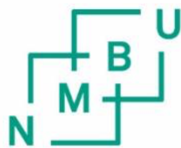

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A feminist perspective on jihadist women: a case study on the female members of Islamic State

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A feminist perspective on jihadist women:

a case study on the female members of Islamic State

Tiril Johnson Dølo

Ås, 2018

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Declaration

I, Tiril Johnson Dølo, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

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Date…………………………………………

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All errors are mine alone.

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Abstract

This thesis will explore the roles of female members in the Islamic State (IS) and use concepts from feminist theory to illuminate new sides to female jihadists. Since the terrorist attacks on the United States of America (US) September 11th 2001, terrorism and terrorist organisations have held the attention of media, scholars and policymakers worldwide. Terrorism suddenly became a major threat to the security and stability of the international society and many feared the factor of unpredictability that terrorism presented. In the aftermath of 9/11, and as more and more countries were targeted and struck by terrorist attacks, terrorism became subject for careful scrutiny by scholars worldwide trying to understand and unravel its complexities. However, there are aspects still fairly under-researched, such as the roles of women. In fact, it seems as if women are now in a situation where their participation in terrorism is a highly wilful and calculated act based on their own conviction and choice. They take on roles that reach beyond the traditional 'wife and mother'-role. Trying to map out and understand this development is important as it fills a gap in the literature on terrorism. To do this however, we need to remove ourselves from the illusion of women created by socially constructed gender. This entails that we apply concepts from feminist theory to explore the complexity of women jihadists and stop perceiving them as either passive bystanders or violent deviants in an effort to not disturb the image we have of women as caring and comforting. Hence, feminist concepts can help us create a more comprehensive and constructive perception of these women, which is important if we are to acknowledge their true impact. Hence, this thesis argues that, by applying concepts from feminist theories, we are able to illuminate new sides to women jihadists when exploring the roles women hold in IS and look at how their contribution might impact our world.

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List of terms

Al-Khansaa

In this context, an all-female IS battalion known for their activities as morality police in the Caliphate

Dabiq

In this context, the first online propaganda magazine published by IS

Fard al ´ayn

The individual obligation of all Muslims to join jihad

Fard kifaya

The obligation of only some Muslims to join jihad

Hijrah

The act of migrating to the land of Islam, where the laws and governmental systems follow Islam

Mahram

An unmarriageable male that acts as the legal escort for a Muslim woman

Muhajirat

The name used for the women who migrated to the Islamic State

Rumiyah

In this context, the second online propaganda magazine published by IS

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1. Introduction

There has been a tendency among scholars and policymakers to forget or perhaps even purposely overlook women when researching and speaking about terrorism and war, although there are indeed some scholars who have acknowledged their positions.[1] In studies of terrorism, there is an overwhelming bias towards linking the active participants in terrorist- and insurgency groups with men. I argue that there is a widespread perception that women are non-violent and peace-loving by nature, leaving this entire population group out of the larger violence-equation. Consequently, women tend to be perceived as innocent and unfortunate victims of violence that is almost exclusively performed by men (Chatterjee 2016). They are, if mentioned, often portrayed as naïve members who are engaged passively, often in the role of the wife and mother who are there to support their husband who is fighting at the front line (Speckhard 2015). On the other hand, if not perceived as passive wives and mothers, they are pushed to the other side of the extreme – namely as violent, abnormal individuals who can hardly be recognised as women. They are the evil amongst the evil. Consequently, they are placed on the extremes and we therefore, arguably, lack a middle-way. The result is that their agency is taken away from them, and they are left behind seen as misplaced individuals. This further leads to an unfortunate situation where they are removed from any accountability and answerability for their actions and what they are part of. Reducing the role of women in this way not only heightens the risk of overlooking important factors of terrorism and the workings of terrorist organisations from a security perspective, but also of overlooking the possibility that jihadist women can contribute to female empowerment.

This thesis sets about creating this middle-ground. It will apply concepts from feminist theory to offer an alternative perception of jihadist women, first by looking at three key roles women play in Islamic State (IS), and second at their potential impact on security and female empowerment. Hence, this thesis will present a two-folded analysis. First, women in IS are seemingly taking on 'new' roles that go beyond the traditional role as 'mother and wife'.

---

[1] Mia Bloom (2007, 2011); Anne Speckhard (2015); Julia Jusik (2005); Clara Beyler (2003); and Nelly Lahoud (2014) are some of the scholars who have recognised and studied women and terrorism.

Although most of them indeed function as homemakers in the 'state', they tend to take on multiple roles where they also operate as recruiters or even as violent actors (Spencer 2016, p. 91). Many of them seem to have real decision-making power over their own choices as they are actively seeking a role in terrorist organisations that involves activities such as recruitment, intelligence, torture and violence. both within IS and other Islamist terrorist organisations there are examples of women who have organised and executed terrorist attacks, often by using self-detonating bombs, targeting what they perceive as the 'enemy' (Kriel 2017; Rosa 2017; Polianskaya 2018). Hence, these women hold roles in IS that are more complex than what the dominant perceptions assume. After arguing for this premise, a meta-theoretical feminist debate addressing the ways in which feminist theory can illuminate new aspects of female jihadists that offers a 'middle-way' will be presented. The underlying idea is that concepts from feminist theory can provide insights to the potential impact of jihadist women that are, arguably, not yet fully explored. Two arguments will be presented in this debate. The first argument relates to the impact these women have on national and international security, particularly referring to counterterrorism measures that run the risk of being inefficient if overlooking the impact and threat of women. Acknowledging the roles and potential agency these women possess is key to also acknowledging the very real threat they pose. The second argument addresses female empowerment. The idea is that by recognising the true nature of female terrorists we can challenge the dominant perception many have of them, and dare to take the uncomfortable step of recognising the potential jihadist women have of breaking new grounds for female empowerment. Hence, the aim of this thesis is to analyse the women in Islamist terrorist organisations by first laying the premise that women play roles in Islamist terrorist organisations that are not either passive or simply deviant, and second, by looking at how concepts from feminist theory can offer important insight to how we can acknowledge the impact of female jihadists.

Due to restrictions of limited time and space, I will look at the women members of IS only. IS is still, despite of the defeat of the Caliphate, perhaps the most fascinating, and also feared, terrorist organisation we know. It has made its name known worldwide for a number of reasons, such as its striking brutality and also for the visibility of its female members. Being both highly relevant as a terrorist organisation and known for having active female members, IS became an obvious choice to use as a case for this thesis. The idea, by looking particularly

at IS, is not to generalise in the way of statistical generalisation, but to look into a case that can perhaps cast light on the wider issue of female terrorists. By doing this, one can get one step closer to acknowledging the full spectre of modern terrorism – as this is an issue that seems to continue to twist our brains. However, it is important to note that there are many women in IS who are not deliberate members, but instead victims of trafficking or other external factors. These are not subjects of this thesis. Instead, the focus lies on those women who have actively participated in the organisation, believing in the ideology and methods of IS.

The theoretical framework will draw upon specific feminist concepts. Feminism, being one of the critical theories in the discipline of International Relations (IR), grew out of a realisation that existing theories disregarded the importance of studying and understanding the synergies between gender[2] and social relations (Evans 2015; Risman 2004). Although there are many directions within feminism in IR, they are all tied together by a commonly perceived need to challenge the way IR is constituted today, and by an idea that gender is constitutive for international politics (Risman 2004, p. 431). This entails that gender will always have an impact on all social aspects and institutions, including international relations, and it is therefore critical to include gender in studies of our social world. By leaving out the study of gender one runs the risk of overlooking a crucial factor that potentially could explain much of what we observe in the world. Hence, gender is both constitutive of our social world and is constituted by it – meaning that individuals' and society's construction of gender has an impact on our social world, and at the same time, our social world will continue to construct gender. In addition, the thesis will draw on aspects from Middle Eastern feminism, which involves including cultural and social aspects when studying the women of IS (Jacoby 2015). It is arguably difficult to study these women without taking into account the external factors that influence them. Acknowledging this, these two versions of feminist theory will be used to illuminate new sides of women jihadists and offer a middle-way in how we perceive them. Feminist concepts provide the tools needed to study these women from a

[2] 'Sex' is a biological term describing you as either female or male based on your given biological determinations. 'Gender' however, is a socially constructed term that produces and lays certain expectations and characteristics to the biological sexes.

perspective where they are distanced from the social norms that continue to define them and to do this within their own context. This will be further explored in chapter 4.

So, what are the main findings of this thesis? Using concepts from feminist theory, the thesis offers an alternative perception of jihadist women that serves as a middle-ground. It finds that women in IS are not either passive bystanders or violent monsters, but that their participation is complex and their impact is potentially significant. The feminist concepts applied have arguably made it possible to make the rather uncomfortable decision to see them as something else than deviants, and hence recognise the potential impact they have on both security and on female empowerment. Looking closer at the findings, women in IS hold key roles in the organisation as recruiters, as violent actors, and as mothers and wives. By functioning in these roles, they provided significant support to the survival of the Caliphate, which has been essential for IS. Their roles as mothers and wives hold greater potential for power than what is typically proposed, meaning we can no longer understand all women who participate in terrorism as passive bystanders. Further, the fact that they function as violent actors should not be oversimplified – there is no equation sign between violent jihadist women and 'monsters'. Hence, the roles women play in IS are more complex. Further, by using feminist theory, the thesis suggests an alternative perception of the impact of jihadist women. First, by excluding these women we run the risk of not developing functioning counterterrorism measures, which might lead to a significant threat towards national and international security. Second, by acknowledging the true nature of these women as *women*, not as abnormalities, we might be able to go further with female empowerment.

1.1 Objective of the thesis

The objective of this thesis is to apply concepts from feminist theory to investigate the nature of female jihadists, first by looking at the roles they play in IS and, second, their potential impact on security and female empowerment. The idea behind this is that terrorism has, since the 9/11 attack on the USA, been a highly prioritised field for both scholars, practitioners and policymakers worldwide. One tries to understand the ideologies, motivations, structures, economies, resources etc. of terrorist groups in order to understand them and defeat them with so-called counterterrorism measures. However, there are still ways in which these

women are studied that prevents us from fully comprehending the rather complex concept of women in terrorism. By applying feminist concepts to study the reality of the female members of IS, the thesis aims to fill a gap in the literature and offer a, perhaps, controversial presentation of female jihadists where they are given agency as actors and where their influence on our world is recognised.

1.2 Research questions

This thesis sets out to explore the roles of female Islamist terrorists and the way in which feminist theory can contribute to seeing these women from a new perspective, with particular focus on the case of IS. The following research questions will guide the rest of this thesis:

Research question 1. Which roles do women in Islamic State hold?

Research question 2. How can feminist theory illuminate new sides to female jihadism?

1.3 Outline of the thesis

The thesis is divided into seven chapters and a number of sub-chapters. The first chapter provides a simple introduction to the topic of the thesis and presents the research questions and the objective of the thesis. Chapter 2 provides a background, briefly defining terrorism and looking at IS as an organisation. In chapter 3 the methodological framework will be presented. As this thesis is a qualitative study it will address issues such as research design, data collection methods, and validity and reliability. It will also look at ethical considerations and at the limitations of the thesis. Chapter 4 presents the literature review and outlines the theoretical framework this thesis is based on, namely feminist theory. The idea behind a literature review is, first, to disclose what has already been found and said about the topics that are important for the thesis, second, to detect any possible gaps in the literature and third, to help address the research questions presented above. Hence, the rationale behind combining the literature review and the theoretical framework into one chapter is that the theory derives from the gaps detected in the existing literature. Concepts from feminist theory provide a good theoretical framework as it offers ways in which we can address the gaps and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of female jihadists. The analytical section of the thesis starts with Chapter 5, addressing and providing answers to

research question 1. It outlines the ‘new’ roles of female Islamist terrorists by looking at women as recruiters, women as violent actors, and women as mothers and wives. Continuing the analytical part, Chapter 6 illustrates how feminist concepts can offer a different view on the nature of women jihadists and the impact of these women. Lastly, chapter 7 offers concluding remarks intended to swiftly summarise the thesis and findings in its entirety.

2. Background

This chapter will provide some background by briefly looking at terrorism as a concept and suggesting that Ganor's (2002) working definition of terrorism be used as the working definition for this thesis. Secondly, it will look closer at the Islamic State with focus on its history, its ideology and on how we best can define Islamic State as it stands today.

2.1 Defining terrorism

What is important when studying terrorism is first to define it as a concept. This might sound like an easier task than it is, as there is no truly agreed upon definition of terrorism, neither among scholars nor practitioners. As an illustration of the large diversity even among those working with and researching terrorism, one can look at a study conducted by the two scholars Alex Schmid and Albert J. Jongman (in Sjoberg et.al. 2011). After conducting a survey completed among a number of scholars on the field, they ended up with a total of 109 different definitions of terrorism (Sjoberg et.al 2011, p. 8). What this tells us is that it has been difficult for both scholars and practitioners to come up with a definition they can agree upon and which includes enough factors to fully comprehend the complexity of terrorism, while at the same time not ending up too heavy and lengthy (Badley 1998, p. 91).

Although difficult to find an all-encompassing and agreed-upon definition, what seems to be a commonality between different definitions (Schmid 2010; Shanahan 2010) is the idea that terrorism is something more than merely a violent act against civilians used to spread fear. It is also politically, ideologically, and/or religiously motivated. It is strategic and intended to have psychological impact on a wide audience – an impact that in many instances is more critical than any physical damages inflicted by the attack (Sjoberg et.al 2011, p. 8). In addition, there is a general assumption that terrorist groups are violent and not sponsored by any state government (Brown & Pearson 2018). Terrorism is thus more complex in its nature than what many make it out to be. With that being said, lacking a clear definition of terrorism can create obstacles for practitioners both when working with terror-related issues in general, and when trying to include women (Fink, et.al 2013, p. 5).

However, for this thesis, the definition proposed by Boaz Ganor (2002) will be applied, stating that "terrorism is the intentional use of, or threat to use, violence against civilians or against civilian targets, in order to attain political aims" (p. 294). Ganor based this definition on three elements identified as important. First, if an act is to be defined as an act of terrorism it needs to be violent, or at least a threat of violence. This excludes any non-violent activities such as peaceful protests from the definition. Second, it demands political motivation. The objective of the violent act needs to be based on a political vision such as changing the existing regime, altering political power relations, influencing and ultimately changing policies, etc. And third, it targets civilians. Terrorism uses civilians strategically by exploiting their vulnerability, knowing that strikes against civilians will provoke valuable media attention. Ganor emphasises, however, that there is a difference between accidental injuries inflicted on civilians who unfortunately find themselves in an area with ongoing violent and political activities, and activities purposively targeting civilians. Hence, the former should not be regarded as terrorism (Ganor 2002, p. 294). This definition is found to be the most suitable for this thesis, as it includes the most essential elements of terrorism without being too lengthy. Looking at IS, their actions are indeed violent, targeting civilians, and motivated by political visions. Although some could argue that IS is a religious terrorist organisation, I argue that the main motivation of the group lies in its political aspirations, which in fact is to establish an Islamic state on its own, and that religion is what constitutes and justifies its actions. Further, it is an organisation that frequently utilises terrorism and violence as a means towards reaching its political aspirations.

2.2 The Islamic State

2.2.1 The origin of the Islamic State

The roots of the Islamic State (IS) can be traced back as early as to 1999 when the 'founding father', Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, established Jamaat Tawhid wal jihad – the precursor of IS (Chatterjee 2016, p. 203). Al-Zarqawi was born in Jordan and eventually turned to the teaching of Salafism (Jasko. et.al. 2018, p. 5). Eventually, he made contact with Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda, and in 2004 pledged his allegiance to the group. Jamaat Tawhid wal jihad was then renamed the al Qaeda in Iraq - the Iraqi offspring of the well-known Islamic insurgency group al Qaeda (Jasko. et.al. 2018, p. 7-8). Already early on, tensions started to grow between al Qaeda and the newly established Iraqi branch. The two

groups found themselves having conflicting visions for the future and conflicting ideas of which strategies were most efficient. One of the major differences was the belief by the Iraqi al Qaeda that it was time to establish an Islamic state or a caliphate, while the central al Qaeda wanted to hold off the establishment of the caliphate until they could ensure its survival and that it would not be defeated by foreign forces such as the US. Second, al Qaeda in Iraq had a first and foremost inwards looking approach targeting the local population rather than focusing on international reach, although it eventually also increased its activities outside the borders of the 'state'. In contrast, al Qaeda central mainly kept its focus outwards towards the 'far' enemies, exemplified by the 9/11 terrorist attack on New York and the London bombings of 2005 (Mohamedou 2018, p. 89; Byman & Williams 2015).

As a result of these differences, al Qaeda in Iraq declared the foundation of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) already in late 2006 (Shamieh & Szenes 2015, p. 366; Mohamedou 2018, p. 89). As the Iraqi government was weakened after the lengthy US invasion, ISI was able to offer services and goods to the population at a time when the official government could not. This allowed expansion of ISI's popularity and control in the country. Unease in Syria after the breakout of the still ongoing civil war in 2011 also resulted in ISI being able to move across the border and into Syrian territory (Shamieh & Szenes 2015, p. 367). Here it could establish its presence and expand its network of both local and foreign jihadists. Following, in 2013 it declared its formal expansion into Syria and renamed itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and finally took the name the Islamic State (IS) in 2014. Taking on the IS name demonstrated the group's aspiration to, at some point, establish a worldwide Islamic state, reaching far beyond the borders of Iraq and Syria. Then, on June 29th 2014 the IS spokesperson Abu Mohammad al 'Adnani formally announced that an Islamic State was born and that its leader and caliph would be Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Mohamedou 2018, p. 90). In a speech held by al-Baghdadi he called for an obligatory mass-migration of the world's Muslims to the newly established state: "Therefore rush O Muslims to your state […] O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing hijrah (emigration) to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because hijrah to the land of Islam is obligatory" (Dabiq[3] issue 1 2014, p. 11).

[3] Dabiq is the first propaganda magazine of IS published online in several languages.

As IS grew, it began to challenge the status of a weakening al Qaeda, and in some respects managed to establish itself as a global jihadist leadership – a role al Qaeda had enjoyed during its peak days under the leadership of Osama bin Laden (Mohamedou 2018, p.103-104). In other words, IS did indeed constitute itself as an important actor for extreme Islamists around the world with Iraq and Syria becoming the hotspot for jihadist activities. Consequently, Islamist groups around the world eventually declared their support and allegiance to IS and its leader al-Baghdadi (Mohamedou 2018, p 114-119). In this way, IS began to reach a global audience and network in a magnitude the world had not before seen. However, since its peak in 2014 IS has experienced a steady decline while trying to battle both national and international forces, including a US-led coalition and Russia's significant support to the Assad regime in Syria. In November 2017 it was clear that IS had lost control of its two major cities, Mosul in Iraq and ar-Raqqah in Northern Syria. However, although this defeat symbolised the end of the current physical Caliphate, it is clear that IS still lives on both in smaller organised groups, and in hidden individuals around the world still believing in the ideology and mission of IS: the so called 'lone wolfs' (Dhanaraj 2018, p. 1). It is likely that, with the fall of the physical Caliphate, the energy of IS will be refocused from local and regional operations to international terrorist attacks targeting the 'far' enemy.

2.2.2 Ideology and religious conviction of IS

IS is established on an extreme, and arguably wrongful, Islamist ideology (Jacoby 2015, p. 524) believing strongly in loyalty to the group and its leader and in disavowal of the non-believers. We can find evidence of this in issue 2 of Dabiq (2014) where the writer warns those who do not worship Allah by saying that, "Indeed, I am to you a clear warner. That you not worship except Allah. Indeed, I fear for you the punishment of a painful day" (p. 6). It has its ideological roots in Salafism and Wahhabism, as can be found for example in issue 4 of IS' second propaganda magazine *Rumiyah* (2016), where it refers to the teachings of Ibn ´Abdil-Wahhab who is regarded as the founder of Wahhabi thought (p. 16). Today, Wahhabism and Salafism are in general seen as directions within Islam where its followers adhere to a strict understanding of the practices of Islam and where aggression against non-believers is seen as legitimate. IS follows the idea of *takfir*, which means the condemnation of other Muslims by declaring them infidels (Hegghammer 2009, p. 247). These are

individual Muslims and Islamic governments that claim to abide to Islam but that do not follow the teachings and ideological convictions of IS. Takfir is debated among Muslims as it legitimises violence against Muslims, and even al Qaeda abstains in large part from the idea. IS, on the other hand, believes that Islam must be cleansed from within and that the death of 'wrongful' Muslims is an important step towards achieving this goal (Jasko. et.al. 2018, p. 13-14). Further, its members strongly believe that state and religion are bound together and that all state affairs should be based on the teachings of Sharia law (Jasko. et.al. 2018, p. 12). In addition, they believe in martyrdom as a holy sacrifice for the *state* (Saripi 2015, p. 27). IS has also been using an 'end of the world'-narrative to motivate and legitimise its cause. The group believes that the final battle between good and the evil has come, manifested in the war in Syria. It refers to a number of prophecies cited in Islamic texts, such as a particularly hadith saying that armies will come from Afghanistan carrying the black flag and no one will be able to hinder them in reaching the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, where they will finally raise their flag (Jasko et.al. 2018, p. 15).

Despite its brutality and frequent use of terrorism as a method, many argue that IS is not simply a terrorist organisation. Instead, some have argued that it should be defined as an insurgent group or a *hybrid* (Beccaro 2018, p. 208; Krause 2018). It does indeed utilise terrorist methods as a strategy to spread fear and harass its population and its enemies. But it is also a fairly organised group that in fact did declare a 'state' and controlled vast areas in Syria and Iraq; at one point controlling areas with a population of between eight and eleven million people (Jasko et.al. 2018, p. 3; Jones et.al 2017, p. xi). The seize of Mosul in June 2014 was the first major stepping stone and important victory for IS in its state-building project. Mosul is the second largest city in Iraq and was of both strategic and symbolic importance for IS as it marked the beginning of the Caliphate (Mohamedou 2018, p. 106). IS began to establish state-like governmental institutions in Mosul, ar-Raqqah and other seized cities in Iraq and Syria. It set up departments to administrate different sections of society, such as departments for communication, transportation and electricity. It also set up systems for garbage-collection, fixed roads and telephone lines, took control over the banking systems, and sent out 'police forces' to ensure that new rules were followed by the people living on its territory. It set up schools, hospitals and courts (Krause 2018, p. 231). It is then not unreasonable to argue that IS at this point had capabilities in the areas it controlled that came close to what one expects from a fairly functioning state – meaning "control over

territory, finances, population and violence" (Mohamedou 2018, p. 109). In some ways, IS was more successful operating as a functioning state than the official government in Baghdad or Damascus as it provided social services, redistributed resources and, due to its brutal and intolerant regime, repressed most criminality (Krause 2018, p. 232). By this time, it was too simple and even counter-productive to label it merely as a terrorist organisation (Beccaro 2018; Krause 2018, p 224).

Instead, Krause (2018) argues, IS must be seen as a state, an insurgency group and a revolutionary movement – what he calls the "three faces of ISIS". First, he argues, IS is leading a transnational insurgency as it is working towards defeating the existing regimes in Iraq and Syria, but also regimes in countries such as Libya, Pakistan, Yemen and Saudi Arabia (Krause 2018, p. 229). Second, as it over time seized control over large territories, IS evolved into statehood. The group set up a range of governmental institutions and delivered certain social services to the population living on their territory (Krause 2018, p. 231). Third, IS should be seen as a revolutionary movement. The reason for this is that IS is not only trying to defeat regimes or to set up an Islamic state, it also aspires to "reshape societies in the Middle East and beyond, as well as redefine what it means to be a Muslim" (Krause 2018, p. 233). However, as IS has suffered significant losses and lost control over most of its territory, it is difficult to uphold the argument that IS is still an insurgency group, a state and a revolutionary movement. Rather, at this point of time, it is more fruitful to see it as an underground terrorist group with aspirations to once again rise as a state (Mansour & Al-Hashimi 2017). Consequently, and for the purpose of this thesis, I will consider IS a terrorist group and label it as such as I see it as most feasible in relation to the topic addressed here and more true to the nature of the group as it stands today. In fact, IS was early on declared a terrorist organisation by the international society. Already in 2004, the United Nations (UN) and the US branded the group as terrorist and today even countries such as Saudi Arabia see IS as a terrorist group (Charterjee 2016, p. 203).

3. Methodological framework

Choosing a fitting methodological strategy is key for every research project. This chapter will therefore introduce the chosen methodological framework and explain its key concepts. First and foremost, this is a quantitative study focusing on gaining wide and in-depth knowledge of the active women members of IS in an effort to examine their roles and impact in terrorism. Further, it is a case study as it looks at a specific case in order to say something about a phenomenon. In this thesis, the case is the women of IS. Finally, there are certain aspects of such research that need to be discussed, namely data collection, validity, reliability and ethical considerations. Each of these aspects will be discussed later in this chapter.

3.1 Qualitative research method

As mentioned, this thesis examines the nature of jihadist women in IS, which means that one needs to gain in-depth information of a rather limited group of people. The aim is not to fully generalise from the sample to the wider population, but rather to understand the women in IS as a case in order to better understand the broader concept of women jihadists.[4] Based on the nature and objective of this thesis, it is natural to choose a qualitative rather than a quantitative research method.

Denzin and Lincoln, in their *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, offers a rather lengthy definition of qualitative research, parts of if stating that "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (quoted in Snape & Spencer 2003, p. 3). A qualitative research method is characterised by collecting detailed and in-depth information about a small number of cases. It aims at analysing our social world through words and impressions rather than through numbers. It is therefore useful when studying issues with a certain level of complexity that require a wider understanding of both the phenomena and its context (Snape & Spencer 2003, p. 5). In addition, qualitative researchers often emphasise the

[4] To generalise in research involves being able to say that the findings based on data from the smaller sample is also true for the wider population, given that the research is conducted in a proper manner.

importance of description and explanation, and the idea of viewing social phenomena as a process that evolves over time (Bryman 2016, p. 395). Its epistemological orientation is interpretivist in nature and implies that one studies and understands the social world by examining how the individuals themselves interpret their own world and reality. Qualitative researchers hence tend to focus on “seeing through the eyes of the people studied” (Bryman 2016, p. 392).

For the purpose of this thesis, a qualitative methodological approach makes most sense. It is a study that asks questions such as “what, “how” and “why”, and which therefore requires an understanding of the subjects on a deeper individual level. By using a qualitative method, one can study the role of female members of IS in detail, looking at their many roles, and try to understand their reality as it is. It has also allowed one to study the case using the constructionist ontological orientation claiming that what we know about our reality is the result of a social construct that appears when individuals interact (Bryman 2016, p. 375). This lies in the foundation of the thesis as it claims that the social construction of gender has led us to disregard women as important actors and to further delegitimise women who deviate from the social norm and regard them as ‘abnormal’. Further, a qualitative approach allows the use of a wide range of methods and sources, giving the researcher the flexibility to find the method(s) and sources that best capture what they aim to study. This study is primarily a desk study, meaning it is based mostly on written primary and secondary sources when collecting data. In addition, two interviews have been conducted with expert scholars on the field, used for triangulation. This will be further discussed later in the chapter.

At the same time, there are certain limitations and restrictions associated with the qualitative research method. The majority of the critique has been fronted by quantitative researchers. First, qualitative research is critiqued for being too subjective. This implies that the subjective meaning and intention of the researcher has too great of an impact on both the research process and on the findings. Second, qualitative research is critiqued for being difficult, or even impossible, to fully replicate. This has links to the former critique, namely that qualitative research is sensitive to the individual researchers’ personalities and to the decisions they make during the process. Third, quantitative researchers critique qualitative research for its lack of suitability for generalisation. Generalisation is a key concept for

quantitative researchers as they aim to say something about a wider population based on the results from only a small sample. This however is not transferable to qualitative research, which, according to quantitative researchers, is a significant weakness. Fourth, there have been critiques of the lack of transparency. Often, it has been difficult for the reader to get full insight into the decisions made during the research process and why these decisions were made. However, this is an issue that has been addressed by more and more scholars within qualitative research aiming to ensure higher levels of transparency (Bryman 2016, p. 398-400).

3.2 Research design – Case study

A *research design* is a "structure that guides the execution of a research method and the analysis of the subsequent data" (Bryman 2016, p. 40). The research design is there to give directions and a framework for both collection of data and analysis. A research design is therefore not the same as a research strategy or a research method, although the terms often get mixed up (Bryman 2016, p. 40). There are a number of different research designs, such as experimental design, cross-sectional design, longitudinal design and comparative design. In this thesis, case study design will be used.

According to Yin (2009) there does not yet exist a sufficient and comprehensive definition of a case study design. He therefore suggests this definition: a case study is "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin 2009, p. 18). By this definition, he establishes that a case study design focuses on an in-depth study of a phenomenon and that this phenomenon should be studied within its own context. So, what then is a case? Bill Graham (quoted in David 2006) suggests that a 'case' is "a unit of human activity embedded in the real world… which can only be studied or understood in context". A case can be everything from a person, a family, or an event, to a physical place such as a community, a country, an organisation or an institution. What is common of all cases in a case study is that they are interesting in and by themselves and hence serve as the object for in-depth investigation by the researcher (Bryman 2016, p. 60-61). This study is a single-case study design with the case being the female members of the Islamic State (IS). Hence, this implies that I will investigate the women members of IS by

finding in-depth information that gives a wide and complex picture of their reality. Out of this, the aim is to analyse their roles and impact by understanding 'why' and 'how'. Further, it will provide insight to how we can see new sides to female jihadists and which impact these have on our world. As will be argued, the women of IS have shown themselves as important actors within the organisation, who have the potential to impact, among other things, the way we perceive security and the way we perceive female empowerment. However, they are understudied. Due to these women's relevance both for IS and for world affairs, the case is interesting in itself and important to explore if we wish to develop our understanding of terrorism and women.

3.3 Data collection

By using both primary and secondary sources, this thesis is based on source triangulation. Triangulation is used to 'quality test' the data by applying more than one method of data collection. Bryman (2016) offers a definition of triangulation as "The use of more than one method or source of data in the study of a social phenomenon so that findings may be cross-checked" (p. 697). Here, the primary sources, the secondary literature and the interviews have been measured against each other to see if there are agreements or disagreements between them. If the methods indicate some of the same results, one can find support for the argument by pointing to two or more independent sources saying the same. It is a way of finding both strengths and weaknesses in the data (Bryman 2016, 386).

3.3.1 Desk study

As the research topic of this thesis is fairly sensitive and complex, the thesis is in large part based on a desk study. This involves that one primarily uses secondary sources to collect data and detect patterns. Secondary sources can for example be books, academic articles, media articles, official state documents, archived sources and magazines. What is important when using secondary sources to such an extent is to quality check them. This can be done by, for example, looking at the author and his/her previous publications, looking at the publishing media, seeing if the article is peer-reviewed, and also by using common sense – if something does not make sense it might be an unreliable source all together. Hence, it is important to be selective when deciding which sources to use. Bryman (2016) summarises this by suggesting four criteria to evaluate the quality of a secondary source:

> “1. *Authenticity*. Is the evidence genuine and of unquestionable origin? 2. *Credibility*. Is the evidence free from error and distortion? 3. *Representativeness*. Is the evidence typical of its kind, and if not, is the extent of its untypicality known? 4. *Meaning*. Is the evidence clear and comprehensible?” (Bryman 2016, p. 546).

I have, for as far as I could, aimed at using academic articles and books written by well-renowned scholars and which have been peer-reviewed. Although one can always debate whether one agrees with what is written or not, it does not mean that the research is unreliable. Gathering data from texts written by acknowledged scholars on the field provides a certain legitimacy that they are aware of, and follow, appropriate methods for conducting research and that their findings are presented in good faith. Media articles and online resources, for example, are often perceived as less reliable as the authenticity and credibility of the author and the facts presented can be unknown. However, I have used some online resources mostly to collect data about certain events that have been reported on only in the media, such as suicide attacks. In such cases, I still see the data as fairly reliable as it reports on actual events that are known to many. In addition, I have used some primary sources such as the IS magazines Dabiq and Rumiyah. Further, I have used English translations of the Quran and a manifesto claimed written by members of the al-Khansaa Brigade. Using these primary sources has strengthened the thesis as they give direct insight into the ideology and reality of IS. Particularly the IS-magazines and the al-Khansaa manifesto were useful for this purpose. Hence, these primary sources enables one to get in contact with the first-hand accounts of a phenomenon and to understand the elements that direct and influence the case. The secondary sources and the interviews function well in triangulation in relations to these primary sources, where they complement each other by adding different layers of knowledge and insight.

3.3.2 Interview

Using interviews as a method for collecting data is common in qualitative research. It is a useful source for obtaining primary data, but should not be seen as an absolute requirement for producing a good study. For the purpose of this thesis, a semi-structured approach was applied. Semi-structured interviews are characterised by flexibility and the opportunity to depart from the interview guide (Bryman 2016, p. 466-467). In this way, I could allow my

interviewees to share their knowledge and provide useful information that would not necessarily come to the surface without the flexibility semi-structured interviews provide.

The interview guides, to be found in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2, consist of three questions covering the topic of female participation in Islamist terrorism. The first interview guide was sent by e-mail to a researcher at a research institute working on terrorist and radicalisation, as she preferred to conduct the interview in this way (Appendix 1). E-mail can be an alternative when better options are not available. By doing it this way the interview was to some degree structured as I did not have the opportunity to respond to her answers during the interview. But e-mail still enables the interviewer to ask for clarifications or to go further into an interesting issue in later e-mail correspondence. The second interview was held with a professor at the University of Birmingham and was held over the phone (Appendix 2). This was conducted as a semi-structured interview where, in addition to the questions from the interview-guide being asked, we got to go deeper into those issues that were particularly interesting. I did not use a recorder but instead wrote the answers on paper, whereby she encouraged me to contact her again with any further questions or clarifications. A phone interview has its advantages over e-mail interviews as it allows for more of a dialogue, but is still a perhaps less desired method than conducting interviews face-to-face. However, external factors such as access, money and time made it inconvenient to meet in person.

The sampling strategy chosen for this thesis was *sequential purposive sampling*. With purposive sampling, the respondents are chosen based on their suitability and relevance in direct relation to the research questions. Sequential sampling involves a continuing process of sampling throughout the research process. One often sets off with a given sample, which then continues to grow as it seems fit for the research (Bryman 2016 p. 410). As mentioned, I conducted interviews with a researcher at a research institute (interviewee 1) and a professor from Birmingham University (Interviewee 2). Interviewee 1 was elected on the basis of her work on issues concerning women in violent extremism and counterterrorism in the MENA region. Interviewee 2 has published a number of pieces on different issues regarding women, Islam and terrorism. Her interest in gendered jihad and Islamic politics made her highly relevant as an interviewee for this thesis. Their knowledge of, particularly,

women in connection with Islam, violence and terrorism made them highly suitable as interviewees for this thesis.

3.5 Validity and reliability

When assessing the quality of research one often utilises the two concepts of *validity* and *reliability*. Reliability is concerned with the issue of replicability, meaning if the findings would be rediscovered if the study was to be conducted again using the same methods (Ritchie & Lewis 2003, p. 270). Validity concerns the issue of precision. When speaking of validity, you differ between 'internal validity' and 'external validity'. The first refers to whether you study what you intend to study, while the second refers to the findings being applicable to subjects in the wider population – close to generalisability (Ritchie & Lewis 2003, p. 273). However, one can question whether the concepts of validity and reliability, as developed in natural sciences, are fruitful to use when assessing qualitative research. Hence, alternatives made to fit qualitative research better in order to also ensure proper quality testing of qualitative research have been developed.

Among the alternatives to reliability we can find *trustworthiness*, *consistency* and *dependability* (Ritchie & Lewis 2003, p. 270-271). In the same way, researchers have attempted to find alternatives to validity in qualitative research. Internal validity has been suggested replaced with *credibility*, while external validity with *transferability* or *plausibility* (Ritchie & Lewis 2003, p. 273). In Bryman's (2016) book on social research methods, he outlines the alternative proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985; 1994), namely *trustworthiness*. This consists of four different criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. *Credibility* measures the level of feasibility of the conclusion the researcher reached, parallel to internal validity. *Transferability* relates to the possibility that one can transfer findings from one specific context to another, but not to the extent of generalisation. Transferability then parallels with external validity. *Dependability* relates to reliability. Here, one encourages proper and thorough tracking and logging of every step in the research process, which should be open to the audience. *Confirmability* concerns the idea that researchers should act in good faith and be open about possible biases and personal background that might have influenced the research. Confirmability hence parallels with the criteria of objectivity (Bryman 2016, p. 384-386). Although there are still

no fully agreed-upon criteria for quality-testing qualitative research, the four criteria mentioned here are those that will be used to test the *trustworthiness* of this thesis.

The *credibility* of the thesis depends on the feasibility of the conclusion, meaning if the findings and the analysis of the thesis make 'sense' to the reader. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the findings in this thesis is that there exist 'new' roles for women members of IS. This finding, without establishing whether these new roles resulted from a shift in IS' ideology or not, seems to be fairly feasible when looking at the literature supporting it. In the literature review and in the analysis chapters later on, there are several sources mentioned that support the argument that women in IS do indeed take on other roles than the traditional 'mother and wife'-role.

This thesis studies the women of IS and is located in that specific context. However, some of the findings can possibly be transferred to contexts alike that of IS, for example when studying female participation in other Islamist terrorist groups located in the same region. Perhaps even more transferrable is the second part of the analysis which argues that women members of IS are important for our studies of terrorism, as it does not rely so much on the context of IS but more on the mere concept of women. The arguments are feminist in nature and are likely to be transferable also to other contexts where women are subjected, in particular where they are situated in a context where their abilities are underestimated. Hence, the *transferability* of this thesis seems quite good.

Third, *dependability* is measured by the ability to replicate the study. What is important here is to make the research process transparent and to be honest about each step of the study. It is about being open to the reader about what has been done throughout the study and why. This methodology chapter aims at explaining the process of the thesis, the choices that have been made, and the limitations and difficulties met along the way. One of the purposes of doing this has been to ensure dependability. Forth, and in some ways related to dependability is *confirmability*. When conducting a study, it is important not to intentionally cover up any bias or personal background one has as researcher that might influence the research. It is difficult to be fully objective when conducting research, which is acceptable as long as the researcher is honest about the consequences of these biases. In this study, which is focused on women from a feminist perspective, it is quite clear that the researcher has an interest in

feminist theory and uses feminist theory to study these women. There is a risk that this might lead to a discussion more supportive of feminist arguments. However, there are also comments made that criticise some of the feminist arguments in an effort to balance it out to a certain degree. In sum, the research is conducted in good faith and aims at meeting the quality criteria of qualitative research.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Anyone conducting research needs to be aware of certain issues when it comes to ethical considerations. Often, the research can be sensitive for both potential participants of the study and for the public. There are therefore certain rules and norms researchers need to take into consideration before, during and after any study. In addition, one needs to be respectful of the issue of ownership amongst fellow scholars. Ideas and formulations are property, and proper citation is therefore necessary. As this thesis is based primarily on secondary sources, most of the ethical considerations are related to this. As mentioned, when using the work of others one needs to give them credit by ensuring proper citation. If one uses either ideas or direct quotations from another person's texts, one is obliged to cite and give them credit for these particular ideas. If one fails to do so, it is considered stealing. Further, using proper citation makes it easier for the reader to review and quality check statements made in the text. This makes the thesis more transparent.

Further, there are also ethical considerations that come with conducting interviews. Here, one first and foremost has to keep the well-being of the participants in mind. According to Bryman (2016) there are four aspects that are important: "1. Whether there is *harm to participants*; 2. Whether there is a *lack of informed consent*; 3. Whether there is an *invasion of privacy*; 4. Whether *deception* is involved" (p. 125). If one sees that any of these four aspects are being invaded, the researcher is responsible for doing what they can to avoid it. As both of my interviewees are published scholars on the field, I did not consider them to be under any serious risk of harm caused by this thesis in the way one can see in studies where interviews are conducted with for example civilians in conflict areas or the like. Consequently, I did not meet any resistance to my questions or receive any concerns that the content could potentially harm my participants. Still, I chose to anonymise them as I saw no reason for why I had to present any personal details other than their field of expertise.

3.7 Reflections

Conducting a research always involves meeting certain difficulties along the way. Already from the very beginning I knew I was limited in my options of data collection methods. Due to the topic of my thesis, I would have to rely mostly on written primary and secondary sources. Due to security issues, I had no possibility of visiting areas where current or former members of IS are located and hence could not conduct interviews that would provide more comprehensive raw data. The thesis therefore lacks primary data from the units within the case, except from written primary sources such as Dabiq and Rumiyah. In addition, it was sometimes difficult to find secondary sources that could sufficiently provide me with the data needed. As a consequence of this, I had to gather and analyse pieces of data from a large number of sources. This was a timely process that also meant reading papers and books which had little to contribute with. Hence, searching for relevant sources and data was from time to time an ineffective process. Further, after conducting two interviews I realised that additional interviews would not necessarily be beneficial as I saw that much of what they told me was already covered in their publications. So instead of spending time on organising and conducting more interviews, I made the decision to rely more on written sources as I already knew I could not conduct interviews with women who had been part of IS and who would have been able to give me more essential data. However, there is of course a chance that this has led to limitations in my data collection.

Further, I also realised three times during the process that I had to change my thesis topic. After doing some deeper research and talking to experienced people I realised that what I had initially set out to explore was too complex and difficult to achieve within the limited frame of a master thesis. Instead, I had to find a topic that was more doable but still relevant and interesting. Nevertheless, the area of interest that laid the foundation for the thesis has been the relationship between women and Islamist terrorism already from the beginning. However, by having these rounds of realisation, I have also learned more about the reality of conducting research and of the importance of finding a well-thought through topic from the very beginning.

4 Literature review and theoretical framework

This chapter presents both a literature review and the applied theoretical framework. The literature review gives an overview of what the existing literature has said about the topic of this thesis, namely the nature of women's roles and influence in Islamist terrorism. Further, the literature review also exposes shortcomings, suggesting that we lack a comprehensive understanding of the complex reality of the jihadi women. The first concern has been the tendency amongst the scholars reviewed here to concentrate mostly on the connection between women and violence, particularly on women as suicide bombers. There is little recognition of potential other roles women hold and the importance of these roles. By only studying the women participating in violent activities, we overlook a significant number of women who function in roles not necessarily less important, but perhaps less controversial. Although the link between women and violence is undoubtedly interesting, women's involvement in jihadist organisations is more complex.

Second, one can detect a tendency in the literature to paint a picture of jihadist women on two extremes – either as passive bystanders in the roles of mothers and wives, or as un-feminine violent deviants. There is little sign of presenting a middle-way, where we acknowledge the complexity and agency of these women, of course without glorifying or justifying their actions. Painting such a simple image of jihadist women arguably leads to a perhaps unfruitful debate on female jihadists as it demonises them and creates an even deeper divide between 'them' and 'us'. Recognised as gaps in the literature, this thesis applies concepts from feminist theory to illuminate other aspects of jihadist women, particularly looking at the women of IS, that offer a perception of female jihadists where their impact and complexity is recognised. Feminist theory highlights the influence women have on our social world and advocate the need to study women as deliberate actors, not only as passive bystanders. Further, feminist theory should aspire to include all women regardless of their political or ideological positions. Hence, concepts form feminist theory will be applied as a theoretical framework in the attempt to provide an alternative understanding of the female IS-jihadists by exposing the roles they play in the organisation and the impact they have on our social world.

4.1 Women and Islamist terrorism

This section addresses the existing literature on women and Islamist terrorism, particularly looking at scholars such as Anne Speckhard (2015; 2011), Julia Jusik (2005), Nelly Lahoud (2014), Clara Beyler (2003) and Mia Bloom (2007; 2011). In an effort to provide a more comprehensive literature review, it will include what these scholars say about not only IS and its female members but also female members of other Islamist terrorist groups. The reason for this is that the literature on IS is still in its beginning, while the knowledge we have of 'older' groups is more extensive, which can provide valuable insight to this thesis. Reviewing the literature, patterns that seem to repeatedly occur amongst most of the scholars were detected. First, what Islam says about the relationship between women and violence. Second, the literature highlights the reality of social gender constructs that affect how we view and treat women and men. Third, it looks at the motivations that drive these women into terrorist activities. And finally, it questions the willingness or unwillingness of female participation with particular focus on female suicide bombers, some claiming it is a willing act based on women's own decisions while others claim many are forced.

These four themes are relevant both for understanding which roles women in IS fill, and for offering new insight into the potential of female jihadists. What Islam has to say about violence related to women is relevant for the thesis as it explains the difficulties of women who wish to participate in violent jihad, limiting their roles in IS, and at the same time is relevant for the discussion on the threat these women pose. The construction of gender, understood from a feminist perspective, impacts which roles women in IS are *allowed* to have and which roles they *wish* to have. In a society where certain gendered-expectations are as deeply embedded as they are in the Caliphate, it is clear that these will guide the roles and activities of its members. Further, the motivation of women and the question of whether they are willingly or unwillingly participating in the actions of the group are aspects important for understanding the impact these women have. Are they for example politically and ideologically motivated and willingly participating in the activities of IS, they should be regarded as potentially influential actors with agency, perhaps able to pose a security risk and also able to promote female empowerment.

4.1.1 What does (jihadi) Islam say about women and violence?

Inconsistencies and vague descriptions characterise the texts that concern women and violence in Islam, particularly true for the writings of jihadist thinkers. Nelly Lahoud (2014) presents a thorough analysis of what both classical and contemporary doctrines say about this issue in her article *The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women From Jihad*. She begins by outlining the difference between what is known as *defensive*- and *offensive jihad*. *Defensive* jihad is meant for when Muslims find themselves and their territory under attack and is based on an individual obligation (*fard ´ayn)*. *Offensive* jihad, on the other hand, is meant for when an Islamic state needs to go to war against another state. In contrast to defensive jihad, offensive jihad comes with regulations to whom it applies to (*fard kifaya)* (Lahoud 2014, p. 781). In the eyes of today's jihadists, defensive jihad is no longer restricted to a limited territory but has instead gained a global reach as they claim Muslim territory to be controlled by apostate regimes. Together with announcing the current political world order as illegitimate, this boils down to a justification of their own jihad. Understanding the Islamic literature on women and participation in jihad is important for understanding why women in IS have restricted access to participation in violence, but also that it is possible to find texts that would, in fact, support potential participation of women in violent jihad.

One of the founders of al Qaeda, Abdallah Azzam, made the claim that defensive jihad called for an obligation upon *all Muslims* to join jihad.

> "The permission of [one's parents, spouse and creditors] is to be sought if the enemy is not on Muslim soil. If, however, the enemy attacks a port or enters into a Muslim town, *jihad*...becomes an individual obligation (*fard 'ayn*), […] In such a case, [the requirement] to seek permission becomes void and the traditional authority structures cease to apply (*la idhna li-ahadin 'ala ahad*). Accordingly, a boy is permitted to go out to fight without his father's permission, ***a wife without the permission of her husband***, and he who is in debt without the permission of his creditor. This situation (i.e., the suspension of traditional authority structures) continues until the removal of the enemy from Muslim land or until enough people are gathered to undertake this task, even if it requires that all Muslims from across the world need to gather and remove the enemy [emphasis added]" (Quoted in Lahoud 2014, p. 782).

In this passage, Azzam argues for *fard ´ayn* of all Muslims, including unmarried and married women. However, he is also known to promote the necessity of following the rule of *mahram* at all cause, even if jihad is permitted in Sharia (Lahoud 2014, p. 785). In fact, jihadists often legitimise the exclusion of women from jihad by pointing to the concept of *mahram*, referring to sexual purity. In Islam, women are to always be accompanied by a male relative. By allowing women in war zones they would find themselves in a situation where they interact with male non-relatives (Khelghat-Doost 2017, p. 18). This message is at best vague. Following Azzam's teachings, it is difficult to say whether women in IS should be allowed participation in violent jihad or not.

Further, David Cook (2005) argues that for women to be allowed to fight one needs to find statements where Prophet Muhammad consents to such activities, or textual evidence of women close to the Prophet fighting. In his research, Cook found only a few descriptions of events where women had been directly involved in battle. Most of the evidence he found, however, was of women holding supporting roles (p. 376). When explaining the well-known event of Muhammad's wife Aisha leading the "Battle of the Camel" (Aasgaard 2017, p. 100), Azzam wrote that

> "The participation of women in jihad occurred during the time of the Messenger of God, but only in rare circumstances and by older women – except in the case of Aisha for she is a special case by virtue of her [unique relationship] with the Messenger of God. It is therefore possible for women to serve behind the lines [of the battlefield], carrying out such tasks as cooking, nursing and similar womanly activities. Opening the door [to women to participate in jihad] amounts to a great evil" (Lahoud 2014, p. 785).

In other words, Aisha held her position only due to her relationship with the Prophet and her participation in jihad is not equal to a blessing from Muhammad for other women to do the same. Other Islamic thinkers such as Dr. Fadl and Al-'Uyayri argue the same – the Prophet has not given a literal command allowing women to participate in violent jihad. Hence, they all disregarded the way in which Muhammad praised the women who had sacrificed themselves to save both him and the Muslim community (Lahoud 2014, p. 786-787).

The concept of defensive jihad which calls for *fard ´ayn* leads to obvious inconsistencies when jihadists try to both claim a justified war which obliges all Muslims to join jihad, while at the same time excluding women from doing exactly this. They base their arguments on the importance of women performing jihad by continuing the domestic household and ensuring Islamic upbringing. In addition, they underline the lack of a distinct call for women to join jihad by the Prophet (Lahoud 2014, p. 787). Nevertheless, Lahoud (2014) presents an interesting question asking how jihadists can claim that the situation today is extraordinary enough to justify a call for *fard ´ayn,* while not extraordinarily enough to call for women to take up arms (p. 794), which also seems true for the situation of IS. Although IS for long maintained a stance prohibiting women from participating in violent jihad, and hence preventing them from taking on such roles, there are still opportunities to find arguments allowing this if it at one point is seen as reasonable or necessary. As will be discussed in chapter 5, there are evidences of women in IS participating in violence on different levels. They have formed the all-female al-Khansaa Battalion, executed suicide missions and allegedly been present at the front lines (Winter 2015; Mail Online 2017; Dearden 2018). Consequently, how women and violence are linked in jihadi Islamist texts is important for understanding the roles women in IS have been given, and also when discussing the threat they pose as potentially overlooked violent actors.

4.1.2 Construction of gender in terrorism

The second theme that occurs in the literature is the idea of social construction of gender and the effect it has on how we perceive and act out our social reality. Gender is constructed by society in a way which ascribes characteristics, expectations and roles to women and men residing in the particular society. The construction of gender is relevant to the thesis as it impacts the roles women in IS are allowed to take and which roles the women themselves want to take. When it comes to gender construction in Islamist terrorism, there is a clear tendency towards a favouritism of men and masculinity, although there are variations between the different jihadi groups. This implies that men are the ones in charge and who dictate which roles women are allowed to fill and which activities they are allowed to partake in. Even when women are given the opportunity to become members of terrorist groups, they are often strictly limited in their abilities and are rarely given the opportunity to take on any leadership positions (Speckhard 2015, p. 1). What has been seen is that women who wish to participate in subordinate and supporting roles are welcomed and doing so is encouraged,

but they are usually not allowed to take part in any militant activities or take on leadership roles (Frazier 2002). This quite accurately fits the reality of IS, with a few exceptions. Consequently, the gender structures in IS-society limits the opportunities for women who wish to not only be mothers and wives. As Beyler (2003) argues, female violence and female suicide bombing "needs to be understood in the framework of the patriarchal societies in which these women originated, and by taking into account how deeply rooted the values are which separates the female roles from that of the male". I believe this is true not only for female suicide bombing, but for women's general involvement in terrorist organisations. The social constructs lay expectations and limitations on women, which excludes them from a variety of positions. However, in IS women have been involved also in wide recruitment and violence. Although the social norms of the Caliphate limit women's participation in the public sphere, they have shown themselves to take on roles that deviate from the social norms.

Looking at data on violence amongst women in the USA showed that women are not less prone to use violence than men (Speckhard 2015, p. 1-2). Leading from this, Speckhard claims that women can in fact be violent and to perceive them as non-violent by nature is a mistake. This is also supported by Clara Beyler (2003) who claims that women are capable of violence and murder despite the social expectations ascribed them, here particularly mentioning women who execute suicide operations. Hence, the idea that female terrorists are so deviant from the norm of femininity is merely a consequence of our social construction of women. According to Speckhard (2015), we know that women join terrorist groups if they are allowed to, and once allowed in, they might even push for the opportunity to partake in violent terrorism (p. 2). According to Bloom (2007) the fact that women participate in suicide bombings partially counters the theory that women, more often than men, take the path of peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms – that "women are more disposed towards moderation, compromise, and tolerance in their attitudes toward international conflict" (Bloom 2007, p. 95). The women of IS, whom are heavily dictated by conservative Islamic norms, are quite clearly affected by the socially constructed male favouritism. The social norms first and foremost allows them to be mothers and wives, which also leads many to be content with this role. The societal constraints are likely limiting and preventing more women from taking on roles that go beyond the social expectations. To sum up, the social construction of gender dictates which roles women in IS take on, both because their actual

opportunities are limited in a patriarchal society and because the societal norms are imbedded in them to the degree that they are content with supporting roles. It also dictates how we perceive women and makes it difficult to look beyond the extremes.

4.1.3 Women's motivation for participating in Islamist terrorism

Another theme that frequently occurs in the literature concerns the motivation of women who join terrorist organisations. This relates to the thesis as it says something about the independence and agency of these women, offering the idea that their participation is not only based on emotions but also on political and ideological motivations. This is important both for understanding why they take on the roles they do and for recognising the influence these women have. Speckhard (2015), found that the motivation of these women differed depending on whether they found themselves situated inside of a conflict zone or not. As with men, women in areas of conflict tend to find their motivation in feelings of wanting revenge against the oppressors and feelings of trauma from what they have seen and experienced during the time of conflict. Outside of the conflict areas however, women often find that their motivation for joining a terrorist group comes from feelings of "discrimination, marginalisation, frustrated aspirations, a desire to be heroic, to escape a dreary home or work life, to overcome shame, to find a purpose, to belong, for personal significance, life meaning, adventure and even romance" (Speckhard 2015, p. 2). Some might also be affected by hearing about and seeing images and videos from the conflict areas. In such cases, they feel connected to those in the areas of conflict and might adopt their trauma and feeling of suffering. As a consequence, they might wish to act (Speckhard 2015, p. 2).

In another interesting study, Elizabeth Pearson and Emily Winterbotham (2017) argue that women join IS for reasons such as:

> "a rejection of Western feminism; online contact with recruiters who offer marriage and adventure; peer or family influence; adherence to the ideology and politics of Daesh; naivety and romantic optimism; and the chance to be part of something new, exciting and illicit" (p. 62).

These motivations for joining an Islamist group such as IS show that not all women are simply and naively lured by male family members. Instead, there are several and differing factors that influence the choices these women take, ranging from the naïve wish to find a paradise on earth to rather extreme political mind-sets. Particularly the idea of a rejection of Western feminism is interesting for the discussion in chapter 6 on how feminist theory can illuminate new sides to female jihadists. While rejecting Western feminism, some of these women seem to develop their own feminist ideas and are in fact politically motivated (Jacoby 2015, p. 532). However, there tends to be one major difference between men and women in why they eventually join *violent* activities: men tend to join based on nationalistic or religious reasons while women tend to find motivation based on personal factors. These personal factors usually have a nature of traumatic experiences such as losing family members, being subjected to sexual assault, or being treated in a way where one is left feeling defenceless (Windsor 2018, p. 8).

This is also what Bloom (2007) suggests: claiming that women tend to explain their involvement based on personal reasons more than ideological reasons, at least initially (p. 95). In a comparative case study conducted by Jacques and Taylor (2008) where they looked at thirty cases of female terrorists and thirty cases of male terrorists they found support for this argument, namely that women were significantly more motivated by personal factors or by the wish for revenge than what the men were. The results from the male case studies showed that men found most of their motivation based on religious and/or nationalistic reasons. However, claiming that women's motivation lies only in personal factors might create an impression of women that can mislead one to underestimate the dangers female terrorists might cause (Witlox 2012, p. 41).

Hence, there is more to this notion than only a feeling of personal loss and revenge. The motivations we find among women tend to be more complex and intricate than this. It is a combination of personal, religious and political factors that all interact with each other (Bloom 2011, p. 11). Following from this, some women become members of a terrorist organisation and commit violent jihad because they aspire to challenge the gendered norms of society through militancy. They hope to promote gender equality and eventually gain status equal to that of men (Witlox 2012, p. 41). Many of the societies where you find

incidents of female suicide attacks are societies where patriarchal structures are deeply embedded. Some women believe that by participating in non-violent and violent jihad they can change society's view on women and end the patriarchal structures that define them. Women, in opposition to men, see combat as a way, and perhaps the only way, to escape the life they know are awaiting them with strict limitations to what they can achieve (Bloom 2007, p. 95-96). As elegantly stated by Beyler (2003): "When women become human bombs, their intent is to make a statement not only in the name of a country, a religion, a leader, but also in the name of their gender". Understanding the motivation of women who join such organisations is relevant to the roles they play, to the possible impact or threat they pose to the wider society, and to understand the 'empowerment' argument as will be addressed in chapter 6.

4.1.4 Voluntary or involuntary participants of Islamist terrorism?

When we talk of women and terrorism, there are several stories of women who have participated in violent terrorist activities in modern times. Some well-known examples are the female suicide bombers of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and India since 1991 and the so-called "Black Widows" of Chechenia (Speckhard 2008, p. 995). Al Qaeda in Iraq began recruiting women as suicide bombers back in 2005 with the first strike finding place on March 8th the same year (Sjoberg et.al 2011, p. 15). However, there is a discussion in the literature on whether such participation is voluntary or involuntary from the perspective of the women themselves, here with particular focus on those committing suicide operations. This aspect is relevant to the thesis as it addresses the issue of agency and helps us understand the importance of these women in Islamist terrorism.

Julia Jusik (2005) published a book called *Nevesty Allakha*[5] researching the female suicide bombers of Chechenia. According to her research, the majority of the women who have committed or were meant to commit suicide missions were forced into doing so by male members. They themselves did not push the button to set off the bomb but were instead killed by self-detonating explosives or by detonators remotely controlled by men. The

[5] Can be translated to *Allah's Black Widows*

women often did not volunteer, but were kidnapped or sold by their families. In other words, Jusik strongly argues that the suicide women of Chechenia, instead of being deliberate terrorists willingly sacrificing their lives for a 'greater' cause, were victims of terrorism and forced into taking both their own lives and the lives of others.

On the other hand, we also know that women who have joined terrorist organisations such as IS have very limited opportunities given their status as women. They are mainly restricted to the home expected to support their husband and provide them with children. Despite this, it is likely that many women feel the need to accomplish something greater and strive towards fame and a feeling of accomplishment. As argued in the above section concerning the motivation of women to join Islamist terrorist organisations, we saw that some women also had strong political, ideological and religious reasons for joining terrorist organisations. However, due to the restrictions of women, the female members of IS see fewer opportunities to achieve what they wish than what their male counterparts do. As a consequence, women might be led to see participation in terrorist organisations and violent activities as their only available opportunity (Bloom 2011, p. 15). However, if these operations can be said to be strictly wilful acts is difficult to determine due to the many restrictions these societies lay on women. If women had more opportunities to influence society on a political level, then perhaps we would see lower numbers of female volunteers to suicide missions. In an interview Speckhard (2015) had with a member of the Al Aqsa Martyr's Brigade, the interviewee argued that these women in fact recruited themselves due to the lack of other opportunities in fighting back against their oppressors (p. 5). In other words, the willingness of women to join terrorist activities seems to vary and might be difficult to determine, but it is an interesting topic as it sheds light on both the roles women take in terrorist organisations and on whether we can ascribe these women with agency in which they themselves choose their path. Later in the analysis, we will see that there are examples of women in IS who have expressed determination and willingness to participate in IS' activities, both violent and non-violent.

4.1.5 Shortcomings in the literature

In spite of the existing literature review presenting interesting themes and findings that are relevant for answering the research questions of this thesis, there are also shortcomings. The existing literature tends to present female members of Islamist terrorist groups from perhaps a too narrow perspective, failing to see the full reality. Historically, despite the clear importance of acknowledging the link between women and terrorism, feminist scholars have been fairly restricted in the way they have studied this phenomenon. To illustrate this, feminist scholar Christine Sylvester (2010) notes that "Feminism has long associated itself with peace and nonviolence" (p. 609) and that war is "Someone else's misguided activity" (Sylvester 2013, p. 113). Further, Swati Parashar (2011) questions the way even feminist scholars have exceptionalised women's participation in war and how they themselves contribute to reproducing the idea of women as victims (p. 193). Feminists, when involved in studies of violence, have tended to focus on a widened security perspective looking at the protection of women or the 'marginalised', and not necessarily at women as possible abusers of violence (Cockburn 2001; Steans 1998; Copelon 1998). Further, the literature seems to forget the impact of social context when studying women in Islamist terrorism. It is difficult to understand the jihadist women without accounting for social, cultural, and religious elements that influence their actions (Jacoby 2015). By overlooking these aspects of women and terrorism, one might run the risk of giving up an opportunity to establish an alternative discourse that illuminates new aspects of jihadist women (Parashar 2011, p. 193). In an effort to correct this mistake, this thesis will use feminist concepts to present an alternative, and arguably more constructive, perception of jihadist women by offering new insight. Although uncomfortable, we must dare to acknowledge the agency and impact of these women, without being unfairly criticised for glorifying them.

4.2 Theoretical framework – feminist theory

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, applying concepts from feminist theory when exploring the female IS-members can help illuminate new aspects of these women's reality. The objective of this thesis is to explore the roles of women in Islamist terrorism and present an alternative image of these women. As mentioned, feminist theory grew out of a realisation that we need to acknowledge the impact gender has on our social reality (Risman 2004; West & Zimmerman 1987). Hence, feminist theory recognises concepts such as socially

constructed gender, gender-oppression, and deprivation of agency (Evans 2015; Risman 2004; West & Zimmerman 1987). Such concepts will guide this thesis as they allow one to explore the complexity of female jihadists in IS and offer an alternative image of the female jihadist.

The women of IS actively engaged in the organisation, particularly those participating in violent activities, do not fit into the image of the stereotypical woman. The stereotypical woman is a socially constructed concept of 'women' that legitimises gender-discrimination. Society constructs the norms, characteristics and expectations associated with each gender, which impact our social world and guide our conscious and unconscious actions (West & Zimmerman 1987; Lorber 1994). As claimed by West and Zimmnerman (19887: "Rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society" (p. 126). Resulting from these social constructs, we sustain an idea of the stereotypical woman as emotional, caring, peaceful, irrational, and innocent (Sjoberg, et.al 2011, p. 3). In nearly every society women are seen as gentle nurturers, as mothers and partners (Speckhard 2015, p. 1; Berko & Erez 2007, p. 493-494). These 'soft' qualities also contribute to our perception of women as peacekeepers (Cohn 2008, p. 198). This is also true for how we view women in terrorism - a highly gendered institution where the expectations we have towards people differ quite significantly based on their gender. The social construction of gender links violence and force with what we typically perceive as masculinity (Tickner 1992, p. 3), consequently adding an equation mark between 'terrorism' and 'men'. As stated by Lorber (1994): "the continuing purpose of gender as a modern social institution is to construct women as a group to be subordinate to men as a group" (p.33). Hence, the female members of IS, as actors of a violent and brutal terrorist organisation, clearly deviate from the gender norms that make it almost unthinkable that women can partake in any type of violence or militancy.

This leads to a situation where women who are active members of terrorist organisations, and particularly those who are known to have used violence, tend to be spoken of as abnormal. They might even be ascribed masculine character traits to show that they are less 'feminine', but this does not make them 'unfemale' (West & Zimmerman 1987, p. 134). As Anne Speckhard (2015) claims: "Few like to admit that women can be – and often are –

violent" (p. 1). They are also deprived of any true agency (Sjoberg, et.al 2011, p. 5) when described either as abnormal or as victims of factors outside of their own control (Bloom 2010, p. 92; Khelghat-Doost 2016, p. 22). What feminist theory offers is a way to see beyond these social expectations and enable us to study the complex reality of women in IS. Gender often is perceived as natural due to its deep embedment in society, but because we know of its social construct we can use feminist theory to challenge this notion (West & Zimmerman 1987, p. 129). As will be discussed later in this thesis, women in IS have taken on three major roles - recruiters, violent actors, and mothers and wives. All three roles, and perhaps particularly the first two, represent clear deviations from the social norms. Functioning as recruiters, women partake in an essential part of IS by ensuring its continued existence. They are not simply passive, peace-loving bystanders. Further, the image of women involved in violent terrorism is perhaps the furthest away we can come from the stereotypical woman. Feminist theory, by acknowledging that many of the expectations we have towards women (and men) are constructed and thought (Kessler & McKenna 1978), offers a framework where we can remove ourselves from these norms and stop ignoring the reality of these women. It allows us to investigate the roles of women in IS without condemning them as deviants or 'unfeminine'. The social constructs are not given truths, but instead fictional and alterable. Feminist theories, by recognising this, are therefore useful when claiming that not *all* women are caring and peace-loving or militant monsters, but instead complex individuals who can participate in terrorism without being seen as abnormal or unfeminine. In other words, a feminist framework offers an understanding of social gender constructs which makes it possible to draw an alternative reality of women jihadists.

Further, feminist theories promote the importance of agency, meaning the individual's ability to defend their free choices and actions (Chatterjee 2016, p. 202). Historically, women have not had much agency living in a 'man's world'. The patriarchal structures have, as mentioned, constructed an image of women as passive bystanders and consequently deprived them of their agency. In the literature and in media, women in terrorism are described as victims or as deviants, sometimes even as having deeper issues such as depression, suicidal thoughts, and psychopathic traits - perhaps in an effort to explain why women are even able to commit such acts (Bloom 2011, p. 4). As a result, we take their power away from them. By applying a feminist framework, we can instead acknowledge the agency of the female members of IS. These are women who are, as will be discussed further

in chapter 5 and 6, active and willing members of a brutal organisation who seem to make the decision to participate based on a personal conviction. Although many are forced or lured into joining the organisation, we also read and hear about those who are ideologically, politically and/or religiously determined to act. It may seem uncomfortable to ascribe agency to women who participate in an organisation known for its brutality and horrendous acts, but it is still important to use feminist theory also on those women who do not fit the image of women that we wish to maintain.

Feminist theory, by acknowledging the limitations and implications of socially constructed gender norms, allows for a more critical understanding of the two concepts 'femininity' and 'women'. In any position, and even more in positions associated with masculinity, women are constantly evaluated on what is normatively seen as appropriate for women, and she must prove that she is a "feminine being" (West & Zimmerman 1987, p. 139-140). The women of IS, by presenting a reality that includes violence, support of an extreme ideology, and active upbringing of future jihadists, challenge the dominant view we have on women. Doing this they also offer an alternative representation of women that embraces the complexity and agency of women. Using a feminist approach in this thesis will hence provide tools important for critically looking at the way female terrorists in IS have been depicted by scholars, media and policymakers. It allows one to look closer at the situation of women in different contexts and to understand the complexities that surround women – their motivations, their actions, their intentions etc. So instead of merely focusing on the 'terror' side of things by continuously portraying these women as 'abnormal' or 'deviant', feminist theory is useful for looking at the concept of female Islamist terrorists from a 'gendered' perspective. As Cynthia Enloe remarks: "As one learns to look at this world through feminist eyes, one learns to ask whether anything that passes for inevitable, inherent, 'traditional' or biological has in fact been made" (2000, p. 3).

Further, the existing literature has, to an extent, failed to comprehend the context that surrounds the women of IS. Early feminists overlooked the differences between women in an effort to create a unified front against the patriarchal structures, which led them to claim that "all women *want* gender equality, and that all women *want* to be heard" (Jacoby 2015, p. 527). Women across the world face widely different struggles, they have different visions

and beliefs, and they have differing ideas of what they want for their own lives depending on a number of social and cultural factors. Acknowledging this, contemporary feminists developed a new type of feminism – Middle Eastern feminism (Jacoby 2015, p. 532). This version of feminism is interesting for studying the women of IS as it focuses not only on gender, but also on external factors that influence the way these women think and act. When applied, it offers a more comprehensive understanding of the case looking by closer at the context these women find themselves in. It is in fact essential to consider the social, cultural and religious factors that surround the women of IS and to understand their actions and importance in this context. There is more than just gender that constitutes the political identity of these women. Hence, one needs to study these women not from a single-axis gender perspective, but from a perspective that includes all the institutions that contribute to shaping these women and their society (Jacoby 2015, p. 541). This concept suggests a possibility that not all feminists need to share the same fundamental values as Western feminists – hence providing the interesting assumption that feminists do not have to believe in democracy, human rights, Western cultures or Western feminism (Jacoby 2015, p. 532). In other words, it fills a gap in the literature and provides the opportunity for us to create an alternative and more constructive image of the female jihadists by understanding their context.

To summarise, as these theories acknowledge the impact of constructed gender and the significance of contextual understanding, they will provide the framework needed to examine the multiple roles taken on by the female members of IS. They also illuminate new sides to female jihadists, not from a 'victim'-perspective but rather from a perspective that legitimises women and their complex reality. Feminism lays the theoretical foundation for understanding women's agency (Chatterjee 2016, p. 202). Diana T. Meyers described the issue of women's agency by stating that:

> "Because patriarchal societies consider women as inferior beings, and because these societies severely constrain women's choosing and acting, all feminist-theorists activists alike – regard these questions of why women suffer these wrongs and how they can be righted as crucial. Not surprisingly, then, the issue of women's identity and agency aspire intense critical engagement not only with social conventions but also with the philosophical canon (Meyers 2002, p.1).

Using feminist theory to investigate the roles of women under IS implicates that one sees: i) gender as a social construct that has created unfair gender roles, which need to be challenged, and that we can develop alternative understandings of what being a 'woman' entails; ii) women as individuals with agency who can take informed and deliberate decisions to involve themselves in terrorist activities; iii) women as complex individuals with a variety of context-based motivations, visions and expectations that influence their decisions, and therefore cannot be studied by using the out-dated gender norms as a foundation, and; iv) that we must acknowledge the influence of gender on our social world and the importance of including gender in our studies of such. Using concepts from feminism as a theoretical framework allows for a discussion of the roles of women in IS, why these women should be included in studies of terrorism, and what the consequences are if we fail to do so.

Further, as argued by Tami A. Jacoby (2015), feminism has from its beginning overlooked the differences between women in an effort to create a unified front against the patriarchal structures, which led them to believe that all women wanted the same. Today however, feminists realise that women have different struggles, different visions and different believes depending on a number of social and cultural factors. Using this feminist realisation when studying the female members of IS makes it possible to both examine them from a gendered-perspective, acknowledging the impact of their gender, and at the same time see how their social and cultural context impact their actions. The women of IS have a different background and belief system than the women targeted by Western feminism, and it is therefore essential to acknowledge the social context that surrounds these women if one wishes to understand both them and their impact.

5. The ‘new’ roles of female members of Islamic State

This chapter addresses research question 1, namely: “Which roles do women in Islamic State hold?”. As mentioned, we tend to see women and their participation in terrorist organisations as a dichotomy – either as wives and mothers, or as violent actors. This chapter presents three key roles women in IS are known to have held - namely as recruiters, as violent actors, and as mothers and wives – and aims to reveal the perhaps overlooked complexity of these roles. The wives and mothers are not only simple bystanders adhering to their male ‘guards’. Those involved in violence are not necessarily forced to do so and should not be seen as unfeminine. Instead, these women are also ideologically motivated or see it as the most effective option they have in fighting what they perceive as the enemy. Functioning as recruiters, women have participated both formally and informally in a massive and arguably highly successful recruitment machine, showing themselves as capable and determined actors with agency. Women are moving from holding only supporting roles towards being included in primary roles both in administration, politics and the military of the ‘state’ (Khelghat-Doost 2016, p. 22). In other words, the roles women have played in IS are not black and white. As Gardner (2015) states: “IS has big plans for Muslim women who migrate to their territory to play a key role in building the so-called caliphate”. Society utilise gender to discredit women’s participation in non-feminine activities, consequently reproducing gender norms. This is a practice which needs to be changed. So, what are the ‘new’ roles of female IS-members? The objective of this chapter is hence to look more detailed at these three roles and see how they contribute to offering a more nuanced picture of the female members of IS.

As already mentioned in Chapter 4, most of us tend to preserve an image of women as caring, nurturing and non-violent (Berko & Erez 2007, p. 493-494). With the traditional gender roles and the labour division that developed from this social construct, women have been expected to take on the role as caring, warm and loving wives and mothers in most societies around the world. In many ways, women are perceived to be the ‘weaker’ gender both physically and mentally, and more likely to be affected by their emotions. They are placed in contexts where the patriarchal systems and male leaderships dictate their action. Further, as shown earlier, their motivation to perform violent jihad such as suicide missions is said to be mostly based on personal feelings, potentially leaving out possible political, ideological or religious

factors. In other words, they are denied of agency and portrayed as incapable of making the decision to join such organisations based on their own calculated wish to do so. What this does is to mistakenly generalise women and portray them as mere tools for male members (Khelghat-Doost 2016, p. 22). To present an alternative reality to this is therefore to challenge an idea that is rather anchored in many societies around the world. Almost paradoxically, this is exactly what the female Islamist terrorists are doing by showing themselves as brutal, cynical and sometimes violent individuals who believe in extreme and destructive ideologies far from what we are thought to think of as 'feminine'.

5.1 Women as recruiters

Women have been essential for recruitment to IS. In particular, they have been vital for the recruitment of other women, persuading them to support IS either from home or preferably by performing the hijrah (Weaver 2017; Cottee 2016). Recruitment is an important aspect of all organisations and movements, including extremist groups such as IS. It is vital for the survival and growth of a group, and for its capabilities of reaching its set goals. Without a certain number of members supporting its cause, it will lack essential elements such as physical capabilities, financial support, territorial control or access, administration, and people to run and execute operations. To illustrate the acknowledged importance of recruitment amongst such organisations, a 51-pages long document outlining the recruitment strategy of al Qaeda and IS named *A Course in the Art of Recruitment* was published. The manual was meant to guide supporters globally to recruit new members in accordance with Sharia, also those not formally schooled to do so (Warius & Fishman 2009). Recruitment that includes strategies for how to reach potential members from a wide audience is considered to be important. Consequently, it is meaningful for scholars to study and understand the importance and significance of recruitment amongst such organisations.

5.1.1 Extensive online recruitment

With the rapid emergence of IS in 2013 and 2014, many were puzzled by the group's success in recruitment. People from all across the world travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the group together with local jihadists. The magic formula behind this success was that IS and its female members had mastered the art of using media and the Internet for spreading

propaganda as a recruitment strategy. Over the last few years, the group has produced a number of videos, images and texts aimed at broad recruitment by portraying and offering a life of glory, action and romance (Spencer 2016, p. 79; Hoyle et.al 2015, p. 24). It is particularly targeting those vulnerable youths who struggle with finding purpose and a place of belonging in their current life and who are prone to be persuaded by such promises wrapped in an extreme ideology (Awan 2017, p. 138). The material has in general been of rather high quality with professional techniques for filming and editing. Even though we saw the start of using media with Osama bin Laden's television appearances for al Qaeda, such excessive use of media to spread propaganda and recruit members is rather unique. IS managed to create a propaganda machine by employing social media with a global reach, and hence proved itself to be an innovative and highly capable organisation.

In IS, women have been very active in recruiting women by using the Internet and particularly social media. Facebook profiles, YouTube videos, blogs, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Tumblr have all been used by female members of IS to recruit other women to join the group (Spencer 2016, p. 85). Stories of happy lives as wives, mothers and sisters in a community of jihadists who fight the Holy War in the name of Allah has been the common story told by these women (Spencer 2016, p. 79; Hall 2014; Facebook: Muslimah the Bird of Jannah). They portray their lives as meaningful and rich, with the promise of everything a true Muslim woman can ever wish for. Their online accounts are filled with pictures and videos of beautiful landscapes, of women playing with children, making pancakes, and doing homework. In addition, they contain information aimed at guiding future *muhajirats*[6] by providing practical information and lectures on how to act as a good wife to a jihadist (Spencer 2016, p. 85). These social media 'campaigns' and the overall propaganda of IS are largely built on exaggerating the grievances, both real and perceived, that women feel, and ultimately providing the solution to these in the Islamic State (Rafiq & Malik 2015, p. 16).

Although most of these videos, accounts and pages are shut down by various actors in efforts to stop further radicalisation, there are still some pages publicly accessible. One example is the Twitter account of a woman who called herself Umm Layth. She published verses from

[6] Women who migrate to Islamic State

the Quran, her opinions about how to be a good Muslim, and glorifying texts about the vision and methods of IS (Twitter: umm layth @Brook_Ess 2015). Another example is from a woman known as Shams, or the 'Bird of Jannah' - a 26 year old female doctor from Malaysia who joined IS and married a male member of the group. She was active on several social media platforms publishing IS propaganda. She shared pictures of her life as a jihadi bride in the Caliphate and encouraged other young women to migrate (Hall 2014; Facebook). Another example is Sally Jones, a British citizen who travelled to Syria in 2013, who apparently assisted IS with recruiting hundreds of women to join her in jihad through various social media accounts. She is also known for being an iconic IS-recruiter (Weaver 2017). In a study conducted by Amanda N. Spencer (2016), she found that the majority of the women working on such recruitment were foreigners and that they more seldom found themselves in the role of wives (p. 93). These are only a few examples of women who have been active as recruiters for IS.

Although female members of IS might have held 'back seat' roles, it is clear that those working with online recruitment are very active and also play a role that is essential for IS. Using social media to spread propaganda has shown itself to be effective as it has the potential to reach broadly. It is delivered in a format which appeals to a young audience, with short texts and emoticons. It is in fact estimated that the majority of the women who have joined IS are between the ages of 18 and 25 (Zakaria 2015, p. 118). The online activity by these women, promoting the life in the Caliphate, illustrates their individual willingness to partake in the organisation, seemingly convinced of its ideology and visions. It demonstrates their agency as actors in a terrorist organisation, but at the same time offers an understanding of their roles that is not restricted to being either passive or extreme. They fill a role that is actively engaging them in an essential part of the growth and survival of the group without the element of force. Consequently, they cannot be accused of being passive, nor can they be accused of being brutal monsters.

In addition to using social media, IS has published several issues of two online propaganda magazines. The first one, called Dabiq, came out in a total of fifteen issues, with the first one released in June 2014. In several of the issues of Dabiq one can find articles written by female IS members bringing up a range of topics concerning women. The column is called

"From our sisters" and "To our sisters", and goes into topics such as the treatment of slave-girls (Dabiq issue 9 2015, p. 44-50), advice to wives of non-Muslims (Dabiq issue 10 2015, p. 42-48), the meaningful non-violent jihad of women (Dabiq issue 11 2015, p. 40-45), and how polygyny in Islam allows a man to take four wives (Dabiq issue 12 2015, p. 19-22). The second magazine, Rumiyah, replaced Dabiq in the summer of 2016 and also includes articles intended for women (Clarion Project 2014). Both magazines are published in English and are therefore easily accessible for a global audience. Issue 7 of Dabiq (2015) includes an interview with a woman called Umm Basir al-Muhajirah. To the question of how she feels living in the Caliphate she answers: "All praise is due to Allah who facilitated the way for me. I did not find any difficulty. Living in a land where the law of Allah ('azza wa jall) is implemented is something great. I feel at ease now that I have carried out this obligation" (p. 50). In the same interview, she encourages her 'sisters' to "Learn your religion! Read the Qur'an, reflect on it, and practice it… It is essential for you to love Allah and his Messenger more than you love your own selves, your husbands, your children, and your parents" (Dabiq issue 7 2015, p. 51). Contributing to propaganda magazines such as these shows that women are given a role in not only individual or sporadic recruitment through social media, but also in the organised and formalised propaganda- and recruitment work of IS. Taking on such central roles both in the informal and formal recruitment work of IS provides an image of women who have gained agency. They are deliberately making the decision to promote the ideas and ideology of IS through creating wide-reaching propaganda in an effort to recruit women to the Caliphate. Further, simply by acknowledging the impact of the work these women do, we also attribute them more agency than that we do when we see them as passive bystanders.

Having women in these positions as recruiters, either employed directly by IS or as individuals posting material on different channels of social media, contributes to building a more constructive perception of female terrorists. Even though these might not be involved in what we usually understand as 'typical' terrorist activities such as unprovoked killings, suicide attacks or torture of civilians they are still taking an active stance in promoting the terrorist organisation. They are knowingly and willingly encouraging other women to join a group that is known for its extreme brutality and intolerance for those not believing in their own version of Islam. These women are no longer in a position where they can be described as mere victims who are unconscious of their actions and its consequences, or as passive

spectators. Instead, we need to study them as individuals with agency who are as much part of the ideology of IS as their male counterparts. They have the potential to do as much harm, both physically and psychologically, as male terrorists and having them in the role of recruiters shows that they are in fact both willing and able to take on other roles than those on the outside typically have ascribed them.

5.2 Women as violent actors

Perhaps the most controversial role of female IS-members is their involvement in violent activities. The first section of the literature review in chapter 4 gave a brief overview of the stance amongst jihadi Islamic thinkers on women and violence. In general, women have not been permitted to partake in any violent activities under IS and are instead encouraged to perform their obligations towards the state by serving as good wives and mothers. Despite promoting offensive jihad by quoting qur'anic verses such as "… when the sacred months have passed, then kill the mushrikin[7] wherever you find them" (Quran 9:5, quoted in Dabiq 7 2015), IS has not included women in the obligation for all Muslims to join the jihad. Nevertheless, we do know that women in IS have taken part in violence both as suicide attackers and on the battlefield. After the battle of Mosul in 2017, reports came in of women acting as suicide bombers against the Iraqi troops battling IS. An Iraqi lieutenant claimed that as many as seven women committed suicide missions on a single day, targeting both soldiers and civilians (News24 2017). They hid amongst civilians fleeing the city and in the ruins of destroyed buildings (Mail Online 2017). One incident that drew extensive media attention was the woman who was seen detonating the bomb while holding a child in her arms, apparently using the child as a human shield (Ensor 2017). We also know that women have expressed support for the violence performed by IS on social media, some even celebrating it. Videos of beheadings published by IS are met with celebratory tweets from women supporting the violence, for instance stating that: "So many beheadings at the same time, Allahu Akbar [God is the greatest], this video is beautiful #DawlaMediaTeamDoingItRight" (Hoyle, et.al. 2015, p. 29). Further, the news agency *The Independent* (Dearden 2018) reported on an IS propaganda video released on February 7th this year showing armed women on their way to the front line, carrying the infamous black

[7] Mushrikin can be translated into *polytheist*

flag. It is assumed that these women were headed to the battlefield. Hence, it is obvious that women have played a role also in violent activities despite IS' determined stance against allowing women to participate in violence. They have carried out suicide missions and assumedly been deployed to the front lines, demonstrating strength and determination by being willing to even sacrifice their own lives for IS.

However, we cannot only talk of suicide missions when looking at women and violence under IS. Quite surprisingly to many, over the years IS established three all-female brigades – all with their given areas of responsibility, and some more violent than others. The perhaps most well-known of the three is the al-Khansaa brigade established in February 2014 in the city of ar-Raqqah (Kafanov 2016). It is more commonly known as the female morality police established with the purpose of ensuring full compliance with the rules of Sharia among the women living under IS control. Patrolling the streets, controlling how women were dressed, where they walked, who they were with, etc. Those women who did not adhere to the rather extreme rules of conduct under IS were in the risk of facing severe punishments. Testimonies from women who escaped from IS tell of how frightened they were of these women, some even more frightened by the al-Khansaa women then of male IS members (Kafanov 2016). In addition to the everyday patrolling of the streets, the battalion was also involved in tasks such as intelligence gathering on women, managing security in relation to women, surveillance, torture, and detainment and incarceration of women (Faraj 2018). The al-Khansaa brigade exemplifies again how women in IS assumedly involve themselves willingly in violent roles. This assumption is supported in a manifesto written and published by members of the al-Khansaa brigade (Winter 2015)[8] where it seems as if these women believe in the ideology and religious practices of IS, and are even willing to use violence against the citizens of the 'state'.

These stories are shocking to most and indeed depict a reality that is horrific. Both applauding, encouraging, and committing violence against innocents is by no means justified. However, we should dare to see the full picture of these women and their actions. As mentioned in the literature review, women are not naturally less prone to use violence

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[8] The manifesto was translated by Charlie Winter for the Quillam Foundation

(Speckhard 2015, p. 1-2). Hence, the fact that some women in IS participate in violent activities if given the opportunity to do so should not lead us to the conclusion that they are abnormal, monsters, or not truly women. Instead, they should be judged for their actions in the same way as we judge their male counterparts when they participate in violent terrorism. From this statement, two points should be elaborated on. First, the violent acts of women in terrorism should not be understated. There are tendencies to downplay and excuse their actions by ascribing them deeper emotional and psychological issues (Bloom 2011, p. 4; Beyler 2003). After reports on female suicide bombers, the audience immediately starts to speculate on how and why a woman could and would be able to do something of this scale, portraying such brutality (Speckhard 2015, p. 3). By doing this, we remove their agency and their accountability for their own actions. Second, their roles in violent terrorism should also not be exaggerated. Violent terrorism performed by women is not worse than violent terrorism performed by men, although it seems as if female jihadists provoke reactions much stronger than their male counterparts (Speckhard 2015, p. 3). The image of women covered in black from head to toe killing innocent civilians in the name of Allah is an image that perhaps stirs stronger emotions of distress and fear than that of male jihadists. As mentioned, women are supposed to be caring, loving, and comforting. However, this disturbing image does not legitimise a practice of demonising these women and judge them harder than their male counterparts. This is an issue of gender, as our actions and what we are held accountable for is directly tied to our gender as women and men (West & Zimmerman 1987, p. 136).

At the same time, it is important to also recognise the possibility that the role of women in violent terrorism is not absolute and uncontested. As seen in the literature review, we know of women who have forced to perform violence on the behalf of terrorist groups. The stories of the Chechen women in Julia Jusik's book (2005) makes a good example. Although there are women who have publicly expressed their wish to join violent jihad and a wish to sacrifice themselves for the cause (Bloom 2007, p. 99; Lahoud 2017, p. 62), we do not hear much of those who were forced. Boko Haram found that using women (and children) in suicide operations were far more effective than using men. It is the terrorist organisation who is believed to use more women as suicide bombers than any other organisation of its kind. Although statements from former Boko Haram members claim that some women of the women volunteered as suicide bombers, many were also forced (Kriel 2017).

Consequently, it is difficult to make a clear statement about the role women hold in IS related to violence. On one hand, we do know that they have occasionally held roles that involved different types of violence, but we do not know whether it was a result of their own wish or of force. This distinction is relevant because it says something about the willingness and self-determination of women jihadists. If they have been forced into such positions, it is difficult to justify the argument that female participation in violence demonstrates agency. Nevertheless, looking at IS as an organisation ideologically against women's involvement in violence, and the very few accounts we have of women actually executing violent acts, it is perhaps more likely that the few women involved chose this role for themselves.

In addition, there are disagreements amongst the experts on the field on whether the use of women as suicide bombers in IS was a shift in ideology or merely a strategic move. Commenting on the video in *The Independent (*Dearden 2018), Nikita Malik, director of the Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism at Henry Jackson Society, says that this is not a sign that IS has changed its ideological stance on women and violence, but rather a sign of desperation. IS is being defeated on all sides and now seems to be forced to use all human capacity they have left (Dearden 2018). In line with this, Nelly Lahoud (2014) argues that such videos do not present a group more inclined to allow women to participate in violence. Instead she argues that it is an effort of 'shaming' men into taking up arms. This is also an argument we can recognise from the literature review chapter above (Bloom 2011, p. 7). Simon Cottee and Mia Bloom (2017) also advocate for this understanding of the situation. On the contrary, Charlie Winter and Devorah Margolin (2017) argue that this does indeed show a more permanent shift where one will see more women at the frontlines. They believe that IS has undergone a shift where they adopt a stance on women closer to what that of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi[9]. In their article, they use textual sources from IS' propaganda literature to show this trend. They look at the essay *Our Journey to Allah* in the eleventh issue of Rumiyah. The final passages of this essay are, according to Winter and Margolin, key. It states "Rise with courage and sacrifice in this war as the righteous women did at the time of the Messenger of Allah, not because of the small number of men but rather, due to their love for Allah…" (Rumiyah issue 11 2017, p. 15). Further, in October 2017, the group apparently published a message in al-Naba not only allowing, but obliging, women to

[9] The founder of al Qaeda in Iraq (predecessor of IS)

support those who fight for IS with all means, including involving themselves in physical jihad (Shiloach 2018). They argue that these two declarations together suggest that IS "had at least rhetorically lifted its moratorium on female combatants" (Winter & Margolin 2017). Cook and Vale (2018) also see these developments as a significant shift and a way for IS to signal that women are now permitted to take on such roles (p. 54).

Although controversial, we have seen that women in IS have been given roles involving violent activities such as suicide missions and fighting at the front lines. This goes against the publically announced ideology of IS directed towards the role of women, but is perhaps not surprising when looking both at the historical involvement of women in Islamist jihadi organisations, and at the situation of IS during the last years of its physical caliphate. Although we cannot say for sure whether the events where women are involved in IS' violent activities resulted from an ideological shift or an act of desperation, we can still acknowledge the fact that women have taken on roles that to a large extent deviates from our traditional view of 'women'. They are apparently pushing for the opportunity to partake in violent activities in the name of IS and thereby showing themselves as actors with agency. Although there might be force involved, it is still important to acknowledge their roles in violent terrorism.

5.3 Women as wives and mothers

The majority of the women in IS function in the role as wives and mothers (Hoyle et.al 2015, p. 22-23). In fact, women tend to hold several roles throughout the time they spend in the Caliphate and often hold two or more simultaneously. Like any other society, Islam and Islamic societies sustain certain traditional gender divisions and expectations of one's role in society based on biological sex. In societies built on extreme Islamist ideologies, these divisions are often even stricter and leave little room for deviation from the norms. There are rigid limitations to where women can go, what they can do and what they can wear. When it comes to jihad, women are expected to join and contribute by caring for their husbands and by producing children who will secure the future of the Caliphate (Jacoby

2015, p. 535), this is also true for women in IS. An article in Rumiyah[10] claims that "The woman is a shepherd in her husband's home and is responsible for her flock" (Rumiyah issue 9 2017, p. 19) and contend that this role is a great responsibility which will be immensely rewarded. Further, in an interview with a woman called Umm Basir al-Muhajirah in Dabiq she encourages women to support their husbands, brothers and sons and to be good Muslims: "Be advisors to them. They should find comfort and peace with you. Do not make things difficult for them. Facilitate all matters for them" (issue 7 2015, p. 51). She underlines the importance of women functioning as supporting and loving wives in the Caliphate to ensure the survival of the state. To the outside at least, IS has advertised that women are not to partake in any violent activities. Consequently, I assume that most women who join Islamist terrorist organisations do so with the intent or at least expectation of becoming the wife of a jihadist and the mother of future jihadists. In fact, it is not by coincidence that the media often speak of women who join IS as 'jihadi brides' (Martini 2018; Hall 2018; Gadher & Harper 2018).

In the manifesto written and released by members of the al-Khansaa brigade (Winter 2015), one can get an idea of how central the role of women as wives and mothers is. The manifesto outlines what seems to be the 'true path' for Muslim women according to the authors. Early on it states that the woman was created by God to live on earth, but she was "made from Adam and for Adam" (Winter 2015, p. 17). Assumedly, God has given women certain physical and psychological abilities that make sure she can nurture and raise her sons in the image of God. For this, they claim that "she receives a great reward from the Lord, something that would not come to her from any other employment of any other job…" (Winter 2015, p. 18). In these messages lie the idea that women do not have any greater responsibility in life than that of being a supporting wife for her husband and raising the future sons of Adam. Hence, they argue that there are certain roles given to men and women by God already at birth. These are roles that need to be adhered to in order to avoid what is described as a state of instability where the mere foundations of society will crumble. According to the authors, this is exactly what has happened in Western societies today after women were "'liberated' from their cell in the house" (Winter 2015, p. 19) and the lines got blurred. Hence, women need to ensure their part by re-establishing this line and in that way fulfil the will of God

[10] Islamic State's online propaganda magazine published in English

(Winter 2015, p. 17). In fact, women in IS are encouraged, if not commanded, to stay at home. In the Rumiyah article *Abide in Your Homes*, the author refers to several verses in the Quran saying that women do best by staying at home and only leaving if strictly necessary (issue 3 2016, p. 40). Further, the author claims that the man can indeed prevent his wives of going out too often as long as it does not prevent her from performing extraordinary duties such as visiting the holy house of Allah, providing medical treatment and water to the wounded on the battleground, visiting the market, or visiting friends (p. 40-41). In other words, the primary role of women in IS is to function as supporting wives and mothers, and by this lay the foundation for the existence of the 'state'.

However, being a wife and a mother should not be underestimated. Being in charge of the home and of the upbringing of children, women in IS have the opportunity to transfer the ideology of the group onto their children, indoctrinating them into believing in the cause and means of IS. By holding positions of such power women can in fact, by promoting life under IS, ensure the continued survival of the group. They give birth to the so-called 'lion cubs of the Caliphate' and raise them in line with the ideology and extremist visions of the group. They can also influence close relatives and friends if they hold an influential position amongst the other women and children in the community (Fink et.al 2013, p. 4). Accordingly, "… women become vehicles for transmitting norms of violence, radicalism, and martyrdom" (Byrd & Decker 2017, p. 4). This is a role that has the potential to both keep a terrorist organisation alive by indoctrinating children but also to potentially create individuals supporting the cause of the organisation even after the organisation has vanished. In the case of IS, which has had remarkably many foreign fighters joining the group from countries all over the world, this is a factor that has raised concern amongst people in the West who fear the return of these children to their countries, now as extremists (Khomami 2018; Cook & Vale 2018). If these return without receiving proper attention and support, they pose a significant security risk as they might be 'brainwashed' by their mothers and hence continue to believe in both the ideology and means of IS (MacDiarmid 2018).

Consequently, although the role as mother and wife might sound like a cliché and perhaps even quite innocent, it is a role that holds significant power. The women in IS are in charge of the household and those who believe in the group's ideology are in a position where they can influence their children, relatives and friends into adopting their extreme beliefs. They give birth to children who know no other world than that inside the Caliphate, radicalise them and, by doing that, contribute to the survival of the group. Further, the defeat of the physical Caliphate is not equivalent to the defeat of IS. Instead, the members who manage to escape and those who support IS from the outside still have the opportunity to further radicalise and to perform attacks against the enemy on their own. Consequently, the role as mothers and wives is far from trivial. Accordingly, we should not underestimate this role or the women who hold it.

5.4 IS' shift in strategy towards women

The expert interviews conducted for this thesis gave insight into why these shifts for women came about. Interviewee 2 argued that the shift we saw in IS' position towards women after 2014 came from two main factors. As we know, IS long held a rather strict stance towards women, upholding the idea that their place is within the four walls of their homes where they contribute to jihad by supporting their male relatives. However, as time went by and IS increasingly established itself as a state, this stance seemed to shift towards an increased inclusion of women. Interviewee 2 argued that on the one hand this shift came from the women themselves pushing for such opportunities. Many of these women, particularly those who travelled to IS from abroad, did indeed make the drastic decision of leaving their homes to seek opportunities they felt they could not get otherwise. It is hence not surprising that they aspired to do more for the Caliphate than to simply act as mothers and wives. Consequently, they pushed for those opportunities that could satisfy their initial aspirations. To further support this idea, Interviewee 2 underlined how costly it has been for IS to include women in these activities in terms of losing more people to battle, losing legitimacy amongst those who did not want women to have such positions, and in terms of internal splits and conflict. Although desperation can be pointed to as a reason why IS in the later stages went so far as to allow women to join the battle field, it still does not alone explain the earlier shifts in strategy.

On the other hand, both interviewees also highlighted the fact that the establishment of a 'state' became a changing factor for IS in terms of women. This idea is also supported by Jacoby (2015) claiming that IS recognised the importance of women in populating and building the state (p. 535). Establishing a state involves ensuring a range of additional elements that are not present before one becomes a state. This means that there are more roles and opportunities available to the citizens of the state than there were before. In terms of women in IS it meant that they were still prioritised in the private sphere, but that they in addition could take on roles in the growing administration, take jobs as public sector workers, and even become police and militants. Further, in the beginning IS had more room for promoting the protection of women, while when obtaining more and more territory they had to shift their focus to protection of the state. This opened up for allowing also women, as citizens of the state, to protect it against the enemy. This ultimately gave them access to the public sphere within the state. Interviewee 2 therefore argued that the shift in both discourse and practice by IS towards women came not so much as a result of an actual ideological transformation within IS but from women themselves, and from the fact that IS became close to what we can call a proto-state (Khelghat-Doost 2017, p. 19) with the need to protect its growing territory.

To summarise, this chapter addressed research question 1 asking: "Which roles do women in Islamic State hold?". To answer this, three major roles for women in IS have been presented – women as recruiters, women as violent actors, and women as wives and mothers. As recruiters, women serve a vital part in the organisation by ensuring its growth and survival. Women have taken part in both the informal and formal recruitment machine of IS, demonstrating their important position in the organisation and their agency. As violent actors, women partake in activities and hold roles not at first intended for them. IS' stance against including women in violence has been softened as we hear of instances where women functioned as morality police, as suicide bombers and as soldiers on the battlefield. Although their actions are by no means justified, they should nevertheless not be either understated or demonised because of their gender. It seems as if we want to excuse the actions of these women by claiming that they are abnormal or under distress, in an effort to maintain the purity of women.

Lastly, women in IS function as mothers and wives. They support and sustain the group, and their role should not be underestimated. This position involves potentially significant power to influence and shape young children and other adults into supporting IS. Such indoctrination can show its effects even after the defeat of the physical Caliphate both nationally and internationally. Having looked closer at these key roles, the women of IS are arguably involved in a more complex way than what we are inclined to believe. Hence, there are ways in which we can see women jihadists from a different perspective, offering a perhaps more constructive perception where everything is not black and white. This will be further explored in the next chapter.

6. Why are these women so important?

By now I have argued that women do indeed fill a role within Islamist terrorism, at least in IS, that goes beyond being passive observers or de-womanised militants. Consequently, they are actors within Islamist terrorism that should be fully acknowledged for their capabilities and complexities. Continuing this argumentation, this chapter will address research question 2 and examine how feminist theory can illuminate new sides to female jihadism. Using a feminist perspective, we can see this phenomenon from a more constructive perspective and perhaps offer a middle way between the perceptions we have of jihadist women as either passive or extremists. Doing this might offer important insights into the concept of female jihadists which can help us understand their true impact. We must dare to also include women who do not necessarily believe in the same as ourselves or confirm to the norms we see as fundamental. As shown in Chapter 5, the female members of IS clearly neither fit the image we have of the stereotypical, caring woman, nor that of the modern, liberated woman. They instead conform to rules which in our eyes oppress them; they support an ideology which make women the possession of men, and are even willing to kill both themselves and others for an organisation who is highly intolerant towards the 'non-believers'. In spite of this, these women are still women, they are still humans, and they still have an impact on our world whether we want them to or not. Using concepts from feminist theory, we are equipped to see this and to offer new understandings of the complexity of female jihadists. In this regard, two arguments will be presented – the 'counterterrorism measures' argument and the 'empowerment' argument.

6.1 The 'counterterrorism measures' argument

Women in IS have, as shown, participated in the organisation by holding a number of essential roles. They have shown themselves as capable, willing, and determined members of a very active terrorist organisation. In other words, they are bound to be important. Consequently, we need to acknowledge the nature of these women as they pose a significant threat to both national and international security. As Amanda Spencer (2016) argues:

> "As it stands today, counterterrorism approaches aimed to dismantle the IS primarily targets male militants. Astoundingly enough, women are leading contributors to

> ISIS' strength and capabilities […] A reliable comprehension of these factors can produce essential intelligence in the fight against ISIS (p. 73).

The rationale behind what I have chosen to call the 'counterterrorism measures' argument is that women play such a significant role in Islamist terrorism that they need to be accounted for and included in counterterrorism measures if these are to be efficient. Having women in roles that reach far beyond those of 'victims', they present a potential risk by both supporting and ensuring the continued existence of the group, and also by participating in violent terrorism both locally and globally. According to this argument, including women in studies of terrorism and counterterrorism will provide us with a more comprehensive image of the complexity of terrorism, and hence results in better capabilities to provide effective and complete counterterrorism measures that also address the issue of female terrorists.

The social construction of gender, a concept found in feminist theory presented in Chapter 4, is important for this section. The idea is that gender is a social construct which determines the norms of gender and also, depending on how ingrained they are in society, shape the way we act and think about ourselves and others. Feminist theory acknowledges this and recognises its implications. This helps us to see how the social constructs of gender create an over-simplified image of female jihadists. Looking beyond these constructs we can see that these women are not tied to the illustrations of either defenceless and innocent mothers and wives, nor of de-womanised and deviant monsters. Feminist theory stresses how gender constructs make us oblivious to how gender is in fact made up, and that women can be violent, angry, and convinced by extremist Islamic ideologies, and at the same time women. By keeping up these simplified ideas of jihadist women, we are likely to go down the dangerous path of overseeing women's role in counter terrorism. Although feminist theory has had a tendency to paint a certain image of women as non-violent (Sylvester 2010; Parashar 2011), feminist theory provides the tools to study these women from a more fruitful angle if we dare to use it that way.

As Amanda Spencer (2016) argues, the women of IS were increasingly active within most aspects of building the proto-state of IS and these roles should be understood in order to provide information needed to counter and defeat IS. In the role as mothers and wives, the women of IS have the opportunity to shape and transfer the IS-ideology onto their children,

who return to society with a mind-set and a worldview that make them a security threat already from a young age. Solutions to how we can reverse this mind-set and reintegrate them into society is essential to find, and the long-term effects are difficult to determine. Because of this role held by women in IS, and the security threat it poses, it is important that we truly acknowledge the agency and actions of these women. We cannot continue perceiving them as innocent women who are stuck at home doing domestic tasks, supressed by their husbands. In this way, feminist theory can contribute to finding effective counterterrorism measures. In addition, the role women have held as mothers and wives in IS makes them important for preventing future radicalisation. Female victims, survivors, observers etc. of terrorism are endless sources of knowledge when trying to understand the radicalisation processes and motivations of those who join IS. Their insights can contribute to both preventing further radicalisation of particularly women and to develop other counterterrorism measures. Women can, if included directly in the work of counterterrorism, contribute with preventing further radicalisation by both shaping politics and programmes and by implementing these programmes themselves (Fink et.al 2013, p. 4). Women are in many ways the first-line defence in preventing radicalisation. Hence, they should be included in arenas where policies and decisions are made and where programmes for countering terrorism are developed (Fink et.al 2013). In other words: “It is madness to ignore half of society’s talent and skill in any regard, fighting terrorism is certainly no difference” (Howcroft n.d).

Further, women also play a role in IS’ violent activities as morality police, suicide bombers and assumedly also at the front line (Winter 2015; Mail Online 2017; Dearden 2018). As mentioned, this is a role that tends to provoke rather strong reactions, and which is excused in an effort to perhaps maintain the idea we have of the caring woman. Breaking down these gender norms is hence important if we are to fully acknowledge the threat these women pose to our security. This is well-illustrated in a report written by Joana Cook and Gina Vale (2018) on the women and minors of IS. They argue that women in IS, with particular focus on foreign women, most definitely present a potential security threat - first and foremost to physical security. Women have functioned in roles involving participation in direct combat at the front lines and as facilitators and perpetrators of terrorist attacks as previously discussed. In addition, they estimated that 4 761 of those 41 490 persons who travelled from abroad to join IS in Syria and Iraq were women and 4 640 were minors (Cook & Vale 2018,

p. 3). This amounts to quite a significant number of women (and children) who may still be committed to the ideology and visions of IS - despite its physical breakdown - and hence perhaps willing to continue working for the survival of the group (Cook & Vale 2018, p. 56). Having such numbers returning to their countries of origin creates a pressure on governments to build infrastructure and institutions with capacities to deal with those who return. If we overlook this reality, and keep excusing their behaviour in an effort to protect our simplified idea of women, we remove them from any accountability. If the social gender constructs that sustain our perception of women as caring, loving and nurturing are not challenged, we will not be able to see the true threat these women pose to our security.

Further, the role as recruiters is perhaps the most difficult to counter, and hence the more important to recognise. The many social media accounts, videos, and other IS-propaganda items spread on the Internet indicate how easy it is to take part of the recruitment- and propaganda work of the group. Internet is accessible, large, complicated and sometimes also a good place to hide. This makes it difficult to control. If not accounted for, women still committed to IS can again use the Internet and social media to accomplish such mass-recruitment and hence strengthen a broken IS. Being an important element of counterterrorism strategies, it is again essential to acknowledge the misguidance of socially constructed gender and to embrace the perception of women as potential terrorists.

Including women in studies of counterterrorism hence demands investigation and an understanding of aspects such as how women participate, what they do, why they do it and how they are able to do it. This must be done by looking at the realities of those women who have, actively and willingly, participated in such groups. As argued for earlier in chapter 4 of this thesis, women do involve themselves in Islamist terrorism in a way not previously accounted for and they do so in a manner that is more dependent on their own willingness and initiative than previously assumed. This is a key discovery if one aims at developing counterterrorism measures that also address the potentially growing threat of female terrorists. Feminist scholars have for too long disregarded the idea that women can in fact choose to be militant and have personality traits that make them capable of performing violence (Speckhard 2015, p. 1-2). As Parashar (2011) argues:

> "The problem envisaged here is not that there are some militants who are women but that there are women who 'choose' to be militants, support political violence and whose lives are closely entwined with the militant project in which they participate" (p. 204).

This is problematic. This thesis argues that we need to use feminism for what it is worth and dare to acknowledge jihadist women as *women* in order to develop efficient and extensive counterterrorism measures. Applying this approach means that one must study women not based on the socially constructed stereotypes, but on the uncomfortable reality. On the positive note, the threat of women jihadists has gained attention amongst policymakers over the last year, and they are working their way into the programmes for counterterrorism (Howcroft n.d; De Leede et.al 2017; UN Women 2017; Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee n.d; Foreign Affairs Committee 2018; Council of Europe n.d).

6.2 The 'empowerment' argument

Social construction of gender impacts how we perceive people, including women. As mentioned, the women in IS are often perceived as either passive bystanders or de-womanised militants. This perception of women is, arguably, unfruitful in any debate of why and how. Instead, by applying concepts from feminism, one can acknowledge women as diverse, distanced from the socially constructed norms defining them as non-violent and nurturing, and accept that women participating in terrorism are in fact *women*. Instead of either ignoring them or labelling them as abnormal or even masculine, one needs to include them in a broader understanding of what it involves being a woman. Women and women's behaviour cannot be defined singularly – they are highly diverse individuals and possess a range of different characteristics. This includes women who are deliberately joining extreme organisations driven by radical and violent ideologies, women who are participating in violent activities themselves, women who go against much of what we in the West see as progression and development by following religious teachings that in ways limit women and their freedom. These women challenge the norms set by society by presenting us with an alternative of what women are and can be. The traditional narrative society has created of what a woman should be is far outdated and does not contribute to any progress towards greater gender equality or female empowerment.

In line with this, Swati Parashar (2011) questions the way even feminist scholars have exceptionalised women's participation in war and how they themselves contribute to reproducing the idea of women as victims (p. 193). In her chapter in Kronsell and Svedberg's book *Making Gender, Making War: violence, military and peacekeeping practices* she asks: "… why must feminist scholarship exceptionalize women's violence and cage them in the binary discourse of agency and victimhood, thereby denying possibilities of any empowerment, joy, fear, vengeance, or any other kind of politics?" (2011, p. 193). Contemporary feminists still have a way to go before they fully understand the implications of women involved in jihadi terrorism, including the women of IS (Jacoby 2015, p. 526). So, if we can recognise these women as *women* and introduce them to studies of terrorism, we can contribute to changing the norms that have restricted and limited women for centuries. In other words, we need to encourage scholars and practitioners to make the perhaps uncomfortable decision to acknowledge the nature of these militant women not as exceptions, but as a version of femininity side-lined with any other perception we may have of what femininity is supposed to be. By doing this we can hope to achieve further empowerment of women.

In addition, using these feminist concepts to illuminate a new side to women jihadists does not only serve the purpose of empowering women in general, but also gives special attention to the empowerment of Muslim women. Feminist thoughts are in large part established in the West by Western scholars. Although there are certain basic ideas and issues that can be seen as universal for all women, it is important to understand that women encounter rather different issues depending on context and place. This necessarily leads to the need for context-specific efforts for feminists, as previously discussed in the theory chapter on Middle Eastern feminism (Jacoby 2015). An example of this can be found in the Kurdish women's ideology *Jineology*, which, although being inspired by feminism, criticise it for being too Western centric (Öcalan 2013). Looking at Muslim women, particularly those affiliated with extreme branches of Islam such as IS' Wahhabism and Salafism, they are quite restricted and bound to social norms of male dominance. Female members of IS live their lives more or less completely opposite to what we regard as the modern Western ideals of what should be the rights of women.

Despite this, by applying concepts from feminism one can argue that these women are feminists in their own context. This can also be said for the women leaving their relative freedom in Europe to join IS, although it might sound like a paradox to Western feminists. It has been argued that, "to the ideologically driven supporter, this lifestyle is at once a manifestation of empowerment, worship, and participation" (Rafiq & Malik 2015, p. 20). The rationale behind this is that through propaganda, women who join IS are promised empowerment. They are led to believe that, by joining the group and supporting their cause, they will contribute to something greater than themselves and they will be removed from the societies they perceive as oppressive (Rafiq & Malik 2015, p. 18). Although the reality of women in the Islamic State is not exactly what the propaganda makes it out to be, it still shows a determination amongst those women who choose to join. It suggests that women are in a position to make the decision of what they wish to do and what they want to believe in. They take control of their own lives and hence present an alternative image of both women and Muslim women to the one that many have today. Hence, they demonstrate their agency. Some of the women who joined IS did so based on a conscious wish to promote feminism as touched upon in the literature review. They travelled to the Caliphate from Western countries after feeling alienated and misunderstood by society and from the Western feminism. By joining IS, they believed they could achieve their empowerment and live in accordance with their beliefs, although it goes against what 'the rest of the world' thinks is right (Rafiq & Malik 2015, p. 8). That they choose to embrace a life in a patriarchal society where their rights and abilities are restricted does not imply that they are non-political (Jacoby 2015, p. 527) or victims of external factors.

In an article from Dabiq issue 8 (2015), Umm Sumayyah writes about the obligation of hijrah - the obligation of Muslims to leave the land of kufr[11] and migrate to the land of the believers. She talks of the women who migrate to IS as "sick and tired of living amongst kufr and its people" (p. 33). She praises these women for their courage and accomplishments (p. 33), and states that they are: "fragile as glass bottles but their souls are those of men with ambitions almost hugging the heavens" (Dabiq issue 8 2015, p. 34). Further, she encourages her 'sisters' to perform hijrah even though they do not yet have a mahram, because IS will welcome them as long as they follow the right path of faith. If we apply the feminist idea of

[11] The non-believers

contextually and individually constructed gender, the article is arguably offering an alternative perception of IS-women, describing them as strong and to a certain degree independent. Women who are ideologically committed to IS might feel as if they have manifested the ultimate self-expression by performing hijrah and showed themselves as capable and important (Rafiq & Malik 2015, p. 21). In a study (Hoyle et.al 2015) conducted on women who have travelled to IS, it is shown that many are determined and willing to make several attempts to perform hijrah despite being detained and interrogated along the way. In the study, we find the story of three women who met in Turkey to enter the territory of IS together. They were detained both in Turkey and in Syria but were still determined to continue (Hoyle et.al 2015, p. 19-20). Consequently, women who disclose such determination should be acknowledged for their agency. This is perhaps particularly true for those who travel without a male companion.

What is interesting about this 'empowerment argument' is that it highlights the various ways in which empowerment can be brought about, and that one can in fact find ground for female empowerment in places one did not expect. Having active female members of IS who contribute to the future survival of the group is usually not considered a positive development from the perspective of most people who do not support IS. And from the perspective of most Westerners, the treatment of women under IS' ideology is far from desirable. Understanding how women voluntarily give themselves up to these restrictions is also difficult to comprehend. However, in spite of this, female Islamist terrorists are in their own way providing a ground for female empowerment in a very conservative environment by offering a perception of women and femininity that goes far in departing from that we have today. They attribute themselves agency by demonstrating their capabilities, determination, endurance and strength in a challenging situation. However, to see this we need to apply the feminist concepts that allow us to understand the effects of constructed gender on how we perceive and treat people, including women jihadists.

A good example of this relates to the section above about women in IS and their participation in violence. As mentioned, IS had for a long time a rather consistent stance that women shall not take part in any violent activities. However, as time went by IS began allowing women to form and involve themselves in female battalions, and towards the end even to fight at the

front lines. Although there might be several reasons for this change of strategy, including desperation due to a rapid weakening of the group, we also see signs that this change came from the women themselves pushing for the opportunity to be involved in violent jihad. In fact, an IS-member dubbed Ahlam al-Nasr described in an essay what she wished for herself under IS:

> "It is not possible for me to accept any kind of lifestyle except the life of jihad. I strongly desire it. I want to struggle with all types of jihad: spiritual jihad (*jihad al-nafs*), the jihad of preaching and education, the jihad of [raising] money [to advance our cause], and *the jihad with weapons also* [emphasis added]. Both male and female Companions [of the Prophet] did so, so why won't we do the same?!!" (Lahoud 2017, p. 62).

In other words, she aspired for a life where also women were permitted into the militant sphere of society and where she could use violence to fight for the Caliphate. If this is a part of the reality, which I see as rather likely having looked at material concerning these women, I would argue that this can and will contribute to wider female empowerment if treated properly by media, scholars and policymakers. It shows that women, despite living in a 'state' mainly controlled by strictly religious and conservative men, are capable of directing their own lives so that they can achieve what they want. Acknowledging this by including this version of femininity in studies of for example terrorism and feminism is therefore important if one wants to promote female empowerment. Hence, applying feminist concepts to women in IS helps us see that these women do not fit into the dichotomy of being either passive bystanders or de-womanised militants.

However, it is also possible to argue that this 'empowerment' argument is faulty and that the female members of IS do not promote any type of female empowerment, particularly those who act as suicide bombers. As Beyler (2003) states: "The feminist community has often interpreted these actions as an improvement in women's status in these patriarchal societies. They have misinterpreted murders as acts of emancipation". Women are dictated by the patriarchal structures of their societies, which they try to escape from (Bloom 2007, p. 102). They are used as players in a game controlled by men and might believe that by participating as members of a terrorist organisation they can remove themselves from their gender. However, Beyler (2003) argues that "This is where their mistake lies: they will always be

defined by their gender, and will be used because of what society perceives as a more gentle and innocent appearance rather than an intrinsic quality". According to Bloom (2007) we have seen women in history participating in political violence with the intent of challenging the patriarchal structures and gain equality. However, this rarely results in societal changes of this form (Jacoby 2015, p. 540). Female suicide bombers, instead of confronting the structures that oppress them, work under them and ultimately strengthen them (Bloom 2007, p. 102). Farhana Ali (2005), when talking of the increasing number of female suicide bombers from al Qaeda, claimed that the liberal stance the leadership of al Qaeda had on these women would end as soon as the recruitment amongst men rose and as the group gained control over more territory. There was nothing that indicated a shift towards gender equality where "men would allow the mujahidaat to prevail authority and replace images of the male folk-hero" (Ali 2005). Looking at this development with gloomy eyes, Elaine Donnelly proposed that "'equal opportunity' terrorism is not a step forward for women; it is a step backward for humanity" (2002). In addition, the women of IS fail to include a fundamental aspect of feminism and female empowerment, namely the inclusion of *all* women. Instead, they express views that deny the rights, and in some instances even deny the mere existence, of other women (Jacoby 2015, p. 543).

Another aspect which counters the rationale of the 'empowerment' argument is the apparent front between how the West and IS view the construction of society. As presented in Chapter 5, the al-Khansaa manifesto stresses the importance of maintaining the division between women and men if one wants to avoid a societal collapse (Winter 2015, p. 17). The underlying issue here is that these women, and presumably IS as an organisation, perceive what feminist scholars would call 'gender roles' as something dictated by God and hence fixed. Feminists, on the other hand, see these roles as social constructs that need to be constantly challenged and scrutinised to avoid imbalance and exploitation of one gender over the other. Consequently, these differing views on gender are quite significant in the way one think of society and societal norms. If one believes that the roles of men and women are given by God and therefore cannot be challenged, it is quite clear that one will accept them and adhere to them. The rationale of a Western feminist claiming that gender is a socially constructed concept which in fact produces an unfair society, even pointing to IS as a prime example of such unfairness, is consequently unlikely to fare well amongst those who believe in gender roles as determined by God.

Already here we can see that there are obvious opposites, which are likely to prevent female empowerment. Considering this, it seems as if any structural change in the position of women in IS must come from its male members, while the options for women to ensure their own empowerment are rather restricted and in fact legitimised in religion. As it is written several places in the Quran, women are the possession of men: "Your wives are a place of cultivation [i.e., sowing of seed] for you, so come to your place of cultivation however you wish and put forth [righteousness] for yourself" (Quran 2:223) and

> "Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other […] So righteous women are devoutly obedient […] But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance – [first] advice them; [then] then if they [persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them" (Quran 4:34).

As the feminist scholar Germaine Greer underlines, the destructive trend of women who subordinate themselves to inferiority by passively accepting the idea that women are naturally dependent on men creates as issue (Walters 2005, p. 106).

However, by using feminist theory to examine the full complexity of these women, this thesis argues that women jihadists have the potential to promote female empowerment in their own context. Although they maintain and reproduce a patriarchal society, they do it because they desire it and see it as their preferred way to live. We cannot exclude and demonise those who do not identify with our norms and ideas of what is right. Instead, we must use the tools and make an effort to understand them and their full reality before we make our judgement. Failing to do this will lead to a rather unfruitful debate. To summarise, there are interesting arguments on both sides of this debate. On the one hand, the female members of IS offer alternative understandings of the concepts of *femininity* and *women*. Although supporting a society based on patriarchal structures and an ideology promoting violence, they are showing themselves as capable and determined. They claim agency for themselves and illustrate the complexity of women. Hence, one can argue that these women promote feminism and female empowerment in their own context. On the other hand, they do in fact support and reproduce social norms that are oppressive against women. They abide to rules excluding them from the public spheres of society and agree to function under the rule of men. Although perhaps claiming to promote female empowerment, they instead

strengthen these oppressive structures. According to Jacoby (2015): “ISIS women are merely exchanging one patriarchy for another, probably more restrictive one” (p. 542). Nevertheless, it is important to study these women in their true nature because it ultimately challenges the gender norms that continue to limit women, and because it has the potential to empower women by emphasising their agency. Applying feminist concepts allows us to do so, and hence offer new insights that might alter the perception we have of these women.

7. Conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to apply concepts from feminist theory to investigate the nature of female jihadists, first by looking at the roles they play in Islamic State and, second, their potential impact on security and female empowerment. The thesis found that women have indeed taken on more roles in IS than the typical 'mother and wife'-role, that these roles are more complex and meaningful than what we tend to assume, and that many seem to have involved themselves in these purposively. Further, the thesis found that by applying ideas from feminist thought, we are able to see how the jihadist women of IS impact our world, both from a security perspective and an empowerment perspective. Consequently, the thesis found that, by applying feminist concepts of social gender construction, we are offered new insight of these women which contribute to a perhaps more constructive perception of jihadist women. We cannot limit these women to fit into the narrow perception of jihadist women as passive bystanders or de-womanised militants.

To elaborate on the first findings and answer research question one, women have functioned as i) vital actors in the recruitment of other women to join the organisation, ii) violent actors by participating in the al-Khansaa Battalion, at the front lines and in suicide missions, and finally iii) as wives and mothers supporting their husbands and raising sons who are meant to be the future jihadists of the Caliphate. In recruitment, they have been innovative and active using online channels and social media to reach women globally. They have created social media accounts used for spreading IS-propaganda and giving advice to women who wish to travel to the Caliphate. Further, they have written articles aimed at women in IS' online magazines and, allegedly, members of the al-Khansaa Battalion released a manifesto describing the role and life of women under IS. As violent actors, they have been more restricted as IS' ideology to a great extent object women's participation in battle. However, the women of the al-Khansaa Battalion are known for being brutal when patrolling the streets and punishing women who do not follow the many rules of conduct decided by IS. In addition, there are accounts of women participating both at the battlefield and as suicide bombers, although this is more of an exemption to the rule. Third, most women in the Caliphate are expected to marry a male member of the group and to produce children that are to be raised in the ideology of IS. This role tends to be looked at rather naively as the power women have over the household and their children is quite significant when thinking about indoctrination and radicalisation.

The second part of the findings relates to how feminist concepts can illuminate new sides of women jihadists, hence answering the second research question. The 'counterterrorism measures' argument claimed that the roles women play in IS, and other terrorist groups, are so significant that excluding them will lead to incomplete and inefficient counterterrorism measures. These women might pose a significant threat to both national and international security and we need to acknowledge their potential in order to develop comprehensive measures. The 'empowerment' argument claims that these women have the potential to contribute to female empowerment if we dare to remove ourselves from the comfortable idea of women as caring and peace-loving. Although the acts of these women are horrific, they still present an alternative reality to what we typically expect women to be. Particularly those women who apparently involve themselves more actively and willingly in the ideology and acts of IS are challenging the norms that limit women to powerless victims without agency and accountability. However, it is possible to argue that the women of IS are not contributing to female empowerment because they themselves seek and reproduce a society that oppresses women. Consequently, the 'empowerment' argument needs to be used in the right way if applied.

In summary, the thesis found that women have had important roles in IS that have been overlooked until only recently, and that feminist concepts can illuminate sides to women jihadists that underline their impact on our world. Consequently, the women of IS cannot all be automatically perceived as victims or deviants without any accountability for their actions. Going forward, we need to dig deeper and try to understand the complexities of women in relation to terrorism and violence. To accomplish this, we have to acknowledge their potential and their abilities to act outside of what is traditionally seen as appropriate for women. These women do indeed pose a potentially significant risk returning either to their former residents in Syria and Iraq or to their country of origin around the world. When they do, we need to understand that some of these women, although not all, have willingly participated in a terrorist organisation and should be treated as individuals responsible for their own actions. We should also dare to see the potential these women have of promoting empowerment for women, by demonstrating their agency and determination in a patriarchal society such as the one found in the Caliphate.

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Appendix 1 (Interviewee 1)

1. How would you describe the role of women in Islamist terrorism today?

2. Which activities are women involved in as members of Islamist terrorist organisations today?

3. Do you think the role of women terrorist activities have changed over the past twenty-or-so years?

Appendix 2 (Interviewee 2)

1. How would you describe the role of women in Islamist terrorism today, with particular focus on the Islamic State?

2. Which activities do you believe women are involved in as members of the Islamic State today?

3. How would you think a feminist perspective on the new role of female terrorists will contribute to painting a new picture of women and femininity?

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