Legitimacy of armed groups: A gendered perspective on the Women's Protection Units

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Abstract

In the last decade, the participation of women in political violence has received an increasing amount of academic attention. However, scholars often neglected to find empirical evidence on the implications of women for armed groups perceived legitimacy. To fill this gap, this thesis explores the Women's Protection Unit, which received worldwide media attention in their battle against the Islamic State, as a single case study. This thesis examines the Western perspective towards these women combatants by employing a qualitative content analysis of 43 Dutch newspaper articles. The results reveal that the media uses stereotypes about gender by framing these women combatants as non-aggressive, weaker, and less threatening than the male combatants of the Islamic State. As a result, the media legitimizes the use of violence of the female combatants as they need to protect themselves. Besides, the media glorifies the women of the YPJ by pointing out their fight for Western values, namely equality. Consequently, this thesis posits that the way the media frame the women combatants and their opponent, the Islamic State, favours the legitimacy of the armed group, the Women's Protection Unit.

Key words: Kurds, YPJ, women combatants, legitimacy, media framing, civil war, violence, gender.

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Abbreviations

YPJ - Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (Women's Protection Units)

YPG - Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Protection Units)

PYD - Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party)

PKK - Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party)

1. Introduction

We have to be free from the Syrian government. We need to control the area ourselves without depending on them. They can't protect us from the Islamic State, we have to protect us, and we defend everyone, no matter what race or religion[1] - Evin Ahmed, YPJ member, in an interview with Marie-Claire (magazine).

Evin, like many women who participate in the Women Protection Unit (YPJ), attracted considerable attention from the media across the globe (Toivanen & Baser, 2016). The media centred their perspective on the motivations and actions of these female combatants and highlighted their value in the fight against the Islamic State (IS) (Toivanen & Baser, 2016). In 2014, the IS strived for territorial power in Northern Syria, the Kurdish's minority territory. This led to a conflict between the IS and the Kurdish fighters called the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the women's troop, the YPJ. The conflict was part of the Syrian civil war that started in 2011 between the Syrian Arab Republic led by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and its supporters and various actors opposing the Syrian government (Khan & Khan, 2017, pp. 561-563).

Women's involvement in political violence is not a recent phenomenon (Bloom, 2012). Henshaw (2013) suggests that women present about one-third of armed groups worldwide. As women are more involved in armed conflicts than most people believe, it is essential to study their involvement. In the last decades, more scholars examine the phenomenon of women combatants (Loken, 2018). Some scholars investigate the question concerning why women join armed groups (Gowrinathan, 2017; Henshaw, 2013; Viterna, 2013; Viterna, 2006). Other scholars aim to explain the variation of their role across different armed groups (Thomas & Bond, 2015; Creveld, 2001; Wood & Thomas, 2017). Finally, some scholars aim to understand women's experience in conflicts (Alison, 2003; Turshen, 1998).

These and other topics have been explored by many feminist, conflict and political science scholars or are still being studied today. An ongoing field of study aims to explore the effects of women's inclusion for armed groups (Loken, 2021; Manekin & Wood, 2020; Wood, 2019). These scholars refer to the symbolic power of gender during wartime, resulting in a strategic advantage for armed groups when including women (Bayard de Volo, 2004; Loken, 2018; Viterna, 2014).

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[1] "These remarkable women are fighting ISIS", Marie-Claire, 1 October 2014, p. 1

An important strategic advantage for armed groups is that the framing of women combatant's shape perceptions of the legitimacy of an armed group's goals and tactics (Loken, 2018; Viterna, 2014). Yet, there is limited empirical evidence to support this argument. To fill this gap in the literature, this research aims to answer the following research question:

How does the inclusion of women in armed groups shape public perceptions of the legitimacy of the armed group's goals and actions?

By answering this research question, this study contributes to a theoretically relevant and important area of research that is largely neglected by academia. Moreover, this study aims to create awareness of the influence of gender in conflict, which could have important societal implications.

To answer the research question, the thesis first reviews the literature on women in armed groups. Second, the thesis provides the main argument and conceptualization of the variables in the theoretical framework. Third, it justifies and explains the methodology of the research. Building on this, the thesis studies the perceived legitimacy of the YPJ by analysing the gender narratives, surrounding the violence of the YPJ in the Western media. This is done through content analyses of Dutch newspaper articles. In the final section, the study discusses the findings and aims to answer the research question.

2. Literature review

There are multiple bodies of literature concerning women's participation in armed groups. As their presence is believed to be an important explanatory factor for the emergence, nature, and outcome of a group this literature review exclusively focuses on the literature concerning the implications of women's involvement in armed groups (Taylor, 1999, p. 8). Henceforth, it aims to give an overview of the existing knowledge about the origin and effects of women's participation in armed groups.

2.1 The origin of women in armed groups

The review starts with the literature regarding the motivations of women in armed groups. On the one hand, there is literature that highlights various reasons for women to join armed groups, such as 1) women believe an armed group offers them protection (Viterna, 2006); 2) women believe an armed group provides them selective benefits, such as material goods and (Olson, 1997); 3) women are forced to join an armed group (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2008).

On the other hand, some literature explores the motivations for armed groups to include women (Loken, 2018, 2021; Viterna; 2014; Wood, 2019). Essentially, this literature points to a relationship between the motivations for women to join and for rebel leaders to attract women. To explain this relationship, the literature refers to the strategic value of women as a core reason to include them. This review proceeds by focussing on what the motivations for armed groups entail by reviewing the literature on the strategic value of women for armed groups.

Wood (2019) offers a clear distinction between the direct value of women for armed groups referred to as a practical value, and a more indirect value of women for armed groups referred to as symbolic value. The author maintains that the practical value depends on expanding resource demands. Differently put, armed groups include women to enhance the size of their combat forces (Wood, 2019, p. 63). Similarly, Bloom (2017) posits that armed groups attract women to strengthen the numbers on the frontline (p. 6). Whereas the practical value is straightforward, the symbolic value of women requires a more detailed assessment.

To justify the symbolic value of women for armed groups, scholars frequently examine the importance of gender beliefs (Bayard de Volo, 2004; Carpenter, 2005; Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015; Williams 1982; Wood & Eagly, 2002). Several studies suggest that terms such as resistance and violence are commonly perceived as predominantly male characteristics and coupled to masculinity. Contrastingly, empathy, kindness, and vulnerability are terms that are mostly associated with female characteristics and linked to femininity (Williams, 1982; Wood

& Eagly, 2002). Consequently, scholars claim that deeply embedded gendered stereotypes place violent women in a more favourable position compared to violent men (Bayard de Volo, 2004). Accordingly, Carpenter (2005) posits that women are perceived as less violent compared to men because people perceive them as vulnerable and incapable of violent acts (p. 302). Furthermore, Gentry & Sjoberg (2015) stress that existing gendered stereotypes leads to the belief that women are not supposed to be violent (p. 2).

Thus, women's value derives from these deeply embedded gender norms and values that form stereotypes about women and men in societies (Wood, 2019). As a result, women have strategic implications for armed groups.

2.3. The implications of women in armed groups

Previous studies almost exclusively focus on the effects of women's inclusion on rebel behaviour. These scholars maintain that armed groups have a tactical advantage when using women as suicide bombers because their perceived innocence makes them less suspicious (Bloom, 2007; Gonzalez-Perez, 2008; O'Rourke, 2009). For example, Bloom (2007) suggests that women are less targeted by security personnel than men (p. 94). Additionally, the study of O'Rourke (2009) reveals that gendered expectations make women more lethal than men as they kill on average at least two more people per suicide attack than men (O'Rourke, 2009, pp. 681-685).

Besides the effects of women's inclusion on rebel behaviour, there is a growing set of academic literature that aims to determine how gender shapes perceptions about the course of a conflict. These scholars suggest that rebel leaders strategically use women in their propaganda campaigns to draw attention to the cause of the conflict, to show the severity of the conflict, and shape the perceived legitimacy of the group by garnering support and sympathy for their goals and actions (Alison, 2004; Loken, 2018, 2021; Manekin & Wood, 2020; Viterna, 2014).

Building on this, some literature reports that the presence of women in armed groups is effective for the recruitment of other men or women (Mugambe, 2000; Wood, 2019). Much literature maintains that female combatants put pressure on men because it makes them feel guilty that women are getting a perceived men's job done (Goldstein, 2001; Viterna, 2013). Others stress that women can act as "role models for other women" which convince others to join or support the groups (Mugambe, 2000, p. 10).

The aforementioned literature offers useful theoretical insights into how rebel leaders use women and their stereotypes strategically. Nevertheless, there is limited empirical evidence confirming that women are truly effective in shaping public perceptions of the legitimacy of

armed groups. For instance, Manekin and Wood (2020) carried out a survey experiment to examine the potential influence of women combatants on public perceptions across the borders of a conflict. The authors referred to a fictitious rebel group including women and find evidence that, among the public from two different cultural contexts, the participation of women in armed groups help to garner sympathy for the group (Manekin & Wood, 2020, pp. 18-22).

Contrastingly, another survey experiment by Cohen and Jung (2018) maintains that the inclusion of women in violent groups, including criminal groups, is a "double-edged sword" (p. 14). Their results show that the inclusion of women does not always lead to supportive attitudes because, among Haitians, women that use violence were often seen as "arrogant" and "abnormal" (Cohen & Jung, 2018, p. 12).

In sum, the sparse empirical studies demonstrate there is no consensus whether the inclusion of women positively or negatively influences the legitimacy of an armed group. Because of the limited and contradictory findings, this thesis suggests further study on the effect of women on the perceived legitimacy of armed groups.

3. Theoretical framework

Attaining legitimacy is important for the survival and success of armed groups (Daskin, 2016). As armed groups are situated outside the boundaries of a legal order, they use other means to justify their cause (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015, p. 410). To justify their goals and actions, the literature review previously indicates that armed groups often use women to influence the perceptions about their group. Therefore, this section builds on an argument concerning the gender framing process of armed groups.

3.1 Framing processes

Frames are schemes of interpretations that offer a possibility for individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" events that occur within their life or in the world (Goffman, 1975, p. 21). They define problems, make moral judgements, and focus on certain issues (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Framing refers to a dynamic process that evolves over time. It is a strategic process when certain beliefs and meanings are produced to achieve a specific aim (Benford & Snow, 2000, pp. 623-624). Actors in a group are important in producing a set of meanings or beliefs, which influences the perceptions towards their group (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 625).

3.2 Gender framing processes

Different audiences can perceive the use of violence of armed groups as "radical" or "righteous" (Viterna, 2014, p. 143). Armed groups use frames to shape public perceptions about the legitimacy of their goals and actions. This study defines public perceptions as an "expressed perspective by a group of individuals toward a particular issue or event" (Dowler & Gasperoni, 2006, p. 5).

Although many factors may influence public perceptions, gender is the strongest factor to intensify or reduce the brutality of the violent acts of armed groups (Viterna, 2014, p. 144). Essentially, gender is "a matter of social processes and structures that are created and sustained over generations, at times coercively" (Loken, 2018, p. 18).

Based on gender beliefs, the presence of women in violence, either as victims or perpetrators, provide the act with a certain sentiment (Viterna, 2014, p. 143). Viterna (2014) explains this mechanism and posits that when a woman uses violence it is perceived as radical, particularly if they use violence along with a man. However, if a group of women, especially mothers, use violence it is perceived as righteous. Additionally, if a group of men use violence

against women (and their sexuality), it is perceived as radical. Nevertheless, if men use violence to protect women it is perceived as righteous (Viterna, 2014, pp. 146-148).

In contrast, there is the idea that gender beliefs are so embedded in societies that when a group of women commit violence it is perceived as "transgressive" (Loken, 2021, p. 23). Meaning that women's use of violence produces resistance and disapproval by external audiences. Here women's presence in an armed group represents disorder and insecurity. Loken (2021) calls this a potential "backlash", which leads to the delegitimization of an armed group's goals and actions (p. 24).

Besides the gender framing process of armed groups, the media is also able to articulate and reinforce certain events and issues through news framing (Oberschall, 1996, p. 97). The media frames an element of rhetoric in a way that can encourage or discourage certain interpretations. This comes from the media's choice of narrative to cover a story. Armed groups rarely exercise control over the narrative the media employs (Entman, 1993, p. 54). This gives the media the power to influence public perceptions about armed groups (Goffman, 1975; Deveruex, 2007). Consequently, this thesis considers the media as an important actor that can convey legitimacy or illegitimacy to an armed group.

Building on the theoretical groundwork of Viterna (2014) and Loken (2021), this thesis argues that the way women's participation in armed groups is framed conveys legitimacy or illegitimacy to an armed group's goal and actions. Additionally, it posits that the media is crucial in the formation of public perceptions regarding the legitimacy of armed groups. This thesis applies both arguments when analysing the media coverage of the female combatants of the YPJ. Consequently, it derives from the following expectations regarding the relationship between women's inclusion in armed groups and the perceived legitimacy of the group.

H_1: When the media frame women and their use of violence as righteous it conveys legitimacy to the armed group.

H_2: When the media frame women and their use of violence as radical it conveys illegitimacy to the armed group.

Both hypotheses focus on how the media frame women but emphasise a different outcome as it could either reinforce or weaken the perceived legitimacy of the armed group.

3.3 Conceptualization: Women in armed groups

Henshaw (2013) categorizes three different participation roles for women in armed groups, "the frontline, auxiliary and leadership role" (pp. 43-45). Additionally, Loken (2018) suggests the founder's role (pp. 4-7). First, the frontline role refers to female combatants supporting the group and engaging in and around the conflict zone (Loken, 2018, p. 4). Therefore, these women are most likely in contact with violence. Second, the auxiliary role encompasses supportive roles ranging from "nurses, cooks, spies, fundraisers, smugglers, coordinators, or recruiters" (Loken, 2018, p. 5). Although these women identify with the cause of the group, they are rarely in contact with violence. Third, the leadership role entails women supervising the strategy and the ideology of the group. Finally, the founder role consists of women who initially established the group (Loken, 2018, p. 6).

Keeping the former roles in mind, this thesis refers to women as combatants, so those participating on the frontline because these women are most likely to perpetrate violence or be confronted with its use. This study prefers this focus because it allows analysing whether women's use of violence is radical or righteous, which gives insight into the perceived legitimacy of the group. Furthermore, this study believes this conceptualization is more neutral compared to other terms used in the literature, such as terrorists, guerrillas, or freedom fighters, which involve different meanings and political implications (Toivanen & Baser, 2016).

3.4 Conceptualization: Legitimacy

This thesis defines legitimacy as the belief in the righteousness of an armed group's goals and actions (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015, p. 410). This definition concentrates on the justification of the goals and actions of armed groups. Scholars often associate the legitimacy of armed groups with the politics or governance of the group (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015, p. 411). This entails that legitimacy depends on how armed groups treat civilians. Although this thesis does not specifically focus on the governance of armed groups it still holds that legitimacy relates to the interpretation of the goals and actions of armed groups. Therefore, it distinguishes legitimacy and illegitimacy, the former stimulates sympathy and support and the latter fosters opposition and resistance (Lamb, 2014, p. 6). Consequently, it is important to consider legitimacy and illegitimacy as descriptive concepts about normative judgements, but not as normative concepts themselves (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015, p. 413).

Moreover, scholars often use legitimacy interchangeably with legitimation, but these two notions are not the same (Duyvesteyn, 2017). While legitimacy focuses on the concept or the condition of being legitimate, legitimation refers to the process or the act of making

something legitimate (Duyvesteyn, 2017, p. 674). This thesis, specifically, focuses on legitimacy as a process. This focus is relevant because, compared to state actors, non-state actors cannot refer to the concept of legitimacy to justify their goals and actions (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015, p. 410).

There are, however, multiple challenges with the study of legitimacy (Schoon, 2016). For instance, legitimacy may vary because norms, values, and beliefs differ across social-cultural contexts (Schoon, 2016, p. 4). Moreover, as O'Kane (1993) notes, during periods of a violent conflict each rivalry is perceived as legitimate by one group of people and illegitimate by another group of people (p. 477). These limitations are important to acknowledge and taken into account when making inferences.

Another shortcoming of legitimacy highlighted by rational choice theorists is the fact that it is difficult to separate legitimacy from other reasons for support (Schoon, 2016, pp. 143-144). Other reasons to support armed groups include purely tactical motives, short-term incentives or threats and fear. Therefore, Schlichte & Schnecker (2015) argue that individual support for an armed group is not inevitably linked to the belief that the group's goal is righteous (p. 414). Although this shortcoming is important to recognize, it does not affect this research because this study does not delve into individual reasons for support.

Ultimately, there are multiple levels of analysis to examine *legitimacy as a process*. First, this thesis distinguishes between the domestic and international level. The domestic level refers to how armed groups affect national audiences or specific local communities. The international level refers to how armed groups affect international audiences such as foreign states, international or transnational organizations and the media (Podder, 2017, pp. 686-687). As this thesis seeks to investigate how the Dutch media frame the YPJ, it concentrates on the international level. Second, besides these two levels, this thesis further distinguishes the individual, group, and system-level of analysis (Lamb, 2014, p. 6). Since this study reflects on the inclusion of women in armed groups and its effect on international audiences, a system-level analysis is necessary to draw the correct inferences.

4. Methodology

This section offers the methods that this research applies to test the expectations derived from the theory. Consequently, this section justifies and explains the research design, case selection and data collection.

4.1 Research design

The analysis aims to explore how the Western media, in particular newspapers, frame women combatants in armed groups and link this to the perceived legitimacy or illegitimacy of the group. According to Devereux (2007), the media has the power to shape a narrative that influences public perception. Similarly, Goffman (1975) holds that the way newspapers frame issues and events can influence public perceptions in the long term. Therefore, studying the media coverage of women combatants is relevant to gain insights into the perceived legitimacy of an armed group.

Subsequently, to test the hypotheses, this research employs a qualitative content analysis on the media framing of a single case study. As mentioned in the literature review, previous research conducted survey analyses. However, this study chooses a content analysis because this allows for a more unobtrusive observation, which reduces the likelihood of bias (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 345). Moreover, this method allows for the interpretation of underlying meanings by analysing the latent content of the texts (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 8). This could offer valuable social-cultural insights which make qualitative content analysis an appropriate method for analysing the perceived legitimacy of armed groups (Halperin & Heath, 2017, pp. 345-350). Finally, a single case study is most suitable for this research project because it contributes to existing academic knowledge by being context-specific and empirically powerful (Bennett & Checkel, 2014, p. 5).

4.2 Case selection: The Women's Protection Units (YPJ)

The YPJ is selected as a single case study for three main reasons. First, the YPJ was part of the Syrian civil war which is believed an internationalised war (Toivanen & Baser, 2016). Meaning that many states around the world were involved and reflected upon the conflict in Syria (Carpenter, 2013). To explain, Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and France took part in the conflict and supported the YPJ. As the war captured worldwide attention, it is interesting to look at the Western perspective towards the conflict, particularly regarding these women combatants. More precisely, the analysis determines the

representation of the YPJ in the Syrian civil war by looking at Dutch newspaper articles. In the past, studies investigated media framing of the YPJ in other Western countries, such as France and the United Kingdom but the Netherlands has thus far been neglected (Toivanen & Baser, 2016, p. 11).

Second, the total number of combatants, including the male's troop, the YPG and the female's troop, the YPJ is estimated at 30.000-35.0000. From this number 20-40% belonged to the YPJ, the female troop (Toivanen & Baser, 2016, p. 5). As there were such a large number of women involved in the conflict, who participated on the frontline it is interesting to analyse how the Dutch media frame these women and to what extent this can be linked to the legitimacy of the group.

Third, during the conflict, Kurdish women were often the perpetrators as well as the victims of violence. As discussed, women have a symbolic power during periods of conflict as their femininity links acts of violence to a certain sentiment (Viterna, 2014). This makes it interesting to analyse if and how the media highlights these two narratives as this could give support in favour or not for the argument that framing of gender conveys legitimacy or illegitimacy to the group.

In sum, these points explain why the YPJ is an important case for examining the relationship between armed groups, the inclusion of women, and the perceived legitimacy. By looking at the way the Dutch media frame the women combatants of the YPJ, this thesis contributes to the enlargement of knowledge of the gender framing theory.

4.3 Data collection

To perform the qualitative content analysis, the steps identified by Halperin and Heath (2017) are followed (pp. 346-380). First, the analysis uses qualitative data because the objective is to interpret the underlying meanings that are embedded in the text. The selected data is newspaper articles from national media outlets in the Netherlands. Although the reach of other media channels such as television and social media is unquestionable, newspapers are nonetheless essential for Dutch audiences (Veen & Thomas, 2020).

Furthermore, as data on civil wars is not easily obtainable, in particular concerning the experiences of women in armed groups, newspapers are most appropriate. Thereby, due to language barriers, it is impossible to analyse domestic media outlets in Syria or other countries in this region. Considering the geographical location and language constraints, this research focuses on newspapers from a Western perspective.

The study uses the news database NexisUni and applies the following search words, 'Siege of Kobanê', 'YPG', 'YPJ', 'Kurdish women' and 'Kurdish female fighters', independently or coupled. These words are applied to filter suitable articles related to the armed conflict between the YPJ and the IS in Northern Syria. To overcome bias, the newspaper articles are analysed from both right- and left-wing newspapers (see Table A1). Furthermore, the newspaper articles fall in the timeframe between August 2014 and December 2015. This period is chosen because it falls in and around the period, called the siege of Kobane, of the armed struggle in Northern Syria between the IS and the YPJ that received worldwide media coverage (Toivanen & Baser, 2016, p. 6).

Second, this research uses an inductive approach in order to develop certain categories from the data. Compared to the deductive approach, where categories are based on previous research or theories, the inductive approach allows using the data itself as a basis for creating categories (Bengtsson, 2016). A sample of the data is first examined to identify framing patterns of women in the media, which leads to three preliminary categories or gender frames; women striving for equality, women as victim and women as a martyr (for the preliminary codebook see Appendix C). By looking at these categories, it is further determined whether the frame conveys legitimacy or illegitimacy to the group. Legitimacy and illegitimacy are both linked to the normative concepts of 'righteous' and 'radical'.

Third, to perform the categorisation the analysis uses sentences or paragraphs as recording units. An advantage of examining sentences or paragraphs is that these are not strictly based on words, which gives more space for interpretation (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 346).

Finally, this thesis uses a flexible protocol when analysing the rest of the data, meaning that more categories can emerge from the data itself and incorporated when these are believed significant for the findings of the analysis. This overcomes selecting confirmatory data solely, as the analysis remains open for the inclusion of unexpected findings (Halperin & Heath, 2017, pp. 349-350). The final codebook can be found in Appendix D.

5. Analysis

The analysis section begins with the historical background of the Kurds and the civil war in Syria. This overview is essential to understand the analytical findings on which this section draws further implications. Following the historical context, the section presents and interprets the research findings.

5.1 Historical background: The Kurds in Syria

Kurdish people are the largest ethnic minority group concentrated in Northern Syria close to the border of Turkey (Bateson, 2015, p. 25). Traditionally, the Syrian government systematically discriminated against Kurdish people because their identity was assumed dangerous for the Arabic nationalist culture (Human Rights Watch, 2009, pp. 5-10).

However, the marginalisation against the ethnic minority decreased in 2011, when the Syrian civil war started. What initially began as a democratic uprising in Deraa resulted in an extensive civil war, where thousands of people fell victim and around three million fled their home country (Bateson, 2015). Simultaneously, another difficulty emerged with the rise of an extremist group in the region, namely the IS (Khan & Khan, 2017, pp. 560-569). Although the jihadist group already established around 2000, it successfully took over territories in both Syria and Iraq in the period between 2013 and 2014. Besides their increasing control in those regions, IS became also infamous for its anti-liberal stance towards women and their radical use of violence such as beheadings. The former comes from their strict interpretations of the Sharia Law, which considers women subordinate to men (Winter, 2015, p. 24).

At the beginning of the civil war, the Kurds did not engage in the conflict, but in 2014, staying away from a confrontation with the IS was inevitable for the Kurds. At that time, the Syrian government retrieved their security forces and left the Kurdish regions. This decision came forth out of the opposing position of the Kurdish people towards the Syrian government (Bateson, 2015).

As a result, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), took control over the region. The PYD was established in 2003 as the Syrian Kurdish political party and believed to be a faction of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 25). The PKK was listed as a terrorist group by many states and organisations in the international community, such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The PKK's place on this list was based on their armed conflict for Kurdish rights against the Turkish government that started in the 1980s (Haner et al., 2020, p. 282).

The PYD's political and security appearance became visible after forming their self-defence forces, the YPG including the women's unit, the YPJ. Both the YPG and the YPJ received extensive international attention in 2015 when they liberated the city of Kobanê from the IS. Kobanê was captured by the IS in September 2014 and freed by the Kurdish Protections Units in spring 2015. Consequently, the YPG and YPJ are praised as the troops that successfully defeated IS (Toivanen & Baser, 2016, pp. 3-5).

5.2 Research findings

The content analysis of the 43 newspaper articles provides evidence that the Dutch media uses gender frames to justify the behaviour of women in armed groups. All the gender framing categories, the newspapers mention, and the frequencies are listed in Table 2. This section discusses and interprets these categories with their subcategories.

Table 2. Research findings: The recurrence of categories

Category (gender frame)	Frequency
1. Women striving for equality	31
2. Women as victim	10
2a. Women as victim of IS	11
2b. Mothers as last resort	6
2c. Women as vulnerable	5
3. Women as martyr	15
3a. Women as effective	13
3b. Women as though(er) as men	6
4. Women as terrorist	4

5.2.1 Women striving for equality

The newspapers employ stereotypes of women and portray their use of violence as something extraordinary to justify its use. The most dominant gender frame that legitimizes women's use of violence is 'women striving for equality'. Here, the newspapers highlight that the women of the YPJ are involved in both a physical and ideological conflict. Consequently, it specifies that these women combatants fight for something larger than their enemy. The newspapers, therefore, stress the ideological struggle and refer to the fight for emancipation; equality between men and women, and national liberation; freedom for women and the Kurdish people.

By legitimizing the goals of the YPJ, the newspapers directly legitimize women's use of violence. In doing so, it often represents how the goals of the Kurdish women of the YPJ stand in stark contrast with Jihadist men of the IS and how they treat women. The following quote, for example, indicates the contrast between IS, symbolising women's oppression and the YPJ, symbolising women's liberty.

> *The tough women of the Kurdish troops. With their armed resistance, they were living, feminist, proof that not everything in the Middle East has fallen hopelessly to the women-oppressing medievalists of the Islamic State. Women have long played a role in the Kurdish armed forces. However, they are less often granted a place on the frontline because the Kurdish culture is also very conservative. But during the siege of Kobanê, that subordinate position changed.*[2]

Additionally, the quote illustrates how the Western perspective of the newspapers, to a certain extent, glorifies both the female troop and the Western liberal values that these female combatants strive for. The dominance of this frame can be explained with a reference to the term 'Orientalism' that describes the Western view of the East, also called the Orient (Dilar, 2014). This so-called Orientalist perspective is the Western view of women in the East which is predominantly that of oppressed women (Toivanen & Baser, 2016, pp. 20-21). Accordingly, if women take up arms, it contrasts the Western assumption of women's subordinate position in the East. This gives rise to an admiration towards these women combatants, with a recurring narrative in the newspapers about women that liberate themselves from the traditional patriarchal culture.

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[2] "Medya Osman Murad: 1978-2015", De Telegraaf, 11 February 2015, p. 2

In line with this, the following quote offers an anecdote of a women combatant who decides to participate in the YPJ. Again, this quote emphasizes how the Western media praises these women combatants as they advocate for liberal values.

> *Selgan (35) left her parental home to join the YPJ rebels, who at the time controlled large parts of the Kurdish-inhabited parts of Syria, her brother grumbled at her sister: What does she think of herself? A woman who fights? She shames the family! But she was tired of always having to ask permission from the men in the family.*[3]

Moreover, the quote highlights that Kurdish women are exhausted from being told what to do and, therefore, detach themselves from the patriarchal dominance and join the armed forces of the YPJ. Furthermore, the quote illustrates how the Kurdish culture is still 'conservative' on the domestic or local level. Consequently, this confirms Loken's (2021) idea that women's use of violence or participation in the YPJ is perceived as "transgressive" (p. 23). Whereas the analysis does not find significant evidence in the newspapers to support this "backlash effect" suggested by Loken (2021, p. 24) the quote, however, indicates that this effect may persist on a different level of analysis, namely the domestic or local level.

5.2.2 Women as victim

Besides framing women as the perpetrators of violence, there are several newspapers framing women as the victims of violence. What is compelling, is that the media frame 'women as victims' and the subcategories often provide preliminary information for women to take up arms. In effect, the media pre-justifies women's motives to join the YPJ and use violence. The newspapers frame women as weak and vulnerable which increases the chance to suffer from (sexual) violence, therefore, to secure themselves the use of violence is justified.

- *Women as victim of IS*

Particularly, the subcategory 'women as victim of IS' refers to the media framing Kurdish women as the victim of sexual violence of the IS, such as rape, torture and sexual slavery. The subsequent quote demonstrates how newspapers frame the brutality of the IS.

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[3] "Woede geeft me kracht hen te bestrijden", Het Parool, 17 January 2015, p. 1

> *"Thousands of women have been kidnapped and used as sex slaves. People fled from the massacre of IS, there are images of women and children running around desperately."*[4]

The quote emphasizes women's perceived vulnerability as the media frame them as the victims of the terror of IS. At the same time, it frames the IS as misogynistic, which delegitimize the violence of the IS. This finding corresponds with Viterna's insight who asserts that during the war in El Salvador, the women of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FLMN) are perceived as innocent and vulnerable and the Salvadoran government inhuman and brutal (Viterna, 2014, p. 143). In both cases, there is a contrast between the two sides of the conflict, wherein women's perpetration of violence is legitimized because they need to protect themselves.

- *Mothers as last resort*

In the same line of thought, the Western perspective becomes apparent when the newspapers resonate with the idea that women should not trust the safety of their lives to others. In other words, women need to group and defend themselves instead of depending on men's protection. The following quote stresses the situation is so severe that even mothers need to protect themselves. Again, the media links women's use of violence to a certain sentiment (Viterna, 2014).

> *"Women are raped and taken from their children. Our mothers have to arm themselves in their own homes, because even there they are not safe."*[5]

This is in line with scholars, such as Dahal (2015) positing that the Maoist party in Nepal incorporated women to demonstrate that the conditions were so severe that even women, including mothers, were willing to take up arms (p. 188). Even though the idea that women should protect themselves seems parallel to Western ideals such as emancipation and feminism, the quote shows there is still an expected passivity and victimization of women which makes it hard to match these two former ideals. This inconsistency comes from embedded gender norms and beliefs about women, who are perceived as more friendly and vulnerable than men (Carpenter, 2005; Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015).

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[4] "Islamitische Staat in de verdrukking in Noord-Irak", Het NRC, 14 November 2015, p. 2
[5] "Vrouwen jong en oud bewaken met geweren de grens", De Trouw, 25 September 2014, p. 1

- *Women as vulnerable*

In addition to the theoretical expectations, the analysis finds that newspapers often legitimize the male combatants of the YPG and their actions *without* a reference to the women combatants of the YPJ. Nonetheless, to justify the actions of the male's troop, framing 'women as vulnerable' remains crucial. The following quote emphasizes this idea and indicates how the actions of the men of the YPG are justified because they liberate the Yazidi women from the IS. The Yazidis are an ethnic group with close ties to the Kurds.

> *"Kurdish guerrillas of the YPG are fiercely biting off. In Iraqi Kurdistan, they managed to recapture a symbolic place of IS. The group liberated the city of Sinjar this month, where ISIS had kidnapped hundreds of Yazidi women."*[6]

Accordingly, the YPG's use of violence is righteous because the group fights the IS and protects civilians or ethnic groups such as the Yazidis. Differently put, the newspapers legitimise the use of violence of the YPG, because the narrative focuses on how male combatants protect the most vulnerable in society from the 'barbarians' of the IS by exclusively referring to children, the elderly and most dominantly women. This is in line with the theory of Viterna (2014) who holds that if men use violence to protect women it is perceived as righteous (p. 148).

5.2.3 Women as martyr

The frame 'women as martyr' entails the legitimization of the use of violence of women combatants of the YPJ because they sacrifice themselves for the greater cause. In doing so, the newspapers often frame women combatants as the pride of the Kurdish minority. The next quote illustrates how the newspapers admire these female combatants for sacrificing their lives to protect civilians.

> *"Fighters of the YPJ played a heroic role in saving people. Since then, there have been international weapons donations for the Kurds in Iraq and the Western world seems to have woken up to the threat of IS."*[7]

As marked before, the quote illustrates how the newspapers frame YPJ as positive and refer to them as heroes, whereas the IS as negative and refer to them as a threat. This contrast gives legitimacy to YPJ's use of violence and illegitimacy to IS use of violence. Thereby, the quote shows there is sympathy for the YPJ because they got direct support of weapon donations. This

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[6] "IS zag zijn kalifaat dit jaar slinken", De Trouw, 23 December 2015, p. 2
[7] "Ze noemen ons terroristen", Het NRC, 23 September 2014, p. 1

resonates with the theoretical argument that women are crucial to garnering support and sympathy for armed groups (Viterna, 2014; Loken, 2018).

- *Women as effective*

The media also employs the subcategory 'women as effective'. Here, the newspapers indicate that women fighting on the frontline are effective for combating the IS because their femininity frightens their enemy. Therefore, the newspapers highlight that women's presence on the frontline is already a disruptive weapon. Furthermore, this frame delegitimizes and ridicule the male combatants of the IS. For example, the following quotes emphasize the Western perspective towards the 'absurd' beliefs of IS.

> *"At the front, the YPJ fighters are the perfect opposite of the bearded men of IS, who are said to be more afraid of the Kurdish women than of the YPG, the Kurdish men's brigades. They think a man will not go to heaven if he is killed by a woman."*[8]

> *"Kobanê is more than a strategic goal for IS. The Kurdish profit means a loss of face, all the more because many women fight with the enemy."* [9]

Moreover, both quotes illustrate how the newspapers frame the female troops of the YPJ as weaker than the men of IS. Consequently, the newspapers ridicule male combatants of the IS when losing the fight of these female combatants. Notably, the latter narrative of the newspapers goes so far by stating that a defeat by the YPJ means a loss of reputation for IS. Accordingly, from this gendered narrative, the deeply embedded stereotype regarding women lacking physical strength compared to men is applied to delegitimize IS use of violence (Carpenter, 2005).

- *Women as tough(er) as men*

Additional insight is that some newspapers frame women combatants of the YPJ in a gendered way, but do not link it to the legitimacy of their acts. The subcategory 'women as tough(er) than men' presents this phenomenon. The newspapers explicitly compare females with male combatants, as the following quote reveals.

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[8] "Vrouwen zijn betere krijgers dan mannen", De Volkskrant, 2 December 2015, p. 1
[9] "Zij vecht in Syrië mee tegen IS", De Trouw, 5 January 2015, p. 2

> *"They engage in daily fights with ISIS. Not in the background, but on the frontline! They are just as good fighters as the men. Our women don't shy away from anything."* [10]

Again, the media frame female combatants with astonishment, by pointing out how these women are somewhat exceptional or different from the 'norm' because they show masculine features or behaviour which is controversial to their feminine identity (Toivanen & Baser, 2016). The feminine identity is associated with the early mentioned stereotype that women are not supposed to be violent (Bateson, 2015).

5.2.4 Women as terrorists

The final gender frame concerns 'women as terrorists'. This frame is the least common because the goals and actions of YPJ are rarely framed as radical. Compared to the IS, the newspapers do not use words such as 'terrorist', 'extremist' when referring to the YPJ. Likewise, such words are not even applied to the men of the YPG. One might expect this would be the case because of their close links with the PKK. However, only a few newspapers raise the connection issue with the PKK, as the coming quote underlines. The quote contains an experience of someone from the conflict region.

> *"She has 'respect' for the YPJ because they fight IS. But it remains the PKK, and they have no business here. Let them return to the mountains!"* [11]

Whereas this thesis analyses the public perceptions on the international level, the quote gives interesting insights into the public perceptions on the domestic level. It illustrates that there is a feeling of deep fascination for the women of the YPJ because they fight the IS, but also some hesitancy towards the group because of their link with the PKK. Overall, the newspapers share a narrative of women combatants without a linkage to radicalness or illegitimacy.

Building on this, the analysis shows that newspapers use specific words to describe and characterise women of the YPJ. The recurring words in the newspapers to describe these women are 'strong', 'heroine', 'brave', 'tireless' 'disciplined' and 'motivated'. Furthermore, almost all newspapers frame the Kurdish female combatants in opposition to their rivalry, the Jihadist male combatants of the IS. The newspapers label IS combatants as 'brutal', 'monsters' 'headhunters' and 'inhuman'.

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[10] "Vrouwen aan het front in Kobani", De Telegraaf, 10 October 2014, p. 1
[11] "Utopia met gebreken", De Trouw, 1 December 2015, p. 4

In general, the contrast of these words has two implications. First, the newspapers use positive words to describe the female combatants of the YPJ, which favours the legitimization of their use of violence and that of the YPJ. Second, the newspapers use negative words to describe the male combatants of the IS, which delegitimize the use of violence of their use of violence and that of IS.

As a final note, despite the different political orientation of the newspapers, all the outlined categories are somewhat consistent throughout the newspapers. This means there is little difference in the framing of women combatants.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, women have been and continue to be the perpetrators of political violence. Yet, scholars neglected the implications of women combatants for armed groups' perceived legitimacy. Therefore, this thesis aims to investigate the relationship between women and armed groups' perceived legitimacy by answering the following research question: *How does the inclusion of women in armed groups shape public perceptions of the legitimacy of the armed groups' actions and goals?*

To analyse the relationship the thesis focuses on the media representation of the women combatants of the YPJ. In doing so, the thesis conducts a qualitative content analysis of 43 Dutch newspaper articles published during the period of the siege of Kobanê. The analysis finds support for the main argument which entails that the way media frame women combatants convey legitimacy to the armed group. Specifically, the thesis finds significant support for the first hypothesis: *when the media frame women's use of violence as righteously it increases the legitimacy of the group*.

First, the newspapers praise the women combatants of the YPJ as they aim to achieve equality, which echoes Western values. Admiration towards the women combatants leads to a dominant narrative in the newspapers about how women detach themselves from the traditional patriarchal culture and join the YPJ. Second, the newspapers glorify the women of the YPJ by pointing out their fight against the IS. To strengthen the contrast between the two opposing sides of the conflict, the newspapers frame the women of the YPJ as 'heroines' and the men of IS as 'barbaric', which legitimize the YPJ and delegitimize the IS. Importantly, the newspapers employ stereotypes about women and frame them as passive and vulnerable. By framing women as the victims of IS, the media justifies women's use of violence in order to protect themselves.

The analysis, however, does not find enough support for the second hypothesis, *when the media frame women's use of violence as radical it delegitimizes the group* because the newspapers do not frame the female combatants as radical. However, as some insights of the analysis indicate, the so-called "backlash effect" may exist on the domestic or local level (Loken, 2021, p. 24). Therefore, future research could extend the scope of this research. As this thesis focuses on the implications of women combatants on the audiences at the international level, a suggestion for further research is to examine the effects of women on the audiences at the domestic or local level.

This thesis, however, encounters some limitations. For instance, with the use of qualitative content analysis, the possibility of bias could not be entirely excluded. While all recording units are systematically categorised and analysed, a personal reflection in the research findings is inevitably present. Another limitation is that the thesis analyses a single case study from a Western perspective which makes the research findings less generalizable. Particularly, the perceived legitimacy of armed groups may vary in different social-cultural contexts. It is, therefore, important to investigate whether the arguments can be applied to armed groups from various contexts.

Finally, a promising research direction is to further investigate the discovered dominant frame, 'striving for equality'. Fieldwork on the position of Kurdish women in a post-conflict situation could give valuable insights into whether the goals of the YPJ were achieved and thus resulted in more equality in their society.

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The newspaper articles are retrieved from the database NexisUni. All the newspaper articles are presented in chronological order.

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3. "IS'ers grootste nachtmerrie: het Koerdische vrouwen leger" Het Parool, 17 August 2014, p. 2.
4. "Gruweldaden IS jagen zelfs eigen bondgenoten weg", De Trouw, 22 August 2014, p. 1.
5. "Nederlandse Koerden nemen Kalasjnikovs op", Het NRC, 26 August 2014, pp. 1-2.
6. "Uiteengedreven zal het volk ten onder gaan", De Trouw, 26 August 2014, p. 1.
7. "Vluchtelingen aan de grens Turkije", De Volkskrant, 22 September 2014, p. 1.
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9. "Vrouwen laten zich niet doen en vechten IS", Het Parool, 23 September 2014, p. 1.
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11. "Eindelijk ziet de VS dat we in gevaar zijn", het NRC, 23 September 2014, p. 1.
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13. "Niet eerder ontmoette IS zo'n taaie tegenstander als de strijdgroep YPJ" Het Parool, 8 October 2014, pp. 1-2.
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17. "Als Kobani valt zijn wij aan de beurt", De Trouw, 13 October 2014, p. 2.
18. "IS teruggeslagen", De Trouw, 17 October 2014, p. 1.
19. "Hakken in het zand: Amerikanen schieten koerden in Kobani te hulp", De Telegraaf, 21 October 2014, p. 1.
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22. "Het sprookje van de engel van Kobani is bijna voorbij", Het NRC, 6 November 2014, p. 2.
23. "De Turken hebben iets uit te leggen", De Volkskrant, 11 November 2014, p. 1.

24. "IS slaat op de vlucht", De Telegraaf, 14 November 2014, p. 1.

25. "Vrouwen worden bij ons weggestopt", Het Parool, 29 November 2014, p. 2.

26. "Veilig maar ver weg is geen optie", De Trouw, 2 January 2015, p. 1.

27. "Zij vecht in Syrië mee tegen IS", De Trouw, 5 January 2015, p. 2.

28. "Woede geeft mij kracht ze te bestrijden", Het Parool, 17 January 2015, p. 1.

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39. "Islamitische Staat in de verdrukking in Noord-Irak", Het NRC, 14 November 2015, p. 2.

40. "Utopia met gebreken", De Trouw, 1 December 2015, p. 4.

41. "Vrouwen zijn betere krijgers dan mannen", De Volkskrant, 2 December 2015, pp. 1-2.

42. "IS zag zijn kalifaat dit jaar slinken", De Trouw, 23 December 2015, p. 2.

43. "George Orwell komt tot leven in Syrië", De Volkskrant, 28 December 2015, p. 3.

Appendix A: Tables

Table 1. Analysed newspaper and their political stance

Newspaper	Number of articles (43)	Political stance
De Telegraaf	*5*	Right
Het NRC	*10*	Right
De Trouw	*12*	Centre
Het Parool	*8*	Left
De Volkskrant	*8*	Left

Source: NexisUni

Table 2. Research findings: The recurrence of categories

Category (gender frame)	Frequency
7. *Women striving for equality*	31
8. *Women as victim*	10
2a. Women as victim of IS	11
2b. Mothers as last resort	6
2c. Women as vulnerable	5
9. *Women as martyr*	15
3a. Women as effective	13
3b. Women as tough(er) as men	6
10. Women as terrorist	4

Appendix B: General rules for coding

- An article can include multiple ideas that relate to several categories (gender frames). All relevant recording units (sentences/paragraphs) are classified in one category.

- A portion of a text is referred radical or righteous in the following scenarios:
    - Radical coloured <mark style="background-color:magenta">pink</mark> when the newspaper article refers to women of the YPJ and their goals and actions as extreme/out of proportion.
    - Radical coloured <mark style="background-color:red">red</mark> when the newspaper article refers to the IS and their goals and actions as extreme/out of proportion.
    - Righteous coloured <mark style="background-color:green">green</mark> when the newspaper article refers to women of the YPJ and their goals and actions as right/just.

- Underneath, the preliminary and final codebook are presented.
    - The categories that emerged during the process are coloured <mark style="background-color:yellow">yellow.</mark>

Appendix C: Preliminary codebook

Category (gender frame)	Description	Example code
Women striving for equality	Used when the article refers to women's use of violence as *righteous* because they strive for equality.	• The female fighters act as troops striving for emancipation.
Women as victim	Used when the article refers to women's use of violence as *righteous* because they need to protect themselves.	• Women are raped and taken from their children. Therefore, they need to arm themselves.
Women as martyr	Used when the article refers to women's use of violence as *righteous* because they are fighting for others/homeland.	• These women sacrifice themselves by fighting for their country, that is the only thing that matters.

Appendix D: Final codebook

Category (gender frame)	Description	Example code
1. Women striving for equality	Used when the article refers to women's use of violence as righteous because they strive for equality.	- The female fighters act as troops ==striving for emancipation.== - Kurdish women are fighting a double battle: against the Islamic State (IS) and ==for equal rights for women.== ==Freedom for all women in the world==, if necessary, enforced with firearms. ==If women really want to be equal to men, then they have to be willing to fight== because just talking will not work.
2. Women as victim	Used when the article refers to women's use of violence as righteous because they need to protect themselves.	==Women are raped and taken from their children==. Therefore, they need to arm themselves. - After a month of siege, Kobani has become a symbol of resistance against ISIS. ==Even women reached out to their old Kalashnikov in an attempt to stop the advance of the== ==heavily armed Muslim barbarians.==

		• Even Kurdish women are joining the fight ==to defend Kobani.==
		• It is only a matter of time before the ==extremists of IS== also overrun Salamiya. ==Even women arm themselves==.
==2a. Women as victim of IS==	Used when the article refers to **IS's** use of violence as radical because they attacked women (civilians). Used when the article refers to women's use of violence as righteous because even mothers need to defend themselves.	• ==Gruesome ISIS== managed to take over dozens of Kurdish places in the past week. In doing so, ==the terrorists proceeded in a horrific way. Men were executed and women imprisoned.== • Part of the Kurdish army, nearly 10,000, also consists of women. Symbolically, they defeated ISIS where ==the extremists turned thousands of Yazidis into sex slaves.== • Fear predominates, and the pain one feels for the absent: ==the women and children who are in the hands of IS.== Between 600 and 900 women are missing. Because some women managed to hide their cell phones, it is

		known that they are spread over at least four locations and that <mark>young women there are abused by the IS fighters. Women are also said to have been sold as slaves.</mark>
<mark>2b. Mothers as last resort</mark>	Used when the article refers to women's use of violence as righteous because even mothers need to defend themselves.	• Hundreds of mothers and daughters have taken up arms and are <mark>determined to risk their lives to protect the Kurds in Iraq</mark> from the <mark>advancing terrorist movement IS.</mark> • Even when they are pregnant, they move to the front lines. • Women are <mark>raped and taken from their children</mark>. <mark>Our mothers have to arm themselves in their own homes,</mark> even there they are not safe.
<mark>2c. Women as vulnerable</mark>	Used when the article refers to **YPG's** use of violence as righteous because they protect women.	• <mark>Kurdish guerrillas of the YPG fiercely bite themselves off.</mark> In Iraqi Kurdistan they also managed to recapture a symbolic place of IS. • <mark>The group liberated the city of Sinjar this month, where ISIS had kidnapped many Yezidi women.</mark>

3. Women as martyr	Used when the article refers to women's use of violence as righteous because they are fighting for others/homeland.	• ==These women sacrifice themselves by fighting for their country==, that is the only thing that matters. • ==Kurdish women are trained to defend their village.== • Because women bare children, ==they are able to sacrifice themselves==, even if they are not mothers. • Fighters of the ==YPJ played a heroic role in saving people.== • The inhabitants of Kobanê are ==proud of the fighting spirit of the women who defend Kobani== and they want to let everyone know that loud and clear.
==3a. Women as effective==	Used when the article refers to women's use of violence as righteous because their femininity facilitated them to fight **IS.**	• The almost ==tireless female YPJ fighters that IS could not compete with==. • At the front, the ==YPJ fighters are the perfect opposite== of the bearded men of IS, who are said to be more afraid of the Kurdish women than of the YPG, the Kurdish men's brigades. • The barbaric IS fighters think a man does not go to

		heaven if he is killed by a woman.
	Used when the article compares women combatants with men combatants*. *Says nothing about their use of violence	• Women are just as good fighters as men. Our women combatants do not shy away from anything. • Women are better warriors than men because adrenaline and testosterone make men reckless. Women have willpower and patience. They are the carriers of life. • Female soldiers do fight with the YPJ, the female military division of the Kurds. Admittedly, 'they are just as good as the men', says Amed.
4. Women as terrorist	Used when the article refers to women's use of violence as radical.	• She says she has 'respect' for the women of the YPJ, because they fight IS. "But it remains PKK, and they have no business here. Let them return to the mountains!" • This secular people's militia even uses tactics that are mostly with the enemy: suicide bombings and other kamikaze actions. Last weekend, a

		female guerrilla fighter blew herself up amid an IS militia.