female migrant workers—within the context of violent extremism. By gathering primary data from 100 former FMDWs, the study provides empirical insights into how isolation, digital exposure, and religious discourse can influence women's perspectives on extremism. The research also adds value by incorporating a gender-sensitive lens into the discourse on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), emphasizing the role of women as agents of peace within their communities.

However, the study has certain limitations. The use of a single geographical location (Indramayu, West Java) may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of Indonesian migrant workers. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, particularly in relation to sensitive topics such as religious ideology and radicalization. Future research would benefit from including a more diverse sample across multiple regions, incorporating longitudinal tracking, and integrating

interviews with other stakeholders such as family members, community leaders, or former recruiters.

Overall, this study underscores the critical importance of community-based interventions and women's empowerment as central strategies in reducing the risk of violent extremism and fostering sustainable peace.

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