Wives imported from the West – the Migration of Western Women to the Islamic State

Introduction
By 2015, the number of foreign fighters who had joined to ISIS from the West was more than 5000. From them, at least 550 were women, which is an unprecedented number of those, who decided besides a terrorist organization. The academic and the popular sphere is divided in the question what is the motivation behind this decision, however it is a constant non-understanding why these women decides against a democracy to join to an autocracy, were the rule of law is not maintained and the role of women is traditional. It seems that they are giving up their rights, liberties and freedom and chose to be oppressed. Therefore, the paper analysis the question how the West deals with the tendency of the emigration of so much women and how it tries to explain itself this phenomenon.

While theses women’s motivation can be diverse, their representation is very similar. Therefore I would like to analyses the public opinion towards these women, what people think is in the background of this decision. For this, the best tool to use is media analysis because media reaches to everyday people and besides forming the general view about a question it also reflects that. I would like to analyze the depiction of women, because media usually treat them differently from man, positioning them in the familial sphere, not taking into consideration their agency and free will. Therefore, my argument is that they are represented as passive agent who are influenced by other actors like man or terrorist recruiters.

In the first part of my research, I will show the role of women in the Islamic State and the propaganda which targets especially Western women. From that, it can be seen that women are mainly targeted with promises of equality and respect towards women. In spite of this, media usually highlights personal factors when talking about these women, which can be seen in the second part of the research. In the final part, I will show the findings of my discourse analysis, which supported the hypothesis that women are depicted as passive agents with no political motivations.

Jihadi brides
Since 2012, in parallel with the sweep of the Islamic State terrorist organization, the phenomenon of foreign fighters appeared in the international news portals. They are those Westerners who travel to Syria or Iraq, to fight in the side of the Islamic State for the foundation of a Sunni Islamic State. But besides men, women also appear in the list of Westerners who travelled there. From the 3000 Western citizen who left their country 550 was women by 2015, which means that an unprecedented number of women decided besides the joining of a terrorist organization. Most of the times, these women leave to marry an IS fighter, with whom they met on the internet, and be a "jihadi brides". In this section, I will present the role of women in the Islamic State and the possible motivations behind the decision to leave.
Unlike the pictures on the popular media accounts of ISIS members, women are allowed to fight only in very extreme and special circumstances, but in general, possibilities for fighting are very low. One example of this is the Al-Khansaa Brigade, which is an ultra-oppressive police force, aiming to monitor females and responsible for enforcing female moral behavior. One of the leading figure of this Brigade is even a British girl, Aqsa Mahmood who left Glasgow in 2013.

The most important role of women is motherhood and family support, that is why they are usually getting married very soon after their arrival to Syria. A secondary role for women involves female specific propaganda, which targets both Women from the West and women from other parts of the world. The main message targeting Westerners is that in the Islamic State women are valued, and treated not as sexual objects, but as mothers to the next generation and guardians of the ISIS ideology. In their propaganda, they argue that the Western model for women has failed, and that migrating to Islamic State-held territories holds the only solution. According to Erin Saltman, ‘there is a strong sense that you are joining a family. They really play up the fact that you are among sisters, that everyone is treated equally. Part of it almost plays out a feminist narrative, which says the West sexualizes women and, in Islamic State territory, you are treated with respect.

However, as lot of researches have shown, their demographic profile is diverse, there is no one type of women who goes to Syria, but they are from different ages, countries and family backgrounds. Some are members of a Muslim diaspora, a smaller number are converts. As their demographic background, their motivation can be also very different, but researchers suggest that it do not differ from the motivation of men: alienation, inequality, marriage, adventure, and pull of the cause are the main motivations for going to Syria.

According to Peresin the motivations cited most often by the women themselves are religious or political ones. These motivations can be for example fulfilling their religious duties or taking part of the state building process. This later also means to accept a new role as a women, which is different from the one they had in their homeland in most of the cases. Therefore, as the Quilliam foundation argues, gender is not important when talking about radicalization, only when talking about recruitment: women make more effective recruiters of other women than men.

From above, it can be seen that although what women are promised in the propaganda material of ISIS is being in equality, being treated with respect and fulfilling their religious duties, as I will argue in the further parts of this essay, Western media highlights only the personal motivations that contributed in the decision to leave.

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2 Counter Extremism Project, Avaible at: https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/aqsa-mahmood
5 The Guardian, ‘I went to join Isis in Syria, taking my four-year-old. It was a journey into hell’, Avaible at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/09/sophie-kasiki-isis-raqqa-child-radicalised
Media representation of female terrorists

In this section, I will briefly present the existing literature about the media representation of female terrorists. All of these sources argue that women are usually placed in the familial world of emotion and victimhood which is in contrast with the area of men who own the political and public world. Therefore, analyzing women’s place in terrorist organizations is a good way to see what happens when women start to engage with activities that are traditionally associated with masculinity, just like political violence. This research contributes to this literature but from the viewpoint of women from the West, who are perceived as giving up their democratic rights to live in a regime highly oppressive against women.

As Jessica West argues, the popular representation of women is not changed from the hegemonic feminity, and their feminine qualities and motivations are emphasized primarily. In practice, it means that when trying to explain the reasons they decided to join to a terror organization, personal motivations come to the front. For example in the case of Chechen Black Widows, media sources usually highlight that they are forced into terrorism by manipulation or rape or revenge as a motivating factor, but political reasons very rarely appear in these articles. The reason why it is problematic is the lack of the agency of the actors: they are instrumentalized and denied the possibility to make their own decisions.  

Naaman argues similarly in her article about media representation of Palestinian female suicide bombers. According to her, the depiction of war generally falls into normative gender categories, which shows men as fighters and women as the victims. The traditional image of women is nurturers or mothers of the nation, vulnerable and in need of defense. This image is challenged when women decides to fight besides men, therefore in the popular media they are often represented as deviant from prescribed forms of femininity.

Nacos also gets to the same conclusion in her essay about the media representation of female terrorist. She shows that, in spite of the high involvement of women in every part of terror activity, mass media typically depict them as interlopers in an utterly male domain. According to her, media uses stereotypes, like their physical appearance, personal connections or emotional motivations, therefore it covers the reality when talking about women in terror organizations.

And finally, in the book Women, Gender and terrorism, Sjoberg and Gentry state that scholar and public reports usually conclude that women engage in terrorism for personal reasons, but according to the authors this denies women’s agency and reify gender stereotypes. While the standards of what it means to be a woman are still subordinated to the standards of what it means to be a man, women’s violence falls outside of these ideal-typical understandings. Therefore, “sensationalized media coverage of female terrorists follows a storyline that portrays women as capable of becoming bombers only if they are dominated by men instead of attributing their actions to similar factors as those seen to motivate men or even to other individual factors or choices”.


In the previous parts of the paper I showed with what messages women are targeted to join to the terrorist group and in general, how media depicts terrorist women. While their motivation can be diverse from personal factors to political and religious one, media usually highlights the premier one which have a result in not taking into account women’s agency. In the final part, I will test this hypothesis by analyzing media sources.

As a methodology, I use discourse analysis on the most popular international news portals. I chose discourse analysis, because media can reflect the general public opinion of a society, therefore it is suitable to measure how the West explain this phenomenon to itself. Therefore, for the analysis I chose five prominent Western news websites, both from Europe and from the United States: BBC, CNN, The Guardian, Huffington Post, The Independent. While doing this, I was looking for the appearance of the motivation of the women and the context they are depicted. I assumed, that their family background and personal problems are almost always appear in the media articles.

Findings and discussion
After analyzing the media reports about the topic, it can be seen that media uses simplification when trying to understand the motifs of the women. Most of the articles emphasized personal motivations while political ones appeared very rarely, however it can also be observed in some articles. Besides personal and political motivations, two articles I found mentioned the push factors European societies cause which contribute in the decision.

Most of the articles are personalized, they present the life of the girls in the home countries, make interview with their families and show how these girls lived their ordinary lives: as good students, hanging about their friends and listening to pop music. Most of these depicts women as vulnerable victims

"Accounts of Jihadi brides are full of hope and naive romanticism"\(^{14}\)

"She added that the Islamic State seemed to be playing on the insecurities of the very young women being recruited and their desire to belong"\(^{15}\)

or those who were influenced by men

"The departures are less the whims of adolescents and more the conclusions of months of work by organised radical recruitment networks that specifically target young people in search of an identity"\(^{16}\),

"Her family does not know exactly how, but propaganda videos making the rounds play to the ideals and fantasies of teenage girls."\(^{17}\)

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
"What we’re in need of, ideally, is to ensure that these children fully comprehend the realities of ISIS. Do they have any idea of what life is like under ISIS?“  

However, in spite of the bigger weight of personal factors, some articles also raised the attention that political and religious factors can contribute to this decision.

"However this does not mean the young women simply want to find a husband. The "jihadi bride" concept is only part of the story. There is another side to their decision to travel. Women are joining IS because it provides a new utopian politics - participating in jihad and being part of the creation of a new Islamic state."

"While some women are attracted to the idea of marrying a fighter, others “are joining I.S. because it provides a new utopian politics, participating in jihad and being part of the creation of a new Islamic state,”

There was only two article I found, one written by Lee Smith from Hudson Institute, and the other on New York Times, which was about a more macro level analysis, arguing that Europe’s values and social context are also in the background.

“Because, for all the awesome social services and consumer goods it can offer, Europe has become incapable of endowing the lives of its citizens, Muslim or not, with meaning.”

"They grew up in a Britain that is filled with Islamophobia, where people seem to constantly speak ill about their faith."

I didn’t find any sign of othering, but rather the articles try to show how these women are similar to us. One mean for it is the personalized depiction I mentioned above, through which the reader can identify with the girls. If somebody is represented as the Other, it is rather the terrorists, of whom the articles do not show anything besides that they are influence young, vulnerable girls from Us.

One possibility for further development of the research is to compare media representation of women and men. It can be interesting to see whether men are also represented as personalized ways as women. And other development could be to compare the members of a diaspora and converts with European origin. According to my hypothesis, the attitude towards diaspora members is more hostile, and contains elements of Orientalism, while non-diasporic women are rather seen as the victims of terrorist recruiters.

18 Huffington Post, Teenage Rebellion or Radicalisation of Schoolgirls in UK?, Avaiable at: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ruwayda-mustafah/isis-girls_b_6732326.html
21 Hudson, Why the teenage girls of Europe are joining ISIS? Avaiable at: https://www.hudson.org/research/10738-why-the-teenage-girls-of-europe-are-joining-isis
22 The Guardian, Without more support, Muslim girls may well be tempted by Isis’s HR department, Avaiable at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/24/muslim-girls-isis-teenage-east-london
Conclusion

In my essay, I focused on the question how the media represent women who travelled to the Islamic State to join the terrorist organization. I was interested in the representation of women, because media usually treat them differently from man, positioning them in the familial sphere, not taking into consideration their agency and free will.

In the first section I showed the propaganda targeting Western women to travel to Syria and their main roles in the country. In the second section, I showed the existing literature of female terrorists’ representation in the media. All of these source argues that the portrays of women credit them individual and personal motivation factors rather than religious or political ones. Therefore, my hypothesis was that although the motivation of foreign fighters are diverse, media only highlights the personal factors, which fits in the hegemonic feminity theory.

After analyzing online media sources with discourse analysis, I partly supported my hypothesis: it is true, that most of the sources personalized very much the women who left. They usually show their family and their life back home as ordinary teenage girls and very few articles mentioned political factors as possible motivations. However, I did not find any evidence on othering the Muslim women who left. Instead, they were showed as some of Us, who were fobbed by male terrorist recruiters. One possible development of the research is to compare the portrays of male and female foreign fighters to see whether this personalization is unique in the case of women.

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The Guardian, Without more support, Muslim girls may well be tempted by Isis’s HR department, Avaible at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/24/muslim-girls-isis-teenage-east-london [Accessed 11. April 2017]