

**Unveiling the gendered narratives in the Dutch public discourse surrounding (returned)
female ISIS fighters**

Date: 29-12-2023

Word count 17.217 (1988 citation)



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Master thesis

MA: Conflict Studies and Human Rights

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“This is not to say that we dream of a world where all women are allowed to engage in suicide bombings and incite genocides. We dream of a world where no one does those things. Until that happens, however, idealized notions of femininity which trap (any) women into an idealized role based on gender are a threat to, if not a reversal of, the ‘rising tide’ of gender equality.”¹

¹ R. Inglehart, and P. Norris, *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change around the World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003). In Caron E. Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Thinking about Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2015), 23.

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Unveiling the gendered narratives in the Dutch public discourse surrounding (returned) female ISIS fighters



Image 1: The Guardian, The all-female al-Khansaa ISIS police brigade in Syria. Photograph: unknown/Syriadeeply.org <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/23/number-of-women-and-children-joining-isis-significantly-underestimated>

Abstract

This study examines how the Dutch public discourse framed female foreign fighters of ISIS utilizing gendered stereotypes. In particular, the gendered narratives developed by Sjoberg, Gentry, and Schmidt; the mother, monster, whore, and (stupid) victim are used to explore whether and how gendered stereotypes influenced the framing of these women. Gendered narratives offer a simplification to describe and comprehend the world utilizing prescribed gender assumptions on how men and women are expected to act during conflict. Women are therefore not seen as violent actors and are viewed as passive victims and mothers in need of saving. When examining the agency of the foreign fighters of ISIS women had multiple roles and were of great significance in facilitating the jihad of ISIS. However, the Dutch public discourse used gendered narratives to describe their roles in the Caliphate which deprives these women of their agency. It is relevant to acknowledge how gendered narratives shape our thinking for the sake of transitional justice, gender equality, and better security- and reintegration plans.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the summer of 2016, a woman with two small children appeared on the horizon on the border of the Islamic State and the Kurdish region. She waved a white cloth in the air, caught in a no man's land and running for her life towards the Peshmerga troops. Somehow she survived and Laura H. from 'Sweet Lake City' (*Zoetermeer*) became global news. She was the woman who fled the Islamic State after she was abducted by her husband. At least that is what she told the Peshmerga. Laura H. a young Dutch woman who had a troubled youth and later converted to Islam was one of the first and most famous returned foreign fighters in the Netherlands.² Upon her arrival in Amsterdam, the narrative surrounding her story changed from portraying her as a survivor who escaped from ISIS to depicting her as a possible threat to national security. Laura H. was being prosecuted because they thought she might be released from ISIS to commit a terrorist attack in the Netherlands. Her story was, after all, somewhat unbelievable since she escaped in clear daylight. Laura H. then became a potential perpetrator and was convicted for two years in jail.³

1.1 Female fighters of ISIS and the Dutch public discourse

Since the Syrian civil war, the terrorist group Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) experienced many territorial victories. In June 2014, the leader of ISIS Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, called out a new Caliphate. From that moment on many Muslim men and women performed the *hijra* (migration) to the new Islamic State (IS) to live under *sharia* (Islamic) law.⁴ In 2015 it was estimated that 550 European women traveled to the Islamic State, this is probably between 10% and 20% of the total foreign fighters who joined ISIS.⁵ The International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) stated that since 2012 almost three hundred Dutch citizens moved to Syria and Iraq, according to the ICCT a third of them were female.⁶ The Dutch State does not have an active policy regarding the repatriation of the women and children who stayed in the Kurdish camps since the military and territory defeat of ISIS.⁷ This has caused a debate in the

² Thomas Rueb, *Laura H.: Het kalifaat meisje uit Zoetermeer* (Das Mag Uitgevers, Amsterdam, 2019).

³ Rueb, *Laura H.*,

⁴ AIVD, *Leven bij ISIS, de mythe ontrafeld*, (January 2016) 3-7.

⁵ Elena Pokalova, *Returning Islamist foreign fighters: threats and challenges to the West*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 166.

⁶ Tanya Mehra, "The Repatriation of Five Women and Eleven Children from Syria: A Turning Point in the Netherlands?" (February 11, 2022), <https://www.icct.nl/publication/repatriation-five-women-and-eleven-children-syria-turning-point-netherlands>.

⁷ Hanne Cuyckens, "De repatriëring van Nederlandse Syriëgangers: Een verplichting voor de staat van oorsprong?" *Justitiële verkenningen* 48, no. 3 (2022): 46.

Netherlands on the question of what to do with these Dutch women who want to return to the Netherlands. Subsequently, this also led to a debate on what their role and agency was within the Caliphate. The story of Laura H. reflects the public debate in the Netherlands.⁸ These women went, sometimes under force, to the Islamic State. Some believe that these women were victims, compelled to live under ISIS by their husbands or male relatives.⁹ These women are frequently presented as ‘jihad brides’ with no agency and focus on the personal objectives that led them to want to live in the Caliphate. Others emphasize the possible danger these radicalized women might cause for national security and frame these women as evil militant fighters.¹⁰ Thus, women are framed as naïve girls who followed their great love, women who are even more radical than their husbands, or women who ‘accidentally’ ended up in the Caliphate. According to the Dutch intelligence agency, AIVD, the reporting about jihadist women is dominated by stereotypes.¹¹ Evidently, these women are frequently framed through a dichotomy, as either victims or perpetrators. The narratives surrounding Laura H. demonstrate how these perspectives can be attributed to the same individual.¹²

The discussions in the public discourse regarding the agency of female ISIS fighters during their time in the Islamic State reflect the common portrayal of female agency in violent conflict. This thesis will therefore examine the question: How did the Dutch public discourse frame the agency of Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS, in particular those who returned to the Netherlands, between 2014 and 2022, utilizing gendered narratives? The decision to study the public discourse between 2014 and 2022 can be justified because the number of women traveling to Syria and Iraq grew following al-Baghdadi’s call to jihad in 2014.¹³ Furthermore, as of today (December 2023), there are still women living in Kurdish camps, generating a public debate about their position inside the Caliphate. As a result, the decision was made to analyze the most recent and complete sources.

1.2 Methodology

Women’s agency during violent conflict is a topic that is frequently dismissed or downplayed due to gender stereotypes. Women are viewed as caring, peaceful, loving creatures and thus

⁸ The public debate in the Netherlands centered around female foreign fighters since men were less likely to return because there was a higher chance of getting killed on the battlefield. Or they were already imprisoned in Syria or Iraq.

⁹ A. Navest, M. de Koning, and A. Moors, “Jihadbruiden? Hoe Nederlandstalige uitreizigsters naar Syrië trouwen,” *ZemZem* 14, no. 1 (2018): 148-158.

¹⁰ Navest, de Koning, and Moors, “Jihadbruiden?” 148-158.

¹¹ AIVD, “*Jihadistische vrouwen, een niet te onderschatten dreiging*,” November 17, 2017, 2.

¹² Rueb, *Laura H.*

¹³ AIVD, *Leven bij ISIS, de mythe ontrafeld*, 6.

frequently depicted as victims of conflict, whereas men are viewed as aggressive perpetrators.¹⁴ Due to the gendered assumptions, women are often perceived as passive actors in violent conflict, lacking agency. Nonetheless, multiple studies, predominantly conducted by feminist scholars, argue that women can have significant influence during violent conflict. Women actively participate in civil wars, insurgencies, and Islamist terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS.¹⁵ However, women's agency is not always acknowledged throughout society when we examine how women are portrayed in the narratives surrounding their involvement in conflict.

It is important to delve into the current body of literature on gender theories and how conflict is gendered to acquire insight into the phenomenon of gendered stereotypes in violent conflict and their influence on public discourses. Chapter two of this study will, therefore, undertake an examination of the theoretical framework that underlies gender stereotypes in violent conflicts and its role in shaping public narratives that try to explain female agency within conflict. Subsequently, the commonly used gendered narratives in conflict will be illuminated. These are the (stupid) victim, mother, monster, and whore narrative. The first narrative is the (stupid) victim narrative, developed by Rachel Schmidt, which deprives women of their agency in conflict focusing on their victimhood and addressing their stupid and naïve behavior which got them involved. The mother, monster, and whore narrative are lenses developed by Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, two well-known conflict scholars who applied a feminist lens to conflict studies. They argue that female agency in violent conflict can be explained because of their biological need to support others, mother. Or their biological dysfunction which explains their violent, yet irrational behavior, monster. And the whore narrative will explain female agency due to their sexual dependence, depravity, or sexual slavery of men.¹⁶ These narratives will later be applied to examine the Dutch public discourse regarding (returned) female foreign fighters of ISIS to see how their agency was framed.

The third chapter will examine the question: What was the involvement and significance of women in the Caliphate? To answer this question the chapter will give some descriptive and historical background of ISIS. Moreover, it will examine the role and agency of women within the Caliphate. It appears that women had more supporting roles which meant that they were supposed to stay at home being supporting wives and mothers. However, women were also

¹⁴ Caron E. Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Thinking about Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2015), 1-26. Cynthia Enloe, "All the Men Are in the Militias, All the Women Are Victims: The Politics of Masculinity and Femininity in Nationalist Wars," in *The Curious Feminist*, ed. Cynthia Enloe (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 99-118.

¹⁵ Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 1-26.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 1-26.

deployed to spread propaganda, recruit new members, guard the enslaved Yazidis, and police other women.¹⁷ It is important to have this knowledge to understand the discourses when referring, or not referring, to their agency within ISIS. Furthermore, the ongoing discussion on what to do with Dutch female foreign fighters who want to return to the Netherlands is highlighted as well.

The following chapter will try to answer the research question by examining how these female jihadists were framed in the Dutch public discourse by applying the lenses of Schmidt, Sjoberg, and Gentry; the (stupid) victim, mother, monster, and whore narrative. Since this study is conducting a discourse analysis multiple sources are analyzed. For instance, news (paper) articles, and televised interviews with Dutch returned female foreign fighters. In addition the comments on the interviews that were available on YouTube are also examined but to a lesser extent. Moreover, an academic article, a documentary episode, and parliamentary debates about Dutch female foreign fighters will be examined. Furthermore, three books will be analyzed: *De vrouwen van het kalifaat: Slavinnen, moeders en jihadbruiden* from a Dutch journalist, Judit Neurink¹⁸, the best-seller book of Thomas Rueb: *Laura H.*¹⁹ And *Kalifaat ontvluchters* by Marion van San, a scholar who works as senior researcher at Erasmus University.²⁰ These sources will provide a variety of different perspectives on how the public discourse framed the female foreign fighters of ISIS. These sources contain different perspectives of the women themselves as well as journalists, politicians, policymakers, academics, and a best-seller author. Moreover, these sources tell personal stories but also emphasize the broader theme of female agency within the Islamic State.

When analyzing conflict, it is crucial to be aware of the narratives that surround the conflict. Coming from a constructivist perspective, I argue that discourses are extremely important for generating violent conflict; people need to talk themselves into war.²¹ To understand conflict, you have to examine how discourses construct our world. This study is therefore based on qualitative research conducting a discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is the name given to a variety of different approaches to studying texts, languages, speeches, or other forms of communication. According to Rosalind Gill: “A discourse analysis is based on

¹⁷ Devorah Margolin and Joana Cook, *The Agency and Roles of Foreign Women in ISIS*, The Center for Justice and Accountability, August 2023, 19-33.

¹⁸ Judit Neurink, *De Vrouwen van het Kalifaat: Slavinnen, moeders and jihadbruiden* (Uitgeverij Jurgen Maas, Amsterdam, March 2021).

¹⁹ Rueb, Laura H.

²⁰ Marion van San, *Kalifaat Ontvluchters* (Prometheus, November 2019).

²¹ Ingo W. Schröder and Bettina Schmidt, “Introduction: Violent Imaginaries and Violent Practices” in *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*, London, and New York: Routledge, 2001, 15.

the notion that language is not simply a neutral means of reflecting or describing the world. Moreover, a discourse analysis is based on the conviction that discourses construct social life.”²² Discourses are thus constructed and influenced by social hierarchies and power structures. Lanchukorn Sriwimon and Pattamawan Jimarkon Zilli argue that discourses are embedded with the reproduction of ideology through language. Similar to discourses, gendered stereotypes are constructed and influenced by different power structures.²³ These gendered stereotypes are prevalent in discourses and result in the fact that certain minorities, for instance, female jihadists, can be ill-represented. These gendered stereotypes can be unveiled by conducting a qualitative discourse analysis.²⁴ Through this examination, the aim is to identify and scrutinize prevalent narratives, specifically those framing women into gender stereotypes such as the mother, monster, whore, and (stupid) victim.

1.3 Relevance

The relevance of highlighting the surrounding gendered narratives of Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS in the Dutch public discourse is threefold: gender equality, national security, and transitional (gender) justice.

First, it is relevant for the sake of gender equality. Chapter two will emphasize how the utilization of gendered narratives in conflict reinforces gender assumptions and leads to gender subordination. One of the important aspects of the definition of gender is that it is socially constructed. Sjoberg and Gentry argue that these gender narratives create an idealized image of masculinity and femininity that people never can live up to. Hence, it is important to create awareness regarding how these gendered assumptions can be found in all aspects of our lives, including the field of international relations and conflict. An increase in awareness of gender stereotypes could potentially construct more gender equality.²⁵ Moreover, feminist scholars like Cynthia Cockburn and Cynthia Enloe argue for more awareness of the experiences of women in violent conflict. Much attention is given to the experiences of women as victims, less attention is paid to the agency women had in violent conflict. These gendered narratives diminish the opportunity to provide a comprehensive understanding of violent conflict.²⁶ It is

²² Rosalind Gill, “Discourse Analysis,” in *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image, and Sound: A Practical Handbook*, ed. Martin W. Bauer and George Gaskell (Sage: London, 2000), 172-190.

²³ Lanchukorn Sriwimon and Pattamawan Jimarkon Zilli, “Applying Critical Discourse Analysis as a Conceptual Framework for Investigating Gender Stereotypes in Political Media Discourse,” *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 38 (2017): 136-142.

²⁴ Sriwimon and Jimarkon Zilli, “Applying Critical Discourse Analysis as a Conceptual Framework for Investigating Gender Stereotypes in Political Media Discourse,” 136-142.

²⁵ Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 1-26.

²⁶ MacKenzie, “Securitization and Desecuritization,” 241-261.

important to be aware of how these narratives shape our thinking and hide the part of conflict where women have agency based on political or ideological objectives. Men and women can both be perpetrators and victims in the same conflict. In addition, they can have agency and still be victims. Creating awareness of gender stereotypes in conflict can break this binary thinking and can create more gender equality.

Secondly, it is important to study gendered narratives for the sake of transitional (gender) justice. To obtain transitional justice it is important to pay attention to both victims and perpetrators. When female agency is not acknowledged in the retributive justice mechanisms this might impact the prosecution of female perpetrators.²⁷ Björkdahl and Selimovic speak about this in their article and state that not acknowledging female agency might create gender justice gaps. Many scholars plead for a more inclusive gender justice without discrimination in accessing legal systems, hence much focus is on the sexual and gender-based violence women experience during conflict. Yet, only including this part of women's experiences of conflict will create women's justice and not gender justice.²⁸ Creating awareness of how gendered narratives dismiss women's roles in violence might create more transitional (gender) justice.

Moreover, regarding the aspect of national security, Schmidt argues that:

“That is, women can be essential supporters of terrorist organizations without directly participating in violent attacks. But if law enforcement focuses primarily on attackers, where women are rare, they overlook the essential roles that women more commonly have in these groups—fundraising, logistical planning, indoctrinating children, or new members, gathering intelligence, and acquiring weapons and supplies.”²⁹

The last reason for the relevance of studying gendered narratives lies in the associated security risks. Depriving women of their agency by framing them as victims, mothers, monsters, or whores does not do justice to their role and involvement within the Caliphate. Diminishing female agencies can therefore create a security gap. If the part that women play in violent conflict is being downplayed, violent groups can take advantage of this. Moreover, proper deradicalization programs should be developed when these women return to the Netherlands. Therefore, policymakers of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency agencies need to be aware

²⁷ Alison, “Women as Agents of Political Violence,” 447-463.

²⁸ Annika Björkdahl and Johanna Selimovic, “Gendering Agency in Transitional Justice,” *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 2 (2015): 165–182.

²⁹ Schmidt, “*Duped: Examining Gender Stereotypes in Disengagement and Deradicalization Practices*,” 963.

of how gendered narratives shape our thinking into believing that women play a less important role in violent conflict, meanwhile, their role is extremely important.³⁰

1.4 Ethical challenges

Before delving into this, it is essential to address the ethical challenges related to studying the framing of the agency of female foreign fighters of ISIS. First, examining the agency of women might be generalizing. I am aware that every woman must have had a different experience during their time in the Islamic State. It is therefore important to be aware of the individual agency of these women, particularly during the prosecution.³¹ Moreover, this is a sensitive matter and the subject concerns people's real-life experiences and trauma, it is crucial to represent the role of women with as much respect and accuracy as possible. Each of these women has a unique journey that led them to the Caliphate, which should not be simplified in a narrative shaped by gender assumptions and stereotypes. Lastly, this study is centered around Muslim women living in the Caliphate, particularly the women who performed the *hijra* (migration). In addition, I am aware that other women, in particular Yazidi women, must have had a different experience, which should also be acknowledged and, fortunately, is a subject of other studies.

³⁰ Schmidt, "Duped: Examining Gender Stereotypes in Disengagement and Deradicalization Practices," 953-976.

³¹ Margolin and Cook, "The agency and Roles of foreign women in ISIS," 5.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

This chapter will provide a theoretical framework for understanding how conflict is gendered and how women's agency in conflict is explained using gendered narratives. Before delving into this, it is important to establish a comprehensive grasp of abstract concepts such as gender, and the role of gender in violent conflict.

2.1 What is gender?

When one examines the concept of gender, one striking element emerges: gender is socially constructed. Rather than being rooted in biological sexes, gender is a construct shaped by society and prevailing discourses.³² People have the need to simplify their surroundings and therefore gender norms serve as a framework for people trying to make sense of the world.³³ They hold preconceived assumptions about the characteristics and behaviors associated with being a man or a woman. As such, because it is socially constructed, it can evolve through the influence of changing narratives and discourses.³⁴

Another element of the definition of gender is the fact that gender contains a structure of power and reflects power relations in society. This indicates that gender is relational, specifically establishing a binary relation between men and women.³⁵ Throughout history and in contemporary society, there exists a gendered hierarchy, where women and femininity are positioned in a subordinate role compared to men and masculinity.³⁶ Having gender assumptions gives rise to gender stereotypes, whereby individuals are expected to conform to the prescribed societal norms associated with their biological sexes. These stereotypes are present in public discourses. As previously mentioned, these gender ideas are socially constructed and relational, and as a result, they also exert an impact on various aspects of daily life, including domestic, educational, occupational, and political spheres. This influence extends to global politics, international relations, and also conflicts. In gender stereotypes, women are frequently ignored in the global political arena, and their roles are downplayed and understudied.³⁷

³² Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 1-26.

³³ *Ibid*, 1-26.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 1-26.

³⁵ Although gender is much more than just the binary construction between male and female and it also includes thoughts on the LGBTQ+ community, in general when examining gender narratives in society most people think in the dichotomy of male and female characteristics.

³⁶ S. S. Deylami, "Saving the Enemy: Female Suicide Bombers and the Making of American Empire," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 15, no. 2 (2013): 177-194.

³⁷ Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 1-26.

In short, the definition of gender that will be utilized throughout this thesis is drawn from Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg's book 'Beyond Mothers, Monsters, and Whores: Thinking about Women's Violence in Global Politics.' Gender is defined as follows:

“Gender is a set of discourses which can set, change, enforce, and represent meaning on the basis of perceived membership in or relation to sex categories. Gender discourses, so defined, regulate global politics: in interstate relations, international development, and international security.”³⁸

2.2 Gender and violent conflict

Acknowledging that gender represents socially constructed power relations between characteristics ascribed to men and women, we can explore how conflict is gendered. An important notion from feminist scholars is that women experience conflict differently.³⁹ This is frequently overlooked when studying conflict and therefore women's experiences often form a blind spot. Therefore, it is usually these feminist scholars who argue that a gendered lens should be applied to studying conflict. For instance, Cockburn argues that we need to observe the functioning of gender as a relation of power that compounds other power dynamics. Therefore, to have a better understanding of conflict dynamics we need to apply a gendered lens.⁴⁰

As a result, feminist scholars mainly focused on the victimization of women's experiences and how their victimhood was ignored in post-conflict societies.⁴¹ Therefore, a significant amount of feminist scholars have tried to reveal this by focusing on gender-based and sexual violence. This, however, reinforces the gender stereotype of men being perpetrators and women being victims.⁴² Women are thus not seen as individuals with agency in conflict. Moreover, the notion of women as victims and men as perpetrators reinforces gendered hierarchies. Enloe, a well-recognized feminist scholar, writes about this phenomenon and developed the term militarized masculinity. Enloe argued that the characteristics of masculinity are acquired through military service during times of war. Therefore, men are seen as fighters and participants of war while women are embraced for their femininity during times of conflict.

³⁸ Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 4-5.

³⁹ Enloe, “All the Men Are in the Militias, All the Women Are Victims,” 99-118. Megan MacKenzie, “Securitization and Desecuritization: Female Soldiers and the Reconstruction of Women in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone,” *Security Studies* 18, no. 2 (2009): 241-261. Miranda Alison, “Women as Agents of Political Violence: Gendering Security,” *Security Dialogue* 35, no. 4 (December 2004): 447-463. Cynthia Cockburn, “The Continuum of Violence: A Gender Perspective on War and Peace,” in *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*, eds. Wendy Giles and Jillian Hyndman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 24-44.

⁴⁰ Cockburn, *The Continuum of Violence*, 24-44.

⁴¹ Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 1-26.

⁴² Schmidt, *Duped: Examining Gender Stereotypes in Disengagement and Deradicalization Practices*, 955-956.

This creates a dichotomy between men and women in society and the assumption of how they should act during conflict.⁴³

Thus feminist scholars argue that throughout society there is a gendered assumption that men make war and women make peace. Women are seen as naturally peaceful and have a perceived aversion to risk. Moreover, Megan MacKenzie mentions in her article that this stems from women's biological capacity to be mothers.⁴⁴ Women are life givers, not takers. Rachel Schmidt argued that these gender stereotypes underestimate the role of women perpetrators which causes gendered assumptions to be further reinforced. She stated in her article about gender stereotypes in the Counter Violent Extremism practices in the UK that:

“Unless women are specifically documented as combatants, many war and terrorism scholars do not consider women's roles seriously, writing them off as camp followers, ‘fan girls,’ supporters, or ‘jihadi brides’; or, more commonly, they do not mention women or gender at all.”⁴⁵

What happens when women engage in violent conflicts that challenge the previously defined gender assumptions? There is a need to explain how women can actively participate in political violence. According to Sjoberg and Gentry, particular narratives linked with prevailing gender stereotypes arise in public discourses to help people understand the phenomenon of women having agency in conflict.

2.3 Gendered narratives in violent conflict

The narratives often portray men as aggressive and women as passive, diminishing female agency. Schmidt, Sjoberg, and Gentry provide narratives to explain female participation in political violence. To be specific, the mother, monster, whore, and (stupid) victim narratives are used to explain female agency.

First, other narratives surrounding female agency in conflict are discussed. Shirin S. Deylami examined the phenomenon of female suicide bombers and how Western media wrote about this. She argued that the media often used narratives of victimization of these female perpetrators to justify the military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴⁶ She stated that these women were framed as in need of rescue since Islam was a religion of patriarchy. Besides the narrative of needing to be rescued these violent women were also framed as having Down syndrome, depression, or schizophrenia. All these narratives deprive women of their agency.

⁴³ Enloe, “All the Men Are in the Militias, All the Women Are Victims,” 99-118.

⁴⁴ MacKenzie, “Securitization and Desecuritization,” 241-261.

⁴⁵ Schmidt, Duped: Examining Gender Stereotypes in Disengagement and Deradicalization Practices,” 955.

⁴⁶ Deylami, “Saving the Enemy,” 177-194.

Deylami argued that women in general are framed as victims, in particular women of color and Muslim women, as a result they achieve a subaltern status in society and lack agency to act for themselves.⁴⁷

Brigitte Nacos wrote an article on how female politicians and -terrorists are often portrayed in the same manner within the media. Although her article was written before the emergence of ISIS you can see similarities with the gender stereotypes being used within the Dutch public discourse for female foreign fighters of ISIS. Nacos argued that the media used stereotypes because we cannot comprehend women in roles that societal norms and prejudice regard as intrinsically masculine, women as political leaders, and actors in violent conflict.⁴⁸ Nacos gave examples of the physical appearance frame, the family connection frame, the gender equality frame, and the tough-as-males frame. Nacos however argued that these frames are to a lesser extent used for describing female politicians. Yet, the usage of this type of framing is declining, while the gendered frames that the media used to describe female terrorists are persisting. In conclusion, Nacos argued that these frames are causing a real security problem since terrorist groups can take advantage of the fact that their women are not seen as a real threat since their lack of agency.⁴⁹ In this thesis the lenses of Nacos and Deylami are not deployed, only referred to, because the frames used in the Dutch discourse resonated more with the narratives developed by Schmidt, Sjoberg, and Gentry.

The most prominent gender stereotypes in the realm of gender and conflict studies are drawn from the works of scholars Sjoberg and Gentry in their book “Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics.” However, for this research, the revised and updated edition of their book, titled “Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores: thinking about women’s violence in global politics,” is employed. They argue, like the scholars above, that gender stereotypes are used to explain women’s participation in political violence. In their critical examination of the different narratives prevailing in conflict, they argued that the distinguishable mother, monster, and whore narrative are dominant. These narratives imply that women’s violence is different from men’s violence. Moreover, women’s violence is not conforming to the assumptions and characteristics of femininity and womanhood. With the mother, monster, and whore narrative biological or societal functions and -dysfunctions are emphasized which explains the violent, yet irrational behavior of women actors.

⁴⁷ Deylami, “Saving the Enemy,” 177-194.

⁴⁸ Brigitte L. Nacos, “The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media: Similar Framing Patterns in the News Coverage of Women in Politics and in Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005): 435-445.

⁴⁹ Nacos, “The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media”, 435-445.

“The mother narrative describes women’s violence as a need to belong, a need to nurture, and a way of taking care of and being loyal to men.”⁵⁰ In this context, women engaging in political violence are portrayed as being motivated not by political or ideological objectives but rather by their motivation stemming from the private realm. There are two categories in the mother narrative. First, the supporting and nurturing (good) mother. Within this narrative, women are seen as supporters of violence and mothers of new fighters. You often see this narrative within the field of terrorism. Second is the vengeful mother. This woman resorts to political violence out of revenge.⁵¹

The second narrative Sjoberg and Gentry introduce is the monster narrative. They state that: “The monster narrative eliminates rational behavior, ideological motivation, and culpability from women engaged in political violence. Instead, they describe violent women as insane, in denial of their femininity, and no longer women or human.”⁵² According to these narratives women resort to violence because of a biological flaw that undermines their femininity. Instead of being peaceful and nurturing these women kill and therefore something must be wrong with their womanhood. Unlike the mother narrative where women resort to violence because of their biological need to nurture, the monster narrative deprives women of their biological femininity. These women are framed as even more deadly and evil than men who committed the same crime because they also broke the code of what womanhood should entail.⁵³

The third and final narrative, according to Sjoberg and Gentry, is the whore narrative. They state that the whore narrative tries to explain women’s involvement in political violence and blames this on their dysfunctional sexuality. Within the whore narrative there are three possible explanations. The first is erotomania which means that women engaged in conflict have such a strong sexual desire that this articulates in committing violence. The second is the erotic dysfunction of women. Women are often framed by their capacity to have sex with men, when women do not have sex with men they can be framed as masculine or lesbians. It shows similarities with the monster narrative, but within the whore narrative the biological flaw is focused on the dysfunction of not having sex. The third option is sexual slavery. This refers to the fact that women are seen as sexual pawns and possessions of men. These women are then framed as naïve and not capable of thinking for themselves; therefore their men decide for them

⁵⁰ Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 70-92.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 70-92.

⁵² *Ibid*, 93-111.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 93-111

what to do.⁵⁴ An example of the sexual slavery narrative is the usage of the term ‘jihadi or jihad bride’. These women were framed as seduced and under the control of Arab men.⁵⁵

The three narratives have in common that they focus on women’s personal objectives, depriving them of their agency. Their role in political violence is explained via assumed female biological function (mother narrative) or dysfunction (monster- and whore narrative). The idea that these women act out of political or ideological motivation is dismissed. By placing these women in the frames of mothers, monsters, and/ or whores deprives their agency. Moreover, this reinforces gender stereotypes and eventually gender subordination.⁵⁶

Schmidt used the mother and monster narrative in her study on the deradicalization of female terrorists in the UK. However, she added one more narrative; the (stupid) victim. This narrative frames women as being easily manipulated, followers, and naïve individuals who cannot think for themselves. This framing ignores the fact that women, even ones who are victims, may use violence for their own intrinsic and political motivation. Within this narrative, the manipulation and abuse by their husband or other male relatives is often mentioned. This resonates with the article of Deylami where she stated that often Muslim women are framed as victims in need of saving from their abusive husbands.⁵⁷ Schmidt argued that the usage of this narrative can have two consequences: framing women as victims without agency allows some women to use narratives of victimhood to avoid detection and/ or prosecution.⁵⁸ Secondly, this victimization of violent women causes a blind spot in terrorism investigation and counterterrorism programs since their agency is not taken seriously.⁵⁹ Although this narrative shows many similarities with the sexual slavery aspect of the previous whore narrative, it is not solely focused on the sexual exploitation of women’s minds and bodies and therefore makes up its own narrative which will be utilized during this study. Schmidt argued that within terrorism the: mother, monster, and (stupid) victim narrative provide the most common explanation.⁶⁰

There are many similarities between the previously mentioned gendered frames in violent conflict. In general, all the narratives try to explain the phenomenon of women’s violence and try to connect this to other gender assumptions about what femininity entails. Women are seen as loving, nurturing, and peaceful creatures not capable of committing violence

⁵⁴ Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 93-111.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 115-116.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 112-134.

⁵⁷ Deylami, “Saving the Enemy”, 177-194.

⁵⁸ Schmidt, “*Duped: Examining Gender Stereotypes in Disengagement and Deradicalization Practices*,” 959-960.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 960.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 953-976.

during conflict. Therefore, when it does occur this has to be the consequence of their womanhood or failed womanhood. In this manner, they form either no significant danger, or even more because of their dysfunction. Moreover, the reasons women participate in violent conflict results from having issues in the private sphere, political and ideological objectives are dismissed and downplayed. Before examining if this was true for the Dutch public discourse, the role of women in the Caliphate will be explored.

Chapter 3: The role of female jihadists

In order to critically study the Dutch public discourse on the agency of (returned) Dutch female jihadists it is important to have a good understanding of what roles were prescribed for women in the Caliphate of ISIS. Therefore this section will try to answer the question: What was the involvement and significance of women within the Caliphate of ISIS between June 2014 and 2022? Furthermore, this part will also elaborate on the debate about female jihadists who wanted to return to the Netherlands. This chapter is descriptive, yet its content holds significant information for the second, more analytical section of this thesis.

3.1 Historical background of ISIS

Understanding the contextual and ideological background is critical since it has a considerable impact on the roles assigned to women. Analyzing ISIS's history gives a more comprehensive understanding of the elements that determined women's position inside the Caliphate.

ISIS is a jihadist terrorist organization known for its brutality and use of online propaganda.⁶¹ The question of where to start with the history of ISIS is part of a scholarly debate. Some scholars go back to 1979 to the war in Afghanistan, others argue that ISIS started when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi moved to Iraq and established a militant organization called Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad.⁶² Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) became more prominent after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, therefore others argue that the history of ISIS started in 2003.⁶³ However, as the Syrian civil war began in 2011, their focus shifted to Syria as well.⁶⁴ Subsequently, the new leader; Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, called out the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). They started to conquer more territory and had many military successes due to the unrest in Syria and the ongoing civil war against Bashar al-Assad. In 2014 al-Baghdadi called out a new Caliphate, ISIS became the Islamic State and al-Baghdadi was named as the new caliph.⁶⁵ This marked an important point for the role of women in the Caliphate because, from that moment on, IS was seen, by its members and adherents, as a real state requiring women to make it function. IS, although not recognized as a legitimate state by the international

⁶¹ Joas Wagemakers, "De ideologische onderbouwing van de Islamitische Staat," *ZemZem: Tijdschrift over het Midden-Oosten, Noord-Afrika en islam* 10, no. 2 (2015): 6-13.

⁶² Wagemakers, "De ideologische onderbouwing van de Islamitische Staat," 6-13.

⁶³ Rafat Kurdi, "Islamic State," *Background Report | XXII | NATO* | 03, 2016, 1-17.

⁶⁴ Kurdi, "Islamic State," 1-17.

⁶⁵ Because the world community does not recognize and acknowledge the Islamic State, most scholars used the acronym ISIS when writing about the organization. As a result, when referring to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's terrorist organization, I shall therefore mostly use ISIS.

community, operated as a functioning state for residents in its controlled areas.⁶⁶

However, since 2015 the Islamic State faced many military setbacks, causing its territory to shrink. Because of the brutal implementation of their ideology the international community, as well as other terrorist organizations decided to fight back. The news of the beheadings, including journalists and humanitarian workers, as well as the genocide against the Yazidis and other minorities by killing the men and selling their women and children as sex slaves, sparked global outrage.⁶⁷ Furthermore, multiple terrorist attacks in Europe have caused the West to interfere, and the U.S. formed a coalition to fight ISIS. However, the Kurdish Peshmerga, the Syrian army, and other Shia militant groups have played the most significant part in repelling ISIS. Nevertheless, Rufat Kurdi argues that: “Surely, ISIS will not completely vanish, but it may shift from a state to a global terrorist organization.”⁶⁸

Some facets of ISIS ideology and operational methods become apparent in the preceding section. For instance, the fact that their goal was to establish a new Caliphate with a descendant from the prophet Mohammed. Within this Caliphate the *sharia* law should be implemented. An important notion here is that adherents of ISIS use a Salafist interpretation of the Quran. This implies that everything should be interpreted exactly as written. Moreover, Salafist Muslims believe that everyone should live according to the standards of the Prophet Mohammed’s time. It is important to note that not all Salafists are jihadists, however, most jihadists are Salafists. In addition, a second critical aspect to emphasize is that the majority of Muslims do not acknowledge any of ISIS’s statements or actions.⁶⁹ The implementation of ISIS’s ideology has caused many atrocities for the civilians living under their territory. For instance, the sexual slavery of the Yazidi women, the beheadings, same-gender relationships are forbidden and hands are cut off when people are caught in thievery. All their actions are justified according to their interpretation of Islam.⁷⁰ However, at the same time, ISIS presents itself as highly modern through its usage of social media to spread its propaganda. Moreover, they do not fight with swords, which was more common in the time of the Prophet, but with modern weapons. Abdel Bari Atwan therefore describes ISIS as a medieval group with modern military, administrative, and propaganda skills.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Wagemakers, “De ideologische onderbouwing van de Islamitische Staat,” 6-13.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 6-13.

⁶⁸ Kurdi, “Islamic State,” 6.

⁶⁹ Neurink, ‘*De vrouwen van het kalifaat: slavinnen, moeders en jihadbruiden*’, 56.

⁷⁰ Wagemakers, “De ideologische onderbouwing van de Islamitische Staat,” 6-13.

⁷¹ Marianne van Leeuwen, "Review: ISIS beschreven," *Atlantisch Perspectief* 40, no. 1 (2016): 19.

3.2 Women's lives in the Caliphate

As stated above the number of women migrating to Syria and Iraq after Al-Baghdadi called out the new Caliphate grew immensely.⁷² Al-Baghdadi urged men, women, and children to move to the new Islamic State and live under 'true' Islamic rules. Women were required to take care of the family and bear a new generation of well-educated young combatants, or lions as they were nicknamed.⁷³ Furthermore, due to their gender segregation, they required women for jobs like doctors, nurses, and teachers. The call to move to IS resonated with many Muslims around the world, including people with Western backgrounds who had converted to Islam. Together with some of the women living in the conquered territories, they facilitated the state-building of the Islamic State. The AIVD, argued in 2017 that since 2012 at least eighty Dutch women travelled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS.⁷⁴

What were the objectives for women to join ISIS? Female foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq are frequently represented as 'jihad brides,' coerced by their husbands or relatives as well as inspired by romanticized pictures of heroic combatants, or as militant fighters.⁷⁵ Devorah Margolin and Joana Cook argued in their article on women's agency and their roles in ISIS that this answer is rarely this black or white. They state that the choice to move to ISIS territory was affected by their age, family status, country of origin, and many more aspects.⁷⁶ Although it should be acknowledged that some women were forced to live within IS, others had full agency when making this decision but did not want to be militant fighters. Some women were ideologically driven and wanted to live under Islamic law. Other women argued that they wanted to be part of a community or sisterhood. Moreover, there is no evidence that women's ideological motivation to move to ISIS was lesser compared to men's motivation.⁷⁷ When these women arrived in Syria or Iraq they were placed in an all-women's house until their partner was settled after their military training and found a home. Women were also placed in these houses after their husbands died and the authorities had to find new husbands they could marry.⁷⁸

Although women had additional responsibilities, as will be seen in the following section,

⁷² Pokalova, *Returning Islamist foreign fighters: threats and challenges to the West*, 166.

⁷³ Margolin and Cook, "The agency and Roles of foreign women in ISIS," 20.

⁷⁴ AIVD, "Jihadistische vrouwen, een niet te onderschatten dreiging," 3.

⁷⁵ A. Navest, M. de Koning, and A. Moors, "Chatting about Marriage with Female Migrants to Syria: Agency beyond the Victim versus Activist Paradigm," *Anthropology Today* 32, no. 2 (2016): 22-25.

⁷⁶ Margolin and Cook, "The agency and Roles of foreign women in ISIS," 7.

⁷⁷ Sofia Patel and Jacqueline Westermann, "Women and Islamic-State Terrorism: An Assessment of How Gender Perspectives Are Integrated in Countering Violent Extremism Policy and Practices," *Security Challenges* 14, no. 2 (2018): 53-83.

⁷⁸ Margolin and Cook, "The agency and Roles of foreign women in ISIS," 21.

the primary role of women in IS was to be supportive wives and mothers. This is also in line with the ideology of ISIS of what the role of a woman is during the jihad. This resulted in women being at home most of the time, being completely covered, including their hands and eyes. Moreover, any time a woman went outside the house it was mandatory that they would be accompanied by their husband or another male relative. At home, their responsibilities included keeping the house clean, making meals for their husbands, and fixing their clothes when they were damaged. Furthermore, when required, wives were expected to care for their injured husbands. Finally, women were expected to bear and nurture children by ISIS's standards. In particular, the foreign fighters who did not speak Arabic lived an isolated life at home. In short, women's roles within IS were defined by traditional domestic responsibilities.⁷⁹ It is important to acknowledge the significance of the supporting roles that women played in the Caliphate. These roles were fundamental for facilitating jihad and contributing to the existence and organization of the state as a whole. Their supportive function played a key role in perpetuating the system of the Islamic State.⁸⁰

3.3 Beyond the domestic sphere

The women in the Caliphate also facilitated jihad in other ways. Starting with the significant role they played in spreading propaganda and recruiting new members online. Through their social media accounts on Twitter and Tumblr they reached out to individuals across the world. Particularly women were valuable in recruiting new members online. They talked about sisterhood with women and promised men wives if they moved to the Caliphate.⁸¹ In addition, these women also used their social media accounts for fundraising and gaining material support. Yet, when assessing ISIS's financial supporters, the online fundraising is often forgotten because of the larger amounts gained from criminal activity and occupying oil fields.⁸² Moreover, women posted photos and videos of themselves on social media holding guns to lure people who wanted to join the fight.⁸³ Regarding the agency of returned female fighters some of these women did get military training and knew how to make bombs and how to operate weapons.⁸⁴

Another important aspect considering the role and agency of women in the Caliphate, was the fact that while managing the household some women had access to or were in control

⁷⁹ Pokalova, *Returning Islamist foreign fighters: threats and challenges to the West*, 165-194.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 171.

⁸¹ Margolin and Cook, "The agency and Roles of foreign women in ISIS," 25-27.

⁸² *Ibid*, 25.

⁸³ Pokalova, *Returning Islamist foreign fighters: threats and challenges to the West*, 165-194.

⁸⁴ Margolin and Cook, "The agency and Roles of foreign women in ISIS," 22.

of a slave. These were often Yazidi women, and among them were also children forced to work in the houses of ISIS members. In 2022 a German female foreign fighter of ISIS was prosecuted for crimes against humanity for the enslavement and abuse of an underage Yazidi girl.⁸⁵

Women could also have an active role and use violence if they had a position within the female department of the morality police, the Al-Khansaa brigade (see image 1). Since there was a strict gender segregation within the Caliphate, women were policed by other women for violations of the strict rules of their implementation of the *sharia* law. The Al-Khansaa brigade would check whether women would dress and behave correctly and if they would raise their children according to religious standards. Women who participated in the Al-Khansaa brigade were allowed to carry weapons.⁸⁶ Foreign and local women used this as a way of income or to protect their families. One of the most famous Al-Khansaa brigade was the unit in Raqqa. The Al-Khansaa brigade was known for its extremely violent operations. They would attack women using extreme violence, harassment, and torture. Some sources claim that these women would beat, lash, and bite other women, sometimes to death. Women who were in the female unit of the Hisba were more likely to become female combatants when ISIS started to lose territory.⁸⁷

Although ISIS emphasized the role of women as being mothers and wives, it became the leading Islamist organization in deploying women as combatants and terrorists.⁸⁸ When ISIS started to experience more military and territorial defeat they shifted in their stances on the position of women in combat positions. At first, women were only allowed to conduct defensive jihad, meaning that they were allowed to fight when under attack. Yet they were allowed to carry suicide bomb belts. However, since 2015 ISIS started to deploy women as combatants. In 2018 women were seen fighting on the frontlines against the Syrian troops. Moreover, there is an account of a women's battalion training using weapons and were therefore also deployed in suicide attacks. It is important to note that the role of women in combat positions was rare and not the standard for ISIS, yet considering the role of women who stayed with ISIS to the bitter end it is important to remember their changing role regarding using force.⁸⁹

To end, since their territorial defeat many women were put into camps, the most famous one being the Kurdish Al-Hol camp. Although not all women in these camps were still adherents of ISIS, some women were. There are cases of Al-Khansaa brigade controls and women

⁸⁵ Margolin and Cook, “*The agency and Roles of foreign women in ISIS*,” 4.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 30-32.

⁸⁷ Pokalova, *Returning Islamist foreign fighters: threats and challenges to the West*, 186.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 185-189.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 185-189.

policing other women. Moreover, these camps were used as places for other war crimes and crimes against humanity. Therefore, these camps were not only a place for victims but also for women who were still radicalized and wanted to fight for their beliefs.⁹⁰

The role of women according to ISIS was mainly to be good wives and mothers and live according to their ideology. This suggests that not all women were forced jihad brides who lived in IS. Some women were compelled to come, but this image deprives all women living in the Islamic State of agency. Moreover, the image of a woman waiting for her husband to come home from battle is also incorrect. Women had mostly facilitating roles within the Caliphate. Not all of them were militant fighters, however by spreading propaganda, recruiting new members, and enslaving Yazidis they helped to facilitate the organization of ISIS.⁹¹

3.4 Returned female fighters and the public debate in the Netherlands

In general, women were more likely to return since there was a lesser chance of dying on the battlefield. The women, who stayed with ISIS to the end, were captured and held in Kurdish camps. ISIS male fighters were immediately imprisoned.⁹² The conditions in the Kurdish camps were deplorable due to a shortage of water, food, and medical care. Furthermore, the camps were overcrowded, resulting in the spread of diseases and a lack of personal space. These women were frequently accompanied by their children, who were also suffering as a result of the terrible conditions. Therefore, many foreign female fighters expressed their desire to return to their land of origin.⁹³ In particular, European states compared to the U.S. were not very eager to repatriate foreign fighters of ISIS. Many women waited a long time to return to their homeland, which sparked a public debate about whether this was the proper decision in terms of human rights, morality, national security, and the necessary legal procedures for addressing the accountability of these women.⁹⁴

Supporters argued that repatriating female foreign fighters was justified, emphasizing the safety of the children. They contended that these women's children were victims of their parents' decisions.⁹⁵ Furthermore, some argued that children should not be separated from their parents and therefore mothers and children should be brought back to the Netherlands. On the

⁹⁰ Margolin and Cook, "*The agency and Roles of foreign women in ISIS*," 34.

⁹¹ Ibid, 6-35.

⁹² Patel and Jacqueline Westermann, "Women and Islamic-State Terrorism: An Assessment of How Gender Perspectives Are Integrated in Countering Violent Extremism Policy and Practices," 53-83.

⁹³ Thijs Broekkamp, Alice Pap, Siska Pater, Carl Stellweg, and Marianne van de Werken, "De giftige nasleep van het kalifaat," *Het Grote Midden-Oosten Platform*, April 16, 2021, <https://www.hetgrotemiddenoostenplatform.nl/de-giftige-nasleep-van-het-kalifaat/>

⁹⁴ Mehra, "The Repatriation of Five Women and Eleven Children from Syria: A Turning Point in the Netherlands?"

⁹⁵ Margolin and Cook, "*The agency and Roles of foreign women in ISIS*," 48.

other hand opponents of repatriation argued that these children were indoctrinated at school from a young age. Moreover, some children, in particular boys received military training from the age of nine. Therefore, the presence of children could also pose a concern for national security. Alex March argued that the public opinion was hostile against the idea of repatriating the children. “The public opinion regarding the repatriation of children is almost identical in the Netherlands where 60% of Dutch citizens believe that children of Islamic State members under the age of six should not be repatriated.”⁹⁶

The question on repatriation was thus also part of a discussion of national security. Within the discussion on what to do with these women, there are advocates of repatriating who argued that these women who they thought were still radicalized, were a greater danger abroad than imprisoned here in the Netherlands. It happened that women escaped out of the Kurdish camps, in that case, there was no longer supervision on these women which meant that they could get back to the Netherlands unknown.⁹⁷ In contrast, critics contended that bringing these women back to the Netherlands would pose a national security risk for Dutch citizens. Individuals, such as Laura H., were suspected of plotting terrorist attacks. The AIVD also expressed concern about the potential threat these women might pose upon their return to the Netherlands. Consequently, opponents argued that leaving them in Syria or Iraq to face punishment would be a preferable course of action.⁹⁸

The legal dimension of the debate also featured diverse perspectives. Opponents argued that the female foreign fighters received a far too low penalty in the Netherlands. The average jail time for foreign female fighters was around two years. They argued that punishments like these were far too little compared to the suffering of the Yazidis.⁹⁹ However, proponents of repatriation argued that for the prosecution procedure, it was better to have these women here in the Netherlands. According to the AIVD, women who traveled to IS-territory are seen as part of the terrorist organization. This meant that male- and female members of the Islamic State, militant or not, were seen as participants in the jihad of ISIS.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, the Dutch prosecution started when the foreign fighters were still in the Kurdish camps to avoid impunity. However, it was not allowed to prosecute these women if they stated that they wanted to be in the courtroom. Several courts had indicated that they did not want to try the ISIS women

⁹⁶ Alexis March, “Far from Home: Overcoming the Challenges to Repatriating Foreign Women Who Joined the Islamic State,” *University of Illinois Law Review* 2021, no. 3 (2021):1184.

⁹⁷ AIVD, “*Jihadistische vrouwen, een niet te onderschatten dreiging*,” November 17, 2017.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Broekkamp, Pap, Pater, Stellweg, and van de Werken, “De giftige nasleep van het kalifaat.”

¹⁰⁰ AIVD, *Leven bij ISIS, de mythe ontrafeld*, 3-7.

involved in *'absentia.'*¹⁰¹ As a result, the Dutch state was forced to repatriate these women leading to more discussions in the Netherlands on the role of these women within the Caliphate.¹⁰² Therefore, opponents of repatriation were in favor of local prosecution or even an international tribunal. They argued that the Dutch state was not responsible since these women turned their back on the democratic rule of law. Moreover, they argued that for the sake of transitional justice, it would be better to prosecute these women locally because the victims would be more involved during their trials.¹⁰³ Furthermore, critics argued that measures should be taken to break the nationality link and to further limit responsibilities towards these female foreign fighters.¹⁰⁴

Within the media, fathers, mothers, and other relatives of men- and women who went to Syria were interviewed to demonstrate that their children were no danger to the Dutch society. Eugène, the father of Laura H., appeared multiple times on talk shows, and on the news to express the humanitarian perspective on this matter. Eugène's position on repatriating Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS is motivated by a variety of factors. He stated:

“I believe it is the right thing to do for the Kurds. They have been dealing with our problems in that region for a long time. Furthermore, they are our children and grandchildren. It is also vital for the safety of the Dutch people. Leaving them behind creates uncertainty since we do not know if they will be able to return.”¹⁰⁵

Not only relatives, but other supporters as well, stressed a more open approach to the return of foreign fighters. In particular, in terms of children's safety.¹⁰⁶

This chapter answered the question of what the involvement and significance of women was within the Caliphate. The primary role of women was being wives and mothers. However, women had other tasks beyond the domestic sphere to support the jihad through propaganda, recruitment, the enslavement of Yazidis, and policing other women using violent punishments. They also served as teachers, doctors, and nurses and therefore helped the state-building of

¹⁰¹ Cuyckens, “De repatriëring van Nederlandse Syriëgangers: Een verplichting voor de staat van oorsprong?” 46.

¹⁰² Mehra, “The Repatriation of Five Women and Eleven Children from Syria: A Turning Point in the Netherlands?”

¹⁰³ Broekkamp, Pap, Pater, Stellweg, and van de Werken, “De giftige nasleep van het kalifaat.”

¹⁰⁴ Cuyckens, “De repatriëring van Nederlandse Syriëgangers: Een verplichting voor de staat van oorsprong?” 50-55.

¹⁰⁵ RTL Nieuws, Vader Syriëganger Laura H. over terughalen IS-vrouwen: ‘Het fatsoenlijke om te doen,’ 1 juli 2021, <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/politiek/artikel/5239470/vader-van-syrieganger-laura-h-over-terughalen-vrouwen-het>

¹⁰⁶ Chrisje Sandelowsky-Bosman and Ton Liefwaard, “Waarom Nederland zijn uitreizigers en hun kinderen in Noord-Syrië moet ophalen,” *Justitiële verkenningen* 48, no. 3 (2022): 86-105.

ISIS. Furthermore, women could receive military training and after 2015 women were more regularly deployed as combatants which should not be ignored when examining their agency. The discussion surrounding the repatriation of Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS sparked immediate debates about their roles and agency within the Caliphate. How these women and their agency were portrayed in this debate significantly influences whether they are perceived as a security problem and/ or shapes discussions on appropriate justice and reintegration measures. Now that we know what their agency was according to scholarly work, and what questions surrounded the return of these women, it is interesting to see how women's agency was portrayed in the Dutch public discourse and if the utilized frames were influenced by gendered stereotypes.

Chapter 4: Gendered narratives in the Dutch public discourse

4.1 *The (stupid) victim narrative in the Dutch public discourse*

The (stupid) victim narrative developed by Schmidt explains the deprivation of agency among women in conflict, portraying them as stupid and naïve victims. This frame seeks to interpret their actions in the context of their perceived roles as easily manipulated and/ or abused by their husbands or male relatives. Related to this, according to Deylami in particular Muslim women are framed as victims of their abusive husbands.¹⁰⁷ Women's objectives to participate in conflict are related to something in the private realm and are not connected to political and ideological motivations.¹⁰⁸ This section will address if and how the (stupid) victim narrative was used to frame the agency of Dutch female ISIS foreign fighters.¹⁰⁹

Women who traveled to ISIS were often depicted as naïve victims. Subsequently, as images and videos surfaced featuring women posing with weapons, the narrative shifted toward a more hostile and violent image. Nevertheless, these women when speaking about their objectives to move to Syria and Iraq and their time in the Caliphate often frame themselves as naïve victims. The first thing that stands out when examining the framing of the agency of Dutch female foreign fighters who joined ISIS is the reason for their departure. A popular frame utilized to explain why these women left is that they naïvely followed their husbands or were forced. These women are the so-called 'jihad brides' who joined ISIS because their husbands or male relatives forced them to move to Syria and Iraq.¹¹⁰ A significant element of this frequently employed frame is that the majority of these women assert that they were unaware they were heading to the Caliphate. For instance, Laura H. argued in a televised interview that she thought that she and her husband would move to an Islamic country, not IS.¹¹¹ Other women also framed themselves as unaware of where they went when discussing their journey to ISIS. In this manner, women are framed as lacking agency and oppressed since they were taken to a conflict zone without their consent. Moreover, it also emphasizes their naivety and stupidity that they got themselves into this situation.

When these women were aware of their trip to ISIS, they occasionally claimed that they

¹⁰⁷ Deylami, "Saving the Enemy", 177-194.

¹⁰⁸ Schmidt, "Duped: Examining Gender Stereotypes in Disengagement and Deradicalization Practices," 953-976.

¹⁰⁹ MacKenzie, "Securitization and Desecuritization," 241-261.

¹¹⁰ Schmidt, "Duped: Examining Gender Stereotypes in Disengagement and Deradicalization Practices," 955.

¹¹¹ Laura H, interview on Eenvandaag, "Syriëganger Laura H. over haar tijd in het kalifaat: 'Het was de hel op aarde'," YouTube video, 4:50, uploaded by EenVandaag, November 16, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPR6xk_VY_8

were ignorant of the atrocities committed by ISIS. When Marion van San asked a woman who moved to Syria and Iraq in 2015 about the violent images published online and if this stopped her she replied by saying that she thought; it was a conspiracy of the U.S.¹¹² Van San interviewed multiple Dutch and Flemish men and women for her book, *Kalifaat ontvluchters*.¹¹³ She also interviewed family members and therefore creates an interesting image of how these women portray themselves and how family members frame their actions.¹¹⁴ When women are framed as not knowing about the atrocities of ISIS this emphasizes the naivety and stupidity of these women. It is worth noting that when Van San writes from her perspective, she provides an objective and accurate representation of these women's agency. Related to this, some women and media sources stressed that in particular men misled them and brought them to ISIS territory under false pretenses. This is a sentiment expressed by Laura H. during an interview with Dutch journalist and talk show host Margiet van der Linden. In the interview, Laura stated:

“Because for him it was a premeditated game to get me this far. For him, the ultimate goal was to travel with the family and contribute to the jihad. When I arrived I was shocked and it was not what I had imagined. I felt very deceived (...) I was quite naïve. I was seventeen and already had a child. I wanted to fix it and do it right.”¹¹⁵

In Thomas Rueb's book about the life of Laura, her friends and family also stress the naivety of Laura H., including her mother Jennifer who stated: “My daughter has been brainwashed. Afterward, I should have seen it, but yes. Laura is a charming girl but so influential.”¹¹⁶ Moreover, the sister of Laura's husband Eva stated in a police hearing:

“I do not think she was forced, but she was tricked into it. I think she presented it as better than it was. Ibrahim abused Laura, and I know her as a girl who is naïve and easily influenced. I want to indicate that she is too naïve to stay with Ibrahim despite the abuse. I would never allow myself to be abused like that.”¹¹⁷

Both parties emphasize her naivety and the fact that she had no idea where she headed, depriving her of agency for her motives for joining ISIS. Moreover, Ibrahim's sister also emphasized the abusive relationship between Laura and her husband. Rueb, on the other hand,

¹¹² Van San, *Kalifaat ontvluchters*, 107-122,

¹¹³ Ibid, 115-120.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 61-79.

¹¹⁵ *Mensen met M* with Duncan Laurence and Laura H, aired on December 25, 2019, https://www.npostart.nl/mensen-met-m/25-12-2019/KN_1711432.

¹¹⁶ Rueb, *Laura H.*, 69.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 171.

claims that Laura was aware of their planned journey to the Caliphate. Yet, he paints a picture of Laura H.'s traumatic childhood and adolescent years and explains why she converted to Islam. Laura and her relatives frame her as a naïve young woman who was essentially a victim in which they emphasize the abusive behavior of Ibrahim.¹¹⁸

Sinan Can, a Dutch journalist who traveled to Iraq with Hussein, a father whose ex-wife and three children joined ISIS. His daughter Miriam is now living in a Kurdish camp and wants to return home. When the woman was asked why she left she replied: “I did not know that. I did not know I would end up here. I was framed.”¹¹⁹ In an interview with *EenVandaag*, a news channel, the Dutch Hafida said that:

“We made a big mistake coming here. We saw a promise. (...) In the end, this all turned out to be a lie in which things were promised. We are one of many who have been lured into their trap.”¹²⁰

Hafida and Miriam emphasize that they were lured to the Caliphate under false conditions, undermining their agency in the choices they made independently.

Tamara Buruma and Frederieke Dölle wrote in their academic article about returning female jihadists of ISIS. They both have a background in law, and Buruma is the lawyer of Ilham B., another well-recognized Dutch returned female fighter. Giving a perspective from the defense team they utilized a narrative that victimizes these women as well. They argue in a discussion regarding their motivation to leave: “Not all women knowingly go there to support the armed struggle. Many girls went there with the naïve assumption that they could best live as Muslims in the Caliphate.”¹²¹ Although these women have more agency in this frame, they left because they wanted to be better Muslims and were not misled or forced by their men. These women are still portrayed as naïve.

Another common feature of the stupid victim frame, which is regularly employed while explaining why women joined ISIS, is the conversion of Dutch women. This feature frequently focuses on their troubled childhoods and difficulties growing up as explanations for their radicalization. Van San argues in her book that, in particular converted men and women, sought

¹¹⁸ Rueb, *Laura H.*, 17-212.

¹¹⁹ Sinan Can, *De verloren kinderen van het Kalifaat*, March 2018, <https://npo.nl/start/serie/de-verloren-kinderen-van-het-kalifaat>.

¹²⁰ Interview with Hafida on *Eenvandaag*, “Nederlandse IS-vrouw Hafida: 'Niet bang zijn voor terugkeerders,’” August 24, 2018, <https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/item/nederlandse-is-vrouw-hafida-niet-bang-zijn-voor-terugkeerders/>.

¹²¹ Tamara Buruma and Frederieke Dölle, “Vrouwelijke terugkeerders uit Syrië: Het perspectief van de verdediging,” *Justitiële verkenningen* 48, no. 3 (2022) 65.

redemption for their mistakes in the past by converting to Islam or following a stricter version of Islam.¹²² In the book of Thomas Rueb, but also the interviews and news articles about Laura H. her troubled childhood is emphasized.¹²³ Her brother was chronically ill which resulted in a reduction of attention for Laura growing up. She converts to Islam at the age of fifteen. Laura H.'s story, which positions her in the victim frame, is also linked to her abusive husband Ibrahim, with whom she has her second child. Rueb narrates the story of Laura H., portraying her as a lifelong victim, aiming to explain the reasons behind her desire to join ISIS. He details the series of unfortunate events that have transpired in her life. Van der Linden also describes Laura as 'lost' in her controversial interview, called *Mensen met M*.¹²⁴

The reason to deliberately move to a war zone and live under the strict rules of ISIS is explained through their naivety, stupidity, and victimization of these women. Van San argued that families do not recognize the political reasons for leaving but mainly emphasize their daughters' personal problems as a reason for their departure.¹²⁵ The women, relatives, and journalists frame these women as victims and deprive them of the agency to decide to join ISIS and write off political or ideological motivations.

Secondly, when discussing their experiences within the Caliphate these women can be portrayed as victims. In particular, in the self-portraying, these women address the bad circumstances within the caliphate. An anonymous woman argues in a newspaper interview: "I have had similar experiences here. A missile hitting your house is an unforgettable experience."¹²⁶ And the previously mentioned Hafida argues that: "we have lived under torture"¹²⁷

In her book "*De vrouwen van het kalifaat: Slavinnen, moeders en jihadbruiden*", Judit Neurink delves into the lives of women in the Caliphate.¹²⁸ Although her work does not exclusively concentrate on Dutch women, the book has the potential to have a significant influence on the public discourse in the Netherlands. Neurink, a Dutch journalist who has covered stories on ISIS extensively, provides important insights into the discourse analysis on

¹²² Van San, *Kalifaat ontvluchters*, 28-34.

¹²³ Rueb, *Laura H*.

¹²⁴ *Mensen met M* with Duncan Laurence and Laura H.

¹²⁵ Van San, *Kalifaat ontvluchters*, 107-122.

¹²⁶ Cyril Rosman, "Nederlandse jihadistisch in Syrië: ik wil graag terug naar huis," *AD*, September 20, 2017, <https://www.ad.nl/buitenland/nederlandse-jihadiste-in-syrie-ik-wil-graag-terug-naar-huis~a3a678d0/>.

¹²⁷ Interview with Hafida on *Eenvandaag*, "Nederlandse IS-vrouw Hafida: 'Niet bang zijn voor terugkeerders,'" August 24, 2018.

¹²⁸ *The Women of the Caliphate: Slaves, Mothers and Jihad Brides* translation of Judit Neurink, *De Vrouwen van het Kalifaat: Slavinnen, moeders and jihadbruiden* (Jurgen Maas, Amsterdam, March 2021).

women's agency and how it is framed in the Dutch public narrative. She examines the daily life of the women of ISIS but also gives an extensive description of the atrocities committed against Yazidi women. She creates an image of women in ISIS as 'sex machines' and 'baby factories.' According to Neurink, the female fighters of ISIS were victims during their time in the Caliphate. For instance, Neurink wrote about the relationship between the women of ISIS and the enslaved Yazidi women living together.

“From a Western view of women's solidarity, you would expect that the wife would take care of the poor kidnapped, raped girl. Nothing could be further from the truth. From the stories of escaped Yazidi women, I gather that wives are just as involved in the slave circus as their husbands. Although they could object to it for all kinds of reasons, in practice, they hardly do so. That says something about the powerlessness of these women, but also about the fear of the husband with his loose hands. Moreover, due to the war, there has been more domestic violence.”¹²⁹

The fact that women supported the enslavement of Yazidis is explained through the fear of their husbands since women were victims of the increasing domestic violence. According to Neurink the fact that these women could support the enslavement because of political or ideological motivations is not considered to be an option. Furthermore, Neurink suggests that women should support one another; therefore, female jihadists violated the code of womanhood. Moreover, this also resonates with the work of Deylami who argued that in particular Muslim women were victimized in relation to their abusive husbands by journalists in the West.¹³⁰

In addition, another example in which Neurink frames a woman as a victim is when she describes an article written in *Dabiq*¹³¹ about the justification of the enslavement of Yazidis.

“There could be a world of sadness behind these words. The jihad bride who came to the caliphate and was married off to a man with whom she does not share and who may even treat her poorly. Because Umm Sumayyah keeps repeating how glorious ISIS's actions are, she gives the impression that she is convincing herself or that she does not believe in it at all and is merely repeating what she has been taught. These are fiery words from someone who is religiously insane or deeply religious.”¹³²

Again, Umm Sumayyah is not considered an actor with agency who would write this article based on her own beliefs. Neurink dismisses her behavior as the result of being afflicted

¹²⁹ Neurink, *De Vrouwen van het Kalifaat*, 83.

¹³⁰ Deylami, “Saving the Enemy”, 177-194.

¹³¹ A journal of ISIS.

¹³² Neurink, *De Vrouwen van het Kalifaat*, 85-87.

by the Caliphate's poor circumstances. She assumes that the woman is convincing herself and hence does not believe that a woman can accept the enslavement of other women.

In conclusion, Neurink argues: "In the story about ISIS, women are mainly victims and accomplices - or they stand on the sidelines and help pick up the pieces. Do they have the choice as mothers and wives not to participate in radicalization?"¹³³ According to Neurink, women who joined ISIS were victims who were unable to stand up to their husbands, leaving them with no agency.

Laura H. is not only victimized in the book of Rueb before her departure to ISIS but also during her time in the Caliphate. Rueb describes in great detail how Ibrahim physically and mentally abused Laura. At one time Ibrahim points his Kalashnikov towards Laura and tries to strangle her.¹³⁴ Rueb argues: "Laura is not the only one who has been abused. She believes that wearing veils and niqabs protects women while also concealing violence from husbands."¹³⁵ With this quote, Rueb also victimizes other women in the Caliphate. He also included a self-portrait of Laura during her time in the Caliphate which was coming from the police file (see image 2). You can see a face that is heavily injured due to the abuse. This image contributes to the victimization of Laura H.

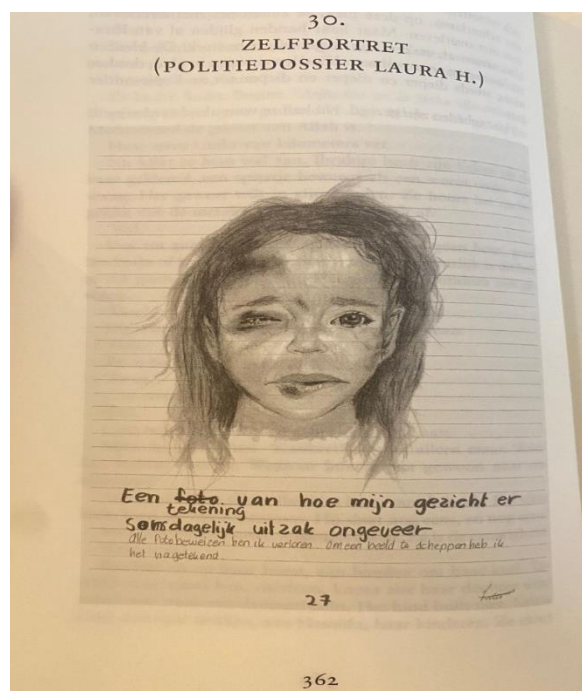


Image 2: Self-portrait of Laura H. Thomas Rueb, *Laura H.* 362.

¹³³ Neurink, *De Vrouwen van het Kalifaat*, 203.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 412.

¹³⁵ Rueb, *Laura H.*, 293.

Moreover, when you ask these women what they thought of the practices of ISIS you often hear the story that they did not know what happened outside their houses. For instance, the story of Ilham B. a woman who traveled to Syria when she was nineteen returned to the Netherlands in 2021 which caused a lot of debate in the Netherlands about whether or not ‘IS-women’ should be repatriated. *Omroep West*, a regional news channel, had a neutral stance in describing her situation. The stated:

“She got married there and gave her husband the opportunity to commit terrorist crimes, the court said. She also owned firearms, chatted about the armed struggle, and spread propaganda. Her statement that she lived in a bubble in Syria and did not know what was going on outside the home is therefore not believed by the court.”¹³⁶

This quote demonstrates that the Dutch court held her responsible for her actions although she tried to reduce her sentence by stating that she did not know about the atrocities committed by ISIS. This frame does not necessarily victimize her, yet it shows how she self-portrayed her naivety. The Dutch court however did not resonate with her statement. Van San elaborates on how these women claim they were unaware of the violence outside. She however argues that the women probably knew more about the violence than they claim they did. But explains their passiveness due to the abuse they might face if they spoke out against their husbands.¹³⁷ Yet, Van San makes no mention of these women agreeing with or even participating in the violence. In short, when speaking about the role of women within the Caliphate their responsibilities and knowledge are minimized. Their roles and agency were explained through their victimization and naivety. By focusing on how they lived ‘in the hell on earth’¹³⁸ these women are framed as victims and not actors in spreading propaganda or recruiting new members online.

Third, the difficulties that female jihadists faced were not limited to the conditions in the Caliphate. When studying the discourse around these women, the bad circumstances in the Kurdish camps are something that is addressed often, through the women themselves as well as by scholars and journalists. One anonymous woman stated: “We sleep on the floor on a mattress, there are diseases, and wintertime is approaching.”¹³⁹ The word nightmare is used multiple times by different women describing the conditions in the Kurdish camps. “Two other

¹³⁶ “IS-vrouw Ilham B. uit Gouda moet 3,5 jaar de cel in,” *Omroep West*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.omroepwest.nl/nieuws/4583225/is-vrouw-ilham-b-uit-gouda-moet-3-5-jaar-de-cel-in>.

¹³⁷ Van San, *Kalifaat ontvluchters*, 161.

¹³⁸ Laura H, interview on Eenvandaag, “Syriëganger Laura H. over haar tijd in het kalifaat: ‘Het was de hel op aarde’,”

¹³⁹ Rosman, “Nederlandse jihadistisch in Syrië: ‘ik wil graag terug naar huis’.”

IS women, who want to remain anonymous, also want to return home. In audio messages to *EenVandaag*, they say that they hope that ‘this nightmare’ will soon come to an end.”¹⁴⁰ Not only do these women victimize themselves, but also academics Buruma and Dölle describe how these women were victims living in the Kurdish camps.

“The women who have returned so far all stated that they regret the journey they made to Syria as young adults, usually between 2013 and 2015. Some of them waited for years in appalling conditions in Kurdish detention camps until the Dutch authorities came to repatriate them and their children.”¹⁴¹

The poor living circumstances in the camps are frequently used to justify repatriating these women. Female foreign fighters position themselves as victims in this manner. A second reason for using the victim frame might be a sentence reduction if they do get repatriated. Schmidt argued in her article that creating an image of a naïve victim might help to get a lower sentence and might impact government policies regarding women who lived with ISIS.¹⁴²

In conclusion, Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS were framed, and framed themselves, using the (stupid) victim narrative. Within the given examples the focus was on how these women were forced or lured into the Caliphate, lived there under terrible conditions, might face an abusive husband, and lastly experienced bad living conditions in the Kurdish camps. By utilizing the victim narrative there is no attention for the political, religious, and ideological objectives women had, influencing their role and agency within the Caliphate. These women’s (self)-victimization could have been motivated by a desire to be repatriated or receive a lighter sentence.

4.2 The mother narrative in the Dutch public discourse

The mother narrative according to Sjoberg and Gentry focuses on the biological need of women to support men. Women are assumed to have a fundamental need to nurture and take care of men. It is assumed that women are loyal to their husbands and take care of their children. Within the narratives about women as actors in conflict, their motherhood defines them.¹⁴³ As explained in the second chapter Sjoberg and Gentry made a distinction between the frame of the good – and the bad mother. The good mother is a woman who is loving and nurturing, her actions will be seen as non-threatening. The narrative of the nurturing mother is commonly used

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Hafida on Eenvandaag, “Nederlandse IS-vrouw Hafida: ‘Niet bang zijn voor terugkeerders’,”

¹⁴¹ Buruma and Dölle, “Vrouwelijke terugkeerders uit Syrië,” 67.

¹⁴² Schmidt, “*Duped: Examining Gender Stereotypes in Disengagement and Deradicalization Practices*,” 957.

¹⁴³ Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 70-92.

to describe women who are active in terrorist organizations.¹⁴⁴ This section will address if and how the mother narrative was used to frame the agency of Dutch female ISIS foreign fighters.

To understand the motivation for joining ISIS, the mother narrative is also utilized, in particular concerning the role of supporting wives and mothers. Van San explains how family members describe how their sisters, daughters, and friends joined ISIS because they followed their husbands or wanted to support other Muslim brothers and sisters. For instance, a sister of a woman who moved to IS argued that: “She went there to help people.”¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, Van San tells the story of Theresa a young woman who studied to be a nurse but went to the Caliphate because she wanted to help her Muslim brothers and sisters.¹⁴⁶ The depiction of women in supporting roles resonates with the characteristics of the mother narrative. The framing of the women wanting to support their husbands, brothers, and sisters emphasizes the assumption of needing to nurture and take care of people.

Laura H. is also framed within the mother narrative when trying to understand her intention to join ISIS. Throughout Rueb’s book, as well as in other interviews with Laura H. she is either framed as a victim, as was previously mentioned, or as a (good) mother. Laura is framed as a woman who does everything it takes to take care of her children. In the book, she states that her children are the only good thing that ever happened to her.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, she explained to her father that she wanted to raise her children in a state ruled by *sharia* law.¹⁴⁸ Rueb also describes her life and role within the Caliphate in a supporting and motherly manner. “Laura is juggling responsibilities, caring for both Tawbah, her daughter, and the baby.”¹⁴⁹ Moreover, in the interview with Van der Linden, the good mother frame is used to frame Laura. Again, she is characterized as a mother who does everything for her children.¹⁵⁰ Linked to the good mother frame is a statement from Klaske, Laura’s supervisor during her residence in a home for teenage mothers, she contended:

“Despite everything, Laura was a good mother. I think it is important that people know that. She was only a teenager of seventeen, but she did everything for that child. The child always came first.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. 70-92.

¹⁴⁵ Van San, *Kalifaat ontvluchters*, 114.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 118.

¹⁴⁷ Van San, *Kalifaat ontvluchters*, 457.

¹⁴⁸ Rueb, *Laura H.*, 248.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 278.

¹⁵⁰ *Mensen met M* with Duncan Laurence and Laura H.

That is why I could not imagine that she would come here to commit an attack. I told them that too.”¹⁵¹

Framing Laura as a caring and supportive mother denies her agency, as her motherly role excludes her from being perceived as a security threat. This aligns with the argument made by Sjoberg and Gentry that individuals deemed as good mothers are not viewed as serious threats to national security.

When describing the role of women in the Caliphate, Neurink also stressed their supportive position as wives and mothers. Moreover, she frequently uses the term ‘jihad bride’ to describe the women who moved to join ISIS. She described the world of ISIS as a male-dominated world in which women only serve as companions to have sex with and bear the next generation of fighters. These women are not considered fighters, but women of ISIS fighters. This resonates with how these women are often framed in the Dutch public discourse as ‘*jihadbruiden*’ and ‘*IS-strijders en hun vrouwen*’ (jihad brides and IS fighters and their women). This implies that women did not have much agency within the Caliphate besides being women, and certainly were not participating as combatants. Neurink states that:

“In ISIS, women have been forced into the position of mothers of the Caliphate. They must care for a new generation of fighters and provide the men returning home from war with the sex they need.”¹⁵²

Later in her work, she further articulates: “Almost all women in the Caliphate have in common that they are considered first and foremost as mothers, whether they are wives or widows of a fighter, jihad brides, married to a leader, or maid.”¹⁵³ Although Neurink addressed their role in the Al-Khansaa brigade and also talked about how women abused the Yazidis, she portrayed these women mostly as passive and supporting wives and mothers. Following her statements women in the Caliphate would not have much agency and if they took on a role it was because out of fear for a man.

Neurink frequently used the term jihad bride. She is not alone because Van der Linden and news sources utilize the frame jihad bride when writing or talking about the Dutch foreign fighters in ISIS.¹⁵⁴ In the previous section about the victim narrative the term jihad bride referred to a woman being lured to the Caliphate. However, the concept of jihad bride can also

¹⁵¹ Rueb, *Laura H.*, 152-153.

¹⁵² Neurink, *De Vrouwen van het Kalifaat*, 29.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 113.

¹⁵⁴ *Mensen met M* with Duncan Laurence and Laura H.

be placed within the mother narrative when it is used to describe a woman who followed her husband to the Caliphate to support him.

Dutch news sources consistently address the role of being supportive wives and mothers as the predominant aspect of women's identity in the Caliphate. For instance: "Because here the IS fighters and their wives are not prosecuted for genocide."¹⁵⁵ Moreover, in media portrayals, these women were often framed by the number of children they were accompanied by in the Kurdish camps. For instance: "I would like to return to the Netherlands, for the future of my children, says a 23-year-old Dutch jihadist in Syria. The pregnant woman is now staying with her young child in a refugee camp near the Syrian city of Raqqa."¹⁵⁶ Or in a more general manner: "The Dutch government has been struggling for a long time with the return of IS women and their children."¹⁵⁷ In the same article by the *NOS* is mentioned how Ilham B. is repatriated with three children.

Evidently, in the ongoing discussion over whether or not these Dutch women should be returned, they are also portrayed and are frequently presented as mothers. The debate subsequently centers on the poor conditions within the Kurdish camps, particularly the challenges faced by children who emerge as victims of their parents' decisions. In the earlier mentioned interview of *EenVandaag* with the Dutch Hafida she is described as the mother who lived in a Kurdish camp with her three children.¹⁵⁸ She speaks about the role of women in the Caliphate and that she wants to return to the Netherlands:

"We women were only women in IS territory, mothers. We cooked and did the household. They really do not have to be afraid; I know that. Many of the women did nothing and just sat at home and took care of the household and the children. So I would like to say very explicitly that there should be no fear towards women. I would like to return with my children because I want to go on."¹⁵⁹

Later on, her attorney also addresses that the children did not do anything wrong and therefore should be brought back to the Netherlands. By quoting Hafida the article framed women in the Caliphate as mothers and wives who supported their husbands and not terrorists which

¹⁵⁵ "IS-kinderen (en hun moeders) terughalen of niet?" *NU.nl*, November 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0bFpqdG65w>.

¹⁵⁶ Rosman, "Nederlandse jihadistisch in Syrië: 'ik wil graag terug naar huis'."

¹⁵⁷ "Nederlandse IS-vrouw Ilham B. met drie kinderen opgehaald uit Syrië," *NOS Nieuws*, June 5, 2021, 10:46, updated June 5, 2021, 13:51, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2383702-nederlandse-is-vrouw-ilham-b-met-drie-kinderen-opgehaald-uit-syrie>.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Hafida on *Eenvandaag*, "Nederlandse IS-vrouw Hafida: 'Niet bang zijn voor terugkeerders',"

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

minimized their agency in ISIS. Furthermore, supporting terrorism, as these women did, is not considered a felony. However, under Dutch law, facilitating jihad is constituted as being part of a terrorist group and is considered a crime that should be punished.¹⁶⁰

These frames imply that being a mother and/ or woman makes up their whole identity. Moreover, the (good) mother frame implies that these women do not form a security threat since mothers are not seen as violent actors during conflict. Mothers are in the end life givers not -takers. There are no examples of using the bad mother narrative in the examined sources. Constantly framing these women as mothers reduces their agency because according to this narrative, they were ‘only mothers,’ and not involved with spreading propaganda, recruiting new members, policing other women, or even fighting on the frontline.

4.3 The monster narrative in the Dutch public discourse

The monster narrative according to Sjoberg and Gentry refers to framing women as monstrous and evil to explain their agency in violent conflict. The monster narrative diminishes the political and ideological motivations of women as to why they resorted to violence and instead focuses on their biological dysfunction. Women in the monster narrative are characterized as insane and are no longer seen as feminine or even humane.¹⁶¹ Within the monster narrative, they are framed as even more evil compared to their male counterparts. The explanation is that women not only broke the law, but they also violated the gender assumption that women are not supposed to resort to violence since femininity and womanhood reflect peace and love.¹⁶² Within these narratives, women resort to violence because something is wrong with their womanhood.¹⁶³ Again women are deprived of their agency. This section will address if and how the monster narrative was used to frame the agency of Dutch female ISIS foreign fighters.

The monster narrative is utilized in different sources compared to the previous (stupid) victim- and mother narratives. Particularly politicians are more known for using the monster narrative when framing the agency of these women. Female foreign fighters are viewed as a threat to national security, which is used to justify their repatriation or non-repatriation, depending on their political stances. The monster narrative is not widely used in the examined sources when framing women on why they left to join ISIS. Several family members, notably Eugène, Laura H.’s father, expressed surprise at their extremism and fanaticism. To practice such an extremist interpretation of the Islamic faith is not seen as something that fits within the

¹⁶⁰ AIVD, *Leven bij ISIS, de mythe ontrafeld*, 3-7.

¹⁶¹ Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 93-111.

¹⁶² Margolin and Cook, “*The agency and Roles of foreign women in ISIS*,” 10-12.

¹⁶³ Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 93-111.

assumptions about femininity.¹⁶⁴

Nevertheless, their decision to move to Syria and Iraq is sometimes framed as a rational decision within the political and parliamentary sources. For instance, politician Van der Plas argued in the debate on bringing IS women and their children back to the Netherlands:

“She was 19 years old, an adult, and very capable of making her own choices; a grown woman, completely sane. Completely sane! Convinced of what she was getting into, this adult woman decided to join the ranks of genocide perpetrators, killers, sadistic murderers, extreme fundamentalists with not an ounce of sympathy and compassion, sadistic slave drivers.”¹⁶⁵

It is interesting to see how the woman (Ilham B.) is framed as ‘sane’ but Van der Plas still uses terms with a monstrous connotation to describe her agency. Throughout this debate, other politicians also used features that resonate with the monster narrative to frame the Dutch female fighters of ISIS. Despite Van der Plas, other politicians did not acknowledge the rationality behind the agency of moving to Syria and Iraq. This results in portraying these women as inhumane and with lost womanhood.

First, when referring to these women most politicians use terms like terrorists, terrorist women, ISIS terrorists, and criminals. It is interesting because the name of the debate is: ‘bringing back IS-women,’ in the meantime these women are framed as terrorists and criminals while speaking about them. The word terrorists does not necessarily make monsters out of these women; however, it portrays their actions in a violent manner. Laura H. asks the judge to not see her as a terrorist, but as a human, a mother with two children.¹⁶⁶ This quote underscores the fact that terrorism and femininity are not seen as synonymous. By framing these women as terrorists, a part of their femininity is taken from them since terrorism is not in line with prescribed gender assumptions.

Yet, some politicians go even further. Markushower from the Party for the Freedom (PVV) used the monster narrative in his statement in the parliament. He stated:

“This ministerial duo, Kaag, and Grapperhaus, abuse their office by voluntarily importing the danger and absolute evil that is ISIS. ISIS terrorists have committed beastly atrocities. These inhumans, these ISIS terrorists, are brought back to the Netherlands by this duo, ministers Grapperhaus and Kaag.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Rueb, *Laura H.*, 248.

¹⁶⁵ *Tweede Kamer*, Debat over: “Terug naar Nederland halen van IS-vrouwen en hun kinderen,” July 1, 2021, <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/>.

¹⁶⁶ Rueb, *Laura H.*, 46.

¹⁶⁷ *Tweede Kamer*, Debat over: “Terug naar Nederland halen van IS-vrouwen en hun kinderen.”

Markushower used words like danger and the ‘absolute evil’ to describe these women. Moreover, he framed the actions of these women as ‘bestly atrocities.’ Later he dehumanized the women by saying ‘these inhumans’ when talking about Dutch female foreign fighters. Markushower’s words resonate with the monster narrative. Later in his speech he addressed the possible dangers of repatriating these women also portraying them as ‘beasts.’ He stated:

“You do not have to be a professor to understand that if you bring ISIS terrorists to the Netherlands, you import death and destruction to the Netherlands. You must really hate the Netherlands and the Dutch if you voluntarily bring back such animals to the Netherlands.”¹⁶⁸

These women are framed using monstrous and beast-like terms, referring to them as animals. He also described that these women helped to commit the most horrific atrocities.¹⁶⁹ The final statement, asserting that women committed the most horrific atrocities, is a framing technique consistently employed throughout the entire debate by multiple politicians. Also, other politicians are showing signs of how the monster narrative has impacted their thoughts and statements on Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS. Van Nispen member of the socialist party (SP) framed the actions of these women as “those people have fully contributed to death and destruction.”¹⁷⁰ He later stated that: “These are people, women, who participated in a system of torture, rape, slavery, and murder.”¹⁷¹ Although Van Nispen does not use words like ‘beasts’ and ‘inhumans’ to describe these women, he frames their actions using terms like death, destruction, torture, slavery, rape, and murder which resonates with the monster narrative. Also, Ms. Kathman from the Labor Party (PvdA) described their actions as horrific atrocities. Moreover, she states that the word ‘*beul*’ (hangman) still falls short to describe these women.¹⁷²

The utilization of the monster narrative serves to securitize these women, framing them as a threat to Dutch national security. The central debate revolves around the decision of whether to repatriate them or not. On one side are politicians advocating for the women to remain in Syria and Iraq, facing local prosecution. Conversely, another group argues that leaving them there may lead to impunity, given the incompetence of local legal systems to manage a large number of suspects. Those in favor of repatriation emphasize the poor living conditions in Kurdish camps and highlight the suffering of the children. Nevertheless, there is unanimous agreement that these women engaged in ‘inhumane’ atrocities against the Yazidis,

¹⁶⁸ *Tweede Kamer*, Debat over: “Terug naar Nederland halen van IS-vrouwen en hun kinderen.”.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

firmly placing them within the confines of the monster narrative.¹⁷³

In addition, regarding the parliamentary debate, it is striking that multiple politicians argue that ‘the women were even worse compared to the men.’ For instance, Joost Eerdmans (JA21) argued that:

“They are often not weak-willed victims, as is sometimes said. We should not be naïve about that. It is often precisely people with a key role, the spin in the network, who are responsible for spreading propaganda. So they are by no means weak-willed and docile. The AIVD calls the women at least as committed to jihadism as the men. The testimonies of survivors also state that the women were even worse than the men and assisted them in the rapes and other atrocities.”¹⁷⁴

This statement not only confronts the users of the victim narrative it also deprives the Dutch female foreign fighters of their femininity. Eerdmans argues that these women were even worse while committing crimes against humanity. This resonates with the aspect of the monster narrative explaining how women are framed as more horrible than men because they break with gender assumptions.¹⁷⁵

Finally, the comment that resonated the most with the criteria of the monster narrative came from the previously mentioned Markushower. He stated:

“There are many terrorists who are now knocking on Mr. Grapperhaus’s door and saying: Mr. Grapperhaus, you have brought back these women, brought back these terrorists - they are not women at all, they are terrorists - and now I want too.”¹⁷⁶

Markushower literally deprives these women of their womanhood, saying that these terrorists are not women at all. Resonating with what Laura H. said about how she wanted to be seen as a mother and not a terrorist, framing these women as terrorists in combination with the tone of the debate shows how the monster narrative is utilized. Schmidt argued that writing these women off as deviations makes it easier to argue for certain security measures, such as leaving them in Syria and Iraq.¹⁷⁷

Another parliamentary debate, although much shorter, was about the fact that the House of Representatives asked questions to Minister Slob about the fact that Laura H. was financially rewarded for her appearance on ‘*Mensen met M.*’ Zohair El Yassini (VVD) argued that: “It is unacceptable that public money is used to pay convicted IS members and terrorists to tell their

¹⁷³ *Tweede Kamer*, Debat over: “Terug naar Nederland halen van IS-vrouwen en hun kinderen.”

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Margolin and Cook, “*The agency and Roles of foreign women in ISIS*,” 10-12.

¹⁷⁶ *Tweede Kamer*, Debat over: “Terug naar Nederland halen van IS-vrouwen en hun kinderen.”

¹⁷⁷ Schmidt, “*Duped: Examining Gender Stereotypes in Disengagement and Deradicalization Practices*,” 957.

stories on television. According to him, they can create an income from their crimes.”¹⁷⁸ In particular, because the episode framed Laura as a mother and victim this caused a lot of turmoil among politicians who depicted her with the monster narrative.

Thomas Rueb also discussed how his work was criticized by certain readers who claimed that while describing Laura H.’s story, Rueb presented her as a victim. As a result, critics photoshopped Rueb into a ‘*NSB-er*’¹⁷⁹ and changed the cover of the book to a biography about Eva Braun, the mistress of Hitler.¹⁸⁰ Also below the video on YouTube where Laura was interviewed by *EenVandaag* the comment section blew up. People stated that they were upset because Laura H. is constantly framed as a victim. Yet other commenters also utilized the comparison with the Second World War. Someone commented: “Maybe we can also make a nice documentary about Hitler, who is sad because he did not become a successful artist.”¹⁸¹ Others commented that she should be sent back, and someone even stated that she should get the death penalty. In addition, other Nazi references were made: “You cannot even call it an *NSB-er*. Your own people are doing this to you. Good luck. Allah is so great.”¹⁸² And “Well, madam gets a TV series based on the book by Thomas Rueb, where the role of the victim is undoubtedly portrayed. Remarkable, never seen a book or film about the ‘*Moffen hoeren*’.”¹⁸³ These comments and the constant references that are made between Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS and the Second World War shows resemblance with the monster narrative.

In the previous section became clear that the overall message in the book of Neurink is that the women of ISIS were living in a male-dominated world in which their agency was minimal. Nevertheless, there are also sections in her work that attempt to explain female agency through the monster narrative. For example, the ISIS women were supposed to guard and watch over the Yazidi women. Neurink said:

“The fighters often entrust their wives with guarding their slaves. I believe all female solidarity disappears when you hear the zeal with which they conduct their task. They focused their

¹⁷⁸ *Tweede Kamer*, “Antwoord op vragen van het lid El Yassini over de uitzending ‘Mensen met M’ met als gast IS-ganger Laura H.,” February 3, 2020, <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/>.

¹⁷⁹ National Socialist Movement during the Second World War in the Netherlands.

¹⁸⁰ Rueb, *Laura H.*, 533-544.

¹⁸¹ Laura H., interview on Eenvandaag, “Syriëganger Laura H. over haar tijd in het kalifaat.”

¹⁸² Laura H., interview on Eenvandaag, “Syriëganger Laura H. over haar tijd in het kalifaat.”

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* During the Second World War, the Germans were called ‘*moffen*.’ ‘*Moffen hoer*’ is a derogatory in Dutch that has historically been used to denigrate women suspected of collaborating with German soldiers during or after World War II.

aggression on the Yazidis as if they were dogs to be kicked away - the way dogs considered unclean in the Middle East are treated.”¹⁸⁴

Neurink again writes about the loss of female solidarity, which is a characteristic of femininity according to Neurink. This makes these women treat the Yazidis very badly. Another example of the use of the monster narrative is when Neurink tells the story about Umm Zeineb who she characterizes as a ‘*Kenau*’.¹⁸⁵ The word *Kenau* refers to a woman who is bossy, unkind, and most importantly not feminine.¹⁸⁶ By framing her as a *Kenau* the woman is framed within the monster narrative which deprives her of agency.

Later in her book, Neurink describes how women are commonly portrayed as mentally ill monsters or as acting in this manner because they are forced to, although this portrayal is incorrect.¹⁸⁷ However, she later writes about how power is not equally divided in the Middle East and that this causes women to overcompensate through strictness. “Women are the worst in my experience.”¹⁸⁸ Again, they are worse not because of ideology, but because women must compensate because their femininity does not achieve the same degree of power as men’s masculinity.

Lastly, in her book Van San describes the story of a woman who first went to Syria to follow the men with whom she fell in love. The story is mostly based on the explanation of the father, and ex-husband of her mother, who traveled after her daughter to the Caliphate a few months later. He argued that: “The mother is seen as the driving force behind the radicalization but is also unstable.”¹⁸⁹ The father and ex-husband described that the mother is the reason for his children to move to Syria and Iraq taking away the agency of his children. Furthermore, he also deprives his ex-wife of her agency by describing her as unstable, emphasizing the biological dysfunction of the woman.

The monster narrative is also utilized to frame the Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS. Yet, this narrative is to a lesser extent used by the women themselves, their family members, and journalists. Politicians are more likely to make use of the monster narrative to portray these women as threatening, to justify their national security policies. Moreover, critics commenting on Laura H.’s interview with *EenVandaag* and Thomas Rueb’s book frame these women more frequently within the monster narrative. It was striking how narratives of the Second World War

¹⁸⁴ Neurink, *De Vrouwen van het Kalifaat*, 88-89.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 91.

¹⁸⁶ *Kenau*, Encyclo.nl, <https://www.encyclo.nl/begrip/kenau>.

¹⁸⁷ Neurink, *De Vrouwen van het Kalifaat*, 125.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 125.

¹⁸⁹ Van San, *Kalifaat ontvluchters*, 81.

were used to draw a comparison. To summarize, the monster narrative was employed to frame these women. Although their crimes were acknowledged widely in the sense that their depiction of women's roles in the Caliphate was more accurate. Their agency in these roles was nonetheless downplayed since their behavior was portrayed as a result of biological malfunction and poor womanhood. Female foreign fighters were deprived of agency since the frames stressed their monstrous, violent, inhuman, nonfeminine character, leading to irrational decisions to fight for the Islamic State.

4.4 The whore narrative in the Dutch public discourse

According to Sjoberg and Gentry, the whore narrative tries to explain female agency in violent conflict to women's overly sexual desire, dysfunction, or because women are framed as sexual pawns and possessions of men. The last aspect of the whore narrative sees men as in control of women's bodies and minds, including whether or not they should act in violent conflict.¹⁹⁰ The last aspect of the whore narrative shows a lot of similarities with the (stupid) victim- and the mother narrative. The whore narrative, however, emphasizes the sexual aspect of the controlling relationship between male and female.¹⁹¹ This final part will delve into answering the question of whether and how the whore narrative was utilized for framing Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS in the public discourse of the Netherlands.

There are examples trying to comprehend why these women left to join ISIS utilizing the whore narrative. Showing many similarities with the mother- and victim narrative these women are often framed as jihad brides. The difference between the mother- and the whore narrative however is that within the whore narrative these women are framed as romantic jihad brides who fell in love with an ISIS fighter or moved to the Caliphate to be with one. For instance, the woman described in the previous paragraph, whose mother and brother followed her into the Caliphate, explains that she left because her lover was already in Syria. Moreover, when her father asks Miriam in *'De verloren kinderen van het kalifaat'* a documentary about her decision to join ISIS she explains that she left because the family was already broken. "Maybe this is why I chased a male love because everything was already broken."¹⁹² The woman in the documentary frames herself as a woman who went to Syria for love on the one hand, but on the other hand, emphasized her need for love because of her broken childhood. In this way, her agency is downplayed because she had only personal objectives, and not political or ideological. Besides Miriam, more women claim that they moved to the Caliphate to marry

¹⁹⁰ Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 112-134.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 112-134.

¹⁹² Sinan Can, *De verloren kinderen van het Kalifaat*.

the men with whom they fell in love. Cyril Rosman of the newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad* stated in an article about women who were living in the Kurdish camps: “These usually concern young women who traveled to Syria to marry a fighter there.”¹⁹³ Depriving women of their ideological reasons to join ISIS. Van San explains in her book that although religious motivations appear to have been the determining factor for many women to travel to Syria, yet according to their families, it was mostly romantic motivations that influenced their decision.¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, in newspaper articles about Ilham B., she is constantly framed as the woman who moved to Syria to be with her partner.¹⁹⁵ In contrast, Ilham B. is characterized in a *NOS* article as moving to Syria because she wanted to join ISIS.¹⁹⁶ Hafida, the woman interviewed by *EenVandaag* was also framed as the woman who moved to Syria and married Thijs B.¹⁹⁷ It is interesting to see how news reports frame these women in relation to their husbands. However, when you look for an article of Thijs B., such as the one of *WNL*, his motivation to join ISIS stems from his radical faith.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, Van San, despite being quite objective in her portrayal, used the term jihad bride at times to characterize women who went to the Caliphate. Instead of Neurink, who frequently used this expression. Framing women as jihad brides who moved to ISIS out of love or because they wanted to marry a heroic fighter downplays their agency because it emphasizes their private objectives.

The narrative surrounding Laura H. also shows resemblances with the whore narrative. In the book of Rueb, but also in interviews with Laura she is framed, or portrayed herself, as a girl with a troubled childhood. Laura was sexually active from the age of thirteen. From then on boys sexually assaulted her.¹⁹⁹ The voiceover of the interview with *EenVandaag* stated that: “Answers can be found in her youth. Boys abuse her because she seeks attention from them. Everybody said that is a whore.”²⁰⁰ Van der Linden in *Mensen met M* also described Laura’s past of having multiple sexual relations with boys at a young age. This resulted in a teen pregnancy.²⁰¹ Rueb in particular describes in great detail how Laura was seen as a ‘slut’ in her

¹⁹³ Rosman, “Nederlandse jihadistisch in Syrië: ‘ik wil graag terug naar huis’.”

¹⁹⁴ Van San, *Kalifaat ontvluchters*, 113.

¹⁹⁵ “IS-vrouw Ilham B. uit Gouda moet 3,5 jaar de cel in,” *Omroep West*.

¹⁹⁶ “Nederlandse IS-vrouw Ilham B. met drie kinderen opgehaald uit Syrië,” *NOS Nieuws*.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with Hafida on *Eenvandaag*, “Nederlandse IS-vrouw Hafida: ‘Niet bang zijn voor terugkeerders’.”

¹⁹⁸ “Rotterdamse terrorist Thijs B. in strijdgebied Syrië gedood,” *WNL*, February 26, 2019, <https://wnl.tv/2019/02/26/rotterdamse-terrorist-thijs-b-strijdgebied-gedood/>.

¹⁹⁹ Rueb, *Laura H.*, 35-60.

²⁰⁰ Laura H., interview on *Eenvandaag*, “Syriëganger Laura H. over haar tijd in het kalifaat.”

²⁰¹ *Mensen met M* with Duncan Laurence and Laura H.

teenage years. He used police hearings in his book in which childhood friends or acquaintances describe Laura's childhood. For instance:

“Childhood friend against the police officer. What I understand is that Laura used to have a lot of boys. So she was seen as a whore. She thinks that... if we women wear a headscarf, it is assumed that we are ‘good people’.”

This connects with both the overly sexual erotomania - and the sexual slavery aspect of the whore narrative. Rueb tries to link her radicalization and the later move to Iraq to the fact that she had a troubled relationship with sex and boys and therefore sought redemption in Islam and later married the devout Ibrahim. Van San similarly gave examples of converted women who sought redemption within Islam after having an eventful youth characterized by many mistakes and sexual relationships.²⁰²

Neurink also portrayed women in the Caliphate utilizing features that fit the whore narrative. She argued that: “Men are constantly thinking about sex, that is why they hide their women because they are property.”²⁰³ The way Neurink talked about the sexual relationship between men and women connects with how women in the sexual slavery aspect of the whore narrative are framed. Furthermore, Neurink provides some examples in which women's agency is interpreted in terms of the erotomania frame. For instance, Neurink is very vocal about how the Yazidi women were treated and how the women of ISIS did nothing or supported this. She argued that: “Even if she is as content as she claims, I cannot imagine it has not resulted in enviousness. That is what the fled Yazidi women told me.”²⁰⁴ Neurink argues that women were jealous of other Yazidi women because they had sex with their husbands, which caused irrational and aggressive behavior against the enslaved women. Neurink therefore deprived these women of agency, either through portraying them as scared oppressed women with the victim narrative, or envious women because their sexual needs are not met since their husbands are sleeping with Yazidi women.

In addition, Neurink also used an erotomania frame when writing about the romantic motivations of women to move to the Caliphate. She states: “For many women, the search for meaning, sisterhood, and identity is the most important driving force. But girls will be girls so they also long for romance.”²⁰⁵ The sentence ‘girls will be girls’ is based on the gender stereotype that women are overly romantic and look for love. The statement that women moved

²⁰² Van San, *Kalifaat ontvluchters*, 28-33.

²⁰³ Neurink, *De Vrouwen van het Kalifaat*, 20-28.

²⁰⁴ Neurink, *De Vrouwen van het Kalifaat*, 89.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 155.

to the Caliphate for romance is in line with the whore narrative. It is less common in the description of men and their reasons to join ISIS that they did this for romantic reasons. Overly romanticizing women and framing them as jihad brides who joined ISIS for love deprives these women of their agency.

It becomes clear that the whore narrative is mostly used for describing their motivation to move to the Caliphate, emphasizing their romantic objectives, and to a lesser extent describing their agency within ISIS. The whore narrative did not occur within the descriptions of women within the camps or who did return to the Netherlands. Although less prevalent than the victim- and mother narrative, the whore narrative was also utilized to describe Dutch female foreign fighters.

4.5 Discussion

For this thesis multiple sources were studied, having different perspectives, and hopefully giving a comprehensive representation of the Dutch public discourse to see how Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS and their agency were framed. These sources contained the self-portraying of these women as well as the frames used by others to describe their agency. This section will discuss the most noticeable and common components of the frames used for these women.

Most of the sources did not hold on to just one narrative to describe the agency of these women. For instance, Neurink framed the women in a subordinated position using extensively the victim- and mother narrative and to a lesser extent the monster- and whore narrative. The book of Rueb also described Laura H. mostly in the victim- and mother narrative, and he used a few examples of the whore narrative to explain her radicalization process. It is therefore important to notice that the sources may overlap. The women could be framed using both the victim-, whore-, and mother narrative. This was particularly true for framing the women as jihad brides. Depending on the context in which it was used it could apply to a woman forced and/ or lured to the Caliphate (victim), a woman who wanted to support her husband and raise children according to the laws of ISIS (mother), and/ or a woman who joined ISIS out of love or because she wanted to marry a heroic fighter (whore). This demonstrates the flexibility of certain frames and how they link with multiple gender assumptions. Furthermore, it shows how difficult it is to categorize life events utilizing gendered narratives.

Moreover, during the analysis, the differentiation between the victim- and whore narrative was somewhat blurry, in particular concerning the sexual slavery aspect of the whore narrative. Sjoberg and Gentry argue that men can have complete control over the mind and body of a woman when she is framed as a sexual pawn. When these women were abused by their

husbands this could therefore fit into both the victim- and whore narrative. Nevertheless, in this study, these women were studied through the features of the victim frame, in reality, it could be both. In the end, women's agency is dismissed because of their relationship with men.

There is a striking distinction between how these women frame themselves and how they are framed by others, particularly by politicians and people online. These women framed themselves in the first place as mothers stressing that during their time in the Caliphate, they were only responsible for taking care of their children and ensuring a clean household. These women did not speak about their possible role in spreading propaganda, recruiting new members, joining the Al-Khansaa brigade, following military training, or even joining combat at the frontline. Second, in framing how they want to make the trip to the Caliphate, they lean more heavily toward the victim narrative. These women often stress that they were either not aware that they were going to the Caliphate, or that they did not know about the atrocities committed by ISIS. This frame emphasizes their naivety and victimhood since they were lured to the Caliphate. Furthermore, when chatting with journalists about the conditions in the Kurdish camps these women often emphasize their victimhood. With words like 'nightmare' and 'hell' they describe the situation within the camps. The victim frame is not only used by the women themselves but also by their family members, Rueb, and lawyers like Buruma and Dölle. The fact that these women diminish their agency by framing themselves as naïve victims might help them with their repatriation, within trials or when they return to the Netherlands in general. This resonates with Schmidt who argued: "how some people exploit tropes of women as weak and naïve in order to avoid prosecution when they are caught and/ or when they the return home."²⁰⁶

The politicians on the other hand framed these women almost only using the monster narrative. Although sometimes referring to them as jihad brides, the general frames applied for describing these women were terrorists, criminals or even dehumanizing frames like beasts, inhumans, and the absolute evil. The securitization of these women arises from the perception of politicians who view them as a potential threat to national security. This perspective resonated with another argument by Schmidt, in which she said that depicting women as monstrous and deviant serves to emphasize the need for proactive security measures.²⁰⁷ Evidently, both parties have an interest in using a particular frame, the women to get repatriated or get a lesser punishment, and the politicians to justify their political stances. It demonstrates

²⁰⁶ Schmidt, "Duped: Examining Gender Stereotypes in Disengagement and Deradicalization Practices," 557.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 558.

how gendered narratives can be employed deliberately and unconsciously.

Most journalists had a more neutral stance when describing the agency of these women, compared to the parties mentioned above. For instance, they distanced themselves when foreign fighters were interviewed by saying ‘they said.’ However, sometimes terms like jihad brides and IS fighters ‘and their women’ were utilized to describe these women. These terms place women in a subordinate position because being a jihad bride implies that they were either forced into the Caliphate or because they wanted to marry or support a husband emphasizing personal objectives. Additionally, the portrayal of IS fighters and their ‘women’ suggests that these women were not actively engaged in the jihad, depicting them as less of a threat. Moreover, their womanhood becomes the most defining aspect of their identity.

A final point for the discussion is where to draw the line between describing reality as how it was or trying to comprehend the situation by applying gendered narratives like those of Sjoberg, Gentry, and Schmidt. Many of the women in the Caliphate were mothers who spent most of their time at home. It is thus not surprising that the mother frame is used to characterize their agency. Moreover, some women moved to the Caliphate out of force or because they were naïve (victims). In relation to that, Laura H. was abused and neglected during her childhood. Did Rueb victimize Laura H., or did he just describe her radicalization process? Furthermore, some women experienced abuse during their time in the Caliphate, and the circumstances were horrific in the Kurdish camps. In addition, some women moved to Syria or Iraq because they fell in love with a man who was already living in the Caliphate. So where do you draw the line? Where does the objective description end and the framing based on gender stereotypes begins? Maybe with the assumption that women did not have any significance outside the private realm? Or maybe neglecting the roles outside the domestic spheres or not mentioning the fact that they could hold Yazidi slaves in their houses, spread propaganda, recruit new members, policed other women, or even joined military training and eventually fought at the frontline. ISIS was after all the Islamist militant organization with the highest rate of women participation.²⁰⁸

Gendered narratives based on gender stereotypes and gender assumptions about what femininity entails are constructed as a simplification to understand the world around us.²⁰⁹ In particular, during conflict, people tend to use gendered narratives to explain women’s participation. Women are initially perceived as loving, nurturing, and peaceful creatures not capable of committing violence and having agency during conflict. Therefore, when it does

²⁰⁸ Pokalova, *Returning Islamist foreign fighters: threats and challenges to the West*, 186.

²⁰⁹ Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 1-26.

occur this has to be the consequence of their womanhood or failed womanhood. In this manner, they either form no significant danger, or even more because of their dysfunction and evilness.²¹⁰ This applies as well to understanding the agency of Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS. The (stupid) victim, mother, monster, and whore narratives, all to a different extent, were used to describe the agency of these Dutch women. Nevertheless, all these narratives have in common that they place women in subordinate positions while emphasizing their personal motivations for joining ISIS and consequently downplay their agency.

²¹⁰ Gentry and Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 1-26.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Laura H., the woman who appeared on the horizon in the summer of 2016 running for her life towards the Peshmerga. She became ISIS's most well-known and characterized Dutch female foreign fighter. Laura has been framed as victim, perpetrator, mother, monster, abused, naïve, terrorist, fragile, slut, whore, *NSB-er*, and convicted criminal. All these frames tend to describe the agency of Laura H. who went to ISIS and joined the jihad. Besides studying the narrative surrounding Laura H., this thesis tried to examine how the Dutch public discourse framed the agency of Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS, in particular those who returned to the Netherlands, between 2014 and 2022, utilizing gendered narratives.

To answer this question, this study first examined how conflict is gendered and how this leads to people using gendered stereotypes and gendered narratives based on ascribed preconceptions of masculinity and femininity. During a conflict, women are praised for their femininity, while men are praised for their masculinity. The stereotype of women as kind, nurturing, and especially nonviolent beings results in the assumption that women are presented as characters with less agency during conflict. However, when this does occur people try to comprehend this by framing their agency in line with the assigned gender assumptions. Sjoberg, Gentry, and Schmidt developed these lenses to demonstrate how people try to explain women's violence based on their (stupid) victimhood, biological need to support men in conflict as mothers, and biological- and sexual dysfunction as monsters and whores. Within these narratives, women are deprived of their agency since political- and ideological motivations are dismissed or downplayed. Instead, these narratives focus on gender stereotypes to explain why these women had a role in the violent conflict.

According to the third chapter their agency was broader than the explanation of the (stupid) victim, mother, monster, and whore narrative. The role and significance of the women in the Caliphate of ISIS was mainly focused on maintaining the household and raising the next generation of fighters. Nevertheless, they also could have an impact in spreading propaganda, recruiting new members, and guarding the enslaved Yazidi women and children. To a lesser extent women could also participate in the Al-Khansaa brigade policing other women, join military training, or even fight at the front line and become suicide attackers. Furthermore, women could have functions like nurses, teachers, and doctors, which helped facilitate the jihad of ISIS.

When studying the sources that represent the public discourse it became clear how frequently the women portrayed themselves as the (stupid) victim. These women or their family

members and acquaintances emphasized their naivety when speaking about their decision to move to the Caliphate and join ISIS. Others argued that they were forced by their husbands, also emphasizing their victimhood. Furthermore, for their agency in the Caliphate, the victim narrative is utilized, focusing on the bad conditions, consequences of the ongoing war, and the continuing domestic violence. This aligns with Deylami's assertion that in particular Muslim women were subjected to victimization in the West due to assumed abusive men in the Islamic patriarchic society. Most of the women stressed that they were not aware of the situation outside the house and which atrocities ISIS committed. While in the Kurdish camps, these women also employed the victim narrative. Particularly, during media interviews, they emphasized their victimhood and naivety. The victim frame was also adopted by journalists conducting interviews with these women within the camps, as well as in articles by criminal lawyers defending them. These women likely employed the victim narrative as a strategy to secure a more moderate punishment upon repatriation.

This study showed that the mother narrative is also regularly employed when describing the agency of the Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS. In their motivation to join ISIS the Dutch female foreign fighters are framed as women who want to support their fellow Muslims and/ or husbands and raise their children in a correct Islamic environment, emphasizing their motherly and supporting role. The agency during their time with ISIS is also constantly framed within the mother narrative stressing the fact that they only were mothers and people should not be afraid. In this manner, the mother narrative also downplays their agency which makes them less of a security threat. But to what extent is this an objective description and when is it a simplification of reality utilizing this narrative based on the gender stereotype that women support men in conflict? The fact that other options of having agency in the Caliphate were not discussed makes us think that these women were framed within the mother narrative.

To a lesser extent and utilized by other individuals, the monster narrative was also used to describe the agency of Dutch foreign female fighters. Politicians commonly used the monster narrative online and during parliamentary debates. Words like beast, inhumans, and hangmen were all deployed by different parties to emphasize the possible danger of these women. Although the Dutch female foreign fighters were portrayed as having more agency compared to the other narratives, it still diminished their agency by using these kinds of words to describe them. They did not join ISIS for their political or ideological motivation, they joined because they were irrational and evil monsters.

Lastly, the whore narrative that described these women as overly sexual or sexual pawns of men. Compared to the mother- and victim narrative the whore narrative was mainly focused

on framing the agency of why these women left to join ISIS. Within the whole narrative, women were framed as jihad brides who moved to Syria or Iraq because they followed the men they loved or because they wanted to marry a heroic fighter. These women are overromanticized which diminishes their ideological and political motivation.

In conclusion, to answer the question of how the public discourse in the Netherlands framed the agency of Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS, between 2014 and 2022, using gendered narratives. This study showed that these women were framed using the (stupid) victim, mother, monster, and whore narrative. Emphasizing their naivety, romanticness, or biological need to support the jihad and therefore moved to the Caliphate. During their time in the Caliphate their agency was also framed as related to their roles of mothers and victims on the one hand. On the other hand, politicians and online commenters also used the monster narrative to frame their agency. Furthermore, during their time in the Kurdish camps hoping for their return to the Netherlands these women themselves, their family members, and journalists framed them as mothers and victims. It is important to note that there is much overlap between the different narratives, in particular with the term jihad bride, which resonated with the victim, mother, and whore narratives depending on the context. Furthermore, in particular, the mother- and victim narratives are used regularly at the same time.

Thus, the agency of Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS was framed utilizing the victim, mother, monster, and whore narrative. By focusing on related gender assumptions and stereotypes their agency is diminished and downplayed. Ideological and political motivations are not mentioned at all or to a lesser extent. These gendered narratives based on gender stereotypes and assigned assumptions offer a simplification to understanding the world around us. These stereotypes make us think in categorizations like mothers, whores, monsters, and victims. In reality, the women in the Caliphate could be both victims of domestic violence, and mothers raising their children according to the standards of the ideology of ISIS but did everything they could to save their children in the Kurdish camps. They could enslave Yazidi women and children, recruit other people, and spread propaganda but still were naïve in their thoughts of what the Caliphate would look like. These gendered narratives give us a categorized, simplified, and one-sided image of conflict.

It is important to be aware of how these gendered narratives shape our public discourse because they impact our journalists, politicians, and policymakers. During this study it became clear how politicians are more eager to deliberately use the monster narrative to securitize these women and justify their political stances. It is therefore important to address their agency objectively and not use the simplified gendered explanation. On the other hand, the Dutch

female foreign fighters and their family members were more eager to use the victim- and mother narrative to diminish their agency, get repatriated, and receive a less severe sentence. This study therefore shows that gendered narratives can be both intentionally and inadvertently be used by different parties. To obtain more transitional justice and better security policies it is important to acknowledge how these narratives shape our thinking in the public discourse. Lastly, encouraging gender equality and acknowledging women as individuals with agency beyond stereotypical roles of victimhood, motherhood, romanticization, monstrosity, or sexualization is crucial for establishing a world where women are not relegated to subordinate positions and their agency derives from ideological and political objectives.

While this study gives useful insights into the framing of the agency of Dutch female foreign fighters of ISIS in the public discourse, certain limitations must be acknowledged and addressed. These limitations not only shape the extent of the findings but also suggest prospects for future research that will expand on this work and broaden our understanding. First, the sources examined in this study tried to represent the public discourse as much as possible. Yet, these are only a small number of the accessible sources out there concerning this particular subject. Moreover, although giving different perspectives within the public discourse the examined sources are to some degree randomly picked. There is no justified reason for focusing on these specific sources while excluding others. Therefore, more research can be done studying different sources reflecting the Dutch public discourse. Secondly, this study is mainly focused on how gender stereotypes impact the narratives around female foreign fighters. However, foreign male fighters of ISIS and their portrayal in the public discourse can also be impacted by gendered narratives. Additionally, the victim narrative and monster narrative are not related to being women and can also be applied to men. Nevertheless, according to Sjoberg and Gentry, this happens to a far lesser extent. This can therefore be a subject for further research. Moreover, other discourses in different countries can be studied as well to see if there are similarities and differences compared to the Dutch case. Finally, as discussed in the second chapter, there are additional gendered lenses that can be used to examine gender stereotypes. Applying different gendered lenses to the Dutch case of female ISIS foreign fighters could therefore be a subject of future study.

This study attempted to unveil how gendered narratives based on gender stereotypes impact our understanding and framing of women's agency during their time in ISIS's Caliphate. It is essential to acknowledge that women's agency does not end in the kitchen and that their engagement and membership in ISIS might be linked to ideological and political objectives.

Each of these women has a unique journey that led them to the Caliphate, which should not be simplified in a narrative shaped by gender assumptions and stereotypes.

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