

# WOMEN WHO DON'T WANT TO BE SAVED: A GENDERED ANALYSIS OF "ACCEPTABLE" VS. "UNACCEPTABLE" FEMALE VIOLENCE

## MUJERES QUE NO QUIEREN SER SALVADAS: UN ANÁLISIS DE GÉNERO DE LA VIOLENCIA FEMENINA "ACEPTABLE" FRENTE A LA "INACEPTABLE"

ANASTASIA-ATHÉNAIS PORRET\*

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The voluntary departure of hundreds of young women, born and socialised in Europe, to Daesh-controlled territories has raised many legitimate questions. Why do women choose to adhere to ideologies that appear to disempower them? Can they really embrace such patriarchal violence? Women have traditionally been seen as the victims of violence, particularly Islamic terrorist violence, often thought of as a male prerogative. Even years after Daesh's defeat on the ground, the ambiguity of female violence remains a compelling issue, particularly when faced with social and legal challenges posed by female *returnées*. To offer a gendered analysis of women in/with violent ideologies and address their agency this paper will analyse representations of "acceptable" and "unacceptable" forms of female violence by focusing on the intersection between femininity, vulnerability, empowerment, sexuality and violence.

**Keywords:** Islam, female violence, terrorism, agency, jihadist group

*La salida voluntaria de cientos de mujeres jóvenes, nacidas y criadas en Europa hacia los territorios controlados por el Daesh ha suscitado muchas preguntas legítimas: ¿Por qué las mujeres eligen adherirse a ideologías que parecen desempoderarlas? ¿Pueden realmente asumir semejante violencia patriarcal? Tradicionalmente se ha considerado a las mujeres como víctimas de la violencia, en particular de la violencia terrorista islámica, a menudo considerada una prerrogativa masculina. Incluso años después de la derrota del grupo Daesh en el territorio, la violencia femenina sigue siendo un tema de actualidad, sobre todo ante los retos sociales y jurídicos que plantean las mujeres retornadas. Para ofrecer un análisis de género de las mujeres con ideologías violentas y abordar su agencia, este artículo analizará las representaciones de formas "aceptables" e "inaceptables" de violencia femenina, enfocándose en la intersección entre feminidad, vulnerabilidad, empoderamiento, sexualidad y violencia.*

**Palabras clave:** islam, violencia femenina, terrorismo, agencia, grupo yihadista

\* Université Paris Diderot

## INTRODUCTION

The voluntary departure of hundreds of young women, born and socialised in Europe, to a warzone controlled by an ideology that seemed to promise them the exact opposite of freedom and empowerment has raised many legitimate questions. Why do women choose to adhere to ideologies that appear to disempower them? Why do they embrace violence, done to them and others, voluntarily?

There is a tendency to think about violence in general, and terrorism in particular, as a male prerogative. By definition, "terrorism is an anxiety-inspired method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi)clandestine individual, group, or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal, or political reasons" (Schmid & Jongman, 2005, p. 5). Although terrorism is far from being a modern phenomenon (Duyvesteyn, 2004), the last decades have seen increased focus on "religious terrorism", specifically "Islamic terrorism", and to a lesser extent, "far-right extremism". Indeed, Islamic terrorist groups have long been considered as solely appealing to males, partly because they promote the implementation of strict patriarchal societies in which women's rights, from a western perspective, are minimal or non-existent.<sup>1</sup> It therefore seems baffling that some women could support such projects. This paper will strive to offer a gendered analysis of women who support violent ideologies or who partake in violence. This will allow us to address their agency, propose new ways of thinking about female violence, and to apprehend it outside of an androcentric lens.

This paper will initially concentrate on mechanisms of adherence. I will first be focusing on adherence to hyper-conservative groups before discussing female fighters or sympathisers of terrorist organisations, with a focus on Islamic terrorism,<sup>2</sup> and Daesh<sup>3</sup> in particular. The paper will then address representations of "acceptable" and "unacceptable" forms of female violence by analysing the portrayal of two types of female violence: the valiant (glamourised) Kurdish female soldier and the (sexualised) monster, the so-called Jihadi bride. The aim of this paper is to offer a gendered analysis of women in/with violent ideologies, address their agency and propose new ways of thinking about female violence while apprehending it outside of an androcentric lens.

The first part of this paper is based on the results of 35 in-depth, semi-directive interviews (19 in France, 16 in Ireland) conducted with white female converts to Islam<sup>4</sup> in Paris, Lille, Lyon, Marseille, Aix-en-Provence, Cork, Dublin, Kilkenny and Waterford, and participant observations. I undertook this qualitative fieldwork over three years, between January 2017 and June 2019, as part of my doctoral research project. I chose a semi-structured format to collect life stories, with conversion and experiences post-conversion as a focal point of those stories, to unearth mechanisms of adherence. The second part of this paper relies on the review of the media narratives of British and French press from 2015 to 2022 and

<sup>1</sup> Far-right supremacist movements also prone harsh conservative expectations of women. However, they are less widely discussed, possibly because they are less visible in terms of female dress restrictions (see Leidig, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> By "Islamic terrorism" I understand either lone terrorists or terrorist groups that claim to act with religious motivations, echoing, or derived from, political/societal ideals set out by fundamentalist Islamists militants and extremists.

<sup>3</sup> Daesh is the acronym for the Arabic name of ISIS, Dawla al-Islamiya fi-l-Traq wa-ach-Sham, and is often used by the critics of the "Islamic State". I will use it in this article to bypass the problematic use of the term State in reference to a terrorist-controlled territory (see Chaumette, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> In terms of age, the participants were between 17 and 71 years old at the time of the interview, with an average age at conversion of 20. The age of conversion, for the purpose of this research, is fixed at the age at which the shahada was pronounced.

the review and analysis of research papers that look at Western representations of Kurdish female fighters on the one hand (Toivanen & Baser, 2016; Alkan, 2018; Efe, 2019), and “Jihadi-brides” on the other (Ibrahim, 2017; Speckhard & Yayla, 2017; Martini, 2018; Bloom & Lokmanoglu, 2020). For the media review, the analysis has been carried out on British and French broadsheets with recognised coverage of global news but also known for their different political leanings: *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Telegraph*, *Le Monde*, *L’Express*, *L’Obs* and *Le Figaro*.

### THE DIFFICULTIES OF ADDRESSING FEMALE VIOLENCE

Women have traditionally been seen as the victims of violence. In the case of Muslim women, gender continues to intersect with a neo-Orientalist discourse, which refers to the Western production of various misconceptions and generalisations about “the Orient” (Said, 2003). This narrative has produced a “Western” understanding of Muslim women and the creation of a hierarchical hegemony of “the West” over “the Orient”. Added to this narrative, is the preconception that whiteness<sup>5</sup> is incompatible with being Muslim. This stems from a racialisation of religion and specifically of Islam. Indeed, most grievances against female conversions are discursively centred around the status of Muslim women in religion. Islam is believed to reflect intransigence, segregation (social and gendered), intolerance and anti-modernity. Violent groups, like Daesh, are portrayed as exemplifying that myth. Following from the Orientalist narrative, Islam itself was constructed as a “foreign” and “backwards” religion. This perception was then reinforced by violent acts of terror actors and justice systems that have been termed “medieval” and “archaic”, with a focus on “the grotesque form that the violence takes – including decapitations, stoning, and immolations” (Revkin, 2016, p. 5). The emphasis on the hyper-violence of the male Orientalised “other” further feeds into the notion that white women must necessarily be coerced to join these groups. This perception ignores the fact that adherence to an ideology is also the (re)construction of self through the adoption of a new referential that is partly achieved through a binary opposition and/or rejection of the socio-politico-religious offers traditionally available in the person’s given environment (Porret, 2022). The appeal of religious fundamentalism for some women cannot be ignored. Indeed, women who embrace fundamentalist versions of Islam show a serious commitment to the reframing of their way of life. Traditional approaches to fashioning the intimate and immediate social spheres, understood as divinely sanctioned, are seen as an alternative to a society perceived as uncertain, transient, and occasionally threatening (Inge, 2018, Adraoui, 2019).

This West/Orient categorisation has played a significant role in legitimising the “war on terror”, both on a military and ideological level (Martini, 2018). This led to a narrative of liberation for (supposedly) oppressed “Oriental” women (the woman in need of saving): from the mass unveiling ceremonies during the Algerian war, to the 2001 US-led intervention into Afghanistan, the “rescue motif” to “save” helpless women has frequently been utilised to secure popular consent for military intervention. Arguably, since the first

<sup>5</sup> Critical Whiteness Studies apprehend whiteness as forms of normative power in a system of domination with degrees of power, based on (projected) class, gender, religion and nationality.

wave of female Daesh *returnées*<sup>6</sup>, many Western countries have started to take a step back from these gender-biased approaches, visible in the way these women have been prosecuted. In France, the first Daesh female returnees in 2016 were not treated by the justice system as independent perpetrators of terrorist violence. They were portrayed as victims of either brainwashing or grooming. It is only after several thwarted attacks led by women, such as the Notre Dame bombing attempt<sup>7</sup>, that Daesh female members started to be perceived outside of the common triptych of mothers, monsters or whores (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). Much has also been written about these women's agency. Mostly, they have been portrayed as anti-models of femininity, because they embrace or support violence that goes against predefined notions of the Western model of female empowerment (the woman who does not want to be saved). Identifying their motives and involvement, but also questioning the notion itself of female violence is key, because the main issue faced by Western governments today is the return of these women and the need of developing tailored prosecution and rehabilitation strategies. More sporadically women have also been framed as capable of embracing violence to seek empowerment, in its Western notion of female emancipation and desires (the woman who saves herself). This refers to the image of the Amazon-like feminist, oppressed but brave, who fights like a man, but keeps her femininity. This figure, exemplified by the Kurdish female fighter in the Daesh conflict, is one of the two that will be analysed in more detail in this article.

Yet, years after Daesh's defeat on the ground, the ambiguity of female violence remains a compelling issue. Women have long been active participants in wars and terrorist organisations, including Islamic terrorist groups. Their roles have been varied and have changed within and across organisations. They have been soldiers, suicide bombers, recruiters, militants, logistical supporters and spies. Nonetheless, women who joined these movements continue to be viewed through a patriarchal lens. On the one hand, female terrorists (who unambiguously carried out violent acts) are portrayed as "monstrous", thus unveiling the continuing dichotomy between "woman" and "terrorist". This can be seen through the discursive emphasis on their acts (that take on a more horrid form), motives (often deemed emotional) and gender (female violence takes on a form of exceptionalism). Whereas the male terrorist is simply a "terrorist". On the other hand, the "wives" of fighters, are described in mainstream media as being victims of an emotional state or a challenging childhood, rather than personal, ideological or political motivations. Tellingly, during the prosecution of a French female Daesh member<sup>8</sup> nicknamed "the Daesh midwife", the defendant was described as intelligent, sensitive, and determined, but also lacking familial stability growing up. Another French *returnée*<sup>9</sup>, prosecuted the following day, was for her part described as "emotionally immature", unstable and a victim of her own choices.

6 *Returnée* refers to individuals who have returned (whether voluntarily or involuntarily repatriated) from Daesh-controlled (or previously controlled) areas to their country of origin.

7 In 2016, five women, who were part of an all-female jihadist cell, were arrested after a failed plot to detonate a car bomb outside Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris.

8 A French female *returnée*, Douha Mounib, was sentenced to twelve years imprisonment on the 1st of March 2023 by the Paris Criminal Court.

9 Amandine Le Coz, a convert, was condemned to ten years imprisonment by the Paris Criminal Court.

## FEMALE VIOLENCE AND THE MECHANISMS OF ADHERENCE

### *Adherence, Empowerment, and Extremism*

When questioned about their choices, nonviolent converts to Islam often make at least one reference to the relationship between feminism(s) and Islam, and/or female empowerment through Islam. Many women also insist on the importance of presenting themselves as emancipated. My research on white female converts to Islam (Porret, 2020 & 2022) shows that the refashioning of converts' feminine subjectivity is key for them to live out their new religious prescriptions fully. This, regardless of the Islamic ideology they follow. To do so, they must re-signify their presence and concrete religious practice in the public sphere. However, they do not only aspire to embody some of the European self-descriptions that they grew up with, but they also want those attributes to be recognised as part of their new Muslim female self. The mixture of their previous lived experience of gender-based rights and their scholarly knowledge of Islam allows converts to formulate specific demands, while affirming their legitimacy as independent Muslim women (to their non-Muslim relatives and in the Muslim communities they join and/or interact with).

Converts who display Salafi-inspired markers in the public sphere consciously impose all the more their new performative body on their surroundings (Inge, 2018). Through their performance of an alternative "modest" body, they simultaneously reject their society's model of "femininity" and prone new ethics of self-realisation and autonomy (*vis-à-vis* that model of "femininity"), all the while conforming to the traditional forms of their new faith's regulatory powers. This construction of a pious Muslim self is achieved through strict self-regulation, often voiced as empowerment, as well as high levels of social monitoring (Noor, 2017). All converts are confronted with acceptable modes of religiosity, and sets of beliefs and practices, that they are expected to follow. Modern conversions are essentially individual acts of faith, linked to a social context, as well as exercises in creating individuality and difference. Conversions to Islam can therefore be read as a social criticism, a personal rehabilitation of the self, or an opportunity to restructure one's immediate surroundings.

Quid of female jihadists? There is a lack of available data on female Daesh affiliate's perceptions of femininity and gendered roles. However, it is worth noting that it is precisely because hyper-conservative groups legitimise some women's desires for "traditional" identities of wives and mothers, as well as the attraction for the transgressive nature of these groups, that they are attractive. In terms of perceptions, as Sjoberg and Gentry observe, women who engage in violence are in many cases simultaneously stripped of any responsibility for their actions and reduced to their sexuality. In other words, they are labelled as mad "whores" (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). Their femininity (or lack of) is seen as perplexing. This viewpoint partly stems from the irreconcilability of full body covering practices in public with feminine practices and female sexuality. On the one hand, these *niqab*-clad shadows are reduced to being the terrorists' child bearers, and on the other, they don't fully fit into the "innocent victim" model because they willingly offer themselves sexually to the *hyper-patriarchal* terrorist. This viewpoint also positions these women as being more susceptible to the lure of Daesh's predatory masculinity (as opposed to a "positive" Western masculinity) (Zarakol, 2017).

Arguably, many *muhajirat*<sup>10</sup> did not encounter the societal model they were expecting when they arrived in Daesh-controlled territories (Speckhard & Yayla, 2017), and several suffered violence at the hands of their husbands and other women. However, this does not negate a desire and confidence in the potential for their ideology to provide an alternative (gendered) social model of which violence is an accepted and acceptable component. Furthermore, it is legitimate to suppose that, like many women across the globe who join orthodox and extremist movements, female Daesh affiliates are diverse in terms of social and familial aspiration, perceptions on their born society, ideas of femininity and degrees of commitment to their faith. Failing to consider their spiritual commitment, their social ambitions but also their understanding of femininity, leads to an oversimplification of their engagement. A gendered analysis of push-and-pull factors to extremist violence is crucial to adequately respond to the challenges posed by female *returnées*.

#### *Women Who Adhere to Violent and Misogynistic Movements*

The involvement, and particularly the *hijra*<sup>11</sup>, of young white female converts to Daesh-controlled territories in the 2010s, sparked an intense media debate around their role, motivation, and agency. Emphasis has been on their social status (middle class or lower middle class), skin colour (underlining the preconception that *whiteness* is incompatible with being Muslim), their educational level (brilliant scholars or with a university education) and their prior engagement in civil society as free and “modern” women, who grew up in liberal families. The focus on these particularities underlines the irreconcilability of the West’s gendered narrative with the involvement of white Western women with violence, but also their involvement with Islam, which is portrayed as the antithesis of female empowerment. The second irreconcilable aspect is their rejection of “saviourship”. As Spivak (1994, p. 93) famously pointed out, one of the processes wherein Western states legitimise their interventions at home or abroad, is by emphasising the oppression of some women (usually non-white) by racialised men, or their (masculinist) religion (often Islam): “white men saving brown women from brown men”. Yet, without asking the women if they wish to be saved.

That is not to say that women have not suffered immensely at the hands of repressive regimes, such as the Taliban rule. However, the rhetoric of the woman in need of rescue, only offers a Western model of emancipation. Once liberated, they are expected to throw off their veils, don make-up and carry out a European lifestyle. All of this, without considering economic, educational, religious, and cultural needs and challenges. Instead of giving these women a voice to express their agency and desires, the narrative merely serves as justification for a military intervention as well as to reinforce stereotypical constructions about the barbaric nature of Islam and its subhuman treatment of women (Jiwani, 2009). Because this narrative of saviourship has been widely adopted, the situation of white female converts willingly joining orthodox and/or violent Islamic groups like Daesh is presented as even more baffling. Their depiction as brainwashed, irrational, naïve, sexually deprived, or

<sup>10</sup> Muhajirat is the Arabic word for the women who made hijra. In contemporary context it refers to women who migrated to the so-called “Caliphate” (Daesh-controlled lands).

<sup>11</sup> Traditionally refers to the Prophet Mohammed and several of his companions’ departure from Mecca to Medina, in 622. In contemporary terms it usually refers to the emigration of Muslims to Muslim-majority countries. In the case of Daesh, the call to hijra has been a powerful recruitment strategy.

simply monstrous and therefore unfeminine (Ibrahim, 2019). This illustrates the collective disbelief that women would willingly forgo the Western model of social and political gender equality.

On the one hand, this stems from a recurrent critical bias in Western feminism's metadiscourse to characterise women as a homogenous group with a shared oppression. This has been challenged by post/neo-colonial theories (Chatterjee, 1993; Spivak, 1994; Abu-Lughod, 2015; Kian, 2017). Nonetheless, in the dominant model, "Third World women" (a category that is also applied to Muslim women in the West) are cast as inevitably dependent and powerless.

This average Third World woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being "Third World" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimised, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexuality, and the freedom to make their own decisions. (Mohanty, 1984, p. 337)

Thus, when the decisions taken by these women go against the Western paradigm of liberation (i.e., unveiling, rejecting domesticity, religion, tradition, etc.) they provoke anxiety, confusion and repulsion:

In media portrayals, the female Muslim body censured for its modesty (burkini) or for not revealing its face (*niqab*) is always understood through governance notions of "abnormality" in terms of its gender and sexuality. (...) Imagined through deviance, hostility and its aberrance, it is not capable of producing pleasure or consuming desire. (...) The fear of the Jihadi bride in media narratives is partly derived from sub-human qualities where it can be "brain-washed" by doctrines of violence but not located through (...) its bodily pleasures or subjectivity. (Ibrahim, 2019, p. 15)

Those who actively embrace terrorist violence and the associated hyper-patriarchal system of jihadist groups are therefore seen as particularly threatening, because they blur socially acceptable notions of femininity. This nonetheless leads to the question of why these women would join or "convert" to extremist narratives.

#### *Mechanisms of Adherence: Converting to Extremism?*

One interesting aspect of the so-called "Jihadi bride" is the emphasis on white converts. Although some researchers have looked at the role of religious conversion in extremism, radicalisation, and terrorism (Bartoszewicz, 2013; Mullins, 2015; Schurmann et al., 2016; Geelhoed et al., 2019), the overall picture remains fragmented. Most theories that touch upon radicalisation cut across various approaches, mainly psychological, sociological and from a conflict studies approach. Broadly speaking, psychological and cognitive theories:

claim that radicalisation is the result of individual psychologies, personalities, and choices. (...) [This ranges from rational choice theories that] contend that people choose terrorism because it is the best available option to affect change [while others] argue that joining a terrorist movement offers an "identity stabiliser" for people with low self-esteem or for those who, as excluded minorities, are searching for belonging. (Kleinmann, 2012, p. 279)

On the other hand, sociological theories argue that "societal forces are radicalising mechanisms" (Kleinmann, 2012, p. 280). These wide-ranging approaches suggest that most of these theories intersect, as there is no one reason to explain radicalisation.

Like nonviolent conversions, each individual journey to extremism is going to be unique in its exterior influences and the ways in which that individual reacts to society (Porret, 2022). Sociological perspectives have stressed the influence of environmental conditions and the role of “radical milieus”, small-group dynamics, and antagonistic competition with the state. This is valid for both genders. To this can be added a variety of personal characteristics, backgrounds, and involvement pathways. Female mechanisms of adherence and modes of engagement are therefore key to look at because they are increasingly diverse and fall along a wide spectrum. Engagement ranges from supporting a terrorist group, disseminating propaganda material online, fundraising, information mining, fighting, planting bombs to carrying out a suicide attack. Acts of support are particularly interesting because they don't imply fighting (typically linked to male violence). These can be attractive to some women who want to participate in the group's violence in alternative ways, while others will challenge their group's notions on female involvement in combat.

Mechanisms of adherence are also key to look at because they suggest a crossover between narration of belonging, narration of violence and acts. Indeed, the individual and social experience of adherence cannot be separated from its vocalisation and historicisation. Discourse is a key aspect of any group adherence. Framing their motivation for an ideology or for specific forms of violence as part of a rehearsed narrative is an inherent part of the recruits' learning process:

Terrorists may have *learnt* to describe their motivations in ideological terms during their socialisation into the group [and] such justifications may obscure other motivating factors that could be of equal or greater significance. (Schuurman & Taylor, 2018, p. 3).

The ideological positioning of an individual tends to first mirror the influencer<sup>12</sup>, then the group's discourse. Gestures will then reinforce both discourse and ideology. Adherence is therefore a twofold mechanism, with behaviour playing a crucial part in the development and acceptance of ideologies. It is reinforced by the upholding of a shared etiquette, behaviour, and a common language.

### **BRAVE (VIRGIN) WOMEN AND RADICAL WHORES: ACCEPTABLE VS. UNACCEPTABLE FEMALE VIOLENCE**

#### *Understanding Female Violence*

Female violence is tangled with notions of (un)femininity and masculinity. An enduring myth about female violence is that the women involved are either radical yet liberated political actors fighting for their own empowerment, or weak women, victims of their personal circumstances and emotional nature:

The issue of female violence reveals the complexity of thinking about women in an active relationship with violence, in societies where they are considered above all as victims of violence. In contemporary female jihadism, this bias is expressed mainly in the attempt to explain women's involvement in a way other than by their own intentionality, or their adherence to the cause, because the benefits they derive from such adherence are not obvious to society. An alternative explanation is therefore sought to make sense of [their] commitment,

<sup>12</sup> Here I differentiate influencer from recruiter. The influencer is understood as a person, who may or may not be a recruiter, who will inspire an individual looking to join an ideology, yet without denying that person agency.

[such as] a tendency to explain their acts in terms of a dramatic personal history more than the result of ideological conviction. (Casutt, 2018, pp. 87-88)

This consigns female actors of violence to being valiant feminist fighters or unstable emotional preys. This myth consequently ignores the nuances of female agency and the complexity of violent engagement.

Female violence is also frequently understood through a masculine referential: the vengeful woman is first and foremost a mother or a widow, and the deceitful ingenue is either a naïve virgin or a “whore” in waiting. The valiant soldier, the only acceptable violent female figure, is simultaneously pure and glamourised, which allows her to temporarily take on a masculine role (that of a soldier) because she then “reverts” to being a woman (empowered yet peaceful and available to the male gaze). Importantly, the Kurdish soldier is glamourised as opposed to being sexualised, like the Daesh affiliate. Tellingly, in Western media outlets, these women were described as beautiful, Amazon-like, Joan of Arc<sup>13</sup> figures, subconsciously emphasising their purity. There was also a frequent focus on their hair, or accessories, which stands out as a stark opposition to the veiled women of Daesh, as exemplified in the media extract below:

Two women in military uniform, AK-47s slung over their shoulders and colourful floral scarves tied in their hair, walk through a desolate landscape. On the way, they spot a stray dog trying to dig up the corpse of a jihadist who has been summarily buried by their comrades. (Riffaudeau, 2021)

Portraying these women’s violence through the male gaze not only denies them full agency, but it also hinders an objective analysis of their motivations, which is necessary to understand and prevent violence in general.

In the following sub-parts, I will analyse the portrayal of two antithetic types of female violence that dominated the female violence narrative during the Daesh years: the valiant (glamourised) Kurdish soldier and the deceitful (sexualised) ingenue also known as the “jihadi bride”. These stereotypes examples highlight the difficulty for media and policy actors to think about female violence as intentional outside of specific social gender dynamics (radical feminism and empowerment).

#### *Glamorous Freedom Fighters: Kurdish Female Battalions*

At first largely unknown in the West, the YPJ, the YPG’s female battalion, gained prominence in the media after the liberation of Kobane in 2015 by the Kurdish Protection Units. Several groups fought against Daesh for the liberation of the city, but Kobane can arguably be seen as a turning point for the mediatisation of Kurdish women fighters in Europe (Toivanen & Baser, 2016). Kurdish actors took advantage of this spotlight to increase visibility for their cause, but Kurdish female fighters have also been independently conceptualised as valiant and emancipated by a Western audience. After Kobane, dozens of news stories were published on Kurdish female fighters. They were largely portrayed as the heroic binary opposite of their opposition, Daesh, whose jihadists embodied obscurantism and patriarchy. They also became the (sympathetic) antithesis of the *niqab*-clad Daesh women.

<sup>13</sup> Joan of Arc, also called “the maid/virgin”, was a fifteenth-century French combatant, who dressed as man in the hundred years’ war. She was canonized as a saint after her capture and execution.

There is no doubt that the YPJ, along with other armed units, were a decisive military force in the fight against Daesh. The all-female brigade, however, was erroneously presented as a novel phenomenon and the women's ideological and political reasons for joining the fight were largely overlooked or simplified:

News stories, particularly in cases when female combatants were interviewed personally, framed the ideological battle as one of emancipation. It was one that extended beyond the "Kurdishness" of the struggle, and that concerned a more universal battle for women's emancipation in the region (Toivanen & Baser, 2016, p. 13).

Involvement in these armed groups assuredly allowed some women to emancipate themselves from patriarchal practices, such as forced marriage, honour crimes and domestic violence, and acquire a new status within Kurdish society. Indeed, it is worth noting that in Kurdistan, the gender divide remains very present:

In the larger cities, there are signs of a degree of openness to women's rights regarding access to outdoor spaces: some women sometimes wear nothing more than a scarf in their hair; others are covered from head to toe, but with their faces uncovered. A lot of them are outside. But cafes are still mainly reserved for men or families: a single woman is still looked upon at best with astonishment, and more often with reproach. (Minces, 2016, p. 138)

Some women joined the PKK/YPJ for ideological reasons, while others joined because they were the only military unit to accept female fighters. Others, who were not mediated, joined the fight in Erbil as assistants, nurses, or logisticians but they do not fight (Minces, 2016). The focus on a unique female Kurdish battalion underlines the dichotomy of the mainstream Western narrative on female violence. Emancipation was glorified, while traditional support roles and the reality of an everyday patriarchal culture (possibly too close to the support roles of the Daesh wives) were overlooked.

In the West, Kurdish female fighters were therefore portrayed as exceptionally "heroic", but they were also highly gendered. Several European media outlets focused on the "feminine" practices of these women, set in opposition to the hyper-masculinity of the Daesh terrorists, thus framing their violence as necessary (to escape sexual violence at the hands of the jihadist), but also as exceptional:

The combination of masculine-like participation in military action at the front line with softer, feminine-like attributes is a powerful way to construct a heroic image of women in war, who step outside their traditional roles when extreme circumstances require so. (...) [T]he fact of highlighting their gender and "femininity" at the same time lead to their participation becoming framed as something not only heroic, but as an atypical behaviour for women. (Toivanen & Baser, 2016, p. 17)

This "exceptional" female violence therefore becomes acceptable because it is framed as heroic and glamorous. Not only are the combatants portrayed as preserving their femininity, but also as fighting Daesh's patriarchal impositions on women. Although Daesh was an immediate threat to them and their community, their political ideology, the emancipatory aspect of joining the YPJ and personal reasons for taking up arms were largely overlooked. Focus was mainly on (the all female) camp life and glimpses of these young women's feminine habits. The notion of sexual honour, which the young woman must protect at all costs, including suicide if she is caught, was also largely overlooked in Western coverage (Alkan, 2018). This model of acceptable female violence is legitimised because it is both exceptional

and exotic: they are portrayed as both liberated and liberating, since they promise freedom not only for their people but also for women in general. Their revolutionary involvement can therefore be glorified, while brushing over their personal, political, gendered, and social struggles (Maucourant, 2015). Indeed, the beautiful, young, unmarried women of the YPJ were frequently portrayed as little more than “poster girls”. Their fight was key to the Western metanarrative of good vs. evil, modernity (female empowerment) vs. obscurantism (Daesh).

*The Naïve, Sexually Voracious, Monster: “Jihadi Brides”*

Unlike the brave young female Kurdish fighters, mothers and wives are excluded from this “acceptable” parenthesis of violence. Like the infamous “black widows”<sup>14</sup> (Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2006), Daesh female recruits have long been depicted through their male counterparts. As the modern female monster, the female Daesh terrorist is indeed first and foremost depicted as a wife and mother figure, exemplified through the controversial image of the “jihadi bride”. Unlike the Kurdish female fighter, the “jihadi bride” is not glamourised, partly because she has rendered herself invisible to the male gaze. She is, however, sexualised.

The term “jihadi bride” draws heavily on Orientalist notions of Muslim women’s servitude and the incompatibility between Islam and secular modernity. It also encloses women who joined jihadist groups into a strict heteronormative paradigm, where they are often believed to exist only through and for their monstrous husbands: they are portrayed either as naïve and brainwashed, or as whores, guided by (unnatural) sexual drive for terrorists. In that narrative, it is through her (sexual) attraction to monstrosity that the “jihadi bride” finds alternative fulfilment, yet her desires are not her own, and can only be portrayed through the gaze of her “monstrous” husband, as analysed by Ibrahim:

As such the Jihadi bride is a secondary entity, an appendage, forged against the terrorist figure of the “monstrous” Jihadist. (...) The Jihadi bride is imagined through the existence of the male Jihadist as the antagonist (...). Her sexualisation is through his male gaze and subsumed through this servitude where both her mind and her mortal body can be possessed through him. (...) Positioned as a sub-human, she is (...) cast as a sacrificial object for the sexual pleasure of the extremist Jihadist. (Ibrahim, 2019, p. 2)

In that narrative she is both, a victim of his monstrous masculinity (and hypersexuality), and a victim of grooming. However, even when she is seen as a victim of grooming, through her attraction to this male “other” and by bearing his children, she actively “sympathises” with the antagonist, and aspires to become a “monster” herself. Furthermore, by embracing Daesh’s model of hyperpatriarchy she disrupts “idealised notions of Western femininity and represents the ever-present potential of women to subvert the categories that subtend gendered order in Western (post)modernity” (Third, 2014, p. 1). Still, her agency remains suspect, because “it is not an agency aimed towards the liberation of oneself but rather an agency enthralled by ISIS in its service and for its ends” (Jiwani, 2021, p. 57).

Furthermore, faced with Daesh’s morbid fascination with sexual violence, the most shocking having been the sexual enslavement of Yezidi girls, the Western metanarrative of the “jihadi bride” focused on the supposed fragility, naivety and brainwashing of Daesh

<sup>14</sup> Chechen female bombers who were portrayed as acting in revenge for the deaths of their husbands, sons, and brothers.

recruits. Even the recent prosecutions of female *returnées* tend to frame their motives in emotional terms (González et al., 2014). Many stories highlight either the romantic optimism of manipulated young ingenues seeking a bearded prince charming in a war zone, or problematic familial backgrounds, such as a history of abuse or addiction, trauma, toxic parental models and sexual abuse. These reasons can still be true. Bloom (2011) for example points to the high incidence of rape among violent extremist women. Several female recruits also suffered violent physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their husbands and tried to escape. Nonetheless, to isolate their experience as purely or predominantly emotional contributes to depoliticise female violence and reinforces the metanarrative of women as eternal victims.

### *Vulnerability and Violence: Reclaiming Traditional Roles*

There is a tendency to think violence as acts, rather than to consider the wide range of ways in which a person can partake in violence, including through support roles or by bringing up children to adhere to an ideology of violence. Physical violence, including death, can also arguably be experienced by proxy for women who have a restricted access to the battlefield (Benslama & Khosrokhavar, 2017). Yet, regardless of the degree of physical violence they can achieve (partly because most Islamic terrorist groups discourage, if not prohibit, female violence), women in jihadi groups are far from being passive. This active involvement starts with the determination displayed by these women who left for Syria, often alone, to participate in a socio-political model that they ideologically support and where they find alternative forms of empowerment.

It is difficult to know the degree of direct physical violence these women wished to engage in. Especially since in Daesh's early recruitment strategy relied on reinforcing gender binaries and delegitimising female combat:

Analysis of the now-defunct *Dabiq* shows (...) women [represented as] victims, whose abuse by the enemy justifies men's jihad to both avenge and protect them. Second, women are depicted as symbolically sanctified mothers and sisters and incubators of the next generation. While men's existence as fighters was precarious, it was the women who represented *baqiya*, or permanence. (Pearson, 2018, p. 47)

This use of perceived vulnerability has been mobilised by young women who joined Daesh in a large range of non-combat roles. Yet, Daesh later changed its stance regarding female involvement in violence. The gradual incorporation of women into a wide range of roles, from advocacy to money laundering, reflects an evolving strategic logic of jihadi groups (Khelghat-Doost, 2019). Many women therefore took on varied roles. They were not limited to a purely reproductive function or domestic tasks and actively participated in the modelling of a violent, yet organised society, while finding strategies to assert their agency in that milieu. Some women also reclaimed common perceptions of female vulnerability and peacefulness to their advantage to perform violent acts:

Women are able to use their gender to avoid detection on several fronts: first, their "non-threatening" nature may prevent in-depth scrutiny at the most basic level (...); second, sensitivities regarding more thorough searches, particularly of women's bodies, may hamper stricter scrutiny; and third, a woman's ability to get pregnant and the attendant

changes to her body facilitate concealment of weapons and bombs using maternity clothing, as well as further impeding inspection because of impropriety issues (Cunningham, 2003, pp. 172-173).

Indeed, as noted by Khelghat-Doost (2019), since most security and counterterrorism policies and practices in the Middle East and North Africa, are highly male-dominant, using women provides these clandestine structures with a strategic advantage. Indeed, “due to several religious and cultural reasons, most members of security forces are comprised of males, which restricts proper implementation of security procedures on women at check points or during public/house searches” (Khelghat-Doost, 2019, p. 859).

Nonetheless, the idea that these young women challenge binary representations of the Muslim woman, and of violence, by joining terrorist organisations must be tempered. They are not necessarily subverting gender norms, but reclaiming traditional perceptions to facilitate their engagement, while favouring a consolidation of gender norms. Yet, not acknowledging their involvement because of gendered perceptions of violence and vulnerability deprives these women of agency and limits the understanding of a complex phenomenon: “the role itself, whether active fighter, suicide bomber, wife, mother, and others [does] not influence the agency of women” (Bloom & Lokmanoglu, 2020, p. 5).

## CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to highlight the various degrees of female violence and the many forms it can take. The irreconcilability of the West’s prominent discourse on gender equality and the pull of some women towards misogynistic ideologies has had a negative effect on policy and security actions. Indeed, acknowledging the complex role both Islamic fundamentalism and the pull of some women towards hyper-patriarchal societal models, is key to explain why these women chose to join extremist groups and either support, or partake, in violence. Although female radicalisation into far-right white supremacist and extremist movements is beyond the scope of this article, the overlapping of narratives between Islamist female recruits and white supremacist female recruits<sup>15</sup> should also be taken seriously when assessing the drivers of terrorism.

The first part of this paper has concentrated on mechanisms of adherence to fundamentalism, at an individual level. From non-violent Islamic conversions, to Salafism, to jihadi engagement, the type of adherence a woman chooses will be highly dependent on the available “Islam market”, including its violent forms (Porret, 2020). Furthermore, it is important to remember that conversion, and radicalisation, can be transgressive assertions of one’s agency and identity. This has the potential to render radical narratives attractive to some women. It is arguably more beneficial to look at strategic pull factors promoted by terrorist groups, as well as global trends, to explain why some women do radicalise rather than look for “emotional predispositions” to embracing violent views. Daesh’s communication strategy has also been highly effective and transnational. It has successfully mobilised individuals from a vast array of backgrounds, including some recent converts to Islam who can be vulnerable to specific targeting because of their isolation and

<sup>15</sup> Particularly narratives surrounding societal degradation and the need to restore social order through restoration of the nuclear family unit. For a discussion on Women in Far-Right Extremism, see Leidig (2021).

lack of religious knowledge, but also by provoking strong emotional responses through the diffusion of violent images.

The second part of this paper addressed forms of female violence and their depiction. The first figure of “acceptable” female violence, the female Kurdish fighter, has largely been appropriated in the West as neo-orientalism still plays a part in popular culture:

Media reports glamorising female Kurdish fighters taking on DAESH caricaturise these women as a novel phenomenon. News producers and even fashion magazines appropriate female Kurdish fighters for their own sensationalist purposes by picking the most “attractive” fighters for interviews and exoticise them as “badass Amazons”. (Efe, 2019, p. 128)

This approach has fed the narrative of bad vs. evil in the war against Daesh, however it has largely overlooked the deeper struggles of these female fighters. Furthermore, their violence (however legitimate), has been glamourised thus minimising their agency.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Kurdish fighter’s binary opposite, the jihadi bride, has been depicted as a combination of extremes: in terms of violence, of piety, of sexual drive (or lack of, due to extreme piety) and in her rejection of the Western model of femininity and empowerment. Through the apparent sacrifice of her free-will and body to her monstrous jihadist husband, she remains a complex and repulsive figure: Denied her bodily pleasures and encoded through death, martyrdom and sacrifice she performs as a shadow figure of conflict and violence. (Ibrahim, 2019, p. 17).

Yet, due to the gendering of structural issues that underpin terrorist violence, such as explaining female extremism through emotional factors (toxic environments, trauma and abuse, grooming, etc.), there has been failure to consider a broad range of female involvement in violence, alternative forms of violence and the risk represented by the pull factors offered by radical extremist groups. Several young women who left for Daesh-controlled territories sought to challenge the societal and gendered norms in which they were brought up and some were seeking alternative models to live out their femininity. Even if many did suffer mentally and physically once they reached the so-called Caliphate, it does not mean that they did not uphold the ideology of the group and sought empowerment through (association with) violence. Further radicalisation of belief is another risk to consider for female *returnées*, particularly those currently in prison, who have the possibility to recreate informal female pious circles. Many of these women have now also shifted from being young naive jihadi brides, to being mothers and widows of jihadists. This particularity adds another component to the equation. These women, who had largely ambiguous roles in the construction and legitimisation of a hyper-violent society, are now, as mothers, potential vectors of violent ideologies.

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