Socio-ecological portrait of two young women from Montreal who joined ISIS

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Biography

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Abstract

This study focuses on the educational and social contexts of two females who left Montreal (Quebec), Canada to join ISIS in Syria. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory as the conceptual framework, narrative methodology allowed the collection of rich data on the trajectories of these radicalised minors. The broad aim of the study was to identify the push and pull factors that contributed to their abrupt departure. Although a few of the many reasons that pushed them were identified, it was not possible to uncover the pull factors/mechanisms that led to their mobilisation.

Keywords: Education; Montreal; Radicalisation; Trajectories; Women

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Introduction

In February 2016, 10–12 young women from a variety of religious and secular families, who lived and were educated in Canada, left for Syria. Of these, at least five conceived children in ISIS territory (Cain, 2016), and contributed to raising 'a generation of Western ISIS babies' (*CBC News*, 2016). Among them, seven were from Quebec (Conseil du statut de la femme, 2016a). Against this background, this study explores the socio-ecological portrait of two radicalised girls (both were 17 years old when they left their homes) from among this group of women who had either succeeded in leaving Greater Montreal to join ISIS or had attempted to do so. The broad aim of the study is to identify some of the factors that led these women to leave their families and homes in Western countries and travel to join the Islamic State in Syria. While women in the West have been striving for freedom and equality, it seems paradoxical that some would voluntarily join a conservative jihadist group and start a radically new life (Musial, 2017).

While we did not uncover the mechanisms that led to their mobilisation, we were able to identify a few of the many factors that pushed them to leave Quebec for ISIS territory. Our findings are not presented as being the main reasons behind their choice. Rather, they elaborate on some mechanisms that might have led to their decision to leave in secret for ISIS territory. The two cases are different although there are many commonalities. While it is not possible to make generalisations regarding their background, it is hoped that by examining the social ecology and personal histories of women who join jihadist groups, a general pattern of female radicalisation will eventually be revealed (Huey and Witmer, 2016; Bakker and de Leede, 2015). In order to ground the discussion in this article, we begin by clarifying our concept of radicalisation and our use of the social-ecological framework, which is relatively novel in studies on violent extremism.

The phenomenon of radicalisation

The process of radicalisation is complex, non-uniform and non-linear (Horgan, 2008; Silke, 2011; Ghosh et al., 2017), with no universal definition of the concept (Heath-Kelly, 2013;

Neumann, 2013; Tiflati, 2017). This paper, which is based on events unfolding in the province of Quebec, has adopted the concept of radicalisation as defined by the Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence (2016) based in Montreal:

> [radicalisation is] a process whereby people adopt extremist belief systems – including the willingness to use, encourage or facilitate violence – with the aim of promoting an ideology, political project or cause as a means of social transformation.

An important problem with the burgeoning literature on radicalisation is the dearth of empirical studies examining the relationship between the early development of the process and social institutions, such as education. Relevant literature on radicalisation has so far dwelled on some theoretical discussions that accompany examples in some Western contexts and case studies on radicalisation and recruitment in Muslim-majority countries and regions (Bloom, 2017; Bloom, Tiflati and Horgan, 2019; Botha, 2014; Combs, 2017; Jensen et al., 2018; Moir, 2017). Some research has also focused on online radicalisation and terrorist recruitment in the era of social media (e.g. Baugut and Neumann, 2019; Koehler, 2014). Further, there is a growing body of literature that examines the positive and/or negative roles of various forms of education in countering violent extremism (CVE), evaluates and critiques the effectiveness of concrete educational strategies or approaches to CVE in particular countries, and looks at the specific role of religious education in relation to violent extremism (Awan, Spiller and Whiting, 2019; Davies, 2008, 2016; Gearon, 2013; Ghosh, 2018; Ghosh et al., 2017, 2016; Miller, 2013).

This study focuses on "radicalisation" as a process towards extremism (i.e. how individuals turn from law-abiding human beings into terrorists) (Ghosh et al., 2017; Moghaddam, 2005). The process of radicalisation involves individuals severing ties with those in their immediate environment (family, friends, colleagues etc.), and progressing along a radical path that may eventually lead to violence (Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence, 2016). It is a distinct journey for each individual that changes their value system over time (Neumann, 2013). 'Radicalization sets off a process of change in the individual's psycho-cognitive construction of new identities that is part of the changes in behaviour associated with this stage' (Ghosh et al., 2017, pp. 6–7). Since these changes happen during the formative years of a person, the process is associated with education and the social ecology in which they are socialised. Several studies describe the push (and pull) factors (see Appendix 1, Ghosh et al., 2016) that steer individuals towards the radicalisation path. These involve socio-ecological features that may be shaped early on at school, such as socio-political alienation, reawakening of religious identity, and anger or frustration over perceived discrimination (Shapiro and Maras, 2019).

Our study of two young women from Montreal, Canada, both of whom left their homes suddenly and without notice, explores the hypothesis that they may have faced socio-

ecological challenges in their interactions at school, as well as within their family and wider social environments, which may have triggered their decision to take such a drastic step. ISIS has profited from access to a global platform through the Internet and social media, and both sexes have found appeal in its propaganda (Saltman and Winter, 2014). Women's involvement in the group has grown rapidly although they largely have gendered domestic roles to play as wives, and mothers of the next generation (Shapiro and Maras, 2019). Like men, women may become radicalised through diverse routes, but extremist narratives have been targeting them more often than their male counterparts, only increasing their chances of radicalisation (Carter, 2013; Edwards, 2016; Pearson and Winterbotham, 2017). Our assumption is that both men and women who left Quebec for the Islamic State during its existence were gradually radicalised over a period of time. The data in this empirical study were obtained through discussions regarding the interactions of the two girls at school, and with their family and wider social networks. Research on female recruitment to ISIS has so far provided only preliminary information on the driving forces behind it (Bakker and de Leede, 2015); however, several studies focus on the ease of access to propaganda material through social media and online platforms as the key radicalisation element for female recruitment (Pearson and Winterbotham, 2017).
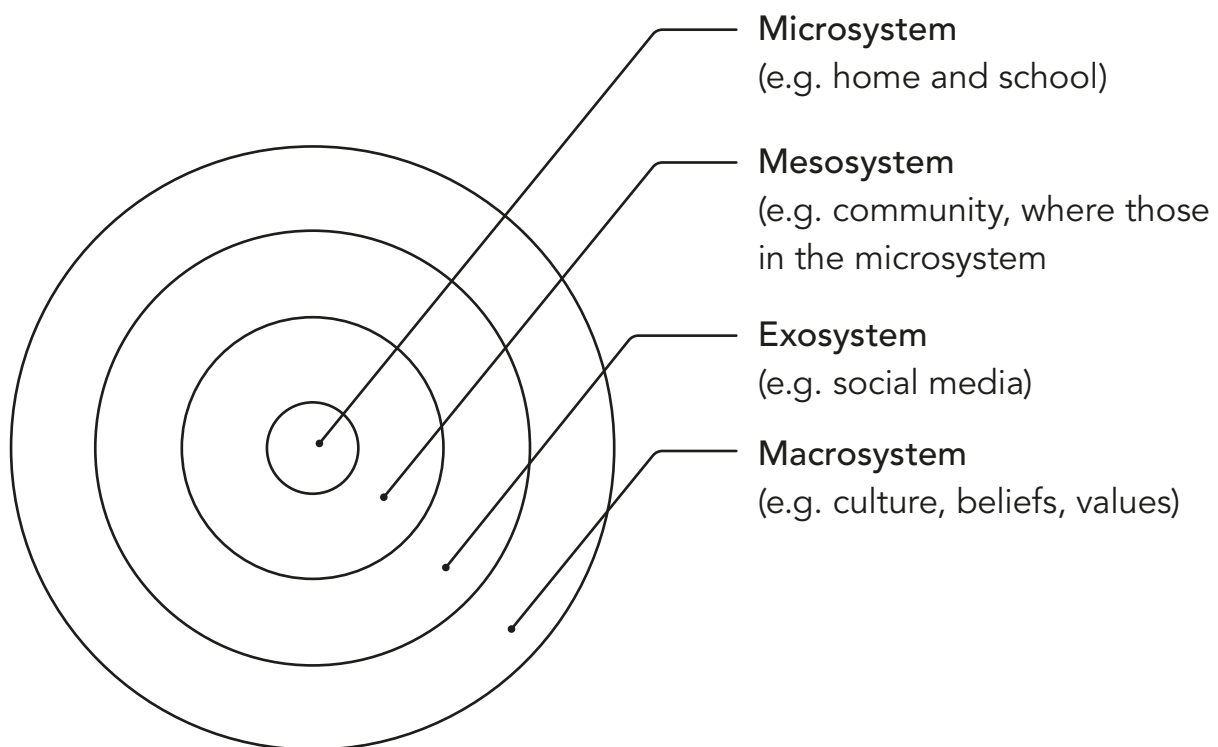
Our discussions were not with the women who had already left for Syria but with people who knew them well. Yet, parts of their lives were unknown even to their own families and there is no indication of their involvement with social media or online propaganda. As such, the focus of this study was on revealing the socio-ecological portrait of these two allegedly radicalised girls from Montreal. In doing so, this work contributes to the research on women in terrorism (Bloom, 2007, 2011; Bloom, Tiflati and Horgan, 2019; Brown, 2011, 2014; Davis, 2006, 2013; Gentry, 2015; Gentry and Sjoberg, 2015; Sjoberg, 2013, 2014) and to the *Women and violent radicalization* report, co-authored by the Conseil du statut de la femme and the Centre de prévention de la radicalisation menant à la violence (2016) in Quebec. While the report focuses on gender and agency among radicalised women from Quebec, this study investigates socio-ecological factors and their influence on radicalised women in Montreal, as seen by their peers, family and community members. In order to understand this multi-factorial experience, our analysis was framed by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

Theoretical framework: socio-ecological portraits

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory postulates that human development is influenced by biological, psychological, social and institutional factors that make up one's socio-ecological portrait. The social-ecological framework positions individuals at the centre of scaffolding systems, as illustrated in Figure 1. Firstly, individuals experience the *microsystem* that contains one's immediate settings (school or home). This exists within a *mesosystem,* where aspects of the microsystem interact, such as one's community. The mesosystem is encompassed by the *exosystem,* an extended aspect of one's context, which maintains influence over one's immediate community, such as the media. The interrelationship

among these three systems exists within a *macrosystem* that contains the ideology, structure and culture dictating the beliefs and attitudes of the systems. The interrelationship across each system takes place within the *chronosystem*, measuring the impact of time on one's social ecology. Assuming that events in the micro-level are the most influential to an individual, our study raised questions about the factors that may have led our two subjects towards radicalisation, namely the school and home relationships in the micro- and mesosystem (in questions No. 1 and No. 2). We did not probe beyond these levels in this study because our focus was on daily interactions and experiences at school, within the family and in the community at large.

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Social-Ecological Framework (1979).

Microsystem
(e.g. home and school)

Mesosystem
(e.g. community, where those in the microsystem

Exosystem
(e.g. social media)

Macrosystem
(e.g. culture, beliefs, values)

Following Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological framework, formal education (the type of education offered in traditional educational settings, such as schools and universities), non-formal education (the type of education offered in organised programmes outside the formal system, such as workshops and conferences, both offline and online) and informal education (knowledge absorbed implicitly, such as at home, or through religious and other community organisations) are part of the micro- and mesosystems. In each system, education is an important component of an individual's development and, thus, merits attention in a discussion of the social, cultural, political and economic factors that can steer one towards violent radicalisation. Unlike other theories (e.g. Gurr's 1970 relative deprivation theory and Diani's 1992 social movement theory), Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological framework cohesively showcases the multi-factorial influence of all these factors in one's life. It thereby emphasises the importance of context, and that radicalised individuals do not fit a single profile or trajectory towards radicalisation since this relates to a variety of factors identified

in the literature as triggers towards radicalisation (Ghosh et al., 2016). As Ghosh et al. (2017) have shown, several "push" factors can be sidelined through good educational strategies to prevent marginalisation in the classroom.

The Quebec context

The two women who were the subjects of our study were children of French-speaking immigrants, and were born and raised in Montreal. The province of Quebec holds a special place in Canada. As a French-speaking province with a unique history and culture, it is beneficial to describe briefly the historical and social context in which immigrants of different religious backgrounds find themselves and how they integrate into the social fabric of a largely Catholic state, which is now strictly secular. Quebec's history and social policies affect all people, especially those who do not belong to the largely French-speaking population, mainly in two ways: 1) adequate knowledge of French (Bill 101, 1977, and others, which stipulate that French is the language of work and education); and 2) secularism policies (discussed below) particularly for people of other religious groups. The Quiet Revolution of the 1960s saw the province of Quebec move rapidly from social and religious conservatism and isolation to rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. Sparsely populated other than the descendants of the original migrants from France, who had colonised the area called "lower Canada", the few immigrants who came to Quebec were largely Catholic (Irish, Italians and Greeks). The move to curb the authoritarianism of the Catholic Church and the introduction of social policies to impose secularism led to a sharp drop in birth rate, which along with increasing globalisation resulted in the need to encourage higher levels of immigration and increase the share of Canada's intake of refugees from various countries. Ironically, the need to curb the domination of the English language coincided with the need for immigration at a time of fervent Francisation in order to save the French language and culture. Several pieces of legislation, such as the Charter of the French language, Bill 101 (1977, making French the official language of the province), and other bills promoting Quebec's secularism have been used by successive provincial governments to affirm Francisation.

For the two subjects in our study, French was not a problem. Their parents spoke French and they grew up in the Francophone sector of Montreal. The problem, rather, was the imposition of secularisation policies that many Muslims felt were particularly restrictive. Negotiating the relationship between religion and the state has been increasingly affirmed by separating the secular public state from the religious private sphere. As the two radicalised women in our study were from the Muslim community, the secularisation policies were of great significance to them as Muslims in Quebec. From this perspective, it is evident that the following policies had an impact on the Muslim community.

The Charter of Quebec Values was introduced in 2013 with the intention of prohibiting public sector employees (including educators) from displaying conspicuous religious symbols, and

would have required amendments to the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Bill died after the defeat of the minority provincial government that introduced it. Between 2013 and 2014, however, religious-based hate crimes against Muslims in Quebec rose by 175%, and by 400% towards religions that were not identified (Ministère de la sécurité publique, 2016). In 2015, 47% of hate crimes across the province (130 of 272 incidents) were based on religion (Duval, 2018; Ministère de la sécurité publique, 2017). Most hate crimes targeted minority religious groups, particularly Muslims and Jews (Statistics Canada, 2017). In 2017, the government adopted Bill 62 making Quebec the first province in North America with a law denying public services to women wearing a niqab or burka. In the same year, Quebec reported a 50% increase in hate crimes from the year before, and the incidents targeting Muslims almost tripled from 41 in 2016 to 117 in 2017, accounting for 26% of all incidents in 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2017). Statistics Canada (2017) also indicated a 151% increase in hate crimes from the previous year, across the country. The situation in Quebec has been particularly grave. The January 2017 terrorist shooting of six Muslim men in Sainte-Foy, and the increasing anti-immigrant and Islamophobic displays (Page, 2018; Tasker, 2017) are indicative of the continuing unreported micro-aggressions towards minorities, especially Muslims, in Quebec (Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse, Quebec, 2019).

Most recently, Bill 21 (Act respecting the laicity of the State) was passed in June 2019 banning the display of all religious symbols in public (as Bill 60 had proposed). A huge public outcry against this secularism bill focused on the perceived threats to educational and health institutions in particular.

Overall, and in relation to the push and pull factors of radicalisation, our participants identified threats to their individual and collective identity enshrined in the government's proposed Charter of Values of 2013. Marginalisation from mainstream society can be inferred from the increase in Montreal hate crimes against Muslims in the years following the proposal (mentioned above), as well as the inability of individuals to find rental properties or jobs as a result of Islamophobia and xenophobia (Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse, Quebec, 2019). In Quebec, such push factors are evident in marginalised individuals who share that: 'I am proud to be a Quebecer and wouldn't want to be anywhere else. I love the people here, but the media denigrates us' (Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse, Quebec, 2019, p. 21). Furthermore, experts on bullying (Espelage and Swearer, 2010) and other forms of aggression and violence (Boxer et al., 2013) refer to the social-ecological framework. Kneip (2016) found that freedom from parental control and oppression from Western culture are important reasons for adolescents joining ISIS. The belief that they would gain honour and respect from like-minded individuals was also highlighted by one of our participants. Through the social-ecological framework and by reviewing the socio-ecological portraits of the two young women, we aim to understand the relationship between the radicalisation of an individual, and marginalisation at school

and in society.

Education is a very important part of the social ecology of a place. In Canada, education is governed entirely by each province and Quebec is different in two respects: first, while education is confessional (Protestant or Catholic) in most provinces, Quebec has departed from that framework to establish a linguistic system of school education with a majority French and a minority English school system. Second, although Canada is officially bilingual at the federal level and English is the language of all the other provinces (except New Brunswick which is officially bilingual), Quebec is the only province which is monolingually French. Our participants were from the Francophone sector and no attempt was made to compare it with the smaller Anglophone sector, primarily because there are no known cases of radicalisation among Anglophone youth in Montreal.

Objectives and research questions

This inquiry used two case studies in order to examine the circumstances in formal, informal and non-formal (categorisation explained above) education that may have made these girls susceptible to ISIS propaganda. While we could not find direct evidence that these girls had indeed been radicalised either offline or online, the fact that they fled Montreal to go to ISIS territory renders them *de facto* ISIS members, and by extent radicalised. The issues we explored revolved around the need to understand the socio-ecological circumstances that may have steered these Montreal women towards radicalisation, especially at home and in school, which are the most influential locales of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This led to several sub-questions, two of which are discussed in this article. Each question was formulated in relation to specific literature.

1. What were the women's educational experiences? (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2016; Taylor and Horgan, 2006)
2. What were the women's relationships with their peer group / family members? (della Porta, 2018; Peteet, 1997)

Methodology

We employed narrative methodology to obtain rich data on the trajectories of the radicalised women. The primary method for collecting data was focus group interviews with families, friends and community leaders, who had worked closely with those women. Given the extremely sensitive and dangerous nature of the topic, we had great difficulty recruiting the participants. Recruitment was conducted through personal connections and snowball sampling. We had the exceptional opportunity to involve a researcher who already had connections with the targeted participants through other studies he had conducted. As such, it was possible to interview parents, peer groups, friends and Muslim community leaders familiar with the two radicalised women who were the subjects of our case studies.

A total of three focus groups with leaders, friends and family were conducted. For the first group, we recruited community leaders who worked closely with the families and friends of the radicalised women. For the second and third groups, we recruited family members and close friends of the two women respectively.

Participants
The details of the participants we interviewed are given in Appendix 2. The three focus groups consisted of a total of four (4) males and four (4) females. Although the small sample size may limit the representativeness and generalisation of the results, our findings are consistent with those related to our field of study (Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017). Each focus group discussion lasted from one to three hours (August 2016 – August 2017). Interviews took place in community centres and participants' homes. Community leaders were asked open-ended questions about their views on radicalisation, their perceptions of the lives of Muslim youths in Quebec, and their experiences coaching Muslim adolescents and their families. Interviews with friends and families focused on schooling, identity, integration and their thoughts on possible motives for, and root causes of violent radicalisation. The research study employed Jackson's (2011) interpretive approach – a narrative methodology that privileges participants' worldviews in explaining and interpreting their points of view. Jackson's approach is a pedagogy proposed for diverse student groups and promotes an analysis of representation, interpretation and self-reflection on the beliefs of students and teachers (Jackson, 2015). This approach enabled us to develop a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives on the lived experiences of Muslim youth in Montreal.

For the analysis of our data, we depended heavily on NVivo (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013) in order to organise, analyse and create insights and meaning from unstructured and qualitative data, such as interviews, surveys, social media, web content etc., as well as to identify, organise and understand themes that emerged from our data. Data was analysed first for each focus group individually, and then common themes and categories were revealed (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013).

Findings and analysis: the educational trajectories of radicalised females
The participants in the focus group discussions offered reflections and thoughts on two specific women who escaped to Syria, referenced as Subject #1 and Subject #2.

Profiles of the two women

Subject #1:
She was born in 1997 in the Greater Montreal Region, in Quebec, Canada. Her parents are from Morocco and she has a brother who is four years younger. Although she lived in Montreal until she left for Syria, her parents moved back to Morocco when she was 11. This was only for a year and when she returned with her mother to Montreal, her parents divorced.

She was in grade six at the time. Her father remarried later, but her mother did not.

Subject #1 left Quebec in November 2014 when she was 17 and has not been able to return to Montreal since. She left on a flight to Turkey en route to Syria with a friend. Three months later, she was married to a German national in Raqqah, Syria. She contacted her mother about twice a month and told her that she stayed at home as a housewife and never left the house unless it was necessary, such as to see a doctor. Her husband was a civil worker with ISIS, delivering food in Mosul. We do not know whether he fought with the group. She spent three years in ISIS territory and gave birth to two girls, the first in Mosul, Iraq, and the second in Syria (while in Kurdish custody).

In October 2017, her husband hired a group of Syrian smugglers to take her and her daughter out of ISIS territory. He planned to join them once they were in a safe place. While fleeing with her daughter, Subject #1 was captured by the Kurds and taken to the Roj camp in Kurdish territory, where she remains as of June 2020. Her husband was captured by the Kurds a few months later and he is currently in a Kurdish prison.

Although the mother of Subject #1 knew that there was discrimination towards girls who wore the headscarf in schools and that her daughter's behaviour had changed, she did not suspect that her daughter would leave to join ISIS.

Subject #2
She too was born in the Greater Montreal Area in 1997. Her parents are from Algeria. She has a younger brother and sister. She left Montreal in January 2015 when she was 17 with several radicalised young people, known as the "Maisonneuve Group" because they all studied at the same CEGEP (Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel), called Collège Maisonneuve. Her boyfriend was with her and they married once they arrived in Syria. She gave birth to a boy in 2016. The same year her husband died in Raqah. There were rumours that he was killed in the front lines but we do not have any direct information that he was an ISIS combatant.

Her parents were strict with her, and once she left without anyone knowing, she did not get in touch with her parents very much, at times for over six months. We know that she lived in many cities in Syria (Raqah, Deir Ezzor, Mayadin) and in Iraq (Mosul, Qa'im) and remained with ISIS until the fall of its last village, al-Baghuz in February 2019. Her parents do not know whether she held any formal positions with ISIS or what she did during her time with the group. She is still on the run and lives with a Syrian family in one of the suburbs of Syrian Kurdistan.

We do, however, get a good idea of her thought processes from an email she wrote to her friends almost five months after she arrived in Raqah. The translation of the letter (written

over a period of one week) has been published by Amarasingam and Dawson (2018, p. 19). In the email, she declares her primary reason for leaving Montreal, her family and friends: 'I left to be closer to Allah'. She said, 'I assume you already know that my explanations will revolve around Islam and Allah'. She left because she wanted to be free to believe and wear what she desired (here she is clearly referring to Bill 60, the Quebec Charter of Values, which proposed a ban on religious symbols in public): 'I felt humiliated and demeaned'. She mentions the 'suffering of Muslims (Palestine, Burma, etc.) […] and what Westerners say didn't make any sense […] I could have become a doctor or a nurse, but I saw no usefulness there… [whereas here] I have found a real purpose.' She mentions the solidarity among people who are coming from every country and the unique love for Allah: 'I am telling you in case you are also interested in this love.' She added that she had always been interested in jihad and *hijrah* (immigration to a Muslim country) and that lately her research had been more intense. 'I lived a double life, on the one side I was looking/digging and on the other I was living a normal life, nobody knew except for a friend.'

Subject #2 has featured in many newspaper articles. *Maclean's* (Petrou, 2015) pointed to her Facebook posts on the province's secular charter (Bill 60) to ban religious symbols and dress in the public sector. The *Toronto Star* (Woods, 2018) mentioned that there was no indication that anything was amiss with her except for a posting on 15 January 2015 in which she was trying to sell a silky white graduation dress for $300. *CTV News* (Dunham, 2018) cites a report which said that the Quebec Charter of Values was a contributing factor (but not the only one) that made young Muslims question their place in society causing a certain amount of alienation. It mentions Subject #2 whose feelings of being marginalised and unwelcome had been solidified by the Charter of Values.

The key findings from these conversations are elaborated upon in the following three sub-sections.

Negative educational experiences among Muslim youth in Greater Montreal
The first question of our study, "What were the women's educational experiences?", focused on formal education (in institutional school settings) and non-formal education (offered in organised programmes and settings outside school). While all participants discussed these aspects of education, the formal educational content or curriculum were not criticised by any. Instead, they placed emphasis on the hidden curriculum of formal educational spaces and informal education in society at large.

The hidden curriculum refers to the socialisation process at school – a curriculum that is taught without being formally ascribed. It emanates from the social, political and cultural landscapes and must be understood in relation to the overall social power structures of ethnicity, class and gender that influence the education system (Ghosh, 2010).

We focused on the hidden curriculum in the formal education system and societal discourse, namely the implicit, non-structured messages that young people receive through the classroom environment in their educational institutions, or from social institutions in their lived environment that have a great impact on their behaviour and way of thinking. This hidden curriculum, in the form of implicit messages, posed a stronger concern for young adults than formal and non-formal education. This interpretation is supported by the comments of the participants in the three focus groups.

Exclusionary formal education. In discussing formal educational systems, three main concerns arose from the focus groups, namely negative attitudes from teachers, school administration, and the discriminatory norms that exist in some CEGEPs in Greater Montreal. These experiences were shared by parents and young adults reflecting on their own lives as students.

Participant B, from Focus Group III and a friend of Subject #2, noted that she tutored at her school and volunteered in Montreal food drives and environmental initiatives as far away as 20 kilometres by public transport. According to Participant B, '…everyone knew that Subject #2 was kind and studied the Quran and hadith at the mosque.' He really could not understand her rationale for leaving Quebec and related his concerns with the tensions and instances of discrimination present in Greater Montreal and Quebec.

> *I think she had negative experiences at school. But she never told me about them. I didn't spend a lot of time with her lately. Maybe she also experienced stuff in her community, people not from the same religion. Maybe in her school, it was a white majority school and not a multicultural school. I don't know.*

Other participants also shared that secondary teachers often reinforced divisiveness and misconceptions about the Muslim population at large.

Participant B related the problems of Subject #2 with the struggles he perceived Muslims faced on a daily basis in Quebec:

> *I feel that there is always a fear to practise our religion. We do not feel, for example in a park if I want to pray, I'm scared to pray in public. People will judge you and take pictures of you and put them on the Internet. I fear that people will judge me as an extremist because I am Muslim. I feel that's the difference…*

Researcher: Do you think that the Charter of Values affected those who left?

Participant B: When you see that you have to defend who you are all the time, and you want people to accept you and your religion, that is not normal. People are always questioning who you are. When you start this reflection about the Charter, it breaks something in you. Muslims were asking themselves why they (Quebecers) do not like us.

While Subjects #1 and #2 did not explicitly consider an us-versus-them dichotomy, and the focus group participants may not have done so either, the description of Quebecers and the animosity sensed or perceived by Participant B and other participants show that they experience an otherisation regardless of whether they express it. It is unclear whether this otherisation is a result of political issues, such as the banning of religious symbols proposed in 2013 and passed as a Bill in 2017, or a catalyst for political movements, but the marginalisation of participants due to their Muslim identity is clear both in the comments of Participant B and in the prior discussion on educational experiences. Participant B's view that the Charter 'breaks something in you' beckons attention to the discrepancies in the *de jure* and *de facto* levels of inclusiveness in Quebec society.

As a social worker, Participant P also shared that certain socio-cultural aspects of Muslim culture pose problems for the youth due to conflicts between home and school. For example, some fathers are reluctant to accept public school teachings that go against their religion and culture, which results in tensions between home and school. This, according to Participant P, makes youth more fragile. Likewise, he noted that another source of tension is the cultural stigma of Muslims in certain communities, which leads to a life of struggle and helplessness. The problems become worse and 'this state of fragility [could] continue […] indefinitely. Meanwhile, youth would enter life with a readiness to be easily recruited' (Participant S).

The conflicts can result in lack of discussion between children and parents about the former's problems. Parents are often unaware of what their children are experiencing and tend not to be informed about the local support systems that are available in Islamic or public schools, or other parts of one's mesosystem in Greater Montreal.

Participants pointed to media sources as a means of communicating the exclusionary perspectives that exist in some circles within the non-virtual environment. The participants (who could not comment on the use of social media by the two subjects of this study) emphasised the role of TV and other media in propagating bias against Muslims. To them, negative media narratives were more important than the use of social media because they acted as push factors by marginalising Muslims.

They also highlight the need for a degree of training in the Quebec context, as some teachers in Montreal tend to alienate students in class discussions. According to Participant F:

> *When an adult (the teacher) comes to see you and tells you, oh, you are Muslim, are you Shia or Sunni? Don't you hate each other? I did not even know the difference… I was so young. I was like, oh, there must be some difference. […] Then he was like, no, you should hate each other, there are conflicts between you two.*

From this anecdote, we can see that the formal school space can be an exclusionary environment for a student, if fostered by a teacher, as part of the microsystem that influences human development the most. Another participant from the first focus group – Participant P – raised similar concerns about his daughter's teacher in Montreal, who labelled students as either being a native Quebecois (meaning of French ethnicity) or an immigrant. Although his daughter, who was born in Montreal, self-identified as a Quebecer, the teacher re-labelled her as an immigrant. In sharing this experience, Participant P suggested that such categorisation led to otherisation by a teacher and could incite radicalisation.

In elaborating this concern, Participant P shared that his daughter was given a letter from her secondary school on the eve of Ramadan asking students not to say "Allahu Akbar" because some Muslims in the world were using it as a 'death threat'. Participant P explained this incident:

> *It stated that they forbade [the saying of] "Allahu Akbar" as a form of death threat but in this letter the school administration could have wished a happy Ramadan and found a way to say it without Muslim students feeling pointed at and attacked.*

This raises concerns about the exclusionary behaviours and attitudes faced by students in formal education. For some participants, these sentiments and experiences extended to CEGEPs (colleges). Students in Focus Group II shared many frustrations they experienced in several CEGEPs. Participant K said that her experiences in two CEGEPs were exasperating as she was declined a prayer room because all rooms were already occupied, and she felt that the minority status of the Muslim population created a disadvantage for her and other Muslims, compared to other CEGEPs where Muslims were more numerous. In order to accommodate students of other traditions, Participants A and K requested a spiritual room in their respective CEGEPs instead. In Participant A's experience, there was a debate over the competing rights of all students: 'I remember that during the vote [for the meditation room], a woman stood up [at a general assembly meeting] and said […] If your spirituality is to scream, ours is to pray.' In an attempt to address this concern of competing rights pre-emptively, Participant K put in writing prior to the vote that she aimed to create a welcoming meditation and prayer space for everyone.

Here, according to Participant K, her failure to get a space that welcomed all people was because of Islamophobia. The discrimination our participants felt, however, was not based solely on religion but also on ethnicity and race. She noted that '…it isn't the students' but the administration and teachers that exclude students. These ideas about the exclusionary attitudes in secondary schools and CEGEPs raised questions among all participants. More explicitly, Participant I wondered if it was the discriminatory nature of Francophone schools and Francophone countries (such as France) that allowed schools to lead youth to extremism, positively or negatively.

Overall, it appeared that the attitudes, discussions and responses students received in the formal educational space in one's microsystem created tensions for both Subject #1 and Subject #2. The attitudes of peers, teachers and the school administration impacted participants the most.

Controversial non-formal education. In addition to formal educational spaces, participants also briefly mentioned concerns about non-formal educational spaces, which include organised classes outside the formal school system. For the younger participants, non-formal educational spaces were not of concern. To the contrary, their parents and some adults were most concerned because they were unsure about the content being taught in some of them, such as *halaqa* (Islamic study circles) and their children's ability to interpret the content. These suspicions by parents suggested a previously non-existent degree of scepticism towards the credibility of religious leaders, who were hosting the *halaqa*, and their children's level of thinking, which were a result of current events. For participants, the implicit messages in society and the hidden curriculum at school served as the sources of informal education that impacted the formal and non-formal educational systems.

Politicised informal education (hidden curriculum at school and implicit messages in society)
The key messages that participants said they received from school and society were that one needed to be white and ethnically French or Quebecois/e to "belong" in Quebec society, illustrating the impact of beliefs, values and attitudes on the macrosystem, which influences interactions in one's micro-, meso- and exo- (media) systems. This politicisation of the perceived identity of a native Quebecer girded the experiences of youth in formal and non-formal educational spaces. Two participants in particular highlighted the nuances of identity politics:

> *We must define who Quebecers are. There are a lot of different people that think differently about this. There are native-born Quebecers, and I do not like using this term, I always say it. I am Quebecer and you are too. Native Quebecer, so what? I am here Quebecer and so are you, we are both Quebecers. When we talk about Quebecers, we talk about whites and those who are here*

since forever. We need to change the narrative.

Participant K, Focus Group II

Racial and ethnic identification of a native Quebecer communicates an in-group and out-group distinction that has social and economic ramifications for individuals in the out-group. This socialised marginalisation of individuals from political and social recognition and participation in economic opportunities is directly related to the push and pull factors identified above, that have the potential to lead some individuals to violent extremism. For Participants P and S, it is the tension between teachers and students, the lack of response to Islamophobia at school, and the existence of racism that creates a school climate that can steer individuals towards radicalisation.

> *Do educational programmes radicalise youth? I don't think so. Do their programmes prevent and counter radicalisation? Like a vaccine? No, there is no proof but I don't think they are doing their job. Some might think that we must work on the religious aspect, my position is nuanced. But I don't think actual curricula radicalise.*
> Participant S

To these participants, school curricula might not directly radicalise youth in Quebec and other Western contexts, but individuals in the school and its social ecology may push young minds towards radicalisation. For Participant I, this message extends beyond the school environment into the political realm:

> *It is my contention and till now, I am still convinced that it is the politics that is primarily responsible for radicalisation and violence, the presence of the jihadi option. To not assume this responsibility, they question if schools radicalise and if this mosque radicalises. Yes, in a certain way, but they cannot do it if the jihadi option is absent.*

Overall, with respect to the particular women who left Quebec for Syria, our focus group discussions and analysis highlighted that Subject #1 excelled in her studies, both women cared for the well-being of humanity, and both had a network of close friends. They appeared to self-identify as "Muslim" in general but, according to the participants, not with a particular global group. The abovementioned email from Subject #2 to her friends, however, indicated her identification with problems Muslims face globally. The need to identify as a Muslim in retaliation of what was seen as othering in Quebec or globally, created boundaries in appearance at least (particularly with females who wore the *hijab*). Likewise, individual research participants highlighted the social and cultural struggles exhibited by peers, teachers

and administrators in their Quebec elementary, secondary and CEGEP experiences in the formal Francophone educational institutions, and informal educational spaces in society. In order to round other experiences of Subjects #1 and #2, the next section considers the social relationships of the study participants.

Strained relationships between and with parents

Our second research question, "What were the women's relationships with their peer group / family members?", focused on understanding their familial environment in order to explore the micro- and meso-systems in which Subjects #1 and #2 operated, and in what way these may have pushed them towards extremism. To begin with, although Subjects #1 and #2 appeared to have had a strong network of friends and cared for others in the wider sense, they had both experienced strained relationships with family members in their microsystem. Subject #1 had a strained relationship with her father. Her parents had divorced after their return to Canada from Morocco, during her secondary school years. To this, her mother remarked:

> *Everything was negative for her, there was no positive (which means even the one or two weeks that they spent with [the father]) […] He was too aggressive with her, especially with her (rather than the son) and she pushed back. Sometimes, well one time he said something like the divorce was her fault because she was the reason I came back to Canada. I would say that her relationship with her father had really deteriorated. I mean there was no more contact between her and her father.*

Despite the disdain her daughter felt towards her father, the mother stated that Subject #1 was affectionate and sociable. She loved children and wanted to open an orphanage after seeing images of suffering children in Afghanistan and Syria. Since Subject #1 wore the *chador*, a veil that covers more than the *hijab*, the mother knew it would be even harder for her daughter to get a job given the experiences of women who wore *hijabs* (Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse, Quebec, 2019). The mother felt that perhaps it was this form of discrimination that impacted her daughter, as she had a kind heart and did not wish to be a passive observer of injustices.

In considering her daughter's departure from Canada, the mother realised that there were tell-tale signs of her daughter's abnormal behaviour that she only recognised upon reflection. For example, Subject #1 stopped watching TV with the rest of the family, spent most of her time in her room and, in order to save money, stopped buying things, no matter how insignificant, such as coffee. Also, two weeks before leaving for Syria, at first unbeknown to the mother, Subject #1 had an anxiety attack and had to call 911 as she was shaking, crying, feeling ill. According to the mother:

The night before her departure, she said: 'Mom, tomorrow I'm going to meet my friends.' […] As she wanted to stay so badly, it was agreed that she would spend the night at her friend's. The following day, in the afternoon, I got her message saying: 'Sorry mama I've left Canada. I've immigrated (for God's sake).'

In an effort to find an explanation for these changes, the researcher asked the mother if she felt that the divorce had affected her daughter. She denied this, saying that she was against profiling individuals who were raised in single-parent families in a manner akin to orphans. Alternately, in discussing the peer and family relationships of Subject #2, a friend of hers was unsure why she may have left for Syria but felt that it may have resulted from family (who were from Algeria) conflicts. Other peers, who were all of Algerian background, met as friends. They recalled that she was from a religious family, and felt that she left to be with her boyfriend. She had indicated problems between her parents.

Maybe this affected her as well, but I don't know. It was the first thing that came to my mind when I heard about her departure. The climate at home is very important. When youth have problems at home, they want to leave far away to feel better. I think it comes from a: "I want to be free and want my life back" mentality.

Participant B, Focus Group 3

Thus, according to the participants, conflicts between parents result in lack of discussion between children and parents about the problems they experience outside home. Parents are often unaware of what their children are experiencing and tend not to be informed about the local support systems that are available in Islamic or public schools, or other parts of one's mesosystem in Greater Montreal. This situation may have been one of several factors that led those two women to join ISIS.

Key findings

Overall, the findings support our hypothesis that various socio-ecological challenges identified in their experiences and interactions at school, and with their family and social environments growing up in Montreal had triggered their radicalisation. The key findings for this study were twofold and correspond to our initial questions. To the question, "What were the women's educational experiences?", we found that in formal educational institutions, radicalising factors such as derogatory remarks in the elementary, secondary and CEGEP levels appeared most pronounced in interactions with teachers and school staff. Informal messages in education and society were discussed as a foundation for marginalisation experienced by students in the school environment. Related to our second question, "What

were the women's relationships with their peer group / family members?", Subjects #1 and #2 both experienced hardships with their family members at times, and a friend of Subject #2 felt that family tensions might have pushed her friend towards isolation. None of the participants, however, thought that a shift in their demeanour was a result of this aspect of their life. Among peers, both women seemed warm and engaging, but the participants pointed to the discrimination they experienced as Muslims in society, especially towards women who wore the *hijab* as Subject #1 did, and considered that these experiences may also have affected both.

Conclusion

Despite the disassembling of ISIS territory since late 2017, several scholars continue to be concerned about the reach and influence of ISIS extremists online and in their home countries to which some are returning. Likewise, our team is not dismissive of the enduring and far-reaching impact of disbanded ISIS followers or ISIS-inspired groups worldwide, as evident in several incidents by El Shabab in Somalia, an Islamist group in Sri Lanka and most recently by Boko Haram in Nigeria. As such, our study and its findings remain relevant to the understanding of violent radicalisation today.

As identified by Shapiro and Maras (2019), we found that the two women who were the subject of this investigation experienced alienation and discrimination for being Muslim, while reclaiming their religious identity. These factors seem to have played an equal role in pushing them to become members of ISIS. In their study, Shapiro and Maras stated that the gendered factors for women joining ISIS 'were identity (33 percent), sympathizing with perceived injustices linked to exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination (22 percent), or both (44 percent)' (p. 103). Although it is difficult to garner participants on this topic, it is apparent that we need further study on the importance of social, political, psychological, cultural and economic factors that stigmatise or exclude individuals, particularly women, from participating in society. The question remains why, although many Muslim students have similar experiences, only some are radicalised and recruited, while others are not. Hence, the role of moral disengagement (Ghosh et al., 2017; Linden and Klandermans, 2006) or a particular mix of personality traits (Zmigrod et al., 2021), two very important aspects that were not discussed in this study, require further research. For example, how is it that a student in the Quebec school system has no problem supporting violence (even when they are not themselves participating in it physically) and the killing of hundreds of innocent lives? Our strong recommendation is that since school socialises and teaches children during their developmental phases, the main factors towards radicalisation can and should be dealt with at school, not only in cognitive terms, but also by developing the affective and moral domains, which involve emotions and feelings of empathy and care.

In these particular cases the educational settings were largely experienced as negative and exclusionary in formal, non-formal and informal milieus at the elementary, secondary

and CEGEP levels. While the formal curriculum does not seem to affect students overtly, interpersonal relations among students, teachers and administrators do reflect societal attitudes, especially towards women's face coverings, as with the *hijab*. It is clear that urgent attention should be paid to teacher education because teachers and school administrators have a significant influence on identity development and classroom culture, as well as the school environment, one of the most influential aspects in one's microsystem. The role of the media is undoubtedly significant in shaping societal attitudes and also requires urgent attention.

Moreover, as Focus Group II consisted of peers of the two women, it was evident that youth perspectives differed from adult perspectives in our discussions. Thus, as most research on radicalisation and extremism today is written by adult researchers, since it is the young who are mostly radicalised, it is necessary to incorporate in the discussion on radicalisation the perspective of young adults.

Notes

[1] We employ a broad definition of radicalisation that includes both the radicalisation of ideas and the radicalisation of behaviours. We see the attempt to leave the comfort of one's home to join ISIS as radicalised behaviour.

[2] See the full report here: https://numerique.banq.qc.ca/patrimoine/details/52327/2971905

Appendix 1: Push and pull factors

	Individual Level	Societal Level
Push Factors	• Threat to individual and collective identity (Seul, 1999; Taylor, 1994) • Looking for meaning in life: depression; loss of significance; search for identity (Bhui, 2014; Euer et al., 2014; Taylor, 1994) • Personal tragedy (Saunders, 2012) • Boredom: seeking excitement in life (Bhui, 2014; Dugan, 2014) • Looking for revenge against perceived wrong: believe murder is just (Samuel, 2012) • Displacement or immigration without family members (Saunders, 2012)	• Marginalisation from mainstream society (Taylor, 1994; Euer et al., 2014) • Ideological necessity: sacred duty to take revenge against those seen as enemies (Zalman, 2015) • Politically/religiously motivated: religion used as a socio-political guide (Roy, 2004) • Globalisation with Information and Communications Technology (Ştibli, 2010)
Pull Factors	• Peer group (Tharoor, 2015) • Criminals in prison (Samuel, 2012; Saunders, 2012) • Self-radicalisation through exposure to online material (Cohen, 2012; Sivek, 2013)	• Enticing media stories and messages evoking sympathy and affiliation via social media and the Internet (Weimann, 2015) • Online and offline recruiters, and social media (Braniff, 2015) • Radicalised religious or community leaders (Duffy and Harley, 2015; Bergen, 2015)

From Ghosh et al., 2016

Appendix 2: Details of participants

Participant	Description
	Focus group I: three male community leaders
Participant S	Male; social worker
Participant I	Male; imam
Participant P	Male; researcher, coach
	Focus group II: three female friends
Participant A	Female; 19-years-old
Participant F	Female; 19-years-old
Participant K	Female; 20-years-old
	Focus group III: two family members
Mother	Mother of radicalised Female #1
Participant B	Brother (non-biological but of same community) of radicalised Female #2

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