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Isis and the lure of online violence for jihadi brides

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The message for women is domesticity not to fight

The schoolgirls were last seen on security cameras at Gatwick airport, where they boarded a Turkish Airlines flight

What's a teenage girl's idea of a fairy tale? A love story with a Justin Bieber lookalike? That's not for everyone. In the case of three east London schoolgirls, it's more like marriage to an AK47-wielding madman in a war zone who will shroud them in black from head to toe and lock them up at home to clean and cook.

The schoolgirls' journey to become jihadi brides has captivated Britain in the past few days, torn their families apart and drawn a warning from Prime Minister David Cameron about minds being poisoned by an "appalling death cult".

It seems unimaginable to many of us. But the teens — two aged 15, one a year older — are not alone. They're part of an estimated 200-300 European Muslim girls who have made the same journey to the self-styled caliphate run by the world's most monstrous organisation: the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis).

Often, they're lured through social media postings by those who went before them, and depict a utopian existence with a sense of purpose that appeals to young, confused minds.

Those who study this disturbing twist in European radicalisation notice a common feature: the girls who go tend to come from slightly better off families than their male equivalents and are doing well at school. Maybe that's what's most painful: they're not dumb — nor are they psychopaths.

What are we to make of this? Katherine Brown of King's College London says it "challenges the idea that it's all emotional — the girls have awareness of politics and religion, and they're asking questions". But how can the black-and-white — or rather all-black — world of Isis offer a solution to anyone?

The answer partly lies in terrifyingly effective online Isis propaganda. As Ms Brown says, some of the girls who leave for Syria meet the militants on social media that reflect their existing beliefs. And, possibly because of personal experience of seeing Islam under attack at home, they are receptive to the idea that violence is necessary to enable the creation of a caliphate in which they play heroines.

Isis convinces them, she says, that it is noble for them to suffer amid bombs and destruction, and it is glorious to celebrate violence. Indeed, the tweets of some of the hundreds of girls in Syria show a callous reaction to summary executions. One, quoted by the UK-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) think-tank, reads: "So many beheadings at the same time, Allahu Akbar [God is the greatest], this video is beautiful.

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Isis appears recently to have turned its attention to women closer to home. An all-women police brigade posted a recruitment document on a jihadi website aimed at Saudi women. The manifesto, translated by the Quilliam Foundation, the UK counter-terrorism think-tank, accuses the ruling family in Saudi Arabia of deviating from the true path of Islam. It horrifies Isis, for example, that Saudi officials don't seem religiously committed to the ban on driving, even if they impose it.

But what also distinguishes Isis from other extremist groups is that it has carved a space, across Syria and Iraq, where it claims to be building its alternative dream world. The idea of a caliphate has allowed Isis to prey on young Muslims in the west who are searching for an identity.

An analysis of jihadi brides' social media postings by the ISD says the women express grievances at the treatment of Muslims across the world and see the caliphate as an Islamic society built on strict interpretation of sharia law as the solution. They "believe it is their mandatory religious duty to migrate . . . [and] that this migration will bring them closer to God and secure their place in heaven, while giving them a sense of belonging and sisterhood on earth".

The phenomenon of jihadi brides is exacerbating European anxiety about radicalisation and the role of social media, and alienation in Muslim communities. For counter-terrorism officials, though, the threat is not as great as with male migrants. That's because Isis is not interested in training girls as fighters. Some are recruited into the police, a few may take up arms. But while the militants twist minds and promote adventure, the message to women is clear: their place is at home not on the battlefield.