From "Jihadi Bride" to State Enemy: Analyzing the Dutch media landscape reporting on Western women joining the Islamic State (IS) between 2014 and 2022.

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Introduction

After the self-proclaimed caliph of the Islamic State (IS), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared the establishment of the so-called "Islamic Caliphate" in June 2014, thousands of people from all over the world decided to leave their country of residence to start a new life under the flag of the IS (de Leede, 2018; Perešin, 2018;). The unprecedented flow of foreigners to the IS in general, and from Western countries specifically, is remarkable in itself, but even more striking is the percentage of migrant women. Never in history have so many Western women traveled to the Middle-East to join a militant Islamist group (Aasgaard, 2017: 99). Of the nearly 6000 Western migrants to the IS, 17 percent appeared to be female (Cook & Vale, 2018).

Over the course of history, women have supported and participated in terrorist organizations. Female terrorists are "neither misfits nor rare" (Nacos, 2005: 436). Nevertheless, the spheres of terrorism and political violence continue to be regarded as dominated by men (Nacos, 2005, Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008; de Leede, 2018;). Mainly feminist scholars emphasize the power of gendered assumptions and gender stereotypes controlling and, therefore, obscuring our thinking about female terrorists (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007; Alison, 2009; de Leede, 2018).

Recently, scholars have increasingly shown interest in the portrayal of violent and terrorist women in the mainstream media (see Azeez, 2019; Martini, 2018). Previous studies show that the media uses explanatory narratives to make sense of violent women. These narratives are often grounded in traditional gender stereotypes, and, therefore, preserve them (Nacos, 2005; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008; Banks, 2018; de Leede, 2018). Prior research on Western women joining the IS has established that these women are generally portrayed through "gender stereotypes and a neo- Orientalist view" that deny women their agency in their violent actions (Martini, 2018: 458).

This work aims to expand previous research on the media portrayal of Western women who joined the IS, and focuses specifically on their portrayal in the Dutch media. The Dutch Intelligence Services estimated that approximately 100 female Dutch citizens traveled to Syria and Iraq (AIVD, 2020). Considering this relatively high number, the phenomenon of Western IS women received a lot of attention in the Dutch society and media. However, no research has yet focused on the Dutch media portrayal of Western IS women. Especially since the fall of the "Islamic Caliphate" in 2019, a heated debate arose in the Netherlands surrounding the

repatriation of women who joined the IS. To examine how Western IS women were portrayed in the Dutch media, and to analyze whether a change has occurred in this portrayal due to the question of repatriation, this thesis uses a thematic narrative analysis to answer the following research question: "*How are Western women who joined the IS portrayed in the Dutch media between June 2014 and September 2022?"*

Firstly, the literature review discusses the existing literature on gender and political violence. Focusing on the media dimension of this research, the portrayal of female terrorists in the media is addressed in relation to the gender discourse. Narratives used to portray violent women in the media as identified are touched upon, after which the phenomenon of Western IS women is covered.

The second chapter discusses the research methodology used for the analysis, namely a critical discourse analysis and thematic narrative approach. A prior study conducted by Martini (2018) forms the deductive basis from which the analysis is formed in chapter three.

1. Literature review

1.1 Introduction

This chapter gives a definition of terrorism and discusses the discourse on gender seen from a feminist perspective. It explores how existing gender stereotypes shape our understanding of women and political violence. Focusing on the media dimension of this research, the media and its influence on the audience understanding and perception of the news is addressed. The chapter then moves to the portrayal of female terrorists in the media. Finally, the particular case of Western women who joined the IS is addressed, and their media representation is covered.

1.2 Terrorism

For the purpose of this work, it is not only significant to give a definition of the term terrorism, but also to consider the perception of threat posed by terrorism and terrorists, which is highly subjective (Hoffman, 2006). Terrorism is a contested term and, thus, subject to debate. It is a politically charged word more than an ontological phenomenon (Jackson et al., 2011), and therefore dependent on differing views on what is morally wrong. Whereas one government may speak about freedom fighters, another may classify the exact same group as a terrorist organization - and both opinions on the matter may change over time (Hoffman, 2006). Therefore, up until now, no agreement has been reached upon establishing a universal legal definition for terrorism.

Owing to this absence, scholars have attempted to agree upon an academic consensus definition since the 1980s (Schmid, 2012). They all agree that terrorism is a "pejorative term", typically used to address one's "enemies and opponents, or to those with whom one disagrees and would otherwise prefer to ignore" (Hoffman, 2006: 23). What is called terrorism or who is called a terrorist is, therefore, almost inevitably subjective, which demonstrates the constructed nature of the term (ibid.). The constructed nature is important with regards to this research, because it shows that the reporting on terrorism in the news media, which influences the discourse on terrorism, is also subject to different moral judgements (idem.: 28). Accordingly, the way in which Western IS women are portrayed in the Dutch media – as "terrorists", or merely as "jihadi brides"- is highly subjective as well.

After carefully considering many different academic definitions of terrorism, this work relies on the following attempt by Hoffman that distinguishes terrorism from other types of crime: terrorism is "ineluctably political in aims and motives; violent – or equally important, threatens violence; designed to have far-reaching psychological repercussions beyond the

immediate victim or target; conducted by an organization with an identifiable chain of command or conspiratorial cell structure; and perpetrated by a subnational group or non-state entity" (idem.: 40).

1.3 Gender and violence

Mostly feminist scholars recognize that the discipline of International Relations (IR) revolves around masculinity and the experiences of men, as men generally administer both the power- and decision making structures in society (Tickner, 1992, Dunne, 2016). As a result, women's experiences in and contributions to the realm of global politics have been and are often still disregarded (Dunne, 2016; Shepherd, 2015; Smith, 2018; Zalewski, 2015). In response to the gender-blindness of traditional IR, feminist theory emerged as a new school of thought in the late 1980s. This new reflectivist and postpositivist theory challenged earlier explanatory theories by allocating an important place to "beliefs, ideas, meanings, and reasons" within the production of knowledge and our understanding of how the world works (Dunne, 2016: 20). By taking both women and gender seriously, feminist scholarship strongly improves women's visibility within IR (Smith, 2018). Seen from a feminist perspective, gender is defined as "a set of socially constructed characteristics describing what men and women ought to be" (Dunne, 2016: 206).

Thinking about gender in relation to discourse shows that discourses create "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 2002). These regimes produce and uphold systems of unequal power relations which shape our understanding of reality (ibid). The discourse on gender creates "a regime of truth" which assigns socially constructed dichotomized gender roles and norms to men and women, based on their perceived belonging to one of the two sex categories (Handrahan, 2004: 431). From this follows that the gender discourse relies on an imposed hierarchy between men and women, which grants more power to the category of "men" (Martini, 2018: 459). The binary presumption that associates women with femininity and men with masculinity produces gendered identities, that consist of "behavior expectations", rules and stereotypical characteristics known as gender stereotypes (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2015: 5).

Research shows that characteristics that are commonly associated with men and manliness are rationality, autonomy, independence, agency, power, strength and courage (Schippers, 2007: 91; Smith, 2018; 2). Moreover, men are also associated with the use of violence and force (Tickner, 1992). Women and femininity, on the contrary, are socially constructed as irrational, physically vulnerable, inherently peaceful, obedient, unable to use violence and in need of protection (Eichler, 2015: 59, Schippers, 2007; Smith, 2018). In the

context of war, women, are mythicized as society's "beautiful souls" who have an anti-war and anti-violence stance (Elshtain, 1982). The depiction of women as having no agency in violence means that they are constructed as victims in need of protection, while men are depicted as ready to fight and "just warriors" (ibid.). The socially constructed identities of women and men, thus, clearly position individuals in a system of power relations and are part of the discourse on gender which shapes our understanding of reality (Martini, 2018: 459). Some feminist scholars criticize the socially constructed gendered identities that are traditionally, and in their opinion falsely, ascribed to women (Alison, 2004; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008). They apply feminist lenses to expose the power invested in them. However, despite feminist criticism and a changed gender landscape as a result of the bigger and more visible roles that women play in society, gender stereotypes still permeate society (Haines et al., 2016).

Next to the fact that gender is highly intertwined with sexuality, it should also be emphasized that gender is profusely intersected with the social constructions of race, ethnicity, and class (Crenshaw, 1989). Combining social identities instead of treating them as separate entities shows that people, as a result of existing systems of power, can have intersectional identities. These identities bring about different individual experiences, particularly in regard to discrimination and privilege (ibid.). As this research focuses on the media portrayal of Western IS women, who generally identify as (converted) Muslim women, the concept of intersectionality comes to play an important role in the understanding and, therefore, in the depiction of Western jihadi women. More emphasis on their identity is placed in section 1.5.

When women perpetrate acts of violence, they disrupt the gendered identities and gender stereotypes that are traditionally ascribed to them (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008; Smith, 2018). Women's violence is perpetrated in the public sphere by "exceptional" and "unnatural" women who act as agents of violence instead of as victims of violence (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002: 50). This "aberrant behavior", which goes against women's ascribed identity as peaceful "Beautiful Souls" in need of saving and protection, "falls outside of ideal-typical understandings of what it means to be a woman" (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2011: 4, citing Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007: 2). Women committing acts of (terrorist) violence therefore commit a "double transgression" (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008: 7). This means that women are not only seen as guilty of committing acts of violence in itself, but are also considered guilty for ignoring the gender stereotypes assigned to their identity. These stereotypes regard women as

incapable of committing acts of violence (ibid.)

From the gendered idea that women's violent behavior is not natural derives that women's violent behavior is in need of explanation. This "need" to understand the motivations of violent women, whereas the motives of male terrorists to resort to violence do not necessitate explanation, "showcases gender difference in terrorism" (Banks, 2019: 182). Acts of terrorism perpetrated by women are, thus, not treated as "regular" terrorism, but seen as "women's" terrorism. This means that terrorism is gendered in itself (Banks, 2019: 182). The tendency in the mainstream media to explain women's violence is critiqued by Sjoberg & Gentry (2008). They claim that "the possibility that women make a conscious choice to kill or injure" is explained away by stories that "deny women their agency in their own violence' (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008: 5).

1.4 Media and the portrayal of female terrorists

Whether the media reflects or rather constructs reality is the subject of great debate (see Gamson et al., 1992; Johnson-Cartee, 2005; Enli, 2014). Journalists generally emphasize their objectivity or their mirroring reality by their reporting of facts (Johnson-Cartee, 2005). This attests to the idea that the media reflects reality. However, it is also claimed that journalists often fail to acknowledge that the "facts" they actually report on are selected in the first place, and that they are contextualized (ibid.). The way in which information is presented to people, influences how they interpret and process the information received (Goffman, 1974). The media uses different explanatory frames or narratives to narrate news, which means that the media does not only supply the news consumer with information, but also attributes meaning to it (Entman, 1993). By deciding what information receives media focus and by placing this in a particular field of meaning, the media controls how the audience understands and perceives the news. The media, thus, plays a "crucial role in the reproduction, creation, and reinforcement of discourses" (Martini, 2018: 462) and holds the power to indoctrinate the public and its beliefs through its news construction (Althusser, 1971). Given that the media has come to play such an indispensable role in our society, it hugely impacts our understanding of how the world works, our beliefs and our own identity. The methodology chapter further elaborates on frames and narratives, and the differences between them.

Scholars argue that frames and narratives used by the media are often grounded in traditional gender stereotypes and, therefore, preserve them (Nacos, 2005; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008; Banks, 2018). When looking at the media portrayal of female terrorists, it becomes clear that the media tries to make sense of women's violence by using narratives that

emphasize explanations for their deviant behavior. These narratives portray "the female terrorist as a paradox" (Nacos, 2005: 446). Moreover, they generally focus on women's personal motives when explaining the motivations of female terrorists. Feminist scholars have increasingly voiced critique over the emphasis that is placed on women's personal reasons. They argue that this emphasis derives from gendered identities that are traditionally ascribed to women, and, thus, preserves and reproduces gender stereotypes (Saltman & Smith, 2015; Perešin, 2017; Strømmen, 2017; de Leede, 2018). The priority given to women's personal motivations disregards the ideological and political motives that could possibly have driven women to become terrorists, which are identified as the main reasons why men become terrorists (ibid.).

Sjoberg and Gentry (2008) argue that women's violence is given disproportionate attention in the media. However, they also state that the media uses narratives to explain women's violent behavior that link gender to victimhood. These narratives marginalize the stories of violent women by denying them their agency in their own violence, and emphasize women's exceptionalism in their violence (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008: 7). According to the scholars, "the reality of women's violence [..] is buried under the language of sex in stories about them" (ibid.). This means that women's violence is easier to relate to the stereotypes that deems women as more peaceful than men (de Leede, 2019: 45). The "mother" narrative makes an attempt at understanding and justifying women's violence by portraying women as either the *nurturing mother*, acting out of support, or as the *vengeful* mother, acting out of revenge (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2015: 73-74). The "monster" narrative explains women's attraction to violence through the idea of them being inhuman and "pathologically damaged" (idem.: 12). These "monsters" are portrayed as incapable of making rational choices due to their ascribed madness and insanity, which legitimizes their violence and renders them unaccountable for their violent behavior. Lastly, the "whore" narrative characterizes women's violent behavior as sexually deviant. Worded by Sjoberg & Gentry (2015: 113) "women either commit violence because of their insatiable need for sex with men, men's control and ownership of their bodies", known as the erotomaniac violent woman, "or their inability to have sex with men", called the erotic dysfunctional violent woman. Deriving from women's sexual instinct and victimization, women's agency in their violence is limited and even denied (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008: 9).

Nacos (2005) research focuses on similarities in the media portrayal of women in politics and female terrorists, and emphasizes the impact of entrenched gender stereotypes. In relation to Sjoberg & Gentry's work, she reveals the existence of six alternative, but not

incompatible, narratives that are used in the media to explain women's involvement in terrorism: *physical appearance, family connection, terrorist for the sake of love, women's liberation/equality, tough-as-males/tougher-than-men,* and *bored, naïve, out-of-touch-with-reality.*

1.5 Western women who joined the IS and their media representation

Research has focused on trying to understand the reasons why (converted) Muslim women, originally from Europe, decided to join the IS despite the notoriety of the militant Islamist group and its brutal treatment of women (Aasgaard, 2017; Perešin, 2017, Strømmen, 2017). The general belief that women joined the IS primarily to become "jihadi brides" appears to be "reductionist and above all, incorrect" (Saltman & Smith, 2015: 5). Instead, women's motives to join a terrorist organization cover a broad and complex spectrum of both push and pull factors that do not fundamentally differ from those of men (Hoyle, Bradford, & Frenett, 2015; Saltman & Smith, 2015; Patel, 2017; Perešin, 2017; Strømmen, 2017; de Leede, 2018). However, the specific categorization into push and pull factors is problematic, as this particular distinction suggests a false binary that is difficult to maintain. Push- and pull factors are closely related, and not that clearly discernible from one another. Therefore, women's motives are not presented according to this binary opposition.

Scholars have pointed out that women joined the IS as a result of feelings of social or cultural isolation, estrangement and not belonging to the society they live in. This led to an identity crisis and the search for a new life and sense of belonging (Perešin, 2017; Strømmen, 2017; de Leede, 2018). Another factor is the idea that the Ummah, the international Muslim community, is threatened and violently persecuted worldwide. Women felt the need to support the fight against the Assad regime and protect their Muslim brothers and sisters (ibid.). Moreover, the frustration over the lack of international action strengthened women's wish to answer to their religious and ideological duty to make the *hijrah* (ibid.). The prospect of contributing to building the Islamic Caliphate also motivated women to travel to the IS-controlled territories (ibid.). Lastly, personal reasons were often identified as factors that drove women to join the IS, such as a desire for adventure, the idea of liberation, rebellion, personal trauma's and difficult family relationships (ibid.)

Relating back to Crenshaw (1989) and the concept of intersectionality, the media representation of Western IS women is subject to the intersectional identity of Muslim women. They are not only women, which ascribes them a marginalized position and identity

in relation to men, but are both women and Muslim. Consequently, the gender discourse intersects with the neo-Orientalist discourse. Edward Said (1978) introduced the discourse in which the "West" saw the "Orient" as inferior and as "other" in his work *"Orientalism".* Neo-Orientalism emerged as a reaction to 9/11, and constructs Islam and the "Muslim" world as a threat to the "Western" world (Kerboua, 2016). According to Shabanirad & Marandi (2015: 22), "Oriental women are represented as the oppressed ones, they are also regarded as being submissive, voiceless, seductive and promiscuous". Viewed from a gendered and neo-Orientalist lens, and taking into account rising feelings of islamophobia, Muslim women are perceived by the West and Western media as "other", oppressed and victimized women in need of saving (Khalid, 2011). The dependence of Muslim women on men, notably on their husband, father or male relatives, and their voicelessness sensationalizes their violent behavior in a gendered and racialized context (Gentry, 2011). Muslim women are, hence, the victims of a double marginalized identity that stereotypes them, reduces their agency and strengthens gender inequality.

Studies on the media representation of Western IS women show that the media generally refers to these women by the term "jihadi brides" (Strømmen, 2017; Azeez, 2019; Martini, 2018). The term, which automatically associates women's decision to join the IS with being or becoming a married (jihadi) woman instead of the decision being her own independent choice, made its first appearance in news media by 6 July 2014 and was used infrequently (Azeez, 2019). However, the gendered term "jihadi bride" became widely used after the British news media heavily covered the news story of three British teenagers who left the United Kingdom to join the IS in February 2015 (ibid.). Ever since, the term is extensively used by Western media to portray Western women leaving their home to join the Islamist militant organization (ibid.). Next to the term "jihadi bride", research conducted on English-speaking media outlets showed that other frequently used notions are for example "vulnerable women" and "naïve girls" (Azeez, 2019; Martini, 2018). These narratives sexualize women's violence by depending on underlying gender stereotypes and personal motivations, which delegitimizes women's agency in their violence (Strømmen, 2017).

Two scholars in particular have focused on the (English) media portrayal of Western IS women: Azeez (2019) and Martini (2018). Azeez (2019) uncovers that the media portrayal reinforces gender and orientalist stereotypes which depict IS women as innocent victims in need of saving. Martini (2018) investigates the media construction of "ISIS women jihadis" in the British media. She identifies twelve narratives used in the media to make sense of the phenomenon of women who joined the IS: the label "jihadi brides"; the vulnerable, confused

and naïve jihadists; lured, groomed and enticed jihadists; marriage as goal; physical appearances: beauty and 'Islamic appearances'; their failure as women: marriages and motherhood; Islam; liberation, rebellion, adventure and feminism as goals; family relations; personal traumas; the 'hormone-driven' jihadists; the betrayal of "Jihadi Brides". These narratives incorporate to a certain extent the six narratives identified by Nacos (2005), and the three narratives as established by Sjoberg & Gentry (2008; 2015). Therefore, in the next chapter, Martini's narratives are partly used as the foundation of this work's analysis into the Dutch media representation of Western women who joined the IS in Syria and Iraq.

2. Methodology

2.1 Introduction

The literature review has demonstrated that the media generally depicts violent women and female terrorists by making use of gendered and neo-Orientalist narratives. It has also shown a gap on the dynamic change of narratives after the beginning of IS women's repatriation. While Martini offered the most comprehensive list of narratives used in the (British) media until 2017, the question remains whether these are still applicable after the fall of the IS. This chapter addresses the specific method used to conduct the analysis, namely a critical discourse analysis and thematic narrative approach, and explains the logic thereof.

2.2 Methodology

As discussed in the literature review, the narratives identified by Nacos (2005) and Sjoberg & Gentry (2008) overlap, to a certain extent, with the narratives identified by Martini (2018). Therefore, Martini's narrative framework is partly used as the foundation of this work's method. As most research in the field has focused on English speaking media outlets, Martini's narratives will be applied to test whether these narratives were also used in the Dutch media between 2014 and 2022. This timeframe incorporates the beginning of IS women's repatriation, and will, therefore, also reveal whether Martini's narratives are still applicable after the fall of the IS.

2.2 Methods: critical discourse analysis and thematic narrative approach

What is clear from the literature and scholars previously discussed, is that the media has the capacity to shape information and public opinion in general, and in this case on violent and terrorist women. Subjectivity and agenda-setting highly influence decisions on what stories are told in the media and how they are told. For this the media makes extensive use of frames and narratives (Crow & Lawlor, 2016). In other words, the media socially constructs information as news and, therefore, gives meaning and constructs reality rather than reflecting it.

This research analyzes the media and its depiction of women who joined the IS. It, therefore, emanates from a linguistic and constructivist perspective on reality. Hence, discourse analysis (DA) is considered the most appropriate research method for the purpose of this work. This interdisciplinary method is focused on the construction of meaning through language, while also being concerned with the relation between power and language in

society (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Given that the critical perspective considers it crucial to take the context of language use into account, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) is conducted (Fairclough 1992; Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018). Not only text in itself, but the "larger discursive unit of text" is viewed as the unit of communication (Wodak & Meyer, 2001: 2). Consequently, this specific method focuses on describing and explaining "institutional, political, gender and media discourses (in the broadest sense)" (ibid.), as they are seen as relevant for interpreting and/or explaining a text. Especially by deconstructing the discourses, "structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" will become apparent (ibid.). CDA, thus, connects linguistic analysis to social analysis and seeks to critically examine social inequalities that are maintained, conveyed, reproduced, legitimized and/or challenged by the use of language.

For the purpose of this work, the discourse(s) employed by the media need to be scrutinized. An effective way of doing this, is by conducting a frame analysis or narrative analysis. Both research methods are specific types of CDA and are concerned with interpreting the way issues and events are constructed or told. When examining both research methods, it becomes apparent that there is a terminological ambiguity between the terms "narratives" and "frames" (Aukes et al., 2020). While the concepts differ in meaning, social- and political science literature typically deploys the terms interchangeably, and generally do not define the concepts in isolation from each other, if at all (ibid.). The confusion particularly derives from the idea that narratives are not necessarily frames, but are the products of specific discourses in which knowledge is socially constructed, and are therefore framed (Martini, 2018). The fundamental difference between frames and narratives is that frames constitute the perspectives of the actor, while narratives are the "expressed products of those perspectives" (Aukes et al., 2020: 1). News frames are seen as the main organizing ideas that give meaning to affairs and events, whereas news narratives can be regarded as either "rhetorical structures" or "stylistic devices" used by the media to adequately transmit the frames (Lück et al., 2016: 1639, citing Shen et al., 2014: 100). In this way, narratives provide additional complexity and depth to frames, that in itself provide the knowledge for a rudimentary interpretative framework (ibid.). Narratives also connect and combine different frames, and are generally more country-specific due to the tendency of journalists to anchor their news stories in narratives that are familiar to the audience. Consequently, the news is constructed as part of a longer and more recognizable story (Lück et al, 2016: 1639).

Narratives and stories are, thus, not equivalent to each other. Whereas a narrative is a "spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions,

chronologically connected" (Czarniawska, 2004: 17), a story is an "emplotted narrative" (Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2020: 1810). In accordance with the narrative paradigm as developed by Walter Fisher, which maintains that all meaningful communication is constructed in stories, narratives are perceived as "symbolic actions – words and/or deeds – [that] have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them" (Fisher, 1984: 2). The paradigm provides a "logic" for assessing and accepting narratives (ibid.). For a narrative to be believed and taken on by the audience, the story has to be cohesive ("narrative probability") and in accordance with the values and beliefs of the public ("narrative fidelity"). This thesis is concerned with the case study of the Dutch media and focuses specifically on analyzing the language used by Dutch journalists to depict Western women who joined the IS. Based on the mentioned differences between frames and narratives, and with special emphasis on narratives being the "expressed products" of the perspectives of the author, the term "narrative" is used throughout this work, and narrative analysis is chosen as the most appropriate research method.

Narrative analysis is a qualitative research method that is part of the linguistic turn in the social sciences and is used across various disciplines of the human sciences when dealing with the narrative dimension of data (Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2020). The narrative approach is an interpretive method, consisting of a variety of methods and techniques, that deal with a range of different texts that have a storied form (Riessman, 2005). By analyzing and interpreting narratives, the method examines how stories are constructed and told (Czarniawska, 2004). Narratives can pertain to longer periods of time, or to a particular event (Bryman, 2016: 592). Narrative analysis, as an umbrella term, consists of different narrative approaches, such as thematic analysis, structural analysis, and interactional analysis (Riessman, 2005). For the purpose of this work, a thematic approach to narrative analysis is taken. This approach focuses on the content of speech; "what" is said is more important than "how" it is said, which means that language is "viewed as a resource" of investigation (idem.: 3). A thematic narrative analysis permits the researcher to identify different themes or recurring patterns in the way a story is told, but does not examine how these constructions came about (idem.: 2). Accordingly, this representational method not only involves a description of the qualitative data, but also includes an interpretive approach. This involves the coding of fragments of data, that are grouped together in themes and reconstructed in narratives.

This work aims to expand previous research on the media's portrayal of Western women who joined the IS and departs from the framework of the twelve news narratives

identified by Martini (2018) in her analysis of the British media depiction of these subjects (see table 1). However, the specific narratives identified in the case of the UK broadsheets might not be precisely relevant in the case of the Dutch media portrayal of Western IS women. Therefore, next to working deductively from the narratives identified by Martini, I will also take an inductive approach to the analysis and discuss and problematize newly discovered narratives used in the Dutch media to depict Western IS women.

The label "Jihadi Brides"	Marriage as goal	Islam	Personal trauma's
The vulnerable, confused, and naïve jihadists	Physical appearances: beauty and "Islamic" appearances	Liberation, rebellion, adventure and feminism as goals	The "hormone-driven" jihadists
Lured, groomed and enticed jihadists	Their failures as women: marriages, motherhood	Family relations	The betrayal of "Jihadi Brides"

Table 1. Narratives identified by Martini (2018)

2.3 Data collection

The analysis relies on newspaper articles that are published online (or published in print and accessible online), by the three Dutch newspapers with the highest reported daily circulation (NOM, 2022). The newspapers, consisting of both broadsheets and tabloids, cover all aspects of the ideological spectrum: *De Volkskrant*, a left-leaning broadsheet; *De Telegraaf*, a more right-leaning tabloid, and *Het AD*, a central-leaning tabloid (van Praag & Brants, 2014). Taking into account the potential influence of a newspaper, this approach accounts for covering the majority of the Dutch reading population. While focusing on television and/or social media has been given thought, they are deemed less comparable than newspapers over a longer period of time. Not all tv broadcasts are searchable in Nexis Uni, and they do not cover the ideological spectrum in the way that newspapers do. Moreover, social media is ruled out over this longer period of time given access issues in relation to Facebook and Twitter for example.

The newspaper articles were gathered through the use of Nexis Uni. Nexis Uni is an online database of newspaper and magazine articles, transcripts of TV broadcasts and summaries of public records fillings, and is specifically designed for research at institutes of higher education. The time frame for this research goes from the declaration of the "Islamic Caliphate" in June 2014, up until the start of this research in August 2022. This timeframe allows the incorporation of newspaper articles that report on women who joined the IS, but also includes those that reported on the repatriation of (former) jihadi women. The initial sampling was done by searching for the term *'IS-vrouw(en)'*(IS-woman/women). This search combination led to a feasibility issue. However, by using this initial search term, a first examination was carried out which demonstrated that other terms were commonly used to refer to Western women who joined the IS. The final chosen keywords are the following: "*Jihad-bruid(en)* (Jihadi-bride(s)), *Jihadvrouw(en)* (Jihad woman/women), *Vrouwelijke Syriëganger(s)* (woman/women going to Syria), *Syriegangster(s)* (woman/women going to Syria), *Vrouwelijke IS-ganger(s)* (woman/women join(ing) IS). The distribution of the sources is detailed in Table 2.

The language used by journalists in the sample of news articles was systematically organized and given meaning through the use of coding. Given the magnitude of the data set, comprising 271 news articles, it proved to be very practical to make use of the qualitative data analysis tool ATLAS.ti. The narratives identified by Martini (see Table 1) were transformed into twelve pre-set codes, and all segments of data that were relevant to these narratives were coded accordingly (see Table 3 for results). Inductive open coding was also used in relation to the second part of the analysis, where new counter-narratives were identified. Examining the codes by way of employing a thematic approach to narrative analysis revealed that some codes related to broader themes. The themes, presented in the coding protocol as "sub-codes", were grouped together and reconstructed into new counter-narratives. The research questions that drove the analysis were: *What are women's (alleged) motives to join the IS? How are Western women who joined the IS portrayed and what aspects are emphasized in this portrayal?* Data gathered from the three newspapers were coded in isolation from each other and presented in Table 3.

Broadsheet/Tabloid	Total	*De Volkskrant*	*De Telegraaf*	*Het AD*
Articles per source	271	38	122	111

Table 2. Distribution of the sources

3. Analysis

3.1 Introduction

Attempting to answer the question of how the depiction of IS women in the Dutch media relates to the narratives identified by Martini, this chapter discusses and problematizes the main narratives utilized in the chosen Dutch outlets *De Volkskrant, De Telegraaf,* and *Het AD*. Subsequently, it will be analyzed for existing gendered and/or neo-Orientalist discourses. Throughout the process, new counter-narratives were identified as well. These are discussed and problematized in the same way in the second part of the analysis. Seeing that some narratives were used more often than others, the findings are presented in an orderly fashion.

3.2 The narratives identified by Martini

Narrative	Total (%)	*De Volkskrant (%)*	*De Telegraaf (%)*	*Het AD (%)*
The label "Jihadi Brides"	63	34	83	51
Physical appearances	28	29	25	21
The vulnerable, confused and naïve jihadists	25	24	19	33
Lured, groomed and enticed jihadists	18	24	11	23
Marriage as goal	14	8	9	22
Personal traumas	13	16	10	16
Family relations	10	18	1	18
Their failures as women: marriages and motherhood	9	16	6	11

Islam	9	11	7	10
Liberation, rebellion, adventure and feminism as goals	7	3	5	11
Betrayal of jihadi brides	6	8	5	6
The "hormone-driven" jihadists	1	0	2	0

Table 3. Distribution of results, applied to the narratives identified by Martini (2018)

The "Jihadi Brides" label

The literature review pointed out that the term "jihadi brides" is often used in Western media to refer to Western women who joined the IS (Strømmen, 2017; Azeez, 2018; Martini, 2018). However, it also showed that the idea that women joined IS predominantly to become "jihadi brides" is overly simplistic and inaccurate (Saltman & Smith, 2015). Martini (2018: 464) rightfully points out that labelling may be viewed as "an act of epistemic violence" because it constructs the labelled subjects in a particular way that silences them. The "jihadi brides" label was also primarily used in the Dutch media to depict female IS militants. According to this label, women and their decision to join IS were depicted as dependent on their husband and his decisions. Whereas women could have had their own motivations to engage in political violence, the label neglected these and assigned IS women the role of "fighters brides" instead. Consequently, the women terrorists merely existed in their attachment to men which marginalized their agency. This depiction aligns with the gender discourse, in which women are traditionally constructed as more peaceful than men and as having no agency in violence (Eichler, 2015; Smith, 2018). The distribution of the sources showed that *De Telegraaf* clearly used the term "jihadi brides" most often to refer to IS women (83%). *De Volkskrant* appeared to be more neutral in its depiction of western IS women by not using the label as frequently (34%).

Physical appearances: beauty and "Islamic appearances"

The physical appearance of female terrorists is consistently given a lot of attention in the media and strongly contrasts the stereotypical image of a hardened terrorist (Nacos, 2005). In

the case of IS women, the newspapers all maintained this habit quite homogenous by emphasizing these women's beauty and their sweet demeanor. An IS-woman was, for example, portrayed as a "young woman from 'Sweet Lake City,' Holland, with her big brown eyes, shy smile and soft voice" (Wensink, 2020). Another IS militant was depicted as peaceful, her hands folded in her lap, and who "looks out into the world with modest eyes; her aura is gentle" (van Mersbergen, 2020). Multiple times, the media referred to a well-known jihadi woman as "beautiful Angela", having "bright blue eyes and red hair" (Jihad-bruiden wagen, 2019). Others were depicted as "good looking" (Rosman & van der Wal, 2020) "intelligent" (Schoonhoven, 2021), "European" (van Es, 2017), and "kind and polite" (Klerks, 2015). The strong emphasis on female terrorists' physical appearance shifted the attention away from their violent behavior and facilitated a starker contrast between these women and the acts of violence they committed (Nacos, 2005: 439).

The physical appearance narrative often went hand in hand with a neo-Orientalist biased perspective. IS women were typically wearing Islamic clothing (Salome, 2015), a *niqab* or *burqa*, and went through life in "all-concealing black robes" ("Alle vrouwen, 2015) in which "only [her] dark eyes were visible" (Salome, 2014). The Islamic garments were used to portray the radicalization of jihadi women, and the "Otherness" opposed to the "Western" appearance was identified: "Once an 'ordinary' young woman, pretty to look at, with her dark eyes and black hair. Now covered in a *niqab* and one of an estimated forty Dutch jihadi brides in the Caliphate" (Salome, 2015). Islamic clothing was also used to depict jihadi women as oppressed "prisoners". An example of this is the claim "of her own accord, she covers herself in a niqab" (Bloedfanatieke vrouwen, 2014). Whereas this referred to a conscious decision, the statement also implied that women did not do this by choice, but were forced by their IS husbands or by the "Islamic patriarchy" (Martini, 2018: 467), and are therefore victims. At the same time, the findings showed that the *burqa* or *niqab* was not only seen as an expression of religious and radicalized display of victims, but they "also symbolize the inky black shame of people who have contributed significantly to genocide and other war crimes" (Pam, 2019). This claim portrayed the women as guilty of their actions and used the Islamic garments as a metaphor for the shame and guilt these women must feel. The "Islamic appearance" narrative and neo-Orientalist bias were also clearly present in relation to IS women who had been repatriated. On the one hand, women that had been saved out of the "claws of IS" were often portrayed as remaining radicalized and "[…] still wore a black veil" (Schoonhoven, 2017). On the other hand, a strong opposition appeared between the "Western" and the Islamic appearance in the case of deradicalized women: "A heavily pregnant Kasiki, knit cap, black

tight pants, red-painted lips […] In nothing does she resemble the veiled image that exists of a woman traveling to Syria" (Giesen & Groen, 2016).

The vulnerable, confused and naïve jihadists

Characterizing for the IS is the young age of women (and men) who joined the terrorist organization. This might be the reason why many IS women were portrayed as being vulnerable and naïve (Martini, 2018: 465). *Het AD,* for example, stated that "(she) was young and naïve, and did not know the true face of IS" (Tielemans, 2022). Another had left "with a few hundred euros and a straightener, naïve and ignorant" (Schoonhoven, 2021). Other militants were depicted as "sensitive to the influence of others" (Syriëganger Angela B. krijgt 4.5 jaar cel, 2022) or "went to Syria from a naïve-romantic idea" (Bahara, 2018). The narrative existed in relation to the "lured, groomed, enticed" narrative, as women were for example depicted as gullible: "gullibly (she) fell for his smooth talk of the utopia he sketched" (Rosman, 2022).

The depiction of militants as vulnerable and naïve took away women's plausible political engagement to the IS. Moreover, the focus on their young age rendered the terrorist women not seriously dangerous and therefore not credible, as their actions were constructed as unintentional (Martini, 2018: 466). Western jihadi women were, hence, portrayed in conformity with the gender discourse. As a consequence, the narrative reproduced gender stereotypes about women's (physical) vulnerability, their inability to use violence and their need of protection. Statements made by IS women themselves disputed the narrative's depiction and emphasized women's violent nature: "(She) cannot wait to see the severed heads of the apostates in the Netherlands" (as quoted in Schoonhoven, 2017). Another woman wanted her son to become strong to make "as many victims as possible" in the future (Syriëganger Angela B. krijgt 4.5 jaar cel, 2022). The distribution of the sources showed that *Het AD* portrayed IS women most frequently as vulnerable and naïve jihadists (33%). *De Telegraaf* only used this narrative in 19% of its articles, which is remarkable given the degree to which it deployed the label "jihadi brides" (83%).

Lured, groomed and enticed jihadists

Given that Western Muslim women who joined the IS were usually very young, they were frequently portrayed in the media as victims of (online) jihadi recruiters or their Islamic husbands. A newspaper article byline comprehensively illustrated this: "Semra (18) detained as victim of a jihadi recruiter" (Salome, 2014). Words like "lured", "charmed", "enticed" and

"encouraged" were used to depict the militants: "A handsome Dutch Quranic teacher […] had charmed the girls" (Schoonhoven, 2017). This narrative was used in conjunction with the "marriage as goal" narrative, as IS women were often seduced with the prospect of marriage: "She was further encouraged by male recruiters […] a poster boy of jihad who promised dream marriages with himself or with other "lions" (Schoonhoven, 2019). While the media generally depicted the man as the one "luring" or "seducing" women, the findings also showed that IS women were depicted as guilty of grooming and recruiting women themselves: "She left for Syria […] seduced by peer pressure on social media and the fine words of European women who were already there" (Rosman, 2021).

This narrative made sense of the phenomenon of Western IS women by taking away the intentionality of women's actions. They were lured, groomed or enticed by others, and therefore not (solely) responsible for their actions. Instead, IS militants were generally characterized in a passive manner which took their agency away and depicted them as victims of male terrorists. This media portrayal was consistent with the mainstream gender discourse, in which women are depicted as women in need of saving and protection. Consequently, the narrative reproduced gender stereotypes. The results showed that this narrative was contradicted in the media representation of jihadi women as recruiters themselves, which recognized women's violent and conscious intentions by exercising their agency. Some statements made by IS women also opposed the narrative, for example: "I find it hypocritical that all of a sudden people are saying that I was recruited, that I was taken. I ran away from home because of the clashes [with her family]" (Salome, 2014). Whereas this militant refuted the grooming aspect, she related the explanation for her flight to the IS with personal reasons, rather than with political or ideological arguments. Therefore, her decision to join IS was nonetheless "explained away" with another narrative that denied her the agency in her own violence (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008: 5). The findings again showed that *De Telegraaf* adopted the narrative that constructed IS women as victims the least (11%), which contrasts its extensive use of the "jihadi-brides" label.

Marriage as goal

According to the literature, contributing to building the "IS Caliphate" was seen as an idealistic goal and a religious duty, and therefore one of the reasons why Western Muslim women traveled to Syria and Iraq. To quickly build the Islamic State, the terrorist organization strategically obliged their women to marry an IS fighter as quickly as possible. Consequently, IS women were often portrayed in the media by way of emphasizing their

"fervent desire to get married" (Martini, 2018: 466). Many news articles for example claimed that the women "traveled out to Syria to marry an IS fighter and have children with him" (Syriëganger krijgt 4,5 jaar cel, 2022), or flew out to Syria "after being married off to a jihad fighter" (Overheid hoeft jihadbruid, 2021). This narrative was often used in combination with the "lured, groomed, enticed jihadi" narrative, as IS militants were claimed to be "persuaded by Whatsapp-messages to come to Syria to marry their hero on the spot" (Groen, 2014).

This narrative tied into the "whore" narrative, as defined by Sjoberg and Gentry, by portraying these violent women as sexually dysfunctional. Because of their failure to find a husband and/or to have children, and, thus, their inability to please men (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2015), these female militants became emotionally disturbed which has translated into violent behavior. According to this narrative, Western Muslim women were explained to join the jihadist group to fulfil their duty and "their (normal) biological destiny of becoming wives and mothers" (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008: 10). However, by downsizing these women's decisions to join the terrorist organization merely to their desire to get married, their potential political engagement to IS and their rational motivations were strongly marginalized. As a consequence of the "sexual dysfunction" narrative, the violent IS women were depicted as sexually inferior to "real" women (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008: 4), and tried to become complete by joining a terrorist organization. This deemed the women irrational terrorists with no credibility, as joining IS in their quest to find a husband could not be considered a conscious choice. Some statements made by jihadi women complied with this narrative. It was for example stated that "All I wanted was a partner beside me […] I wanted to get married, settle down and have a baby, that is it" (Tielemans, 2022). At the same time, however, another woman stated that she "did not necessarily go there to find a husband" (Rosman, 2021), which clashed with the narrative. Whereas *De Volkskrant* (8%) and *De Telegraaf* (9%) used this narrative in a homogenous way, *Het AD* explained the women terrorists much more frequently by their desire to get married (22%).

Personal traumas

The literature demonstrated that the media tends to make sense of terrorist women by placing strong emphasis on women's personal motivations. In the case of the IS women, the research shows that the Dutch media was also inclined to stress the personal reasons and traumas that may have driven these subjects to join IS. It was said that "many of the young women who left for Syria at the time had problems in the Netherlands from which they fled" (Kompagnie, 2017). For example, the death of her little brother was depicted as the reason why a

"vulnerable girl (became) adrift" (Wensink, 2020). The media generally referred to the "difficult start in life" (Schoonhoven, 2021) and (early) adulthood of IS militants: "She had 'quite a few problems' – single, two children, debts, people jeering at her on the street because of her khimaar- until […] online contacts presented her a way out" (van Es, 2021). Domestic violence was another personal trauma that was often referred to in the media.

As has been discussed in the literature review, the strong emphasis placed on women's personal problems shifted the focus away from their probable political and ideological motives to join the terrorist organization. According to this narrative, only the suffering of severe traumas in life could explain why IS women engaged in violent behavior. By constructing women's actions as a result of the traumas they suffered from, the narrative evoked a certain sense of sympathy for IS militants which rendered their actions irrational, and the perception of them as terrorists almost inconceivable. As such, the gender discourse was upheld, as the women could not be deemed (solely) responsible for their actions. Women sometimes used their personal trauma's to their defense: "You must not forget: I had serious psychological problems" ('Ik zal me altijd schuldig voelen', 2018). The distribution of the sources showed, again, that *De Telegraaf* adopted the narrative the least in its reporting on IS women (10%). *De Volkskrant* and *Het AD* did this to a similar degree (16%).

Family relations

The findings showed that the "family relations" narrative was also employed in the Dutch media to construct women's decision to join the IS in relation to their relatives. An article in *De* Volkskrant, for example, claimed that a mother "followed her adult daughter to the Caliphate" (Stoffelen & van Es, 2020), and that an IS-woman traveled to Syria solely "to follow her little brother" (van der Wal, 2021). However, this narrative was predominantly used with regard to women following their husbands to IS-controlled territories. Many newspaper articles depicted women as traveling to Syria to follow "their husbands, the mujahid (fighter)" (Groen, 2014) or "their radicalized boyfriend" ("Straf voor jihadiste", 2019) who had already joined the IS.

Similar to the "jihadi brides" label, women's motivations to join the terrorist organization were tied to the man and his ambitions and actions, rather than acknowledging women's conscious and personal choice to engage in political violence. This marginalized women's full agency. Considering that the agency of female Muslim militants was downplayed, they were constructed as victimized at the hands of Muslim men (Martini, 2018: 469). Whereas these women engaged in acts of terrorist violence, the media constructed them

in accordance with the gender and neo-Orientalist discourses. This results in a reproduction of gendered and neo-Orientalist stereotypes and assumptions that exist about women that engage in political violence. According to its general tendency, *De Telegraaf* only used this narrative in 1% of its articles. This is in stark contrast with the other newspapers, that related women's decision to join the IS to family members, and especially husbands, in 18% of the cases.

Their failures as women : marriages and motherhood

Analysis of the Dutch media showed that this narrative was indeed also used to depict IS terrorist women, but only in relation to motherhood. The emphasis on their failure as a mother characterized the women as deviant, as the behavior they displayed towards their children was atypical. This "abnormal" behavior was portrayed in the media in two different ways. Militants were either depicted as abandoning their children as they joined the IS, or as bringing them with them and therefore putting them at great risk. It was, for example, stated that a radicalized Muslim woman traveled after her husband and "left her son behind" (de Ruiter, 2019). Another jihadi woman "took two of her four kids with her to Syria", and yet another is said to have "seriously neglected her duties as a mother" (as quoted in Schoonhoven, 2021) by taking her two children to IS-controlled territories at the age of two months and eight years old. Moreover, a teenage girl was said to be "kidnapped by her mother to the IS-Caliphate" (van Es, 2021).

This narrative depicted the violent women as neglecting their duty as women by emphasizing the atypical behavior towards their children (Martini, 2018: 468). They were portrayed as deviant women, acting on "the inadequacy of (their) womanhood" (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008: 16) and disrupting the mainstream gendered idea of a loving and nurturing mother (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2015). Hence, their portrayal placed the militants outside of the gender discourse, which is why these violent women did not pose a threat to the discourse in the first place. It appeared that the "returning jihadi women" were increasingly referred to as returning "mothers" with their children. When the returning militants were said to regret their violent actions, this was generally linked to the fact that they had put their innocent children in danger and had jeopardized their future. Consequently, the narrative shifted somewhat in relation to the question of repatriation towards the gendered idea of the "nurturing mother" (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2015). This placed the jihadi women back inside the gender discourse. IS women's own statements did not clash with the narrative, as they frequently said to have acted in the best interests of their children and "will always feel guilty for putting them in danger" ('Ik zal me altijd schuldig voelen', 2018). The three newspapers used this narrative to

different degrees, with *De Volkskrant* deploying it the most (16%), and *De Telegraaf*, in accordance with its tendency, the least (6%).

Islam

When making sense of the phenomenon of Western jihadi women, the Dutch media regularly acknowledged the role of Islam and its driving force behind women's radicalization. *Het AD*, for example, stated that "Angela is flirting with the most extreme form of Islam imaginable. Her surroundings watch with dismay as Angela becomes increasingly radicalized and even makes plans to go to war-torn Syria" (Salome, 2015). In this narrative, family was depicted as unable to prevent it from happening: "Her family watches helplessly as S. marries an Islamic man who draws her into the jihadist ideology" (Bahara, 2018). A neo-Orientalist bias was also present. *Het AD*, for example, claimed that "an ordinary girl from a Dutch provincial town converts to Islam, radicalizes, regrets it and returns to become 'normal' again" (van de Beek & van Dyck, 2016). This statement clearly implied that Islam is associated with "abnormality" and "otherness".

When the role of religion in a terrorist organization is emphasized, actions of terrorists become depoliticized (Gunning & Jackson, 2011). Terrorists do not act on behalf of themselves, but on behalf of their religion. In the case of IS militants, the women and their religion were demonized and stigmatized. This process of demonization shifted the focus away from women's conscious choice to become terrorists, and disregarded women's agency. As such, the gender and neo-Orientalist discourse were upheld, and gendered and neo-Orientalist stereotypes and assumptions were reproduced as a consequence. It should be mentioned, however, that neo-Orientalism is connected with the entire "Islam" narrative as identified by Martini (2018), since Islam is represented as something "other" and backwards that leads to radicalization. *De Telegraaf* used the "Islam" narrative the least to make sense of the phenomenon of western IS women. *De Volkskrant* and *Het AD* did this in respectively 11% and 10% of its newspaper articles.

Liberation, rebellion, adventure, and feminism as goals

As the literature has demonstrated, one of the motivations for Western Muslim women to join the IS was a romanticization of the experience. A sense of adventure and the idea of liberation were identified as factors that could have driven the women to Syria. The findings showed that the Dutch media had the tendency to emphasize these goals in relation to jihadi women. It was for example claimed that the women joined the IS "looking for a new beginning" (van

der Wal, 2021) and as an "escape" (Rosman, 2017). The idea of liberation could be interpreted in two ways: either as a liberation from (an oppressing) family, which can be seen as rebellion, or as a liberation from the structures in the Dutch society that prevented the women from professing their faith in the way they wanted to. Relating to the "liberation from family" narrative, a female terrorist was, for example, said to "go in direct opposition to her family. She wants to get away from her strict Kurdish father, who thinks girls should do as they are told. Away from her uncles, who have threatened to kill her if she "runs off with a Moroccan" (Salome, 2014). The "liberation through faith" narrative portrayed women as joining IS "to profess (their) faith in the way (they) pursue" (Kompagnie, 2017). It is, for example, claimed that "in Syria, they can be the Muslim woman they want to be" (Bloedfanatieke vrouwen, 2014). Feminism was not found as a way to interpret women's decisions to join IS.

Within the gender discourse, women are generally constructed as obedient subjects. The "liberation from family", or "rebellion" narrative portrays women as disrupting the gendered identities and stereotypes that are traditionally ascribed to them (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008; Smith, 2018). They are, thus, seen as agents of violence. However, the political and ideological commitment they potentially could have had to join the IS were not taken into account. Again, the decision to join was explained by placing emphasis on women's personal reasons, portraying them as irrational and, therefore, non-credible terrorists. Regarding the "liberation of faith" narrative, women's ideological reasons for joining the IS were clearly considered to explain women's violent turn, which made them agents of violence. But also in this case, the decision derived from a feeling of being misunderstood and unwanted in society, which rendered the decision irrational and constructed the women as non-credible terrorists. The distribution of the sources showed that *Het AD* deployed this narrative most extensively in its portrayal of female IS militants (11%).

Betrayal of "Jihadi Brides"

A less present but all the more remarkable narrative was the one condemning jihadi women, for their violent behavior and actions were depicted as a betrayal of the "Western" liberal values and tradition. This portrayal strongly reproduced neo-Orientalist stereotypes of "Western superiority" and generosity that the women betrayed by deciding to leave their privileged "Western" lives for a new, inferior life in the "Orient". The research showed that this narrative was mainly used in relation to returning IS women. Often held in detention camps after the fall of the "IS Caliphate", the women were eager to go home. This narrative

ridiculed their fervent desire to return home by emphasizing their betrayal of their home, claiming, for example, that they were longing to go home "to the country they previously turned their backs to" (Schoonhoven, 2017), to the country "they once so despised" (Steun de slachtoffers, 2019), and to "the house they had wanted to blow up with […] fire" (Peereboom Voller, 2021). To them, "home now means the hated West they recklessly traded for the great adventure with their beloved headhunters" (Marbe, 2017), and the jihadi women were portrayed as "women who have raised the middle finger to the Netherlands […] who should stay in that sand pit over there" (Bartels & Isitman, 2021). Moreover, terms such as "defecting to IS" (Keultjes & Rosman, 2021) and "the Islamic enemy of ISIS" (as quoted in van Es, 2021) were used in this narrative, which depicted the IS as "the enemy other".

The difference in culture between the "West" and the "Orient" was also pointed out. *De Volskrant,* for example, stated that if "jihadi brides decide to go there, they will stay there. If you want to live on in that culture, you do not do it here" (as quoted in van Piekartz, 2018). Whereas the term "jihadi bride" was used in this example, the findings showed that other terms were also used to refer to these women and their betrayal. These testified more to the agency of women in committing acts of (terrorist) violence, and portrayed them as guilty. *Het AD*, for example, claimed: "That is not a jihadi bride, but a female terrorist. You will have to stand trial, but it has to be there. I do not want you back here" (as quoted in Telkens een andere opvatting, 2022). Similarly, it was stated that "those terrorist women have forfeited their right to ever set foot on Dutch soil again!" (as quoted in van Es, 2021). This clearly shows that the women were portrayed as hypocrites. They decided to trade in "Western" liberal values for a life under strict Sharia law, and now wanted to use the Western rule of law to their advantage. All three newspapers deployed this narrative in a homogenous way.

The "hormone-driven" jihadists

Analysis of the newspaper articles revealed that this narrative was only used three times to portray Western jihadi women in the Dutch media. It was claimed that women came from abroad to "sexually satisfy terrorists" (Dekkers, 2014). Moreover, it was stated that sex formed a motive that should not be underestimated: "Many files on jihad brides […] breathe pure adolescent romance and sultry desire" (Seks was drijfveer, 2019). However, this narrative was not further considered due to its low occurrence in the sample. Surprisingly, *De Telegraaf* was the only newspaper that used this narrative to make sense of the phenomenon of IS women. Whereas the percentage to which *De Telegraaf* used different narratives has not always been the lowest compared to the other two newspapers, this is the first time – apart

from the "jihadi brides" label – that the percentage is the highest in relation to the other newspapers.

3.3 Counter-narratives

The following narratives derived from taking an inductive approach to the analysis, and were not previously covered by Martini's findings.

Narrative	Total (%)	*De Volkskrant (%)*	*De Telegraaf (%)*	*Het AD (%)*
The complicit and guilty jihadists	28	16	30	30
The "cliché" jihadists	18	13	22	16
The "ticking time bomb" jihadists	15	24	16	10
The conscious jihadists	14	8	17	14

Table 3. Distribution of results, applied to the identified counter-narratives

The complicit and guilty jihadists

Whereas several narratives constructed female IS militants as naïve and peaceful subjects, who's decision to join the IS was, for example, the result of grooming or personal traumas, this narrative portrayed the women in the opposite manner. Especially news articles that dealt with the phenomenon of "returning IS women" depicted female jihadis as complicit in or guilty of sustaining the IS and of the atrocities it committed. *De Telegraaf,* for example, stated that "jihadi brides were not victims of their murderous husbands […] but were complicit in the most heinous crimes against humanity" (Jihadbruiden, 2017). The militants were not only portrayed in the capacity of supporting their husbands, but their active role as perpetrator of violence was also increasingly reiterated. *Het AD,* for example, claimed that they "recruited new IS members, helped their husbands to rape prisoners and glorified these terrible crimes" ("Steun de slachtoffers", 2019). *De Telegraaf* stated that female militants have "contributed to the deaths of many victims who have been brutally murdered" (Schoonhoven, 2022).

This portrayal opposed the non-violent image of the jihadi woman, confined to her home and taking care of the children. Returning IS women were no longer seen as the victims of men terrorists. Instead, they were constructed as cruel women who were complicit to and/or committed terrible crimes. By emphasizing their complicity and culpability, the counter-narrative depicted IS women as credible terrorists exercising their agency. Women were increasingly referred to as "terror wives" (Triest, 2019) and "female terrorist(s)" (Steun de slachtoffers, 2019), and it was claimed that they should not be treated "differently from men" (Rosman, 2017). This idea opposed the gender discourse, in which women are constructed as more peaceful than men, and recognized women's agency in violence. However, it should be noted that the construction of "female terrorists" implies that terrorism does not belong to the female realm. Women's agency to commit political violence was thus automatically diminished by the use of this term. A neo-Orientalist bias was also present as the terrorists were referred to as "female Muslim terrorists" (De vijf Goudse, 2014). The findings showed that *De Telegraaf* and *Het AD* both used this narrative in 30% of its articles. Whereas *De Volkskrant* did this to a lesser extent, the "complicit and guilty" narrative was more often used than the "vulnerable, confused and naïve" narrative. As has been argued, this change in the dominant narratives is attributed to the appearance of the "returning IS women". The "jihadi brides" label, however, still remained the dominant way to refer to female IS terrorists

The "cliché" jihadists

The media was also prone to emphasizing women's tendency to portray themselves as innocent housewives and mothers, who were unknowing of any atrocities being committed. This depiction was predominantly used in relation to the "returning IS women". *De Telegraaf,* for example, stated that "all IS women returning to the Netherlands claim that they only cooked food and changed diapers in the Caliphate" (Schoonhoven, 2021). Similarly, the newspaper stated that "without exception, they claim in court that they saw nothing of beheadings, slavery or other outrages. Let alone that they participated in them" (ibid.). Their portrayal was often said to be "cliché" (Rosman, 2021), unlikely or dishonest: "Many women deny everything, cover it up, lie about it or, on the contrary, do not reveal anything about it" (Marbe, 2017). IS militants allegedly used existing gender perceptions to their advantage in court or when they were held in detention camps and longed to return home. *De Telegraaf* argued that "women, unlike men, appear to be able to use their gullibility privilege ad nauseum when accused of the greatest crimes imaginable. Indeed, their defense is always the

same. […] The facts, however, always contradict their mendacious versions of events" (Als vrouwelijke jihadist, 2021).

While the women tried to diminish their own agency by claiming to be unknowing victims, the timeframe showed that their portrayal was strongly opposed in the media. This narrative recognized women's intentionality and constructed them as fully exercising their agency. Returning IS women were constructed as committing a "double transgression" (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008: 7; 2011: 14) by being complicit or guilty to the atrocities committed by the IS, and by disregarding existing gendered perceptions. In addition, they were said to lie about it all, and to have used the gender stereotypes to their advantage. Consequently, this counter-narrative constructed returning female IS militants as credible and dangerous terrorists. *De Telegraaf* used this narrative most frequently (22%), but *De Volkskrant* (13%) and *Het AD* (16%) also used this depiction relatively often, which caused it to be used exactly as frequently as the "lured, groomed, enticed" narrative.

The "ticking time bomb" jihadists

With regards to the question of the repatriation of (ex-)jihadi women, the Dutch media tended to emphasize the (long-term) threat these women could possibly pose to society and national security. They were often portrayed as "returning radicals" that were "mostly still firmly convinced of the IS ideology" ("IS-vrouwen", 2019). *De Telegraaf,* for example, stated that "there is just fear. Fear of bombs" (as quoted in In maag met heimwee-jihadi's, 2019). Moreover, returning IS militants were depicted as "ticking time bombs (who) could potentially move to commit an attack" ("Tikkende tijdbommen, 2017). *De Volkskrant* claimed that "no one understands the overt flirting with these life-threatening time bombs" (van Amerongen, 2019). This depiction often went hand in hand with the physical appearance frame, as returning radical women were said to "still wear a niqab and preach radical Islamic texts" (Alle vrouwen zijn slachtoffer, 2015).

This narrative could be considered a counter-narrative, as it constructs returning IS women as dangerous and violent subjects that are guilty of committing crimes and/or acts of terrorism. This depiction contradicts the traditional gender discourse, in which women are associated with inherent peacefulness and the inability to use violence. Within this narrative, the militants were not necessarily portrayed as being more peaceful than men and in need of protection, but were associated with the use of violence. Consequently, women's agency was acknowledged and they were depicted as credible terrorists. Whereas the term "terrorist" and "terror suspect" were increasingly used to refer to the women, it should be mentioned that the

label “jihadi brides” was also still used to depict these women at the same time. However, this happened to a lesser extent and quotation marks were often used to question the label. Nevertheless, the use of the term “jihadi brides” in this context diminishes the female jihadi’s agency to commit acts of political violence. *De Volkskrant* (24%) used this narrative clearly more often than *De Telegraaf* (16%) and *Het AD* (10%). In terms of frequency, the portrayal as “threat” followed right after the “lured, groomed, enticed” narrative.

The conscious jihadists

The findings showed that female terrorists were often depicted as having made a conscious decision to travel to the IS-controlled territories. This often happened in relation to the “returning IS women”. *Het AD*, for example, claimed that “the women traveled to Syria to join IS ‘knowingly and willingly’” (as quoted in Rosman, 2020). It was also stated that they “deliberately traveled to Syria and Iraq out of sympathy for a pernicious ideology” (“Steun de slachtoffers”, 2019) and “knew full well what the organization stood for” (as quoted in Rosman, 2019). Moreover, the militants were constructed in *De Telegraaf* as “terror brides who made their own choice to join the genocidal IS” (Triest, 2021). This narrative is seen as a counter-narrative, as it clearly opposes the “vulnerable, confused and naïve jihadists” narrative. It also opposes the “lured, groomed, enticed” narrative, as it was claimed that they “were not dragged along by their husband” (Rosman, 2016).

This narrative constructed women who decided to travel to the IS-controlled territories as conscious actors who left on their own initiative. Their decision to join the IS was depicted as a deliberate and personal choice, independent from a man’s agenda. Consequently, the militants’ political commitment and intentionality were acknowledged, which recognized women’s agency. However, their agency was still marginalized as the “jihadi brides” label remained the prevailing way to refer to the terrorists. Moreover, *Het AD* stated that “with all their wits, they chose husbands who beheaded people and crucified teenagers” (Thorborg, 2017). This depiction tied into the “marriage as goal” narrative and placed the militants in the realm of the “erotically dysfunctional women”. They became emotionally disturbed as a result of their inability to find a husband. To fulfil “their (normal) biological destiny of becoming wives and mothers” (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008: 10), they deliberately chose a violent husband. This portrayal neglected women’s political and ideological motivations and marginalized women’s agency to commit acts of political violence. The “conscious” narrative was most often deployed by *De Telegraaf* (17%), and was overall used exactly as often as Martini’s “marriage as goal” narrative.

3.4 Conclusion

The research exposed that the narratives identified by Martini were to a great extent used to portray IS women in the Dutch media. These narratives depicted them as non-credible and non-dangerous terrorists, who's decision to join the IS was mostly driven by personal and private problems. The media portrayal generally denied jihadi women their "agency in their own violence" (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008: 5), or acknowledged it merely in relation to men and their agenda's. This explanation of the phenomenon of IS women maintained the discourses on gender and neo-Orientalism, by constructing women along existing gendered perceptions and neo-Orientalist thinking. As such, the "narrative fidelity" (Fisher, 1984) was preserved on what it means to be a Muslim woman in the West. Consequently, the depiction of IS women in the Dutch media often reproduced gender and neo-Orientalist stereotypes.

The research also showed that the phenomenon of "returning IS women" brought about change in the way IS women were generally depicted in the Dutch media. New counter-narratives were identified that particularly related to returning IS women. They were generally portrayed as complicit in or guilty of the atrocities carried out by the IS and constructed as "cliché" jihadists who exploited their femininity to their advantage. Additionally, they were portrayed as conscious actors exercising their agency in their violence, and as a threat to "Western" societies. These counter-depictions existed alongside the 12 narratives identified by Martini, and opposed the dominant way in which IS women were previously depicted in the media. The new narratives, abandoned the "narrative fidelity" by increasingly recognizing women's agency in their own violence. Consequently, "jihadi brides" were progressively constructed as credible and dangerous terrorists.

The most remarkable result from comparing and contrasting the way in which *De Volkskrant, De Telegraaf* and *Het AD* portrayed IS women in their newspaper articles is that *De Telegraaf* used Martini's narratives the least frequent of the three newspapers. However, the opposite is true regarding the use of counter-narratives. This implies that *De Telegraaf* generally has a "harsher" stance against female IS terrorists by recognizing their agency in their violence, instead of having the tendency to explain away the possibilities for that behavior. This approach is consistent with its more right-leaning ideological stance.

Conclusion

This research has aimed to identify how Western IS women have been portrayed in the Dutch media between June 2014 and August 2022. The literature review demonstrated that women have historically been portrayed as innocent victims of violence as a result of the traditional gender discourse that ascribes gender stereotypes to women's identity. Whenever women do commit violence, their behavior is deemed unnatural, and therefore in need of explanation. The mainstream media has the tendency to explain away women's conscious choice to turn violent through the use of explanatory narratives. These are often grounded in traditional gender stereotypes. Accordingly, women's violence is generally explained in the media by linking gender to victimhood, in which specific focus is placed on women's personal rather than political or ideological reasons to commit acts of political violence. A great example of this is the "mother", "monster", "whore", narrative, identified by Sjoberg & Gentry (2008). The justifications for women's violent behavior disregard the possibility that women consciously decided to turn violent, which denies them their agency in their own violence. Consequently, female terrorists are portrayed in the media as non-credible and non-dangerous. In the case of the media portrayal of Western IS women, the gender discourse intersects with the neo-Orientalist discourse as the women generally identify as (converted) Muslim women. Martini's research (2018) shows that between 2014 and 2017, the British media used twelve narratives to make sense of the phenomenon of IS women. The question remained whether these were still applicable after the fall of the IS, and the beginning of IS women's repatriation. Scrutinizing the discourses employed by the Dutch media – *De Volkskrant, De Telegraaf, Het AD* – , a thematic narrative approach was conducted which departed from Martini's twelve narratives, and expanded with an inductive approach.

The analysis revealed that the narratives identified by Martini were to a significant extent also used in the Dutch media portrayal of Western IS women. The Dutch media typically deployed the term "jihadi brides" to refer to IS women, and systematically resorted to women's personal problems in order to explain their reasons for joining the IS. This portrayal generally took away IS women's agency in their own violence, and depicted them as non-credible and non-dangerous terrorists. Whenever their agency was recognized, it generally only existed in relation to men and their agenda's. IS women were constructed along existing gendered perceptions and neo-Orientalist thinking. Consequently, the Dutch media portrayal safeguarded the discourses on gender and neo-Orientalism, and reproduced gender and neo-Orientalist stereotypes. In this way, "narrative fidelity" (Fisher, 1984) was

preserved on what it means to be a Muslim woman in the West.

At the same time, however, a change is apparent in the way IS women were depicted in the Dutch media. The timeframe enabled the research to also take the phenomenon of "the returning IS women" in account. This resulted in the identification of new counter-narratives. As opposed to the naïve and vulnerable "jihadi bride" who fell victim to Muslim men, these narratives generally depicted returning IS women as complicit in or guilty of the atrocities carried out by the IS. They were also constructed as "cliché" jihadists who exploited their femininity to their advantage, and as conscious actors exercising their agency in their violence. Moreover, they were portrayed as a threat to "Western" societies. By depicting female IS militants as agents of violence who were solely responsible for their violent acts, these narratives abandoned the "narrative fidelity". Consequently, "jihadi brides" were increasingly constructed in the Dutch media as credible and dangerous female terrorists.

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APPENDIX

Coding protocol

Narratives	Sub-codes	Labels/sensitizing concepts
The label 'Jihadi Brides'		Jihadi bride, bride, IS-bride, wife, married, marriage, housewife**.**
The vulnerable, confused and naïve jihadists		Vulnerable, young, naïve, easily influenced, easily manipulated, emotional, sad, lonely, victim, controlled, mistake, uninformed, ill-considered, manipulative, impulsive decision, brainwashed.
Lured, groomed and enticed jihadists		Lured, groomed, enticed, used, seduced, deceived, tricked, persuaded, convinced, loverboy, manipulative, online, social media, love.
Marriage as goal		Marriage, marry, married, marrying, husband, wife/wives, bride**.**
Physical appearances: beauty and "Islamic appearances"		Pretty, beautiful, sweet, peaceful, intelligent, mysterious, burqa, niqab, covered, veiled, hidden.
Their failures as women: marriages and motherhood		Abandoned, kidnapped, took/taken [to the Caliphate], children, stolen, left behind, failed marriage, widow, family issues**.**
Islam		Islam, religion, religious, radical, radicalized, extremist, converted, faith, Koran**.**
Liberation, rebellion, adventure and feminism as goals		Adventure, search, quest, liberation, rebellion, escape, feminism, freedom.
Family Relations		Relative, family, husband, spouse, father, mother, brother, sister, daughter, son, niece, nephew, cousin
Personal traumas		Childhood, childhood trauma, turbulent, chaotic, violence, domestic violence, death, troubled, troubled

		childhood, family issues, identity issues, difficult child, problems, abuse, drugs, separation, divorce.
The "hormone-driven" jihadists		Attraction, desire, sexual desire, sex, sexual, hormones, lust, pleasure, whore, prostitute, prostitution, slut, sexjihad.
The betrayal of "Jihadi Brides"		Betrayal, betray, leave, hypocrite, reject, rejection.
COUNTER-NARRATIVES		**Sensitizing concepts**
The complicit and guilty jihadists Voluntary, decision, perpetrator(s), terrorist(s), extremist(s), terror, danger, violence, dangerous, Islamist, threat, bomb, recruiter, underestimated role, underestimated danger	Complicit, guilty, monster.	Complicit, guilty, terrorist, perpetrator, extremist, terror, danger, violence, dangerous, recruiter, cruel, brutal.
The "cliché" jihadists	Mother, housewife.	Housewife, innocent, victim, children, inside, not seen anything.
The "ticking time bomb" jihadists	Returning radical, radical ideology, loyal to IS, no regret	Radicalize, radicalization, threat, under the radar, underground, influence, radical thinking, radical ideology, security threat, attack, national security, indoctrinated, fear, terror suspect, terrorist.
The conscious jihadists	Voluntary.	Conscious, voluntarily, own decision, on own accord, convinced.