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## **Representing Women and Terrorist Violence**

*A feminist interrogation of female agency in the  
gendered discourse of the public*

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## Introduction

The growing group of recruits joining terrorist organisation IS has been a dominant subject of debate in Western media. Addressing the threat of terrorist attacks they have generally focussed on the phenomenon of 'male foreign fighters'. However, as stated by Erin Marie Saltman and Ross Frennet in "Female Radicalization to ISIS and the Role of Women in CVE" (2016), the number of women travelling to join IS has been increasing since 2014 - when IS declared a Muslim Caliphate. Contrastingly, the number of new male recruits has stagnated in 2015 (144). Still, the contributions of women to IS and other terrorist organizations are largely obscured in media reports. Laura Sjoberg argues in "Feminist Interrogations of Terrorism/Terrorism Studies" (2009) that gender is placed at the forefront of the representations of female terrorists. Women's motivations for engaging in terrorism are misrepresented and they are predominantly portrayed as victims of male terrorists (69-70). This also resonates in academic work. While scholars have addressed women's engagement in terrorism, they often fail to do justice to women's individual and political motivations. This research will therefore focus on how stereotypes of women involved in terrorism as victims relate to women's individual experiences of agency and how this relationship can be interpreted.

Firstly, I will elaborate on how femininity has traditionally been socially constructed. Exploring the genderedness of the public/private split illustrates how women's engagement in public life is problematically perceived. Women engaging in terrorist violence will therefore serve as an example of the actions of women that complicate traditional notions of femininity and therefore may be misunderstood and misrepresented. Second, a media analysis will uncover the gendered structures that affect the representations of female terrorists, which consequently affect the way these women are perceived by society. Also, I will go into depth here with the concept of agency and how it can be used in a more inclusive manner. Lastly, the experiences of women in terrorist organisations in comparison to their stereotypical representation offer insights into how women's actions can be understood alternatively. The discrepancy between women's lived experiences and the traditional discourse will serve as a tool to raise awareness of the pervasive presence of gendered structures in contemporary Western societies.

It will become clear that there in fact is a significant tension between how

contemporary societies perceive women and how women experience their position within terrorist organisations. Investigating the representations of women engaging in terrorism will uncover the gendered structures that affect the dominant perceptions of women in the public sphere. Taking the lived experiences of women into account will uncover the narratives that are largely obscured by the patriarchal representations that deny women's agency and serves to counter the strict dichotomy between agents and victims. Failing to acknowledge the differences between individual women makes it impossible to get a full understanding of women's actions and the social structures that confine them to stereotypical feminine roles. This research will therefore highlight the political agency of women, raise awareness of their individual and diverse experiences and challenge the traditional notions of the public/private split.

## Feminist Perspectives on the Public/Private Dichotomy

Gendered dichotomies are not limited to the concept of violence and are deeply rooted in contemporary Western societies. Bankers, politicians and surgeons or nurses, aestheticians and secretaries: why is it that these job titles can evoke ideas that create a division between male and female roles? Although these are rather obvious examples, they illustrate that conceptions that create a dichotomy between men and women are very much present in contemporary societies. Positing masculine roles as being directly in opposition to feminine roles consequently does not do justice to the desires and actions of women. In order to get insights into how this dichotomy traditionally has been constructed a feminist interrogation of the public/private split is provided here.

First of all, a feminist perspective on the public/private debate is provided by Carole Pateman's "Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy" (1989). She illustrates how this dichotomy sustains an unequal opposition between men and women in liberal Western societies. Feminists have argued that liberalism is in fact patriarchal-liberalism, wherein the separation of private and public spheres consequently means a separation between a male and female domain. Pateman argues that based on the division between political power and paternal power in the family women are socially assigned to the private, domestic sphere and are subjected to male authority. Contrastingly, men inhabit and rule both the public and the private sphere.

As women are perceived as subordinates, they could not at the same time be free or equal in the public and are therefore excluded from this sphere (120-2).

Also, Joan B. Landes argues in “Further Thoughts on the Public/Private Distinction (2003)” that precisely because the public and private are posed as mutually exclusive they connote a hierarchical relationship. While the two categories are always influenced by specific local circumstances, the public/private distinction can predominantly be understood as “a loose description of a very long-standing difference between the lives of women and men (30-3). According to Seyla Benhabib it is exactly because the public and private are captured in a binary opposition that an unequal relationship between masculinity and femininity arises. She points out in “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition and Jürgen Habermas (1998)” that: “any theory of publicness, public space, and public dialogue must presuppose some distinction between the private and the public (85).” As Benhabib argues it is necessary that what is understood as public and what is seen as private can openly be renegotiated and reinterpreted. She claims that this opens up the possibility to move away from a discourse based on predetermined gender divisions and create one that is based on individual autonomy and consent (88-9).

### *Naturally Feminine*

The debate about the public/private split focuses on how men dominate both the public and the private sphere, while women are confined to domestic tasks. Pateman argues that this division originates from the idea that women are closer to nature, while men are perceived to be closer to culture. She refers to Sherry B. Ortner’s work when explaining why this leads to the devaluing of women:

Humankind attempts to transcend a merely natural existence so that nature is always seen as of a lower order than culture. Culture becomes identified as the creation and the world of men because women’s biology and bodies place them closer to nature than men (Pateman 124-5).

Thus, because of the traditional idea that women are closer to nature they are confined to the domestic sphere due to their ‘task’ of bearing and nurturing children. In contrast, men as cultural beings are free to engage with and create public life (125). Ortner has written about this nature/culture opposition in “Is Female to Male as

Nature is to Culture?" (1998). She argues that culture is not only perceived as distinct from nature, but also superior to it. Culture is identified with creation and is constantly trying to transcend nature. Therefore, the subordination of nature has come to be normalized (25-27). Pateman critiques this idea:

Ortner fails to give sufficient weight to the fundamental fact that men and women are social and cultural beings, or to its corollary that 'nature' always has a social meaning, a meaning that, moreover, varies widely in different societies and in different historical periods (125).

Pateman addresses the fact that nature cannot be seen as completely separate of culture. Nature is in fact a social construction in itself. According to Pateman Ortner fails to fully address the social meaning of nature and therewith she implicitly reaffirms the traditional binary between men and women (125). She expresses the same critique on Shulamith Firestone, who claims that the dualism between men and women originates from biology itself, namely procreation:

Firestone's argument reduces the social conceptions of 'women' and 'men' to the biological categories of 'female' and 'male', and thus denies any significance to the complex history of the relationship between men and women or between the private and public spheres (126).

To reduce individuals to their 'natural' state and assume that men intrinsically have the drive to dominate women implicitly reaffirms "the patriarchal claim that women's subordination is decreed by nature." Instead, Pateman argues for a feminist theoretical perspective that looks at the social positions of men and women in their specific historical context. She emphasizes that this approach should not rely on a universal dichotomy between nature and culture or men and women, and should also take context specific interpretations of the public and private into account (126).

Even though Pateman makes a legitimate argument that Ortner focuses too much on women's supposed connection to nature instead of the social construction of this preconception, I do not think Ortner's arguments have to be dismissed altogether. Ortner does acknowledge that it is necessary to: "expose the underlying logic of cultural thinking that assumes the inferiority of women (22)." Even though in her paper she uses universalized understandings of femininity and masculinity, she does emphasize that merely adjusting prescribed gendered roles will not change a social system. Therefore, Ortner argues that the underlying symbolic structures of human

culture have to be taken into account in rethinking the cultural logic that subordinates women:

I try to show the highly persuasive nature of the logic, for if it were not so persuasive, people would not keep subscribing to it. But I also try to show the social and cultural sources of that logic, to indicate wherein lies the potential for change (22).

In other words, Ortner does address the fact that the underlying social and cultural ideas are what construct the supposed superiority of men and therefore need to be deconstructed altogether.

Also, Pateman's critique that Ortner does not pay sufficient attention to the fact that women and men are both social and cultural beings might not entirely do justice to her work (125). Ortner actually does explicitly state that the culture/nature distinction is a social construct:

The culture/nature distinction is itself a product of culture, culture being minimally defined as the transcendence, by means of systems of thought and technology, of the natural givens of existence. This of course is an analytic definition, but I argued that at some level every culture incorporates this notion in one form or other, if only through the performance of ritual as an assertion of the human ability to manipulate those givens (39).

Here Ortner addresses that culture does not only transcend nature, it also affects nature. Also, she acknowledges that women do in fact affect culture even though they are primarily confined to lower levels of the social order:

It is she who transforms newborn infants from mere organisms into cultured humans, teaching them manners and the proper ways to behave in order to become fullfledged members of the culture. On the basis of her socializing functions alone, she could not be more a representative of culture. Yet in virtually every society there is a point at which the socialization of boys is transferred to the hands of men (34).

Even though men are perceived as the only ones that can fully accomplish the socialization of children, Ortner identifies women as an intermediate between nature and culture. Because of women's influence on the early socialization Ortner defines women as "powerful agents of the cultural process (33-39)." At the same time, Ortner shows that in this intermediate function women are still placed in a subordinate position. In a way Pateman makes the same argument when he states that women are

not completely excluded from the public sphere. What she deems problematic is that the way women are included is highly restricted by patriarchal beliefs. With this she means that oftentimes their movements in public life are an extension of their domestic roles. (129-32). Ortner and Pateman thus both point out the argument that is most important to a contemporary discussion of the public/private split. Namely, even in women's participation in the public sphere their association with the private and domestic restricts their movements.

As the above-mentioned authors illustrate: taking up space in the public sphere might be problematic or sometimes even impossible for women. Therefore it is interesting to investigate what exactly happens with the social understandings of masculinity and femininity when women do take up roles in the public sphere. For example, in "Reduced to Bad Sex: Narratives of Violent Women from the Bible to the War on Terror" (2008) Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry discuss a pervasive paradox concerning women's integration into global politics. While women are more often participating in areas that traditionally are characterized as male, like politics, the traditional social and cultural structures that prescribe women's roles are not disappearing at the same pace (6). It is therefore all the more important, in a time where women's participation in the public sphere is progressively growing, to investigate the social structures and stereotypes that surround women's drives and actions.

### *The Violence of the Public/Private*

In order to offer a counter narrative to the binary opposition between the public and the private sphere, it is important to rethink the social conceptions of femininity and masculinity. Rosi Braidotti and Anneke Smelik discuss the social inequality between men and women in "De politiek van het subject. Blauwbaard en de verboden kamer" (1989). They argue that the privileging of masculinity is accompanied by the control of that which is female. By placing the different sexes in a dichotomous relationship, female subjectivity can only be defined as opposed to male subjectivity. Consequently, this creates a universal and stereotypical idea of what femininity is and obscures the differences between individual women. This construction of femininity creates an imposed identity on women instead of something that comes naturally (194-7):

The violence of the metaphor, the imagining of women as the only other, is the excruciating game of oppositions. Dualism paves the way for the denial of being different, for the submission and the final destruction of the other (194).<sup>1</sup>

Braidotti and Smelik argue that masculine subjectivity continually protects the boundaries of the self by denying the subjectivity of others; that of women. This absence of female subjectivity is what according to them causes the possibility to create metaphors of the feminine; she can be imagined in any way possible within a male centred discourse (197-9). They regard this as a form of violence; the objectification and controlling of female subjectivity does not consider the difference between women or the lived-experiences of women (193-4). A woman displaying her own subjectivity by entering the public sphere, a traditionally considered male domain, might suffer from this ‘violence.’

With this in mind, taking (terrorist) violence as an example illustrates the problematic nature of understanding women that move outside of their assigned private domain. Berteke Waaldijk makes this connection as well in her article “Geschiedenis, Geweld en Geslacht” (1989). She investigates sex-difference in historiography on war and argues that written histories focus on male fighting spirit and pacifistic women. Her example of war and violence sufficiently illustrates the division between masculine public roles as violent militants, in opposition to feminine roles like nurturing mothers and wives. In this view, women are not guilty of violence, but innocent victims. Investigating violent women can therefore contribute to rethinking femininity and masculinity. In order to investigate the genderedness of violence Waaldijk claims it is necessary to uncover the concrete acts of violence and compare them to their representations. Investigating how violence by women is represented is important, because: “there is a tension between violence and its representation and sex and its representation (216).”

Also, this can uncover in how far the perceptions of masculinity and violence are interconnected and can contribute to de-naturalizing the connection between masculinity and violence. As war reports traditionally focus on women and children as innocent victims of male violence a part of the story remains unexplored. As

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by the author.

Waldijk argues, the experiences of war and violence only get meaning through the culturally constructed lens through which people look at these narratives. So, if violence continues to be characterized as male, it is impossible to get an understanding of women who engage in violent acts. Waldijk reaffirms the argument that the gendered nature of violence – as of any other action in public – needs to be uncovered in order to do justice to women's experiences, motivations and their actual engagements with (terrorist) violence. In addition, Waldijk also brings in examples of the rhetoric of political traditions that, just as the gendered understanding of violence, characterize it as male and consequently excludes women (214-220). Her investigation thus illustrates that women's involvement is deemed problematic in the public sphere in general. Therefore, Waldijk's investigation of the historic representations of war and sex difference can also be applicable to the issue I am debating here: the media representation of terrorist violence conducted by women. As she expresses as well: investigating how female violence is represented – whether it is in history books or in the media – can contribute to rethinking the opposition between men and women and their ascribed roles.

### *Gendering Terrorist Violence*

When masculinity and femininity are continuously perceived as opposing, exclusive terms and the public and the private sphere remain gendered, patriarchal structures will prevail. Looking at violence through the lens of Waldijk and Braidotti and Smelik opens up space to rethink violence as purely a male characteristic. It is now necessary to go further into depth with the representations of terrorist violence specifically, in order to investigate how gendered structures might affect social perceptions of women's engagement in terrorist violence.

First, I will try to define the contested term of terrorism. There are many different definitions and nowadays there is still no international (political) agreement on the term.<sup>2</sup> I therefore want to emphasize that I am aware that it is debatable whether certain groups are perceived as terrorist organisations and that who is perceived as a terrorist might change over time. In this research I turn to John Richard

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<[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2015/571320/EPRS\\_ATA\(2015\)571320\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2015/571320/EPRS_ATA(2015)571320_EN.pdf)>

Thackrah's definition of terrorism in *Dictionary of Terrorism* (2004). His definition acknowledges the ambiguity of the concept: "though terrorism is a real, not an imaginary danger, it is a vague, incomprehensible, unpredictable and unexpected menace (264)." Also, he states that terrorism is something that affects both individuals and the social structure through the on-going fear it evokes: "uncertainty about what sort of behaviour to expect from others results in disorientation." (264) Terrorism therefore is a disrupting force. Thackrah states that the sole purpose of terrorist acts is to intimidate, whereby the direct individual victims are less important than the overall effect on the specific group to whom the act is addressed. I would like to add here that terrorism is in fact a political act. It is predominantly an attack on a certain society and its values and beliefs instead of on individual members. On top of that, Thackrah argues that terrorist acts create fear through the way they are conducted; their senselessness and their indifference to human life (265). The power of terrorism indeed is the creation of perpetual threat, but again I want to emphasize that it is important to look beyond the violence of these attacks. Merely seeing terrorist acts as senseless obscures the underlying politics of terrorist violence.

Having somewhat delineated a way to understand terrorism, I will now look at the participation of women in terrorist organisations and their violence. In "Introduction. Women, Gender and Terrorism" (2011) Laura Sjoberg, Grace D. Cooke, and Stacy Reiter Neal point out that women increasingly engage in terrorism. Even though the involvement of women in terrorism is not entirely new, they are nowadays getting more visible in global politics (2). I would like to use an example by Teresa de Lauretis here from *Technologies of Gender* (1987). She illustrates that 'family violence' did not exist a few decades ago, merely because the expression itself did not exist. De Lauretis does not mean to say that violence in the domestic sphere did not exist at all, it just was not part of the social discourse until the term 'family violence' came into being (38). In the same line of thought, Sjoberg, Cooke and Neal want to emphasize that the participation of women in the political sphere does not automatically mean that their positions are being recognized:

Women remain underrepresented in the political and economic power structures of the world, which have not magically become gender neutral just because women have joined workforces or voting lists (3).

Even though violence has traditionally been characterized as male, women's violence

does not necessarily erase the genderedness of the concept. On the contrary, Sjoberg, Cooke and Neal argue that acts of terrorism specifically show how traditional conceptions of what is feminine still exist and is defined as subordinate and in opposition to what it means to be 'a man.' Women who engage in terrorist violence do in fact disrupt the stereotypical notions of innocent, nurturing women, but the way they are represented reaffirms the traditional gender binary. Sjoberg, Cooke and Neal illustrate that the normalized conceptions of femininity are present in political debates, media coverage and academic analysis of women involved in terrorist organisations. There are existing studies that try to find explanations for female engagement in terrorism, but they do not take the specific context of these women's lives into account. Also, the number of empirical studies is supposedly very low (3-4). One of the pitfalls Sjoberg, Cooke and Neal define when it comes to (academic) writing on the subject of female terrorists is the tendency to find different explanations for women to conduct terrorist violence opposed to those for men (2-3). An example of this is Katharina Von Knop's "The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda's Women" (2007). She specifically makes a distinction between the 'male' and 'female' Jihad, wherein male dominance is central. Even though in her article she tries to point out the importance of women's contributions for terrorist organisations, she reinforces patriarchal notions that create a binary between men and women (397-412). Opposing female terrorism to that of men again leads to the devaluing of women's (political) actions. Therefore, it is all the more important to closely investigate the individual motivations of women and their representations. For that purpose a media analysis offers an important tool to uncover the conceptions of gender in the social and public sphere.

For example, Sjoberg, Cooke and Neal argue that media portrayals predominantly misrepresent women engaging in terrorism. According to them they are "portrayed as unnatural, gender defiant, sexually deviant, psychologically unstable, or easily manipulated." More importantly, in contrast to representations of men, any political motivations for their actions remain unaddressed. Sjoberg, Cooke and Neal therefore argue that media, but also academics, need to focus more on the specific context wherein women conduct violence to be able to "complicate and correct" the stereotypical representations of women (2-5). They try to provide an approach to terrorist violence that takes the actions by men, women and the gendered world in which they interact into account:

Instead of looking at women in terrorism as if “women” were either a gender-neutral category or one separate from men or masculinity, the chapters in this book study those women as gendered actors, navigating gendered relationships and living in a gendered world (7).

Sjoberg, Cooke and Neal argue for being open to alternative narratives and experiences that might contribute to different understandings of terrorism. An important argument they make here is that a gender analysis not only contributes to understanding terrorism, thinking about terrorism can in return provide insights into gender and gendered structures (21).

### *Studying Women and Terrorism*

Investigating the representations of women engaging in terrorist violence can thus be a valuable tool to uncover social and political gendered structures. There are in fact already several investigations of women engaging in terrorist organisations: in “Zombies Versus Black Widows: Women as Propaganda in the Chechen Conflict” (2011) Alisa Stack focuses on women in the Russian-Chechen conflict. She argues that there are two main portrayals of Chechen female terrorists; that of the ‘black widows’ engaging in terrorism to avenge the deaths of their husbands, or as ‘zombies’ who are drugged and tricked into terrorism (86-92). Caron E. Gentry looks at the women involved in the People’s Liberation Front for Palestine in “The Committed Revolutionary: Reflections on a Conversation with Leila Khaled” (2011). She points out that the media portrayals do not correspond with the actual experiences of women engaging in terrorist violence. In her text she tries to break through the stereotypes that women merely conduct terrorism due to exploitation by men (122-130). Sandra Ponzanesi focuses on the Palestinian - Israeli conflict as well in “Female Suicide Bombers and the Politics of Gendered Militancy” (2014). In her media analysis she investigated the portrayals of female suicide bombers and found that their capability to make autonomous, political decisions is consistently being ignored. She as well argues that women involved in terrorist organisations are repeatedly perceived to be brainwashed and indoctrinated by men or their acts are characterized as a ‘widow’s revenge.’ Also, their identity as mothers and nurturers is emphasized to re-establish traditional, stereotypical gender roles (82-9).

In addition, Beatrice de Graaf investigated ten individual cases of terrorist women in *Gevaarlijke vrouwen. Tien militante vrouwen in het vizier* (2012). She points out that Western media and security forces create stereotypes of female terrorists. She claims that men are perceived to act out of political and ideological motivations, while women are represented as acting out of psychological and emotional drives. According to her, these stereotypes exist to help make 'unbelievable' information, a woman conducting violence, more comprehensive to the public. De Graaf also points out that stereotypes obscure the individual backgrounds and motivations of female terrorists and their process of radicalization, which leads to largely underestimating the role of women in terrorism (7-16). Contrastingly, she expresses arguments that again obscure women's individual (political) motivations. For example, she extensively discusses the tactical advantages for terrorist organisations to 'deploy' women, because she is less likely to be detected (8-12). Herewith, De Graaf characterizes the roles of women within terrorist organisations as submissive and portrays them as victims of male authority:

Despite their attempt to emancipate, women as suicide terrorists do mostly play a subordinate role. They remain to be an instrument, a weapon, in hands of organisations or networks that are almost exclusively led by men (10).

De Graaf's conception that women predominantly take up inferior roles in terrorism is exactly what feminist studies of terrorism try to counter. This research therefore aims at pointing out how women can in fact be (political) actors. If women are continuously represented as merely pawns in a male domain and as victims of male oppression, it will leave the public incapable of understanding women's involvement in terrorist violence. Characterizing the public act of terrorism as male moves women to the background. It contributes to the idea that (terrorist) violence is a masculine domain and resonates the public/private split that creates a pervasive dichotomy between male and female roles. The symbolic restriction of women to the private sphere problematizes the social perceptions of women who engage in practices that are traditionally deemed as 'unfeminine.' In order to measure the pervasiveness of the stereotypes that emerge from this in contemporary societies I will go more into depth with the media representations of women engaging in terrorism in the next sections.

## Feminist Critiques on The Representations of Female Terrorists

Having looked into the genderedness of (terrorist) violence, this section is aimed at exploring how this affects the social understanding of violent women. An ethnographic approach is in place here. As defined by Elana D. Buch and Karen M. Staller in *Feminist Research Practice. A Primer* (2014) a feminist ethnography aims at uncovering how gender is understood and made meaningful in social life and how it is related to power (107-109). It is therefore necessary to investigate the dominant narratives of gender – which I will do here using media analysis. Tiina Mäntymäki, Anna Foka and Marinella Rodi-Risberg stress the importance of understanding the cultural role narratives play in *Deviant Women: Cultural, Linguistic and Literary Approaches to Narratives of Femininity* (2015). They argue that representations play a significant role in structuring reality and consequently contribute to the construction of identities. The representations in literature and media reflect the existing narratives of gender in society and reaffirm patriarchal structures. In turn the social constructions portrayed in media can have real cultural and political effects (14-6). Caroline Enberg contributes to this argument in “‘Baby Killer!’ – Media Constructions of a Culturally Congruent Identity for Casey Anthony as Mother and Female Offender” (2015). She also claims that discourses that are represented in the media can construct social reality (136). Investigating media representations therefore contributes to uncovering the constructed notions of gender that resonate in society. Looking at the representations of women who engage in (terrorist) violence through this lens shows that their portrayals are often entrenched in ideas about ‘proper’ femininity:

In patriarchal societies, women who deviate from their culturally and situationally ascribed gender norms are almost invariably depicted in terms of negativity. They are accused of behaving in an unfeminine way, mimicking or attempting to control male behaviour, as well as labelled as violent and aggressive (Mäntymäki, Foka and Rodi-Risberg 9).

Women who fail to conform to ascribed norms of femininity are thus labelled as ‘others’ and portrayed as *deviant* women. In *Mothers, Monsters, Whores. Women’s Violence in Global Politics* (2007) Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry illustrate how women conducting violent acts are perceived as less feminine or even less human; they are flawed in their femininity (10-1). Since violent women deviate from the

social understanding of femininity, they are categorized as 'bad' women (2). Additionally, Mäntymäki, Foka and Rodi-Risberg argue that defining women as deviant always relates to what counts as 'normal.' The definition of deviant femininity is thus embedded in a societies' specific socio-cultural discourse (12).

Hence, representations of violent women are characterized by a dichotomy between 'normal' and 'abnormal' feminine behaviour. According to Enberg it is exactly this social reliance on a gender dichotomy that enables misrepresentations of women's violent acts. Enberg offers an example of women who kill their own children to point out that media representations are driven by a desire to 'explain away female aggression':

Media representations of women who kill their children generally instigate processes of distancing, labelling and dividing the maternal subject – maintaining the discursive identity of 'the good mother' separate from the mother who kills (140).

By emphasizing an opposition between good and bad mothers, the social order of appropriate motherhood remains in tact despite their violent acts. Sjöberg and Gentry contribute by arguing that: "reactions to and stories around women's violence betray lingering stereotypes about what women are and what they should be." Women are explicitly mentioned as *female* terrorists, highlighting that they are not 'regular' criminals (2-9). Violent women thus problematize traditional notions of femininity that are traditionally present in visual culture in general. For example, in cinema women are predominantly portrayed as passive sexual objects in function of the male gaze.<sup>3</sup> The tension created by women who take up active positions as conductors of terrorist violence can be resolved by distancing them from stereotypical notions of femininity. In the words of Enberg, these representations 'explain away female aggression'.

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<sup>3</sup> Laura Mulvey expresses her feminist film critique on classical Hollywood cinema in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). She argues that female characters are passive and characterized by *to-be-looked-at-ness*. They merely serve as a sexual object for the male gaze through which they hold power over her.

## *Feminist Analysis*

As woman engaging in terrorist violence complicate the traditional conceptions of peaceful nurturers it has been argued that media representations often serve to restore patriarchal constructions of femininity. In order to address the frames that characterize women's portrayals a media analysis of Dutch written and audio-visual (news) media covering on women and terrorism will be central in this section. Focussing on textual elements I will try to uncover the dominant discourse that constructs the gendered perception of women. It is important to keep in mind here that there is not one universal interpretation of a text. In "Feminist Media Research" (2014) Heather McIntosh and Lisa M. Cuklanz state that one of the limitations of a textual analysis is that it is always in some way informed by the researchers' bias. In my position as a feminist researcher it is thus important to remain reflexive of the multidimensional nature of the texts and the lens through which I look at them (287-9). On the one hand, keeping my own bias as a 'Western' female researcher in mind throughout the research process helped me to bring in a nuanced perspective. On the other hand, I believe that it is exactly because of my bias as a feminist that I am able to address the problematic nature of representing women.

The collection of data for this media analysis was done as part of my research internship for the Ministry of Defense Section J9 Civil-Military Co-operation and Gender advise on Operations. The internship research was aimed at uncovering the stereotypes about women involved in terrorism that Dutch media portray and how these gendered portrayals affect the way the armed forces and security services perceive terrorist violence. Now I will further expand upon my arguments in this media analysis, going more into depth with specific stereotypes and female agency. To collect newspaper articles I have utilized the LexisNexis database, filtering the search to the four Dutch newspapers with the largest print run: *De Volkskrant*, *De Telegraaf*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *Algemeen Dagblad*<sup>4</sup>, as well as three opinion magazines *Elsevier*, *De Groene Amsterdammer* and *Vrij Nederland*. Also, this analysis incorporates the websites of news broadcasters *NOS* and *RTL Nieuws*, and the media platforms *Nu.nl* and *PowNed*. The analysis is based on 170 newsitems that report on organizations that are generally perceived to be terrorist and are active in

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<sup>4</sup> <https://dundas.reports.nl/NOM/>

Iraq, Syria and/or Libya. The Ministry suggested this geographical focus due to a lack of knowledge about women's engagement in terrorism in these areas and I will continue analyzing media reports on these specific countries. The investigated articles therefore predominantly concern these organizations: ISIS, Al-Nusra and Al-Qaeda. I have searched the LexisNexis database using the following terms (in Dutch) in different combinations: terrorism, women, Iraq, IS, ISIS Al Nusra and Al Qaeda. Since Al-Qaeda's attack on 11 September 2001 stimulated the media's coverage on terrorism, I narrowed down the search to articles from 2001 to 2016.

To explore how media representations relate to the lived experience of women involved in terrorism I will also use several documents issued by Hedayah and The Global Center on Cooperative Security, Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, Institute for Strategic Dialogue and Quilliam Foundation. They have been in close contact with women from terrorist organizations and will offer insights into how the representations of women relate to women's actual experiences. An interview with an analyst from the Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid contributes to this by expanding on her experiences with radicalized women she encountered through her work. Also, an interview with journalist Sinan Can will serve to give insights into the lives of men and women in Syria, Libya and Iraq, and his perceptions of them, as he had personal encounters with them during the making of a documentary.

### *The Victimization of Women*

The investigation of Dutch (news) media shows that representations wherein women engaging in terrorism are victimized are widely present<sup>5</sup>. It is important to keep in mind that in many cases, women are indeed victims of terrorist violence, but the portrayals of women as victims highlight only one side of the story. News media predominantly emphasize that women in terrorist conflicts are victims of male oppression and are vulnerable to rape, which indeed oftentimes is the reality of women in conflict areas. When media do address the fact that women engage in

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<sup>5</sup> The media analysis I conducted in 2016 shows: 50% of Dutch newspaper articles on women and terrorism deny women's agency and/or victimize them, 33% acknowledges women as agents, 6% represents them as jihadi brides, and 11% does not mention women at all.

terrorist violence they predominantly convey the idea that men use them as weapons. These portrayals fail to acknowledge women's individual choice in the matter. Sandra Ponzanesi (2014) critiques the portraying of women as weapons and victims of male power, because it obscures the possibility that women can act out of political motives and conviction (84-9.)

Examples of women used as weapons can be found in several newspapers. De Telegraaf dedicated two articles in 2008 and 2015<sup>6</sup> to the 'deploying' of women as suicide bombers by Al-Qaeda and IS. Both articles emphasize how women are manipulated into conducting a suicide attack without considering the motivations for them to participate: 'Extremists see them as the ideal weapon, because women are usually not seen as a threat (2015)'. Women are thus merely addressed in the context of the tactical advantages they pose, like being less likely to be detected. Also, *Algemeen Dagblad* (2015) uses the example of the Black Widows conducting suicide attacks out of revenge for the death of their husbands. Although the article states that women can choose to become violent for many different reasons, they choose to use an example that connects women's motivations to their relation with men. In 2008, *NRC Handelsblad* discusses the case of a male terrorist who persuaded a woman to blow herself up in Iraq. The article completely focuses on the man, without delving further into the individual story of the woman. Characterizing the men that encourage women to conduct an attack extremely dangerous derives the threat of terrorism from women to merely men. These articles all obscure the possibility for women to make an autonomous, political decision to engage in terrorist violence.

The representations that portray women as tactical tools for terrorist men also resonate in scholarly work. As already mentioned, Beatrice de Graaf (2012) argues that women are predominantly oppressed within terrorist organisations. Another academic example is the article "Female Suicide Bombers: a Global Trend" (2007) by Mia Bloom. Most of the motivations for women to become suicide bombers she discusses deny women's political motivations (94-5). She victimizes female terrorists portraying them as subjugated to male power and easily exploited. Bloom also specifically emphasizes that women engage in terrorist violence out of personal reasons as opposed to ideological ones. She claims that there is a fundamental difference between male and female suicide bombers and that most women who

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<sup>6</sup> Titles and publication dates of the news items can be found in the bibliography

become suicide bombers are widows and victims of rape. Bloom states: “the message female suicide bombers send is that they are more valuable to their societies dead than they ever could have been alive (96-102).” This statement directly touches upon the core of the issue I am discussing in this thesis: women’s ‘messages’ are obscured or misinterpreted precisely because media and scholarly work fail to address their political nature. They fail to explore the specific realities of these women that have led to their actions. When explanations for women’s violent actions are continuously sought in men, it is almost impossible to make sense of women’s engagement in terrorism.

### *‘Normal’ Terrorism*

Women involved in terrorist organizations are largely victimized in media representations, but the marginalization of their contributions to terrorism goes beyond merely seeing women as the weapons of men. The portrayals that highlight women’s supporting roles as wives to jihadists, nurturing mothers and ideological educators for the children pose them to be constraint by a male/female role division that is deemed oppressive to women. Again, these representations provide a very stereotypical view of the experiences of women. Katherine E. Brown discusses the media’s emphasis on women as wives in “Muriel’s wedding: News Media Representations of Europe’s First Female Suicide Terrorist” (2011). She argues that seeing women’s engagement in terrorism merely in connection to their relationship with men places too much focus on private motivations and domestic living arrangements (710-11). Ponzanesi addresses this issue as well stating that representations that bring women’s identities as mothers and wives to the forefront overrule their violent acts and reaffirm the gender status quo. They do not acknowledge the possible political motivations of women and she states that these portrayals serve to counter the shock of women’s deadly attacks by restoring the patriarchal order (82-9). Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) argue the same by demonstrating that these representations preserve the image of ‘naturally peaceful’ women (13). Danièle Djamila Amrane Minne provides another example in “Women at War. The Representation of Women in *The Battle of Algiers*” (2007). She illustrates how the involvement of women in the Algerian war has been underrepresented in the film *The*

*Battle of Algiers* (1966) due to: “a traditional view of the role of women, which assumes that it is normal for women to help out with the kind of everyday tasks they usually perform anyway (348).” The dominant idea is that women do not fight; they are traditionally proscribed to support the men and nurture the children. Consequently the narratives of women who risked their lives in political and technical roles during the conflict have remained obscured.

Likewise, the newspaper *De Volkskrant* published an article in 2014(a) that points out that Western women primarily travel to Syria to start a family in the IS Caliphate and raise their children as ‘pure Muslims.’ *De Telegraaf* (2013) and *Elsevier* (2013) also emphasize that women migrate to marry and become ‘jihadi brides.’ Janny Groen states in another article in *De Volkskrant*:

The young women follow their husbands, the mujahid. Or they are persuaded through WhatsApp-messages to travel to Syria and marry their hero on the spot. They generally have met them through jihadist social media (2014b).

Groen also claims that women get involved in terrorism as sexworkers, which is supposedly seen as the ‘female contribution’ to the jihad. Altogether these articles only acknowledge female positions within terrorist organisations that correspond with traditional domestic, non-violent roles or emphasize the abuse of women. A news broadcast by NOS (2015) even portrays a double denial of women’s autonomy. They report on a group of Dutch girls that fell in love with jihadists through the Internet and were ‘lured’ to Syria by these men.<sup>7</sup> These girls are not only perceived to join a terrorist group merely because of their relationship with men, they are perceived to be manipulated to travel to Syria instead of autonomously choosing to do so.

With this in mind, it is striking to compare the representations of female terrorists to those of men. In *Elsevier* (2014) and *De Volkskrant* (2014c) (2015b) in-depth articles focus on Western men that radicalized and became jihadists. The main focus is on how they were ‘normal’ boys and their decision to adhere to Muslim ideology and to migrate to Syria is framed as a very political one:

Especially the torture and sexual abuse of Muslims by American guards in the Abu Ghraib prison made an immense impression. Their worldview began to take shape: the battle between the Islam and the West (*De Volkskrant*, 2015b).

The detailed portraits that uncover the social backgrounds and political drives of

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<sup>7</sup> <<http://nos.nl/video/2019874-ze-zijn-razendsnel-geradicaliseerd.html>>

radicalized men directly oppose the way radicalized women are generally discussed. Women's political reasons for conducting a violent act remain unexplored and these women's drives are predominantly connected to psychological problems. Dorit Naaman addresses the tendency to attribute women's violence to her mental state in "Brides of Palestine/Angels of Death (2007)":

Relying on the stereotypical gap between traditional feminine qualities (i.e., engaged to be married, good student) and political, violent, and supposedly masculine actions, journalists and analysts alike could not explain the phenomenon. The solution was to search for a personal explanation (Naaman 936).

According to Naaman, women's violent acts are not perceived to be political, simply because violence and politics are not traditionally perceived as female characteristics; they are masculine. Women's actions that deviate from 'normal' femininity are therefore often related to mental instability, opposing the representations of male suicide bombers, who are less often perceived to suffer from psychological problems (936). For this reason, Laura Sjoberg argues in "Feminist Interrogations of Terrorism/Terrorism Studies" (2009) that a feminist approach to women's acts of terrorism should be further developed. She also recognizes the dominant reliance on a rational/emotional dichotomy that divides terrorists in either: "rational political actors or emotionally deranged sociopaths." Sjoberg argues that the middle ground between these two extremes is missing and the lines between rational and emotional motivations are too often based on gender (72). This dichotomy resonates the public/private split that defines 'proper' female behavior in opposition to the characteristics of men. Brown states as well that the violence conducted by women is mostly perceived as irrational and emotional while violence by men is seen as 'normal' and 'rational' (707-12). As a consequence, these gendered representations deny the political, rational and conscious decisions that women involved in terrorism might make and they suppress women's individual voices.

### *A Feminist Redefinition of Female Agency*

The analysis of media representations of female terrorists points out that women's agency is predominantly being denied. Whether women are perceived to be used and oppressed by men, merely contribute as wives or conduct violence due to mental

health issues: their political and ideological motivations to conduct terrorist violence remain unexplored. Sjoberg argues that women's agency in their violence is denied "because women's incapacity to commit acts of terror is essential to maintaining our current idealized notions of women and femininity (69)." In order to address the perceptions of women's capacity to act as an autonomous subject a feminist approach to the concept of agency is necessary. In "Gendering Terror" (2012) Jessica Auchter acknowledges the denial of women's agency in media representations and goes into depth with how scholars address this issue. She critiques how the term agency in relation to terrorism is used in academic work. Therefore, she calls for a critical re-examination of the concept:

Agency remains the attribute which marks entrance into the legitimate political community. Whether or not one is considered an agent has a real-life effect, specifically on women's lives and their ability to participate in significant political action. However, we act as if agency is a matter of common sense rather than questioning how it has come to frame our perception of certain issues (121).

Auchter emphasizes the problematic nature of academic writing on the topic of women and terrorism. She claims that scholars are often driven by the desire to inscribe women with agency. According to her they tend to assume that 'woman-as-agent' is their natural state. Scholars therefore predominantly study women and their political practices in relation to a strict agent/victim dichotomy. Women are either studied in their roles as victims of patriarchy or as agents that oppose a patriarchal system:

The idea that terrorism can be naturally linked with men, that it is just another example of the patriarchal structure of violence which victimizes women, leaves out part of the story, or perhaps gets the story altogether wrong (125).

This gendered distinction again prescribes a power structure that decides who can be perceived as a political agent; women who counter dominant social structures. Auchter argues that the narrow representations that equate violence with masculinity make it impossible to fully understand the involvement of women in terrorism. By viewing women predominantly as pawns in a male domain scholars pervasively neglect to interrogate any specific context that might give their actions social and political meaning. This approach does not leave space for alternative possibilities, which makes the theorizing about violent women and agency an exclusionary

practice. Defining agency through this binary means that certain individuals will be excluded from its possession. Relying on a very specific understanding of agency – resistance against male oppression - to define what a rightful political agent is prohibits scholars from questioning what agency actually means for individual women (122- 5).

Similarly, Saba Mahmood also calls for an alternative conceptualisation of female agency. In “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent” (2001) she shares Auchter’s critique that academics often have a too narrow understanding of agency. The strict agent/victim dichotomy forces scholars to define agency solely in terms of resistance to social norms. Instead, Mahmood argues that the concept should also entail acts that may not be seen as pursuing an emancipatory goal (208-11). As she in her article focuses on Muslim women specifically, she argues that the Islam is often considered by (what is perceived as) ‘the West’ as intrinsically opposed to liberal values. This leads to the stereotypes that characterize the position of Muslim women as unequal and backward. Women involved in religious tradition are therefore automatically perceived to lack agency. Elsevier (2015), De Telegraaf (2014b) and Algemeen Dagblad (2014), are but a few examples of newspaper articles that tend to focus on the restrictions for women due to religious traditions. They emphasize the strict rules that affect women’s lives and directly presume that they experience these as oppressive. These articles convey a one-sided view of Islamic societies; they predominantly focus on communities wherein women are monitored on wearing a veil, where they are only allowed outside at specific times and are solely allowed in public in the company of men.

Not only do these articles not take into account women’s individual experiences and thoughts on religious practices, they also blur the lines between the Islam and extremism. In foregrounding the religious aspects, which from a Western point of view are perceived to be oppressive, news articles often fail to distinguish extreme practices of terrorist organizations from Muslim values. As the terrorist groups I am focusing on in this research are deeply rooted in the Islam themselves, it needs to be recognized that religion plays a significant role in the Dutch media’s pervasive denial of female agency. In this thesis, I will not go further into depth with representations of religion in relation to global politics since it can be a project on its own. However, I do take into account the important impact of Western perceptions of the Islam on the representation of gender. With this in mind, I do want to take from

Mahmood that women conducting acts that might be regarded as submissive should not automatically be defined as non-agents, just as resistance to this position cannot automatically be defined as having agency. Mahmood points out that women's agency is context-specific and it is therefore always necessary to consider women's specific social, political and religious beliefs. Also, to be able to understand women's involvement in terrorism it is necessary to let go of preconceived structures that define what 'being a women' is. If the term of agency is only measured by actions towards gender equality and resistance to male authority, other motivations and desires are left out and excludes individuals from being regarded as agents (209-12).

Therewith, Mahmood's theory resonates Auchter's argument that academic texts that attempt to inscribe women with agency might actually enforce patriarchal structures by affirming that men are violent while women are pacifistic and strive for Western emancipatory goals. This approach to agency leads scholars to perpetually rely on the existing binary framework that has contributed to the subjugation of women. They try to transform it in a tool that in the name of feminism can be used to achieve political emancipation to write agency into women. But as Auchter argues: "simply appropriating a framework as your own does not dissolve the problems that are inhere within the existing framework." Also, this approach represents a unitary conception of women, assuming that all women share a universal experience. (124-7). Neglecting the multiplicity of experiences that shape individual woman therefore leads to generalized representations and misconceptions of female agency.

### *Peacefully Violent*

In opposition to these victimizing media representations, there are in fact Dutch news articles that acknowledge the participation and autonomous will of women in terrorist organizations. For example, De Volkskrant in 2006 and 2007 paid attention to the profound role Dutch women play in terrorist organizations, mostly focusing on how they provide online propaganda for radical groups. Janny Groen and Annemieke Kranenberg quote terrorism expert Reuven Paz:

Striking is the rise of 'jihadi-feminism'. Paz: 'Internet-jihad is now an accepted form of jihad. Women can equally participate, from their own houses. They are very active in the translating and spreading of radical documents and making audiotapes (De Volkskrant 2007).

Also, De Volkskrant published an article in 2008 that states that women have protested against Al-Qaeda's refusal to take them up as fighters. In contrast, De Telegraaf (2014b) paid attention to ISIS who does have a female 'police-brigade', who are using violence. The women of this Al-Khansaa brigade work as a morality police that controls women on their dress and public behavior and take women who do not conform to prison and torture them themselves. Also, the website Nu.nl published an article in 2015 on the prosecution of a French women who was accused of planning a suicide attack.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, there are some articles that explicitly address the fact that the role of women is highly underexplored. While these articles contribute to raising awareness about the involvement of women in terrorism, the representations remain highly gendered. In De Volkskrant (2015a) Marjon Bolwijn refers to criminologist Alette Smeulers, who argues that the role of women in conflict situations is consistently neglected. Smeulers' arguments are problematic because they are posed in a way that reaffirms the dichotomy between masculinity and femininity. Stating that 'women are no better than men' and 'women conduct the same atrocities as men', the article reiterates violence as a male characteristic. PowNed (2015a) does the same referring to this article on their website and state that women can be 'just as cruel as men' in conflict situations.<sup>9</sup> Also, in an article for NRC Handelsblad (2012) Beatrice de Graaf calls for the acknowledgement of the role of women in terrorist violence, while simultaneously downplaying women's actions by stating that they are 'the instruments of men.'

Similarly, another group of articles acknowledges the women's violence while at the same time reaffirming stereotypical notions of femininity. De Volkskrant reported on women of the Free Syrian Army in 2013 and on the Kurdish women of the Peshmerga in 2015(c). These women take up arms against groups that are largely seen as terrorist and are perceived as more emancipated in Western terms than the women of Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra and IS. Despite their use of violence, these women are portrayed rather positively because they are regarded as pursuing progressive goals. The titles of these articles resonate this idea: 'Strong Women Are the Terror of

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<sup>8</sup> <<http://www.nu.nl/buitenland/4188406/vrouw-met-nepbuik-in-frankrijk-beschuldigd-van-terrorisme.html>>

<sup>9</sup>

<[http://www.powned.tv/nieuws/raar/2015/04/vrouwen\\_in\\_oorlog\\_ook\\_gemeen.html](http://www.powned.tv/nieuws/raar/2015/04/vrouwen_in_oorlog_ook_gemeen.html)>

Jihadists' (2015c) and 'We Are Better Fighters' (2013). Still, the representations of these violent - but perceived as emancipated - women are not strikingly different from those of women who are perceived to be terrorists. The Syrian and Kurdish militant women are reduced to normalized ideals of femininity and emphasize the rational/emotional dichotomy between men and women: 'Women fight from their feelings, which makes it easier for them than for men (2013).' They for example also mention revenge for the loss of family members as these women's main motivation, which assigns women's drives merely to their emotions. Algemeen Dagblad (2005) provides the most striking example of the patriarchal representation of femininity. In this article women are directly equated with peacefulness by stating that women can play a key role in the fight against terror. The article builds on the argument that women are naturally more peaceful and communicate more efficiently. Women are thus posed as the ideal tool for resolving conflicts. Whether or not women indeed do contribute to the fight against terror, it is important to stay away from universalization by stating that women are 'naturally peaceful'. The above-mentioned articles acknowledge women's active roles in conflict situation, but only in their socially prescribed 'natural' role as peacekeepers. Whether it is as a freedom fighter or as a negotiator these articles resonate traditional constructions of femininity that maintain an exclusive dichotomy between men and women.

### *Violent and Sexy*

As a final point, it is important to discuss the depictions of women's violence and terrorism wherein the focus on sexuality is central. Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry argue in "Reduced to Bad Sex" (2008) that violent women are often stereotyped as sexually deviant (5-6). Sjoberg and Gentry point out that by reducing violent women to their sexuality the responsibility for their actions is removed from them:

In these stories, women are not terrorists and violent criminals but sexually disturbed – or, worse, sexual victims. An unhealthily strong sexual drive or sexual deviance and dependence are seen as root causes of female violence. Given the link between sex and women's violence, a woman is not responsible for her violent actions because she is compelled to them by a combination of sexual instinct and victimization (7).

Representing female terrorists as sexually deviant thus serves to explain away her violent actions and reaffirm the stereotype of women as victims. Sjöberg and Gentry illustrate that women's violence is often explained through her inability to find a husband, homosexuality, and failure to have children: "Women, unable or unwilling to please men, become emotionally disturbed and translate this emotional trouble into violence (10)." These women are represented as flawed in their femininity and connote that their failure to fulfill their 'natural' roles as wives and mothers leads them to violent acts. Tiina Mäntymäki, Anna Foka and Marinella Rodi-Risberg (2015) and Caroline Enberg (2015) argue the same stating that female sexuality is systematically linked with evil. Characterizing violent women as 'unwomanly' makes sure she is not accountable. Instead, her acts are explained through external factors like bad socialisation or flawed biology. She is again perceived as a victim, keeping traditional ideas of passive, peaceful women in tact (138-44). An example of a pervasive cinematic figure that has been connected to evil is the femme fatale. The highly sexualized femme fatale is still present in contemporary cinematic representations and is characterized by certain unease. Mary Ann Doane describes her in *Femmes Fatales. Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (1991):

She harbors a threat that is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable. In thus transforming the threat of the woman into a secret, something which must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered (1).

The threatening and complex femme fatale is according to Doane a manifestation of uncontrollable drives and represents sexual difference and consequently male fears. Therefore she is often punished or killed (1-2). This cinematic figure can be connected to the representations of female violence that characterize violent women as sexually deviant. Her deviance can be explained through her disconnectedness from traditional femininity and therefore does not interfere with stereotypical female passivity.

To illustrate, an article by Bart Olmer in *De Telegraaf* (2014a) conveys this sexualized stereotype in an article about a Dutch girl who radicalized. The article portrays how she used to dress sexy, but eventually started wearing the veil and moved to Syria. A quote by a neighbor enforces a highly sexualized image of this girl: 'At first I thought she was a prostitute.' Also, the article claims that she and many

others have travelled to Syria for so called ‘pleasure’ marriages with jihadists. The radicalized girls are portrayed as contributing to the jihad as sexworkers. This article also portrays the frame that women who engage in terrorism do so because of psychological problems. The motivations for women to support terrorist groups are thereby not only generalized, these women are also characterized as deviant from ‘normal’ femininity. Representing these women as flawed reduces the social impact of their violence. Sjoberg and Gentry argue that these representations create the idea that: “they are not really women at all but some sexually deviant and perverse beings from whom violence is to be expected, even though real women are not violent (14).”

Additionally, the same applies when it involves motherhood. In a report on a British woman who has been prosecuted for joining IS the NOS (2016) foregrounds her identity as a mother.<sup>10</sup> More importantly, the article connotes that she is a bad mother: ‘during her stay in Syria the women regularly posted pictures of her son on social media. In these pictures the toddler is holding an IS sign and a machinegun (2016).’ So, instead of going into her radical ideas the article creates a dichotomy between her and traditional femininity and motherhood in order to try and explain her deviant behavior. PowNed (2015b) does the same in their coverage on Western women joining IS.<sup>11</sup> They express concerns about the children these women take to Syria where ‘they will grow up in an environment of hate and violence.’ Emphasizing the flawed maternal identity of terrorist women draws attention away from the fact that women can in fact be radical and violent. Merely focusing on their supposed deviancy obscures the deeper understanding of these women’s lives and motivations.

## Empowerment Through Radicalisation

The extensive focus on men as oppressors and the obscuring of women’s agency leads to a biased conception of terrorist violence. Continuously underestimating the involvement of women creates a one-sided narrative that fails to address the complexity of the matter. It is my objective here to investigate alternative stories that

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<sup>10</sup> <<http://nos.nl/artikel/2084265-eerste-vrouwelijke-syrieganger-veroordeeld-in-engeland.html>>

<sup>11</sup>

<[http://www.powned.tv/nieuws/binnenland/2015/09/zorgen\\_om\\_jihadmoeders.html](http://www.powned.tv/nieuws/binnenland/2015/09/zorgen_om_jihadmoeders.html)>

might provide a different view of the engagement of women in terrorist violence. This chapter encourages the consideration of the multiple experiences of women involved in terrorism and opens up a debate about these women's political engagement.

The Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has published the report '*Till Martyrdom Do Us Part. Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon* (2015) by Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith. The institute runs the largest database on Western women joining IS, which is meant to fill the blind spot in research about women and terrorism. They try to uncover the motivations for women to join IS and the roles they play within it through women's social media accounts and direct contact with (ex-) extremists<sup>12</sup> In their report Saltman and Smith acknowledge that the roles of women in terrorist organisations are widely misunderstood. They try to deconstruct the one-dimensional idea that radicalized women simply serve as 'jihadi brides'. The report illustrates that this frame is reductionist and above all incorrect. Saltman and Smith do argue that women's roles within IS are first and foremost as wives and mothers, but they are also perceived to play more crucial roles in for example state-building processes and spreading propaganda (4-7).

Moreover, the ISD report addresses the diverse motivations for women to join IS. They argue that a lot of these women see it as their religious duty to create a Muslim state and strongly believe in the utopian Islamic caliphate. Also, feelings of community, belonging and sisterhood can according to them be pull factors, especially for Muslim women from Western societies (13-6). In a manifesto by the Al-Khansaa brigade the critique on the West and a sense of religious duty comes to the fore as well. In a translation and analysis of this proclamation by Charlie Winter, *Women of the Islamic State. A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khansaa Brigade* (2015), the ideological purpose of the IS Caliphate is enunciated clearly: "the West's obsession with studying "the brain cells of crows, grains of sand and fish arteries" is deemed a distraction from the fundamental purpose of humanity – to worship God (7)." The Al-Khansaa women argue that to maintain their shared focus on God the traditional division between male and female is necessary and "allows women to be better Muslims." Women are therefore predominantly responsible for domestic duties, but instead of perceiving their role as oppressive these women in fact see it as a valuable contribution to building and maintaining the Caliphate (7-9). While women's

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<sup>12</sup> <<http://www.strategicdialogue.org/policy-work/>>

lives under IS ruling predominantly seem to be restricted, their significance cannot be underestimated:

It is always preferable for a woman to remain hidden and veiled, to maintain society from behind this veil. This, which is always the most difficult role, is akin to that of a director, the most important person in a media production, who is behind the scenes organising (22).

This statement by the women of Al – Khansaa illustrates that women value their domestic roles and experience their position as being the orchestrators of the organisation. Erin Marie Saltman & Ross Frenett also emphasize this in “Female Radicalization to ISIS and the Role of Women in CVE (2016).” They investigated women’s engagement in terrorism, also through the ISD database. They acknowledge as well that women predominantly take up domestic tasks, but they claim it is a glorified role. It is seen as a spiritual contribution to the Islamic utopia and not experienced as a limited or oppressed position (150).

### *The Politics of Domestic Duties*

As the narratives of women involved in IS that are captured in the ISD database show; the idea that women’s traditional domestic roles are merely a private matter and are experienced as restrictive might not always be a reality. The Dutch organization for counterterrorism, Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid (NCTV), supports the claim that in their role as mothers and wives, women’s state-building contributions are perceived as very significant. In an interview I held with an analyst from the NCTV (interview A) it has become clear that women are increasingly contributing to terrorist organizations.<sup>13</sup> In the case of IS, the analyst claims that the number of Western women travelling to Syria has grown exponentially, especially since the proclamation of the so-called caliphate. According to her women first and foremost play an important role in the ideological education of children, but they are also very fanatical in spreading the ideology in the form of

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<sup>13</sup> The interviewee analyses information about terrorist organizations in media and beyond. She also collects intelligence from closed sources like the police, the ministries, the Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst and the armed forces. The interviewee can therefore offer valuable insights into the role of women in terrorist organisations.

propaganda:

These women are not the caricatures you see in the media. They are not brainwashed, they are in fact very strong agents and are also known to be the instigators of the radicalization of both other women and men (Interview A: 31-3-2016).

The interviewee points out that women involved in terrorism do not always fit the stereotypical images of victims that we are faced with, but often are strongly committed to the radical ideology of these groups. It is striking that while the 'caliphate' is not the utopia a lot of these women expected, they still continue to spread propaganda about 'the great life' in Syria. As stated in *Leven bij ISIS, de mythe ontrafeld* (2016) by Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst (AIVD), IS promises proper housing, but in reality this is often not the case. Also, the quality of healthcare is very poor (10-1). However, according to the analyst from the NCTV women keep propagandizing the caliphate because they are holding on to their beliefs:

They feel like the hardships in the caliphate are trials they have to go through; they are being tested, but they hold on to the faith that the paradise will come as long as they build it together (Interview A).

The interviewee explains that women keep promoting the caliphate because they will never openly criticize the Islamic state they so firmly believe in. Additionally, she points out that the radical ideology of terrorist groups in fact serves as a way to enlarge women's' autonomous domain. It gives them a sense of belonging:

They get the chance to lecture others, especially their parents. Young people feel like they finally know more about the 'true' Islam than them. Following the ideology gives them the opportunity to create their own future instead of being a passive bystander. It therefore actually is experienced as empowering by young women (interview A).

By stating that the involvement in terrorism can be empowering the NCTV analyst disrupts the stereotype that terrorist groups like IS are directly oppressive to women. In addition, the ISD report by Saltman and Smith (2015) provides evidence of the fact that women have other motivations than merely becoming a passive 'jihadi bride.' The report offers an example of a female IS recruiter who claims to encourage women who want to migrate to IS controlled territory to critically interrogate their own

motivations. The recruiter urges women to only join IS when they feel it is their religious obligation. She explains that women will face many difficulties living in the caliphate, which requires patience and persistence and it will probably not meet the expectations of women who merely migrate for marriage (42). Subsequently, the stereotypes of the peaceful nature of women can be debunked as well. Saltman and Frennet state that IS women are not soft and moderate. In fact, they supposedly celebrate the violence that IS uses. Also, the AIVD argues that although women primarily do not take up arms, they do get training in the use of weapons and suicide vests. On top of that, they state that the women of the Al-Khansaa brigade themselves carry out corporal punishments like whipping (8-9).

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that these are just a few examples of the complex factors that play a role in women's motivations to engage in terrorism. Although ideological female contributions to terrorist organisations and the building of an Islamic state are seemingly highly valued, we cannot forget the restrictions these women live under and the violence that affects them. These reports are merely used here to point out that women's experiences of their role in terrorist organisations might differ from the stereotypical ideas of 'jihadi brides' and non-agents and might engage in violence out of conviction. In no way am I suggesting here that these women do not face hardships like (sexual) violence on a daily basis, but it is important to recognize the social and political contexts that inform women's individual experiences.

### *Deconstructing the Public/Private Dichotomy*

Knowledge about the involvement of women in terrorist organisations is very limited, but the information offered by the ISD and NCTV point out that the lived realities of these women are more nuanced than often portrayed in media and academic work. Theorizing about the involvement of women in terrorism requires looking beyond dominant narratives and taking the social and political context of women into account.

An interview I held with Dutch-Turkish journalist Sinan Can (interview B) offers an interesting example of how dominant ideas about women in terrorism might

change when we move away from a narrow perception of female agency.<sup>14</sup> In his documentary *De Arabische Storm* (2016) he has very personal encounters with civilians from Syria, Libya and Iraq. These narratives offer very human stories about the chaos in their countries, their grief, but also stories of hope. During the interview Can emphasizes the importance of exploring and learning about a society by living amongst them as a civilian. During our conversation it became clear that this approach gave him a lot of insights into the societies he studied. Also, he expresses a strong opinion about terrorist groups and explicitly makes a distinction between jihadists from the West and those from Syria and its surrounding countries:

Men from the neighbouring areas travel to Syria to join IS for numerous of reasons, but they are mainly economic. They have no future in their home countries. The boys from Holland that travel to Syria are all idiots. They are misfits and have no idea what they are doing. Fighting for the jihad gives them status, so they join IS and post pictures on the Internet of themselves holding machineguns. They are just thrill seekers (interview B: 14-3-2016).

Because Can has personally seen and heard the stories of the hardships people face in the countries he visited, he portrays a very different view of those who join IS because they feel like they have no other option to build a life as opposed to people from the West “who should know better” (interview B). When it comes to Western women he expresses the same view. He shares an example of an Italian woman who, according to him, was brainwashed with radical ideas. The woman was supposedly convinced by IS jihadists to kill her husband in his sleep because he did not pray enough. Thereby he reinforces the stereotype that women conducting violence do so under pressure of men. He does not address other motivations for her use violence.

Additionally, his argument that a lot of Syrian women are very ‘emancipated’ is also problematic. For him, the indicator that women are emancipated is seeing many women participate in public life. This trail of thought can be related to the public/private split. He reiterates the dichotomy between a male-centred public and a feminine private. Can makes the assumption here that when women move from their traditional assigned place in the private sphere to the public they are emancipated. Also, he describes a woman he met in Syria as a ‘proper feminist’, partly because of

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<sup>14</sup> Can worked as a research journalist in the countries addressed in this thesis. Therefore, his experiences and thoughts regarding terrorist organisations and the involvement of women are used here as an example of how traditional ideas of male and female roles might affect ones observations.

the fact that she does not wear a veil in public. As argued before, there is no universal female experience and therefore not wearing a veil or participating in public life cannot uncritically be understood as an emancipatory practice. On top of that, because he assumes that a lot of women in the areas he visited are emancipated, he finds it very hard to believe that women would willingly join an organisation like IS wherein women are thought to be inferior. In this interview, Can thus articulates the narrow view of agency that Auchter and Mahmood criticize by defining the concept merely as striving for emancipatory goals in strictly Western terms. These are exactly the ideas that I am trying to deconstruct. Do the women who Can perceives as emancipated actually experience their positions as such? Also, are only the women who move away from religious traditions like wearing the veil agents? It is again important to stress here that practices that from a Western point of view are deemed oppressive are not necessarily experienced as such by Muslim women. As Can speaks from his own experiences in Syria, Libya and Iraq my objective here is not to claim that his observations are false. Instead, this interview illustrates the importance of acknowledging the multiplicity of women's narratives.

Contrastingly, while Can argues that there are no 'emancipated' women within IS, he does acknowledge that some women do take up a more active position within terrorist organisations. He refers to the Al-Khansaa Brigade, which is according to him a very high position for women. He claims that these are only Syrian and Iraqi women because they are deemed more trustworthy then Western women. He thinks the Al-Khansaa women radicalized because: "when you are living in fear for such a long time and had a subordinate position for generations long, you eventually become senseless (interview B)." Again, he fails to take into account women's political and religious motivations to engage in terrorist violence. By explaining these women's violence through their supposed senselessness he characterizes these women as deviants. They are not 'normal' women but 'damaged' women. It is interesting how throughout the interview the more I asked Can about women involved in the organisation, the more he began to question his initial ideas about their position within IS. He started to acknowledge that there is incredibly little known about these women and how the organization is structured. He realized there might be much more to uncover about these women:

It would be very interesting to get to know more about the organisation structure within IS. We certainly should not underestimate the role of women. I think there are indeed women that contribute a lot to the organization. It is in fact known that they can be the drivers of the ideology (interview B).

This comment shows how Can started to challenge the conception that women in terrorist organisations are merely oppressed subjects. Can became more aware of how obscured the roles of women actually are and that we cannot make assumptions on preconceived structures of femininity. Acknowledging the lack of knowledge about the contributions of women in terrorist organisations opens up a space to start thinking about their possible positions:

Women might just be the ones that determine the structure of the whole organization. They could be the core of IS; who secures the cities when the men are out to fight? And who manages the infrastructure and the distribution of food? And how about the stories you hear about female doctors (interview B)?

It is important to ask questions like these, especially when there is so much uncertainty about the role women play in these communities. These are questions that can open up space for alternative narratives to the stereotypical views that characterize Western thinking about Muslim societies. Also, these are exactly the kind of questions that do more justice to women's agency. It shows how the supportive roles that women carry out are very valuable to an organisation like IS. Being open to seeing women as the orchestrators of the society counters the idea that women are merely suppressed and consequently deconstructs the dichotomy between the private and the public. In their private/domestic roles women do in fact contribute to ideological and political ideals.

## Conclusion

In this research I have looked at the representations of women involved in terrorist violence in order to uncover gendered structures that resonate in contemporary society. As terrorism and violence are highly gendered concepts, the narratives of women involved in terrorist organisations prove to be problematic in both media and scholarly work. My media analysis has shown that women are denied agency and portrayed in positions that resonate patriarchal beliefs - that originate from the public/private split. This research therefore aimed to look beyond gendered conceptions that limit the understanding of female agency and the drives of individual women.

Investigating the public/private dichotomy through a gendered lens shows how this split creates an opposition between the roles of men and women. In this traditional model men inhabit the public sphere and are identified with cultural progression. Women on the other hand are perceived to be closer to nature and are confined to the private, domestic domain. This leads to the exclusion of women from the public and therefore the political sphere. Consequently, this model proscribes what a woman should be; she is a nurturer who is naturally peaceful. Women who step outside this opposed position, by engaging in a political act like terrorist violence, threaten this traditional model. As violence is dominantly gendered male, studying women who engage in violence can contribute to rethinking the dichotomy between male and female role divisions.

The media analysis in this thesis serves to uncover the constructed notions of gender that are pervasive in contemporary Dutch society. First of all, the portrayals of women as victims of terrorism are dominant. They are proscribed to be peaceful and therefore non-violent. The women that do conduct terrorist violence are represented as persuaded and brainwashed by men. Second, the representations of women involved in terrorist organisations retain the gender status quo by portraying them in traditional roles as nurturers. Also, in order to explain away female violence, the women that do use violence are portrayed as deviants. They are perceived as psychologically unstable in order to distance them from 'normal' femininity. Third, the differences between the representations of men and those of women are striking. While there are portrayals of radicalized men that focus on their political and ideological motives, women's drives are mostly perceived to be irrational. Women

and men thus remain captured in a dichotomy that deems men to be rational while women are supposedly driven by emotion.

Consequently, these frames deprive women of agency and fail to explore the political and ideological motivations for women to engage in terrorism. This is not only the case in media representations, but also in academics. Both misrepresent women and their actions because they adopt a too narrow understanding of agency. Scholarly work on women and terrorism often tries to inscribe women with agency, but in doing so they rely on a strict agent/victim dichotomy. In this model, agents are those women who oppose patriarchal beliefs. The women that do not conform to this idea are immediately deemed non-agents. Consequently, only women that are perceived to strive for Western emancipatory ideals are identified as agents. This strict binary prohibits a full understanding of women's individual motivations and will continue to generalise women's experiences.

For this reason, it is important to open up space for alternative narratives by exploring the lived experiences of women involved in terrorism. Especially when there is an incredible lack of knowledge about these women's lives it is necessary to look beyond dominant stereotypes. The reports by The Institute of Strategic Dialogue, Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid and Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst offer some insights into the lives of women in IS territory. They illustrate how women are not only victims and they deconstruct the 'jihadi bride' stereotype. These reports demonstrate that some women do turn to radical groups out of conviction. Also, they confirm that women who from a Western point of view are regarded as oppressed do not automatically experience their position as such. In their domestic and supportive roles some women actually feel empowered and play a pivotal role in the state-building process of the Islamic Caliphate. In addition, the interview I held with Sinan Can shows that raising awareness about gendered constructions is essential in countering stereotypes and the exploration of alternative narratives. Deconstructing the stereotypical agent/victim dichotomy is thus necessary in order to do justice to women's individual motives and experiences.

In conclusion, this thesis looks beyond the strict public/private split and encourages to move towards a more inclusive model that does not rely on stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity. The focus on women and terrorist violence illustrates how the continuous reliance on this dichotomous model leads to misconceptions of women and their actions. As both media and academics often rely

on a narrow definition of female agency they uphold a strict agents/victim dichotomy that does not do justice to the individuality of women. It is important to disrupt the traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity to be able to gain understanding of women's diverse experiences. Through studying the representations of women and terrorism this research raises awareness of how gendered conceptions continue to structure dominant ideas about male and female roles in society in general. Additionally, this analysis offers a stepping-stone for rethinking the concept of female agency. For further research it is interesting to investigate the representations of women in other public positions, like female politicians and activist. This might offer a valuable contribution to further deconstructing the gendered public/private split that affects more than just the perceptions of women and terrorist violence.

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## Appendix

### *Interviews*

#### **Analyst at Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid (anonymous). Personal interview. 31 March 2016.**

This interviewee is an analyst at the Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, part of the Dutch Ministry of Safety and Justice. This department determines the levels of (terrorist) threat and makes national threat assessments. She predominantly focuses on op Libya, Egypt, Tunisia and interior jihadism and salafism. I spoke with her at the NCTV office at the Ministry of Safety and Justice about the role of women in radicalization and terrorism and if the NCTV takes the contributions of women into account in their threat assessments.

#### **Can, Sinan. Personal Interview. 14 March 2016.**

Sinan Can is a Dutch-Turkish research journalist and made the documentary *De Arabische Storm* (2016). In this documentary he travels through several countries - including Syria, Libya and Iraq - collecting personal stories of the revolution, the chaos that followed and the emergence of IS. He interviews local civilians, activists and young men who are thinking about joining IS due to economic reasons and families who have lost their sons who fought for terrorist groups. Can shows the hardships of people living in conflict situations and provides a nuanced view of the attraction of radical groups for people who have lost everything and have lived under a dictatorship for many years. I met with him in a Starbucks in Nijmegen where he told me about his experiences during his travels and the people he encountered. Most striking about this interview is our discussion about the involvement of women in terrorism and how it made him rethink his assumptions about their motivations and roles.