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Master thesis

2024

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**Beyond traditional
support:
the active role of women as
ISIS propaganda
disseminators and
recruiters**

Master's thesis

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Study Programme: International Security Studies

Year of defence: 2024

Declaration

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2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 31/07/2024

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Bibliographic note

Pasian, C. (2024). Beyond traditional support: the active role of women as ISIS propaganda disseminators and recruiters. Master thesis. Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Political Studies, Department of Security Studies. Supervisor doc. PhDr. Vít Strítecký, M.Phil., Ph.D.

Length of the Thesis: 199,835 characters with spaces excluding abstract and reference list

Abstract

This thesis investigates the underestimated issue of women's active participation in ISIS posing a critical threat to international security. The project focuses on the extent to which ISIS females' recruitment and propaganda dissemination activities contribute to the organization's endurance and global outreach, exploring how gender-based propagandistic narratives respond to, and are interpreted by, different viewpoints on female emancipation, reinforcing or challenging gender roles. By focusing on the concept of agency, inspired by Giddens's structuration theory, the project aims to provide an alternative understanding of the topic, considering its interaction with the organization's propagandistic content targeting women, as well as with gender roles. To assess their relevance for the organization, this research explores the role of ISIS women in their online and offline contributions as propaganda disseminators and recruiters. Furthermore, it examines how the organization's propagandistic narratives leverage on the ideas of empowerment and emancipation to appeal to its female audience. Through the conduction of a qualitative analysis of carefully selected primary and secondary sources, this thesis aims to contribute to the development of a broader understanding of females' participation in the Islamic State's violent extremism. This research's findings underline the relevance of not only considering their potential as agents in embodying and promoting ISIS ideology, but also the crucial role played by empowering propagandistic narratives, and the subjectivity of the interpretation of female emancipation when assessing the phenomenon of women's participation in violent extremism. This study attempts to provide valuable insights for policymakers and scholars interested in counter-extremism by adopting of a women-centered, agent-centric, gender-based approach.

Keywords: women, ISIS, agency, propaganda, recruiter, disseminator

Table of content

1. Introduction	8
2. Literature review	12
2.1 Women in violent extremism	12
2.2 ISIS female recruiters and propaganda disseminators	16
2.3 Women in ISIS: gender-based perspectives	17
2.4 Female emancipation: the concept from different angles	18
2.4.1 (Western) Feminism	18
2.4.2 Islamic feminism	20
2.4.3 Jihadi feminism	22
2.5 Literature gap	23
3. Theoretical framework	25
3.1 Agency	25
3.1.1 Defining agency	25
3.1.2 Beyond traditional agency: functional conceptualizations	26
3.2 Defining recruiters and disseminators	28
3.3 Propaganda	28
3.3.1 Defining propaganda	28
3.3.2 Propaganda: functional conceptualizations	29
3.4 Defining gender roles	30
3.5 Relationships among concepts	30
3.5.1 Visual Representation	31
4. Methodology	32
4.1 Research design	32
4.2 Case study selection	33
4.3 Data collection	34

4.4 Data analysis.....	36
4.5 Limitations.....	37
5. <i>Analysis</i>	40
5.1 Women’s agency as recruiters and propaganda disseminators.....	40
5.1.1 Online.....	40
5.1.2 Offline	49
5.2 ISIS, propaganda, and gender roles	50
5.2.1 Picturing female emancipation: agency in Dabiq and Rumiyah.....	50
5.2.2 A chameleonic gender-based propaganda strategy	61
5.2.3 Propaganda as tool to reinforce gender roles: the role of aesthetics and visuals	63
5.2.4 Emancipation in official and unofficial propaganda.....	66
6. <i>Discussion</i>	72
6.1 Women as ISIS propaganda disseminators and recruiters: an invaluable resource.....	72
6.1.1 Online.....	72
6.1.2 Offline	74
6.2 Gender, agency and empowerment in ISIS’s propaganda: picturing emancipation?	74
6.2.1 ISIS propaganda as empowering force	75
6.2.2 ISIS propaganda as instrumentalizing conservative force	77
7. <i>Conclusion</i>	85
7.1 Review of the Study and key findings	85
7.2 Recommendations and directions for future research	87
8 <i>References</i>	89

1. Introduction

The participation of women in jihadist groups is an evolving and complex phenomenon, whose roots and implications necessitate further investigation, in order for the issue to be better understood and, therefore, addressed. In particular, ISIS has been innovative in actively integrating women into its society, progressively tasking females with a growing number of functions.

In this context, the distinctiveness of ISIS is rooted in its continuous and multidimensional evolution, key determinant of its success. The Islamic State is in fact described as “a terrorist organization which engaged in guerilla tactics, a political and state-building project, and even a social movement” (Margolin & Cook, 2023, p.6), which has been able to adapt and transform itself over time according to different needs and surrounding circumstances, being able to become a Caliphate in 2014 and returning to be a contained insurgent group five years later. Consequently, the organization’s ideology, resources, means, objectives, recruits, propagandistic messages and indoctrination targets have evolved accordingly. Along with these changes, ISIS has varied its position on women’s participation in its societal structure. Understanding their importance as state-builders and propaganda recruiters and disseminators, the organization has increasingly integrated women in the accomplishment of its divine mission, progressively incorporating them in its proselytizing discourse, successfully developing appealing gender-based narratives to enhance their recruitment.

Among the different factors contributing to women’s attraction towards jihadism and their decision to join ISIS, the role of such propagandistic narratives and their relationship with female empowerment and emancipation is often underestimated within the academic debate, frequently resulting in the neglect of these females’ agency. In fact, the scholarly discourse around women and violent extremism often provides a simplistic picture of the phenomenon: female ISIS virtual and physical joiners tend to be portrayed as brainwashed, passive actors, mentally deviant subjects, or simply victims of the organization’s radical system and brutality.

Additionally, not enough investigation has been undertaken regarding the effectiveness of gender-focused propagandistic narratives in interacting with women’s agency and responding to and reinterpreting the current different perspectives on female emancipation.

Furthermore, despite such phenomenon being increasingly attracting scholars’ attention, the existing academic literature has not been sufficiently able to exhaustively define the impact that women have on IS’s extremist society and the extent to which they play a role in ensuring its survival contributing in terms of recruitment and propaganda dissemination, while promoting agency and empowerment in such a patriarchal societal framework.

Therefore, this research attempts to address the existing gaps in the literature by deepening the scholarly understanding of women's agency in contributing to ISIS's ideology spreading, in parallel to exploring how the organization's empowering propagandistic narratives are designed to fuel their participation. By providing an alternative framework which considers women as agents, this contribution can be helpful to develop a more realistic estimation and comprehension of women's participation in violent extremist activities. Employing a women-centered, agent-centric, gender-based approach, this study aims to offer insightful information to scholars and policymakers that are interested in counter-extremism.

Thus, in order to alternatively address the complexity of this scholarly emerging topic, this thesis attempts to answer the following research question and the related sub-questions:

- To what extent does the presence of female recruiters and propaganda disseminators in ISIS contribute to the organization's overall survival, recruitment efforts and its ability to maintain a global online presence?
- What are the themes and narratives employed by ISIS's gender-based propagandistic message, and how do these reinforce gender roles or challenge them? How do they respond to and are interpreted by different perspectives on female emancipation?

While this thesis' main research question attempts to assess the relevance of women's contribution in terms of propaganda dissemination and recruitment for ISIS's endurance and global outreach, the project's sub-questions aim to identify how the organization's recurrent gender-based propaganda narratives interact with gender roles and diverse existing viewpoints on female emancipation.

To respond to the above-mentioned research question and sub-questions, this thesis will start by reviewing the currently existing literature on the topic, introducing diverse perspectives on the issue. In particular, the section will present interesting contributions within the academic debate on women and their involvement in violent extremism, as well as previous investigations on the role of females in ISIS, and how their engagement has been formerly interpreted through a gender-based lens. Moreover, it will shed a light on different interpretations evolving around the concept of female emancipation, exploring how its facets have resulted in the emergence of a plurality of movements aiming to empower females differently. Precisely, the chapter will introduce how this concept is distinctly conceived by Western, Islamic and jihadi feminists.

Secondly, this project will present its theoretical framework, which constitutes the conceptual and definitional foundation of this analysis. Precisely, this thesis will employ the concept of agency intended as general capacity to act independently and make autonomous decisions, recapturing Giddens' structuration theory's conceptualization of the term. In particular, similarly to the theory, this thesis will contemplate how agents' behaviors constantly change interacting with social contexts, depending on the related variable circumstances, being agency "politically and socially constructed" (Offerein, 2018, p.48). Doing so, the study attempts to shed light on an under-researched aspect of this thesis' topic, which is not sufficiently scholarly addressed from a women-centered perspective, considering females as agents interacting with social environments and the related norms rather than passive subjects in their relationship with violent extremism. Moreover, through the conceptualization of recruiter, disseminator, propaganda and gender roles, the project will focus on the relationship between these key ideas in order to assess the extent to which ISIS women contribute to the organization in terms of propaganda dissemination and recruitment, while considering how gender-based propagandistic themes respond to different interpretations of female emancipation, instrumentalizing female agency, associating it to its peculiar extremist conceptualization for its indoctrination purposes.

Thirdly, the following chapter will elucidate the chosen methodological approach to conduct the study in terms of case study selection, data collection and analysis, considering also the project's limitations. In particular, this section will explore the reasons behind the selection of a fully qualitative, inductive and interpretivist methodological approach, choosing ISIS as object of analysis due to its peculiar, albeit temporal, quasi-state status and the related ambitions, needs and capabilities. Moreover, the chapter will introduce the employed methodology of data collection, introducing primary propaganda sources as well as secondary ones, ranging from previously conducted studies to newspaper articles and reports. These documents will be re-interpreted through an agent-based lens, according to the research theoretical framework. Lastly, the section will mention and address the study's limitations in terms of time, ethics, resources, linguistic knowledge, as well as information accessibility and, consequently, reliability of the employed secondary sources.

Furthermore, the thesis' analysis section will proceed presenting and commenting the accurately selected primary and secondary data to provide a deeper informative understanding of the chosen topic through the lenses of the adopted research framework. To do so, the project will firstly analyze and re-interpret previous academic findings and social media content to investigate how ISIS women contribute in terms of propaganda dissemination and recruitment in the online and offline

domains. Secondly, the following paragraphs will focus on previously selected sections of official and unofficial ISIS propaganda content to provide an alternative agent-based reading of their message. This analysis will introduce the thesis' discussion, which aims to reply to the research question and sub-questions, assessing women's roles in the organization, as well as their positioning in ISIS's chameleonic propaganda strategy which alternatively addresses women's emancipation.

The discussion paragraphs will instead present and examine the research's findings in relation to the thesis' objective. This evaluation is undertaken considering the analysis of both primary and secondary sources, highlighting their differences, discrepancies, similarities, controversies, interpreting them through the selected research framework. Results are discussed from a narrower, IS's female sympathizer perspective, as well as from a broader external one, highlighting the subjectivity of the interpretation of agency and, consequently, of the concept of female emancipation.

Finally, this project's conclusion section will explicitly answer this thesis' research question and sub-questions, providing suggestions for further research.

2. Literature review

The purpose of the following section is to explore the complexities surrounding the role of women in ISIS reviewing the existent scholarly literature not only on females' role as recruiters and propaganda disseminators within the organization, but also analyzing different academic perspectives on women's role in violent extremism, providing a comprehensive analysis of the current state of knowledge on the subject. In order to do so, the following paragraphs will first focus on females and extremism as well as on the existing knowledge on their roles in the Islamic State and how the topic has been previously addressed through a gender lens. Furthermore, the following section will introduce how various interpretations around the idea of female emancipation have resulted into the rise of a variety of movements that conceive the empowerment of women differently.

2.1 Women in violent extremism

Despite the participation of women in violent extremism being constantly growing and evolving, the general academic understanding of this multifaceted phenomenon suffers from a lack of a deep gender-specific focus. In fact, the traditional narrative of women in violent extremism has been overshadowed by a general focus on male perpetrators. However, this does not reflect reality, as women have played and will play a decisive role in insurgencies and terrorism, challenging the stereotypical view of females as passive actors and victims. This biased view on the participation of women in violent extremism is problematic not only from an academic point of view, but also, and especially, in the development of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) policies, as they are not perceived as dangerous as males. Moreover, when taking into consideration the possible role of females within extremist organization, the media and the academic debate tend to focus on the figure of the suicide bomber, neglecting possible ideological, logistical, and operational functions that women can operate within the groups (OSCE, 2013).

To demonstrate the relevance of this growing phenomenon, Cruise (2016) reports statistics on women's involvement in terrorist organizations, specifying how, in 2016, females constituted 25% of all suicide bombers. In her study, however, she also underlines how, despite the majority of the literature focusing only on the role of the female suicide attacker, women's roles within violent extremist organization are changing, comprehending information sharing, message bearing,

recruitment, logistics. However, the study underlines how women are constantly represented as weak, neglecting their agency in undertaking such activities. This is reflected also in how female extremists are labeled: Cruise (2016) cites the examples of the “Black Widows” and “Jihadi Brides” to demonstrate how the gender dimension is integrated in the press to depict these women as irrationally devastated by their husband’s loss or forced by their male counterparts to commit to the cause. On the other hand, the study cites ISIS as one of the most efficient propaganda machines in females’ recruitment, specifying that the Islamic State has been able to successfully recruit Western women, which make up to 10% of the total population of extremists who joined its ranks (Huckerby in Cruise, 2016), suggesting that the phenomenon keeps being misunderstood due to the simplistic general focus on why these women are broken instead of on their agency in joining such organizations.

A major study mainly focused on female suicide bombers is Bloom’s (2005). It explains how females have been traditionally undertaking this role within secular separatist organizations, and only recently within religious ones. Similarly to Cruise (2016), Bloom (2005) recognizes the existence of an evolution of women’s participation in violent extremism, however defining the innovation being the advent of female suicide attacking. Bloom also underlines how, in spite of this, the gender-based definition of women’s roles does not change, as they are depicted as “chaste wives and mothers of revolution” (Bloom, 2005, p.56) even after their martyrdom. According to the scholar, this progressively growing involvement in violent extremism has impacted the existing societal norms in different societies, creating a double trajectory, where it is necessary to maintain their traditional role while persuading society of their valuable contribution.

In parallel, Carter (2013) mentions diverse examples of women’s involvement in violent extremist groups cited in the existing scholarly literature, specifying how women did even constitute their own wings of armed extremism within organizations or directly an all-women extremist group (Jackson et al., in Carter, 2013).

Furthermore, as also mentioned by the scholar, a large body of the existing literature focuses on motivating factors for joining violent extremism, presenting different perspectives on the topic. A relevant contribution in this sense is provided by Saltman and Smith (2015), who focus their analysis on the growing role of female Western foreign fighters joining the Islamic State, disproving the picture of the jihadi bride and recognizing females’ agency in joining the organization. The scholars identify several push and pull factors that drive women to join the State: those include isolation, dissatisfaction with the international geopolitical panorama, feeling that the Muslim community is oppressed worldwide; desire for belonging and for a collective sense of sisterhood,

romance, as well as religious-based duties and goals. Interestingly, the scholars underline how there is no univocal profile of a female ISIS Western foreign fighter, being the related backgrounds characterized by significant diversity. They also explain how women are key players within the organization, ensuring not only the survival of the State as wives and mothers, but also as recruiters and propaganda disseminators, as it will be further explored in this project's analysis.

Rape also appears among the mainly discussed drivers towards violent extremism within the academic debate. According to Bloom (2007), sexual violence is likely to motivate women towards politically violent activities. In her research, she identifies rape as one of the possible motivations that cause the execution of suicide attacks by women, together with revenge, redemption, the relationship with a group member, respect and honor, the latter being tainted by rape committed by enemies (Bloom, 2011). Honor is also mentioned as a motivating factor for women undertaking terrorist attacks by Von Knop (2007).

According to Jackson et al. (2011), violent women are portrayed as “the exception that proves the rule that women are inherently peaceful and less prone to violence by their nature than men” (Jackson et al., 2011, pp.144-145). Citing Sjoberg and Gentry (2007), the research also mentions how these subjects are depicted as “deviant women, monsters or victims to be rescued” (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007, quoted in Jackson et al., 2011, pp.144-145) and how the female terrorist phenomenon represents an advantage for the extremist groups, attracting wider media coverage.

While economic marginalization is also mentioned as another possible factor influencing the decision to join violent extremism, Gentry (2017) focuses her study on the divide between the private and public spheres in order to provide an explanation to the societal gender-based norms that consider women who take part in public activities as political agents as deviant. According to this perspective, females are commonly associated with the private domain, where they act as non-violent, docile presences. In her analysis, the scholar also mentions the evolution on feminist studies on the topic, which evolved from a tendency to dehumanize irrational women who engage in political violence to a progressive acknowledgment of their role within an organization.

Differently, according to Sjoberg and Wood (2015), the reasons driving women to participate in violent extremist activities are similar men's, ranging from political, religious and economic factors, to social pressure, abuse, or incentives provided by the organizations such as financial rewards. Nonetheless, the scholar specifies how the sense of adventure perceived by female recruits differs from men's, as the first tend to romanticize the experience, while the latter are fascinated and

attracted by the violent dimension of political extremism. Sjoberg and Wood (2015) also mention the desire for political empowerment as a driver for females' participation in such groups and organizations.

Cunningham (2003) provides instead a global overview of trends within the phenomenon of female terrorism, identifying key commonalities and differences across regions. According to the scholar, while leftist organizations leverage on females' desire for empowerment and change, women's operationalization is being progressively and conveniently accepted also by secular, religious, and rightist groups. Similarly to Sjoberg and Wood (2015), the scholar argues that the motivations to join such groups and organizations are similar between the sexes, underlining how the final goal usually entails achieving political change, being it subversive or limited. Cunningham (2003) therefore rejects the stereotypical idea according to which women are driven to violent extremism only by personal reasons as revenge, rape, poverty, underlining how, just as men, they are consciously choosing for themselves, combining collective and personal motivations. Moreover, the scholar specifies how societal structures do not necessarily impose and limit women's actions within extremist groups and organizations.

Another contribution is provided by Asante and Shepherd (2020), who also underline that some women and men are subjected to several common attractive factors which may drive them to violent extremism. The scholars, however, focus mainly on women, arguing that even patriarchal organizations as ISIS may provide women with a sense of empowerment. Asante and Shepherd (2020) underline how driving factors may differ among sympathizers for such organizations, calling for action and a change of approach to better tackle this growing global phenomenon, adopting a major gender-based focus in the implementation of CVE programs.

According to Haynie (2016), women and men suffer from the same grievances that make them more susceptible to the idea of joining such violent groups and organizations. Nonetheless, the analysis underlines how the difference is made by personal experiences, which differ among individuals as well as genders, and that potentially result in strongly different outcomes. As Asante and Shepherd (2020), the author calls for an amelioration of policy responses to develop a better understanding of the phenomenon and the related international counterstrategies.

As far as female terrorism is concerned, Jacques and Taylor (2009) provide an insightful classification of the most recurrent factors and aspects mentioned and discussed within the academia. The identified features of the phenomenon include history and overview of female terrorism;

perceptions of female terrorists by the media; roles of female terrorists; motivation and recruitment; environmental enablers, and other reasons, ranging from the most common to the least recurrent aspect (Jacques and Taylor, 2009).

In sum, it is possible to affirm that the existing academic literature on women in violent extremism mainly focuses on the historical evolution of the phenomenon and on its driving factors, with no agreement on the main drivers. A general tendency to underestimate the concept of female's agency and empowerment and its influence on women joining extremist groups and organizations is still present, in parallel to the lacking attention to the implications on the evolution of this global phenomenon.

2.2 ISIS female recruiters and propaganda disseminators

As mentioned, the extent to which women contribute, by disseminating propaganda and recruiting new extremists, to ISIS's survival and maintenance of a global network is often underestimated. However, it must be noted that this topic has been introduced by some scholars the academic debate.

Windsor (2018), for instance, focuses on the use of discourse analysis to examine social media content of a woman who joined ISIS from Scotland becoming a female recruiter for other girls and women. Specifically, through the evaluation of the subject's language on her personal blog, Windsor (2018) identifies linguistic patterns on recurrent propagandistic themes in order to develop a better understanding of the process both from the side of the recruit and later on the one of the recruiter.

Another contribution is provided by Zavadski (2014), who underlines how the influence social media profiles most likely belonging to women that disseminate propaganda and recruit online is measured through their interactions, their time spent online and the activity across different platforms. Most of them also provide recruits with practical advice on how to migrate and settle in the IS's territory. Most importantly, Zavadski (2014) reports how Western women are efficient in recruiting other Westerners as they use captivating language, including emojis and slang terms, to confirm their proximity to their victims. Baker (2014) instead underlines how almost half of the counterterrorism radicalization reports concerns women, outlining how the role of females in the Islamic State has evolved over time, moving from the possibility of only being online propaganda disseminators without physically joining the territory, to take action and migrate.

Finally, Klausen (2015) underlines how the majority of ISIS online propagandistic dissemination of content is made by profiles with a female denomination that are not necessarily based in the conflict zones but are very efficient in terms of international communication. In this context, she emphasizes the relevance of the choice of a gender-related nickname as, despite it not necessarily corresponding to the real identity of the user, it constitutes an efficient strategy to recruit more women to serve ISIS's purposes, as females' interconnectivity appears to be more enduring throughout time.

2.3 Women in ISIS: gender-based perspectives

Few scholars have evaluated the growing females' participation in jihadi movements through gender-based explanations.

According to de Leede (2018), societal stereotypes on both women and men play a role in depicting the profile of the individuals joining jihadist organizations. From the women's perspective, being married to a masculine, brave and faithful fighter protecting his family and territory represents a desirable life project. However, according to this standpoint, this male-centric representation fails to explain the multiple reasons behind the choice based on personal will.

Patel and Westermann (2018) base their analysis on feminist critical theory, understanding this broad phenomenon as it being "part of a 'gendered process'" (Patel & Westermann, 2018, p.56), in which even the use of social media mirrors gender-related societal norms. Particularly, their study cites the work of Pearson (2018) to explain how, for females, online networking functions as a liberating environment, if compared with the Salafi-jihadi restrictive offline norms, thus explaining the success of online recruitment.

Another relevant contribution provided by Kneip (2016) outlines how gender-based social expectations, depicting women as weak and harmless cause female *jihad* to get underestimated. In her perspective, two advantages are considered to explain these women's choice: by following jihadist ideology they ensure themselves access to paradise and to have power over family members, especially if the husband dies and they are taken care by the organization itself. Kneip (2016) therefore identifies the propagandistic message of jihadization as an appealing occasion through which women can escape from family restrictions, gaining respect from the community and making decisions independently. She also underlines how, through ISIS's narratives, the organization may be seen as a second chance for divorced, impure or widowed women, which would not be allowed to remarry in other Muslim societies.

Speckhard and Ellenberg (2023) introduce another aspect of jihadist propaganda in inviting women to take action. Specifically, they focus on the messages convincing women they will have

power over other females once in the jihadist territory. In particular, *sabaya*¹ are cited as an occasion for females to have a maid for free in their house and the chance to exercise authority over them.

Finally, in Smith's perspective (2015), the recruitment of females in jihadist movements can be defined as a "society-building enterprise", in which women are fundamental instruments ensuring the continuity of IS itself. Similarly, Pearson and Winterbotham (2017) find in ISIS's territorial ambitions the necessity to have women to establish their state.

2.4 Female emancipation: the concept from different angles

Despite the existence of multiple theories focusing on motivations that drive individuals to join violent extremist organizations as ISIS, the literature lacks in underlining how ISIS propaganda replies to different perspectives on the feminist concepts of female empowerment and emancipation. In the case of ISIS female recruitment, identifying narratives employed by ISIS's gender-based propagandistic message is in fact crucial to develop a better understanding of this global phenomenon. In order to analyze this major current security issue, it is important to underline that the concepts of feminism and female empowerment do not have a univocal interpretation.

2.4.1 (Western) Feminism

Feminism is generally defined as "Advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex" in the Oxford English Dictionary (1895). This definition, however, lacks in providing an exhaustively detailed depiction of a global phenomenon, which has differently evolved across continents, interacting with diverse societies and the related cultures, sets of values, religions, and customs. Despite the origins of feminism rooting back to the European continent, the phenomenon has indeed developed across the world, resulting in the emergence of different academic perspectives on its characteristics and evolution.

As clearly outlined by Aziz and Sabri (2023), Western feminism developed in different phases, defined as five waves in the scholarly debate, starting from the end of the 18th century until

¹ The term originally referred to young unmarried women. Since 2014, however, it has been used by ISIS to indicate female prisoners of war in the State's systematic slavery institution. In the Islamic State, women on the infidels are kidnapped, sold as goods and exploited as sexual slaves by ISIS fighters in a highly institutionalized state slavery system (Novotná, 2017).

present times, each of these phases mirroring the needs, expectations, desires, struggles of the related period. The first wave of this movement developing in Western countries has been tackling gender equality aiming to guarantee suffrage to women and their access to the job market. The second one fought to ensure the same access to opportunities for women and men in a broader sense, including reproductive, economic, family, and sexual rights, while analyzing and addressing the roots of gender inequality. In this time period between the 1960s and the 1980s, critical feminism and sub-categories of the movement also emerged as different ideological responses to such developments. The following phase addresses the concept of intersectionality, defined as “the network of connections between social categories such as race, class and gender, especially when this may result in additional disadvantage or discrimination” (Oxford Dictionary, 1963), as well as in the adoption of an individual-based approach to tackle gender inequalities. The fourth one, which started in 2012, aims to shed a light on the categories that are neglected by society, involving men in its action as well as social media. Finally, the author introduces the current Western feminist wave, whose goal is not to improve the existing societal condition for underrepresented categories but the broader destruction of the current society and the reconstruction of a new one based on needs of stigmatized people. The scholar concludes his analysis by advocating for major cooperation and continuity between the different ideological movements.

As mentioned by Mirò (2020), Western feminism is rooted in secularism, whose colonial dimension appears throughout European colonial history, still having an impact on modern society. The idea of secularization as saving force from the irrationality of religion is indeed highly entrenched with Western colonization. In the case of Islam, since the earliest contacts with the Islamic world, Europeans have failed in identifying and acknowledging diversity amongst Muslim communities, instrumentalizing the idea of feminism for colonial purposes, morally justifying aggressive behaviors on local cultures, demonstrating the idea of European superiority through the message of saving oppressed women in religious backward societies.

In general, this idea according to which the improvement of females' condition involves the abandonment of local traditions is the result of a historical conjuncture and of an androcentric colonial culture affirming male dominance in the service of political interests. The idea of the need to abandon local traditions to embrace Western modernity is nowadays still pleaded within the Eurocentric political debate on women's condition in Islamic countries, where the spread rhetoric on the oppression suffered by Muslim women contrasting with the liberating West represents a major issue in the progress of the international debate on women's emancipation.

According to Mohanty (1988), Western feminist scholarship exercises a global hegemony on the production and consumption of literature on the issue, having political implications going beyond the mere academic feminist debate. The scholar specifies how even the literature addressing the Global South refers to third world women as a univocal omni-comprehensive category, neglecting internal differences, carrying “with it the authorizing signature of western humanist discourse” (Mohanty, 1988, p. 63). Moreover, she criticizes the same analytical assumption when associated to women as a “coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of their class, ethnic or racial location” (Mohanty, 1988, p. 66), as well as considering men and women as “sexual-political subjects prior to their entry into the arena of social relations” (Mohanty, 1988, p. 68).

2.4.2 Islamic feminism

Several reinterpretations of the Western feminist cause emerged within the Islamic world starting from the end of the 19th century, partly as a response to the dominating stereotypical rhetoric on Muslims, who were considered as underdeveloped, especially due to women’s subordinated condition within society. Among the major aspects that were targeted by Westerners’ critiques, women’s veiling appears as one of the most relevant. This cultural and religious practice has, and mostly still is, considered as a symbol of subjugation, backwardness, and inferiority of Islamic society. This narration, often reductive and simplistic, still plays a role in the fractured relations between the West and the Muslim world. To react to such hostile positions, different streams of thought progressively emerged among Muslims: on one hand, some supported a deeper religious revival, progressively seeing Westernization as incompatible with Islam; on the other, some started sustaining laicity as fundamental to tackle Islamic backwardness. In addition, the events of 9/11 surely had a strong impact on Islamic societies, opening up the public debate on the relationship between religion and the State, as well as on the role of law and religious morality, the relationship between the idea of democracy and human and gender rights and the compatibility with the Quranic scriptures. In this context, influenced also by the advent of the Arab Spring, more and more women have progressively become aware of their potential as contributors in policymaking in the postcolonial states, opposing the Islamist ideas of religious revival and predominance over the public sphere. In such polarized environment, Islamic feminism emerged as an alternative framework, reinterpreting religious precepts through the lenses of female emancipation.

An historical analysis of the developments around Islamic feminism is provided by Badran (2008). The scholar retraces the origin of feminism and its roots in colonialism, describing feminism

as “the creation of both easterners and westerners, of Muslims and those of other religions, of the colonizing and the colonizers” and a “prisoner of colonialism” (Badran, 2008, p.25), underlining how feminism has not to only be intended as white and western. In her analysis, the scholar delineates the different phases that Islamic feminism had been experiencing in the last three decades. In the early 1990s, the phenomenon developed around the idea of reinterpreting sacred texts in an egalitarian sense through secular, modernist, nationalist, and humanist lenses. This first stream of Islamic feminism advocates for religious modernization and a secular state regulating it, therefore focusing more on the public sphere than the private one. In parallel, the scholar underlines how different opinions emerged around the figure of the Islamic feminist, with multiple colleagues refusing this label for the reductionist western-centric meaning generally associated with it. She cites the work of Barlas (2002) to specify how the Islamic feminist conceptualization of gender equality goes beyond the secular conception limited to egalitarianism the public sphere, as the scholar has demonstrated, rejecting patriarchy implemented in the private sphere through the exploitation of the concept of complementarity between the sexes. Badran (2008) then introduces another stream within the Islamic debate on gender equality: the Islamist thought. According to the scholar, throughout the years Islamists, after rejecting the overall notions of Islamic feminism, have been progressively participating in the debate challenging the Islamic feminist perspective, seeking equality in the public sphere rather than in the private domain, interestingly similarly to the first wave of secular colleagues. In particular, the idea of patriarchy within the family as religiously ordained is still highly debated. To Badran (2008), this Islamist perspective questions the possibility to locate them in the circumference of Islamic feminism.

Wadud (1995), one of the most prominent scholars on the subject, refuses the idea of a patriarchal Islam, analyzing the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad’s words and deeds from a woman’s perspective. In her study, she identifies a major issue that women experience within Muslim societies, namely their dichotomous relationship with the law, in which they hold moral responsibility in jurisdiction without equally participating to its development. Wadud (1995) calls for a legal reform within Muslim societies according to the equal principles stated in the Quran, encouraging women’s engagement in the public sphere. In her study, the scholar focuses on the concept of *khilafah*, or moral agency, stated in the scriptures as part of all Muslims’ divine mandate. According to her, the Umma’s modern mandate comprehends, on one hand, the addressing of the status of women in Muslim laws and societies, on the other, on tackling external stereotypical views on Islam and its incompatibility with pluralism and the protection of human rights. To face patriarchy, Wadud (1995) focuses on the

concept of horizontal reciprocity as a moral value of both men and women, which derives from the Qur'anic worldview.

Similarly, Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi (1987) focuses on the distorted interpretations of the scriptures as a tool to domination over women in Muslim societies, calling for an egalitarian reinterpretation of Islamic texts, tackling majoritarian patriarchal perspectives on the Quran and the Hadith. Mernissi (1987) adopts a critical perspective not only towards patriarchal societal norms in the Muslim world, but also in relation to Western feminism, criticizing universalistic and simplistic views on Muslim women as generally oppressed and passive. In her analysis, the scholar also takes into account the effects of globalization and modernity on Muslim women, underlying the contrast and possible tensions that these changes create between modern and traditional cultural aspects. The emblematic element of Mernissi's (1987) critical analysis is the Islamic veil, which represents a broad spectrum of societal practices of control on women in the male-dominated public sphere. Through the reinterpretation of the scriptures, not only she advocates for an amelioration of women's conditions within the Muslim world, but also for a reevaluation of it from the Western perspective.

Barlas (2008) also advocates for the acknowledgement of the Quranic egalitarian viewpoint. However, differently from Mernissi (1987), the scholar refuses the label of Islamic feminist, calling for a contextual interpretation of the scriptures, avoiding male-centric political instrumentalizations. She rejects labels as they refer to the majoritarian univocal interpretation of Western feminism, neglecting differences and alternative paradigms.

2.4.3 Jihadi feminism

The third understanding of feminism bases itself on the jihadist ideology, therefore being dramatically different, if not opposite, to the above-mentioned ones. Despite the terms jihadi and feminism seeming antithetical, this controversial perspective on females' empowerment is constantly growing and evolving, with hundreds of women swelling the ranks of such ideology.

Jihadi feminism bases itself on the strict refusal of Western conceptions of female empowerment and gender equality. Its message is rooted in the complete rejection of Western society, depicted as characterized by "rampant consumerism, crisis of spirituality, atomistic individualism, exploitation of women's sexuality, abandonment of traditional values, and particularly the aggressive nature of its foreign policies against Muslim majority states" (Jacoby, 2015, p. 534).

As explained by Makanda (2019), this approach is rooted and fueled not only by the stereotypical views of Westerners on Islam, but also as a critical reaction to the emerging ideas of Islamic feminism, which are considered as accommodating towards the West, identified as the enemy in jihadist propaganda. Jihadi feminism therefore advocates for a religious struggle, whose divine duty rests upon women and men. In his research, the scholar identifies three pillars in jihadist feminist theory: the misunderstanding towards Islam and gender equality created by Western dominating interpretation models, for instance concerning women's apparel; the propagandistic exploitation of the Scriptures and the definition of violent *jihad* as a religious duty as its outcome; the apparent equivalence between men and women in fulfilling this religious obligation as realization of gender equality.

Accordingly, Offerein (2018) describes jihadi feminism as a series of propagandistic principles that aim to achieve complementarity rather than equality between the sexes, rejecting Western feminism in a sort of "anti-feminist feminism" (Offerein, 2018, p.51), which praises feminine traditional features discrediting Western oppressive capitalistic conception of empowerment, while attributing to women the fundamental role of state-builders, educators, supporters and ideologists, encouraging them to free themselves from Western domination towards empowerment within jihadism.

To conclude, the different perspectives on the concept of female emancipation mentioned above have dramatically diverse implications in social contexts impacting and constituting the dominating social and moral values applied within different social groups. The purpose of this research is therefore to explore how ISIS exploits these concepts in order to swell its ranks presenting jihadi feminism as a sort of "feminist movement that empowers and justifies the 'divine rights' that Muslim women have" (Hargreaves in Makanda, 2019, p. 140).

2.5 Literature gap

As outlined throughout the section, the role of women in violent extremism, in general, and in ISIS, in particular, is still under-researched, despite growing focus on the issue, which now represents an emerging, concerning, and global security challenge. Females' agency in such organizations is often neglected in the literature. When acknowledged, the role of women is generally relegated to the status

of widow, wife, mother, or suicide bomber: much of the work on why women join extremist organizations situates women's political motives in a gendered private realm, where their behaviors are influenced by familial interactions with males. The prevalent narrative emphasizes on personal difficulties, such as romance seeking, widowhood, sexual assault. In the academic debate, studies have been undertaken on the evolution of such phenomenon, conducted through an historical lens, as well as on the reasons that attract women to organizations as ISIS, with no common ideological position on the latter. Nevertheless, the existing literature lacks in underlining the importance of the role of ISIS's propaganda in representing the Islamic State as a valid alternative to both Western and Islamic feminism, presenting a dramatically diverse idea of emancipation. The identification of narratives, symbols, and strategies employed by the Islamic State to perpetrate its agenda is therefore fundamental to develop an accurate understanding of the role of women as propaganda disseminators and recruiters, as well as their idea of agency and empowerment. This thesis therefore aims not only to explore the extent to which women play a role in ensuring the survival of the State and its propagandistic networks, but also on how ISIS's propaganda machine replies to different perspectives on the issues of feminism and gender equality, while framing the relationship between the true Islam and the infidels, with a particular anti-Western focus.

3. Theoretical framework

As previously introduced, this research project aims to investigate not only the extent to which women contribute as propaganda disseminators and recruiters to the existence and endurance of the Islamic State, but also to develop a better understanding on how IS's gender-based propagandistic message targets women, reinforcing or challenging gender stereotypes, while responding and interpreting different viewpoints on female emancipation.

In order to do so, the identification of a suitable theoretical framework is essential in the provision of a scholarly innovative contribution in the academic debate, as it refers to the general theoretical logic and principles that govern how a research topic, methodology, and data are integrated into a viewpoint. Being the discussed topic still under-researched within the academic debate, this project aims to provide a flexible, innovative and integrative approach to the issue through the creation of a framework that combines the concepts of agency, recruiter, disseminator, propaganda, and gender roles analyzing their dynamic and correlated relationships in relation to women's participation in ISIS. Thereby, this thesis project attempts provide an innovative understanding of the topic, with the purpose of providing an alternative contribution in the existing scholarly literature, which does not exhaustively consider this international emerging security challenge from a gender women-based perspective, contemplating females as agents rather than passive victims, as ISIS's propaganda is able to do.

3.1 Agency

3.1.1 Defining agency

According to the Oxford Dictionary (1606), agency can be defined as “Ability or capacity to act or exert power; active working or operation; action, activity”. This definition interestingly refers not only to the notion of action, but also, to the one of power, being the two are strongly intertwined. Similarly, the Cambridge Dictionary (2024) refers to agency as “the ability to take action or to choose what action to take”. Agency is therefore strongly connected with the idea of exercising power, being it on the self or on the external environment. In this project, the concept is intended as the independent, autonomous ability to choose and act accordingly. Nonetheless, since each individual interacts with a different social environment, it is important to acknowledge the relevance of the term's interaction with the notion of power. Being society indeed defined both as “the aggregate

of persons living together in a community, especially one having shared customs, laws, and institutions” (Oxford Dictionary, 1566) and as “Association or interaction *with* or *between* people” (Oxford Dictionary, 1538), one’s agency must be intended as in relation to that of the surrounding societal context and the related power structures. Consequently, if agency is considered as interacting with the concept of female emancipation within societal power hierarchies, it is intended as tool empowering and enabling women to emancipate, while the realization of such emancipation implies an expansion of women’s agency within society. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that the two concepts are deeply intertwined.

In this analysis, the provided definition of agency is voluntarily kept general, as its meaning is not intended as univocal: how agency is portrayed and perceived depends on the individuals’ and collective values, as well as on the product of the interaction between the two. For instance, when considering women’s agency in the struggle for female emancipation, the general understanding of this movement’s objective is to fight “traditional” and “conservative” societal gender norms to have full access to participation in society. The achievement of such goal is generally intended as acquiring the possibility of gaining skills, such as learning a foreign language, having access to the job market, education, political arena, and more generally, to the public space to the same extent as men. However, this majoritarian conception refers to values that are not universally shared. This thesis therefore aims to shed a light on how agency can be differently interpreted in the context of female emancipation in a peculiar society like ISIS’s, characterized by dramatically diverse, if not directly opposite, values. As this project will attempt to explain in its following sections, this understanding of agency is indeed intended more as referring to a decision-making ability rather than to a force exercising power to bring social equality. This conception is more concentrated on the idea of autonomy in making decisions rather than a more tangible idea of autonomy of action within society. Furthermore, agency is often intended as a force that aims to challenge existing norms (Offerein, 2018). Therefore, this commonly shared idea brings this thesis project to analyze which values fuel which idea of agency, and consequently, of empowerment. This is done through the analysis of the Islamic State’s official and unofficial propagandistic content, as it provides an alternative and interesting appeal to women to swell the ranks of the organization.

3.1.2 Beyond traditional agency: functional conceptualizations

As introduced in the previous paragraph, the concept of agency has no univocal meaning. As clearly outlined in Offerein’s work (2018), citing Aucher’s (2012) and Mahmood’s (2001) scholarly contributions, the term has been traditionally associated with the struggle against, and resistance to,

social norms and subordination. This implies that, in the discourse on female emancipation, agency is intended as a driving force to tackle men's domination. This is caused by the general understanding of the term as defined within the patriarchal discourse. However, Offerein clearly specifies how "agency is politically and socially constructed" (Offerein, 2018, p.48), therefore expanding her understanding beyond the majoritarian perspective of it, criticizing the latter as "it becomes difficult to assign agency to the actions of individuals who operate within power structures that do not necessarily fit in" (Offerein, 2018, p.48).

In parallel, this thesis' conceptualization of agency recaptures some aspects of Giddens' structuration theory (1984), which attempts to comprehend the complex interaction between social structure and individual agency. According to the scholar, the two interrelate and fuel one another in what he defines as a "dual structure" (Giddens, 1984, p.25), consisting of social practices and individuals' actions. The scholar identifies this structure as a constantly moving and evolving entity based on the continuously changing relationship between alterations in human behavior, based on agents' capacity to act independently, and those verifying in the surrounding social environment. Therefore, the characteristics of this continuous interaction are highly dependent on social contexts, varying throughout time and space, being them distinctive of a specific circumstance, and potentially bringing structural change (Whittington, 2015). In sum, individuals' behaviors are shaped by structures, yet actions also create and perpetuate them. Interestingly, Giddens sees individuals as contextually inserted, through interaction, in a multitude of social systems which may be contradicting with one other, and that consist in a sequence of social practices, intended as an "ongoing series of practical activities" (Giddens, 1976, p.81, in Whittington, 2015, p.146). In parallel, people's activities are not considered as "merely individual nor simply voluntary" (Whittington, 2015, p.146), as demonstrated by the example of religion, whose "practices are shared rather than idiosyncratic, and they constrain as much as they inspire" (Whittington, 2015, p.146). Therefore, according to this theory, the foundation of agency is intended as rooted in the capacity of managing this contextual engagement in several social systems, to follow some practices and reject other rules, setting boundaries and priorities, influencing their legitimization or rejection.

The relationship between agency and gender is instead analyzed by Mishra and Tripathi (2011). In particular, the scholars argue that the concept is correlated with those of autonomy and empowerment. Nonetheless, their analysis specifies how all aspects need to be equally considered in the realm of policy making to successfully implement development initiatives, while acknowledging the difficulties in assessing their impact, being them context based. Once again, the scholars underline how the understanding of agency is therefore associated with specific subjectivities and sensitivities, influenced by diverse social norms and values.

Another interesting contribution challenging the dominant understanding of agency functional for the undertaking of this research is Davies' (1991). In this study, which adopts a poststructuralist approach, the author argues that the human-centric majoritarian knowledge evolving around the concept does not sufficiently take into account the role of social interaction as well as cultural contexts and power structures, and how those influence the behavior and choices of rational actors, and, consequently, the nature of their agency.

3.2 Defining recruiters and disseminators

Notwithstanding the centrality of agency in this thesis project, conceptualization of the roles of recruiters and disseminators is equally fundamental to understand its practical implications in terms of women's contribution to the Islamic State's survival and global outreach efforts, as well as their relationship with the organization's propaganda.

Firstly, the term recruiter refers to an individual whose goal is to swell the ranks of an organization. In the context of ISIS's religious extremism, recruiters seek to reach out, radicalize and convince individuals to join the Caliphate. In order to do so, they indoctrinate recruits taking advantage of their grievances and weaknesses while providing support and appealing incentives so that they eventually join the Islamic State, at least ideologically, and possibly physically. These activities may be undertaken both in the online and offline environments.

Secondly, a propagandistic disseminator is someone who is not necessarily directly involved with the activities of an organization but spreads its propaganda content in order to influence the target public's opinion. The aim of this activity is to enforce a certain agenda or ideology through manipulation of information and its sharing.

3.3 Propaganda

3.3.1 Defining propaganda

Conceptualizing propaganda is crucial in the successful realization of this research project. Propaganda is defined as "the systematic dissemination of information, especially in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a particular cause or point of view, often a political agenda" (Oxford Dictionary, 1822). In this analysis, the term encompasses not only the promotional content

produced by official state media channels, but also the unofficial ideological content spread by online sympathizers and disseminators.

3.3.2 Propaganda: functional conceptualizations

As far as propaganda is concerned, its implementation and characteristics have evolved over time, in parallel to technology and means of communications. Nevertheless, as clearly defined by Lippmann (1922), not only is it useful, but necessary to individuals to simplify the complexity of reality, filtering its countless aspects. Propaganda therefore acts as a shaper of perception, and it is potentially manipulated, especially through the use of the media. Therefore, according to the scholar, fostering citizens' information, interest and participation in the public sphere is crucial to the endurance of democratic principles. Despite the concept of propaganda being generally associated with the dissemination of misleading information in a context of a political regime lacking transparency, it is interesting and relevant to underline how, as specified by the scholar, it actually concerns democracies as well, where transparency is one of the founding principles.

Regarding the relationship between propaganda and violent extremism, several scholars have provided interesting contributions in the academic debate that are functional to the scope of this project, mainly focusing on jihadism, as it appears as the most efficient and therefore concerning emerging propagandistic phenomenon.

In particular, Braddock and Horgan (2016) emphasize the efficiency of the jihadist propagandistic message, mainly taking into account the successful narrative techniques based on persuasion, emotional engagement aimed at fostering the idea of a perceived similarity and a sense of belonging to a community and a greater cause. The authors acknowledge the success of such narratives and suggest enhancing the implementation of similar strategies to combat violent extremism.

Similarly, the necessity of developing effective counter-propaganda strategies to tackle the spreading of online extremism is a fundamental element in Baele et al.'s analysis (2020), who focus their research on the emotional impact of visual propagandistic content published and spread by ISIS, underlining how the Islamic State's propaganda machine has embraced and implemented a particularly efficient "visual style" leveraging on the evoking of strong emotional responses among the public.

Another relevant contribution for the purpose of this study is provided by Ingram (2017), who instead primarily analyzes the role of media as both an intentional and unintentional contributor to

the spreading of propagandistic extremist messages, both from the side of radical organizations themselves as well as from the victim's side, with media coverage amplifying radical messages and the impact of the extremist threat in the spreading of fear. The author advocates for journalism to be more responsible in avoiding sensationalism which, paradoxically, is helpful to the spreading of such radical causes.

3.4 Defining gender roles

The concept of gender roles refers, in this research, to gender-related expectations and societal norms which influence women's actions and choices, both from the perspective of the recruiter and disseminator and that one of the recruits. These narratives are so embedded in every society that they act as implicit rules providing a precise definition of what a woman should be and do, attributing to the role stereotyped characteristics. These generalizations and beliefs, which refer to specific sociocultural contexts and the related dominant values, influence society and information to the point that even ISIS's propaganda is affected by their existence.

3.5 Relationships among concepts

The concepts representing the bases of this research are deeply interconnected with one another. As the following visual representation will show, the idea of agency is central in the analysis, as it expresses itself in relation to all other founding concepts.

Firstly, agency is in continuous interaction with propaganda. In this project, propagandistic content is analyzed to develop a deeper understanding on how ISIS's persuasive message can depict the Islamic State as a valid and appealing ideological alternative to women, in order to lead them to join the related jihadist cause, responding to different perspectives on the idea of female emancipation. ISIS instrumentalizes the idea of women's agency to depict its society as utopian, where individuals can achieve their full potential and self-realization.

In parallel, the existence of diverse perspectives on gender roles in society represents the ideological assumption from which the IS's propagandistic discourse develops. The message spread by ISIS's propaganda machine is highly gendered, allowing the Islamic State to directly address and empathize with its female audience, introducing its unique conception of female agency.

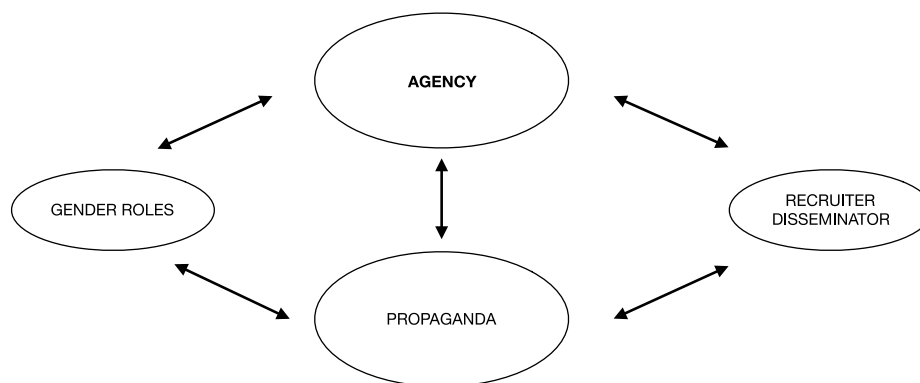
Furthermore, agency and propaganda are strongly correlated with the crucial roles of recruitment and propagandistic dissemination activities: the possibility for women to become a propaganda disseminator or recruiter is represented as the highest achievement in terms of ISIS

sympathizers' conception of female agency, as a woman can pursue the ideological cause through her interaction with propagandistic content while providing a crucial contribution in terms of the State's survival as well as its global online presence.

3.5.1 Visual Representation

A graphic depiction of the conceptual framework was created to better comprehend the links between the study's major concepts (Figure 1). The below diagram indeed shows the relationships between the major categories being investigated: agency, recruiters and disseminators, propaganda, and gender roles.

Figure 1. Representation of the created research framework illustrating the links between its major concepts.



As can be seen in the diagram, the conception of this research's concepts is not unwavering, as they are interconnected with one another. Nonetheless, their classification made in this section is functional to providing a structured answer to this project's research question and sub-questions. Nevertheless, by graphically visualizing the conceptual framework, the complex interaction between these aspects is becomes more understandable, offering a clear path for research design, methodology, and analysis to follow.

4. Methodology

The following section attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of the methodology through which the present study has been conducted. In its first part, the paragraphs will focus on the research design, later outlining how the process of data collection has been undertaken as well as the related analysis and limitations.

4.1 Research design

To attempt to answer the above-mentioned research question and sub-questions, this analysis is conducted through a fully qualitative methodological approach. The research is run entirely through qualitative means as it aims to understand aspects which would not be efficiently explained through the use of quantitative methodologies, namely, the extent of female recruiters and disseminators' contributions in ISIS, as well as to outline how recurring narratives in IS propaganda drive women to swell its ranks in reaction to different perspectives on female emancipation. Thanks to the conduction of qualitative analysis, it is indeed possible to develop a better understanding of the experiences of these women who decide to join radical extremist organizations such as ISIS and the extent of their contribution within the societal and propagandistic structure. As outlined by Lamont (2015), qualitative methods are used to "better understand how we make sense of the world around us, and as such require us to focus on meanings and processes" (Lamont, 2015, p.78), with a specific focus on social actions, therefore suiting at best the project's purpose. The use of a qualitative approach allows to investigate the issue considering how different contexts influence the subjects' choices and perspectives, as well as to remain flexible in understanding their experiences.

Furthermore, this study is conducted through the use of inductive reasoning, as the theoretical observations are based on empirical investigation (Lamont, 2015). Moreover, the study encompasses a combination of both emic and etic perspectives. As far as the first one is concerned, the analysis of women's aspirations, desires and emotions such as disillusionment is taken into account, as well as considering different perspectives on the idea of gender roles across different societies is helpful in understanding women's perspectives on a violent extremist organization like ISIS. On the other side, the use of an etic approach is crucial in the analysis of such patterns and their evaluation from an external and objective perspective. Nonetheless, it is important to remain as neutral as possible, to attempt to reduce the possibility of producing biased results.

In the attempt to answer the above-mentioned research question and sub-questions, the analysis will also follow an interpretivist and constructivist approach, concerned on understanding individuals' meanings and experiences in their social surroundings.

As far as ontology is concerned, the research framework focuses on the nature of the existence of societal gender roles and the related stereotypes which may be reinforced or challenged by the IS propagandistic narration evolving around the idea of agency and empowerment. The study is conducted through the use of a constructionist orientation, aiming to explore how the concepts of female empowerment and emancipation are understood across diverse socially interacting communities (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Conversely, the epistemological perspective derives from the analysis of official propaganda publications, online research articles, documents and media reports, as well as social media content, for those represent the methods through which knowledge is acquired (Jackson, 2016).

Furthermore, the study method may be defined as phenomenological, as it is based on individuals' experience and aims to understand its personal meaning to subjects and social media users as well as the relationship between their inner perceptions, their related intentions and physical and virtual actions in relation to ISIS violent extremist cause (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Therefore, it is fundamental for this research not to adopt a biased position that risks undermining the entire project.

4.2 Case study selection

To develop an answer to the research question and sub-questions, this thesis utilizes a qualitative methodological framework, choosing the role of women in ISIS as a specific case study. The latter, defined as “a work that focuses its attention on a single example of a broader phenomenon” (Gerring, 2004, p.341), has indeed been selected among the broader academic object of analysis of women in violent extremism and of the role of women in jihadist organizations.

The choice of analyzing the role of women within ISIS has been driven by the organization's peculiarity in terms of objectives and accomplishments. As stated by Cronin (2015), “ISIS boasts some 30,000 fighters, holds territory in both Iraq and Syria, maintains extensive military capabilities, controls lines of communication, commands infrastructure, funds itself, and engages in sophisticated military operations [...] it is a pseudo-state led by a conventional army” (Cronin, 2015, pp. 87-88). Despite this definition now being obsolete in overestimating the group's current capabilities, not considering recent developments concerning territorial losses and a substantial organizational

weakening, the Islamic State has indeed been capable, for a limited period, to control territories in Iraq and Syria, exercising, even if only partially and surely in a rudimentary manner, some traditional state functions. In this peculiar context, the role of women differs from the functions traditionally attributed to females in other violent extremist organizations, as they are called, in this case, to exercise state-building functions through the procreation and education of the following generation of faithful ISIS fighters. ISIS indeed aims to establish itself in the international arena as a functional state, this objective being not achievable without females' essential contribution (EUROPOL, 2019). However, as this project attempts to demonstrate, the role of women within the organization goes beyond traditional roles of support and caregiving, entailing also what is presented as an alternative form of female empowerment.

4.3 Data collection

This study has been conducted through Internet and archival, document-based analysis: undertaking research on the topic encounters several difficulties in terms of directly engaging in fieldwork. Consequently, a combination of accurately selected primary and secondary data will be used to get in contact with the subject of interest, through the use of sources ranging from academic papers to newspaper articles, media reports, as well as official propagandistic content released by ISIS.

As far as secondary sources are concerned, this thesis will employ accurately selected data processed from several previously conducted academic analyses, which focus on diverse dimensions of the research topic, analyzing it from through different lenses. These studies are chosen as they provide a valuable contribution in the undertaking of this research, particularly to assess the role of women in as propaganda recruiters and disseminators in contributing to the organization's survival and ideological outreach. For instance, selected academic contributions are functional in terms of social media content provision, reporting Tweets that would otherwise have been lost due to the social network's takedown policies, resulting in a loss in terms of this projects' comprehensiveness. Analogously, among others, other studies' secondary data proves to be crucial in the attempt to answer this thesis' research question by outlining the multifaceted engagement possibilities for women in ISIS society, both online and offline.

Referring instead to primary sources, the most relevant propagandistic source for the purpose of this thesis is the Islamic State's magazine *Dabiq*, which was firstly published by the ISIS Ministry of Media in 2014. Before being substituted with *Rumiyah* two years later, 15 issues were published.

The tailored content of the magazine aims to a global reach; its target audience includes also Westerners: this is demonstrated by the decision of translating its articles for publication in several languages, including French, English and German. The West is indeed central among the themes that are encountered in the reading of such documents, according to ISIS global objectives in a theological and political sense. The dichotomy between the faithful and western sinners in the US and Europe is fundamental in the realization of the Islamic State's journal's scope in terms of recruitment. What is interesting in Dabiq for the purpose of this project is the decision to address one of its sections directly to women. In its editions, the magazine indeed dedicates a space only to female readers, in columns entitled 'To Our Sisters' and 'From Our Sisters', where a clear explanation of females' role within the Islamic State is provided. Differently from what is generally believed, ISIS propaganda provides an empowering perspective for women who want to join their cause. Through the production of such content, the Islamic State has been successful in enticing women to emigrate to its territory by this framing of the Islam/West relationship, analyzing gender roles in the West, and targeting women as essential to the growth of the Caliphate (The Carter Center, 2015).

Similarly, Rumiya has been the propagandistic successor of Dabiq, after the organization lost control on the related territory. The magazine has been published monthly between 2016 and 2017 and disseminated online, as its predecessor. Correspondingly to Dabiq, Rumiya has been designed for global outreach purposes, being translated in several languages and shared worldwide. As the first magazine, articles in Rumiya cover a variety of domains, including content expressly dedicated to women (Stempień, 2021).

Both publications are therefore selected as they provide an interesting input to investigate how gender-based propaganda narratives reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms interpreting and responding to diverse viewpoints on female emancipation.

In addition, with regard to media reports and newspaper articles, their analysis helps to enhance this study's objectivity, capturing an additional facet of this complex phenomenon. In fact, to further ensure the validity of the information retrieved within the project's sources, triangulation through online research as well as comparison with media reports and academic articles will be undertaken. In addition, being the research conducted with flexibility, it will allow to broaden the spectrum of the analysis, adding interesting content to the project and to the existing literature on the issue. Moreover, this thesis attempts to adhere to ethical guidelines when gathering data on sensitive subjects in order to maintain the integrity of the study.

Regarding the tools employed for data collection purposes, secondary information is acquired from several online sources, ranging from Google Scholar to the Charles University and Sciences Po Paris electronic libraries, with the scope of acquiring data from reputable academic publishers. Regarding reports and newspaper articles, online newsrooms and think tank websites are consulted, including, among others, those of the Italian Institute for International Political Studies, New York Times, the Guardian, the Institute of International Relations Prague, International Crisis Group, Wilson Center, and VOX-Pol. Primary sources, namely selected original ISIS propaganda magazines, are instead being downloaded from the dedicated website jihadology.net.

4.4 Data analysis

There are multiple methodologies to analyze qualitative data, being it subjective, especially if compared to quantitative-based mathematical and statistical research. The present study will adopt an interpretive document analysis approach, to better understand the subjects' roles as well as their perspectives and how those interact with the state ideological propaganda spread by the Islamic State.

In particular, this research project will be implemented through the use of document analysis as methodological approach in the consultation of the previously mentioned primary and secondary data sources. Document analysis has been chosen as it can explore the complexity of the subject of analysis in depth, capturing details about women's participation in ISIS propagandistic activities as well as their composite interaction with its gender-based empowering propaganda narratives, applying the conceptual framework in a systematic and precise manner, while evaluating and discussing different typologies of data. Moreover, the use of this approach allows to develop a better understanding of the different perspectives on female emancipation and empowerment, as well as to evaluate how agency is intended based on contexts, values, cultures and subjectivities and how this is reflected in the organization's propaganda message, investigating its rich contextual and ideological content, comprehensively covering the research topic. Moreover, the adoption of a document analysis methodology on publicly available online sources allows to overcome ethical concerns in terms of privacy and consent, while facilitating triangulation to ensure the validity of the undertaken qualitative research (Morgan, 2022), as well as a comprehensive interpretation of the research findings after thorough examination. This methodology of data analysis is particularly efficient in providing the reader with a deeper understanding of the object of analysis, being the research project primarily based on the examination of textual primary and secondary data.

Therefore, starting from the research question and sub-questions, this analysis will attempt to firstly deepen the general academic understanding about the extent to which women contribute to the Islamic State's physical and virtual endurance. In order to do so, this thesis will firstly elucidate about the importance of females within the societal, logistical and ideological structure of ISIS through the use of secondary data selected among several academic projects and press releases. In particular, selected research findings from previous studies will be discussed and re-interpreted according to the project's research framework, evaluating data from an alternative perspective.

Secondly, having assessed the relevance of women for the State, this research paper will attempt to discover whether the narratives employed by ISIS propaganda reinforce or challenge pre-existing gendered stereotypes, as well as how these refer to, or disprove, different perspectives on female agency and emancipation, in line with the research framework. To achieve this objective, this project will take into account information retrieved from ISIS official propaganda sources as well as unofficial information disseminated globally by radical sympathizers and IS members, confronting it with newspaper articles and academic reports based on information retrieved on governmental databases. Doing so, this thesis will attempt to shed light on possible discrepancies, differences, changes in the Islamic State's propaganda strategy over time and on different outreach channels.

Finally, the project will discuss whether the relationship between the radical gender ideology promoted by this peculiar group of jihadists and their conception of agency resonate with the possible existence of a form of empowering jihadi feminism.

4.5 Limitations

This study has a number of limitations that should be noted despite its insightful findings. As previously introduced, primary data collection on the field has not been undertaken in the present research, as several challenges were posed, due to the high sensitivity of the topic. Field research has not been chosen for a variety of reasons, ranging from personal security, to limits regarding time and resources, as well as the possibility of encountering reluctance on the side of possible interlocutors.

Another major challenge is of ethical nature, as access to primary sources raises considerable ethical issues owing to the responsibility towards the research subjects. These challenges range from the difficulty in obtaining informed consent, notifying the participants about the research objectives, potential risks, and methodology, to privacy protection, and the consequent possibility of obtaining

unrealistic data because of prior reasons influencing participants' willingness and honesty. For instance, infiltrating terrorist social media channels raises ethical concerns, as it would imply the creation of a false identity to access group chats and interact with targeted individuals, while posing a risk of unintentionally undermine current counter-extremism intelligence operations.

Due to the presence of the mentioned obstacles, the research adopts a second-hand ethnographic approach. Ethnography is defined as “the study of people in naturally occurring settings or ‘fields’ by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities” (Brewer, 2000, p. 6). This approach holds “the promise of generating creative and transformative scholarship” (Brigden and Mainwaring, 2022, p.204), encompassing the undertaking of research directly in the setting, with participation in the same activities as the subjects. However, being this not possible, an ethnographic approach based on secondary sources will be used throughout the research to comprehensively depict how women contribute to the IS cause being attracted by gender-based propagandistic messages. Nonetheless, the use of such approach presents a notable limit, namely the possibility of missing salient aspects that are not present in the primary research because of differences in terms of perception.

The use of secondary data presents indeed some limitations in terms of accuracy and reliability of the findings. For instance, if a considered pre-existing scholarly project on the issue is based on content retrieved via social media accounts that have suffered from takedown policies, it is not possible to verify and double-check its strength and solidity. Another major concern is the possibility of existing biases in past studies, as initial data gathering may have been impacted by the researchers' personal opinions or objectives, resulting in altered conclusions.

An additional issue that may emerge in the data collection phase concerns information accessibility. The lack of data from certain territories, especially from non-democratic countries which impose limits in social network and Internet usage and access, may constitute a limiting factor in the analysis. Consequently, some areas of provenience may be underrepresented in the project.

Moreover, anti-terrorism online takedowns may pose another obstacle to the research: as far as radical social media accounts are concerned, the snowballing method could have been employed to collect a consistent amount of data and overcome the possible lack of information, having access not only to the initial sample of social media accounts, but also to those whom they regularly interact with. However, being the majority of such content not currently available, this methodology cannot

be successfully implemented, considering also the related privacy concerns as well as the limitations deriving from accessing restricted networks of similar accounts which may lead to inaccurate results.

Another limit is represented by the linguistic difficulties throughout the entire research. The lack of linguistic knowledge represents a relevant issue in the project implementation: insufficient skills in written comprehension may result into imprecise conclusions, as sources taken in account in the analysis are only written in English, representing an obstacle in terms of diversity in the sample's representation. This problematic aspect of research is linked with the risk of producing an ethnocentric result, basing the analysis on personal cultural judgement rather than objectivity. Ethnocentrism, defined as "the belief that the people, customs, and traditions of your own race or country are better than those of other races or countries" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024), generally articulates in the realm of international relations in three main spheres: ignoring the non-Western scenarios, viewing the international arena in through the lens of one's own country, and considering the non-Western experiences as inferior in terms of relevance (Acharya, 2000, pp. 4-7). The risk is therefore represented by the possibility of underestimate "the others' perspectives" and oversimplify their points of view. To overcome this difficulty, the usage of ISIS official state propaganda documents is done, to adopt the most objective lenses possible on the topic.

5. Analysis

As previously mentioned, this thesis focuses on females' contributions to ISIS survival, recruitment efforts and online presence, as well as on the propagandistic themes that the Islamic State employs to attract women to join its cause. Those narratives are highly gendered, and they arguably provide an interesting interpretation of the concept of female emancipation, providing its female public with a different perspective on the idea of women's agency in society. The following section will attempt to provide functional elements to answer the previously mentioned research question and sub-questions through the use of selected primary and secondary sources, ranging from findings from academic papers and reports to newspaper articles, and official documents released by ISIS. In particular, previously conducted studies will be re-interpreted through the selected women-centered, agent-centric, gender-based framework to analyze the role of women as recruiters and propaganda disseminators. Instead, primary data retrieved from official propagandistic publications and secondary social media content will be mainly employed to assess how propaganda narratives respond to different ideas around female emancipation in relation to gender roles, together with some additional information from previous research contributions.

5.1 Women's agency as recruiters and propaganda disseminators

5.1.1 Online

To understand the relevance of women's contribution in the spreading of jihadist propaganda and ideology worldwide, it is necessary to mention the crucial role played by the Internet and social media in the achievement of such goal. The visibility of the jihadist cause has been increasing dramatically since the advent of social media. The use of the latter is advantageous in terms of cost, anonymity, non-regulation, capillarity, availability and accessibility (Magri, 2019). ISIS has been particularly successful among the jihadist groups and organizations in the use of such platforms for propagandistic use (The Carter Center, 2015). The Caliphate has succeeded in adapting to the constant change that characterizes the online world, thanks to the development of an efficient propaganda machine simultaneously active on various platforms and channels, ranging from online blogs to videogame chats (Gerstel, 2016).

As far as social media is concerned, Twitter appears as the most successful social network in the spreading of ISIS ideology: an estimation made in 2014 calculated that between 46,000 to 70,000

pro-IS affiliated Twitter accounts were active on the platform (Berger & Morgan, 2015 in Huey et al., 2019).

For this reason, many scholars, among which Klausen (2015) figures, have studied the role of Twitter in the dissemination of propagandistic content from the Caliphate and above. In her study, Klausen provides an interesting analysis on why Twitter happens to be the most efficient means of jihadist communication, planning how the social network is user-friendly, practical, unexpensive, and acts as an effective mouthpiece in propaganda spreading thanks to its re-tweeting feature, that allows to disseminate written and visual content in real time. Furthermore, differently from other social networks, Twitter can be also used offline, which makes it particularly efficient, especially considering the involved war zones.

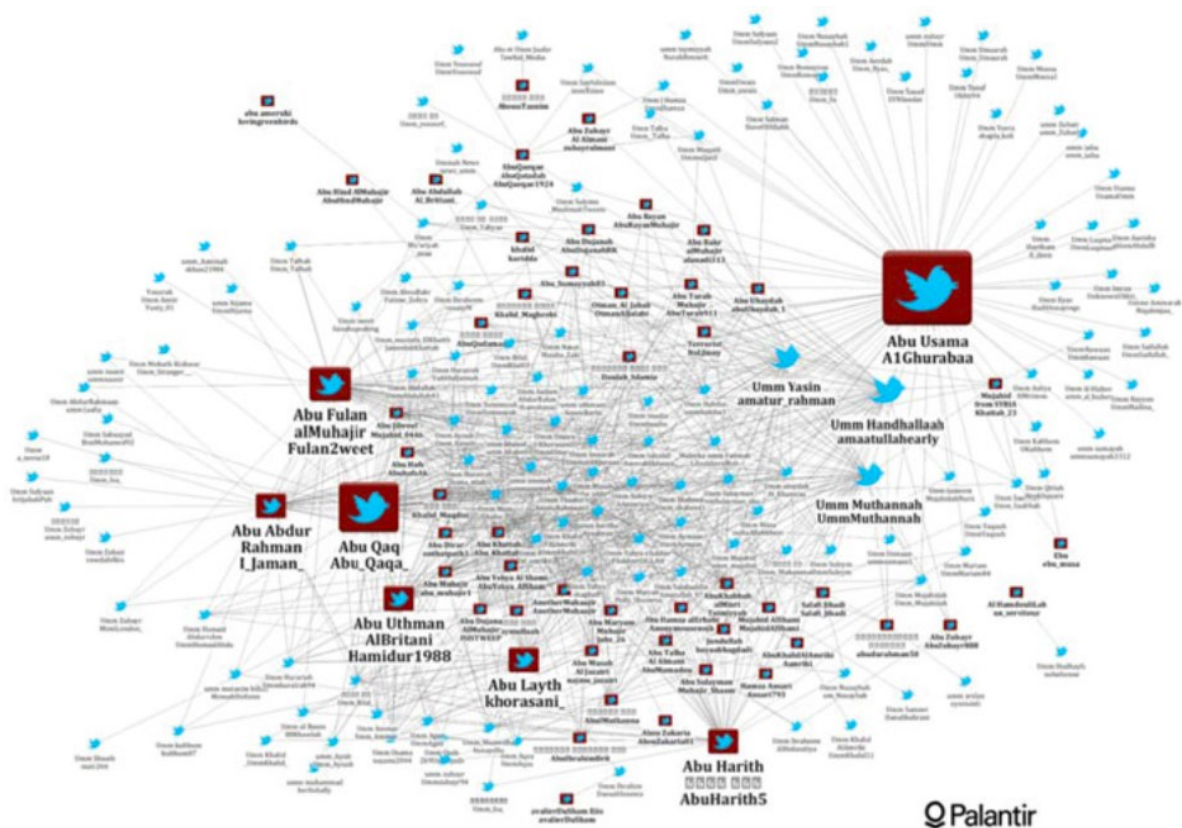
The study is particularly interesting as it mentions some relevant information about the evolution of the relationship between violent extremism and digital communication. Radical organizations have evolved their communication strategy moving from being dependent on the mainstream media to the use of private chat rooms and forums, which were limited in spreading the content to a wider global audience, to social media, which instead enables users to post anywhere at any time, building strategic redundancy essential to the spreading of extremist content. Another essential advantage of the use of social networks as Twitter is that they are more difficult to regulate. Vertical control approaches that were effective in the previous Internet environment do not apply in the current context of social networking, being the system highly decentralized (Gerstel, 2016).

In her study, Klausen and her team have analyzed an initial sample of 59 Twitter accounts of Western foreign fighters who had relocated to Syria over the period of three months in 2014, then proceeding in their research considering a wider sample of 29,000 accounts through the use of the snowballing method. The team has classified the posted content in the categories of religious instruction, reporting from battle, interpersonal communication, tourism and threats against the West. What is most relevant for the purpose of this thesis, however, is the section dedicated to women as propaganda disseminators on the platform. The study has indeed demonstrated how women figure among the most popular and connected radical accounts mostly based outside the combat zone. Some of them appear to manage multiple Twitter profiles to ensure to spread their content to a wider audience. The identification of the profile owners has been possible through the analysis of the profile nicknames: the majority of women in the dataset have named their profile with the word “Umm”, a typical honorific name that identifies a mother, used as a nickname in ISIS society. According to Klausen, “online, women are mobilized as partisans and in tactical support roles to an extent far

surpassing their involvement in any previous jihadist insurgency” (Klausen, 2015, p.16). To appeal to their audience, they represent their everyday life posting “normal” content, including their own children in ISIS apparel to advertise the jihadist cause worldwide.

As can be seen below (Figure 1), the relevance of the “Umm factor” in the propaganda spreading is strategically graphically represented in the study to provide a visual representation of how impactful this phenomenon is in ISIS ideology spreading.

Figure 1. Twitter network of female supporters. Foreign fighters’ accounts are indicated in red. “Umm” accounts are designated by Twitter’s blue bird.



(Klausen, 2015)

In fact, the Internet, especially the use of social media, serves as a tool of empowerment for women that are exposed to jihadist content, as it represents a possibility to discover and establish their identities in a traditionally patriarchal system. The online environment allows users to connect with other individuals to exchange ideas, opinions and information overcoming geographical and time

constraints, developing feelings of belonging and connection with like-minded individuals that might not exist in the offline environment. This, together with the exposition to the strategically engaging propagandistic content of the Islamic State, provides women with a sense of agency, making them feel valuable and valued in the accomplishment of a divine mission, actively contributing to its realization in collaboration with a close-knit community, while overcoming the traditional gender-based restrictions to which they are often subject to in their everyday life (Fraihi, 2018).

Another valuable contribution in the analysis of the role of women as ISIS propaganda disseminators and recruiters is provided by Huey et al. (2019). The study, conducted through the use of a qualitative content analysis approach, has the objective to investigate how women get engaged in ISIS societal structure and how this is reflected in their online activity within pro-IS online networks. To do so, research has been undertaken from around 100,000 tweets collected between January 2015 and 2016. In the study, women generally proved to be more effective than their male counterparts in propagandistic content dissemination, as they seem to occupy more influential roles in the online jihadist pro-ISIS networks. Interestingly, the analysis identifies eight categories of engagement of women in the online and offline radical society of the Islamic State: fan-girls, *baqiya* members, propagandists, recruiters, *muhijrat*, widows, terrorists, and leavers.

Starting from fan-girls, they are identified as young women (between 15 and 25 years old), who strongly support ISIS as they consider this subversive action as “being cool”. Their tweets range from support to extreme acts of violence to daily life content about school and relationships. The specificity of this disseminator profile is that fan-girls never create propagandistic content on their own, choosing instead to re-tweet already existing radical information. These young women aim to be members of the *baqiya* family and celebrate account suspensions as they may draw them near the accomplishment of this goal, as the below tweets (Huey et al., 2019, p.452) show:

[Fan-Girl “Shoutout” Tweet]: Shoutout to @CatSeikh, suspended again, but he’s back.
[Fan-Girl “Shoutout” Tweet]: I’m just a kitten but even kittens know to follow lionesses. So do it!
@OumHu55ain @OumHu55ain @OumHu55ain

For *baqiya*² members, instead, the most important element is the sense of belonging to the ISIS online family, to which these women show support and solidarity. Being more ideologically

² The Arabic term *baqiya* means "everlasting/enduring" or "it shall remain." ISIS sympathizers and propagandists use the word to represent the strength of the community despite the suffered territory losses. Additionally, militants use it on

radicalized than fan-girls, these members are more vocal about their loyalty to ISIS and more susceptible to practical recruitment to IS territories.

Differently, propagandists post almost exclusively about indoctrination, without sharing details on their personal life, aiming to provide an appeal to their audience to convert and join the Caliphate (Huey et al., 2019, p.453):

[Propagandist Tweet]: Good news for all of you. Islamic state is expanding. If you cant fly to Syria or Iraw.. then go to Libya! Or Nigeria or Somalia.

More practically, recruiters act as support providers in religious, emotional, and informative terms to members who already aim to join the Islamic State, as highlighted in the following tweets (Huey et al., 2019, p.454):

[Recruiter Tweet]: Sisters if you cant make Hijrah, you too should go forth in the cause of Allah wherever you are.

[Recruiter Tweet]: Imagine being the wife of a shaheed or an aalim & being given a status of honour with them. On the day of judgement & in jannah.

Furthermore, *muhijrat*³ embody the success of the IS propaganda, tweeting from the Caliphate themselves, while representing also the content of others' shared propaganda stories. They are wives, mothers, sisters, and, in several cases, workers swelling the ranks of the organization. Once their husband dies in the battlefield, they become widows of a martyr, gaining a privileged status not only within the Caliphate, but also among the online community members (Huey et al., 2019, p.455):

[Western Muhajirah Tweet]: It feels like I never left the West. Im surrounded by so many Brits and Europeans its unbelievable.

Finally, terrorists and leavers are those women who have been accused of crimes associated with terrorism and have abandoned the ISIS cause, respectively.

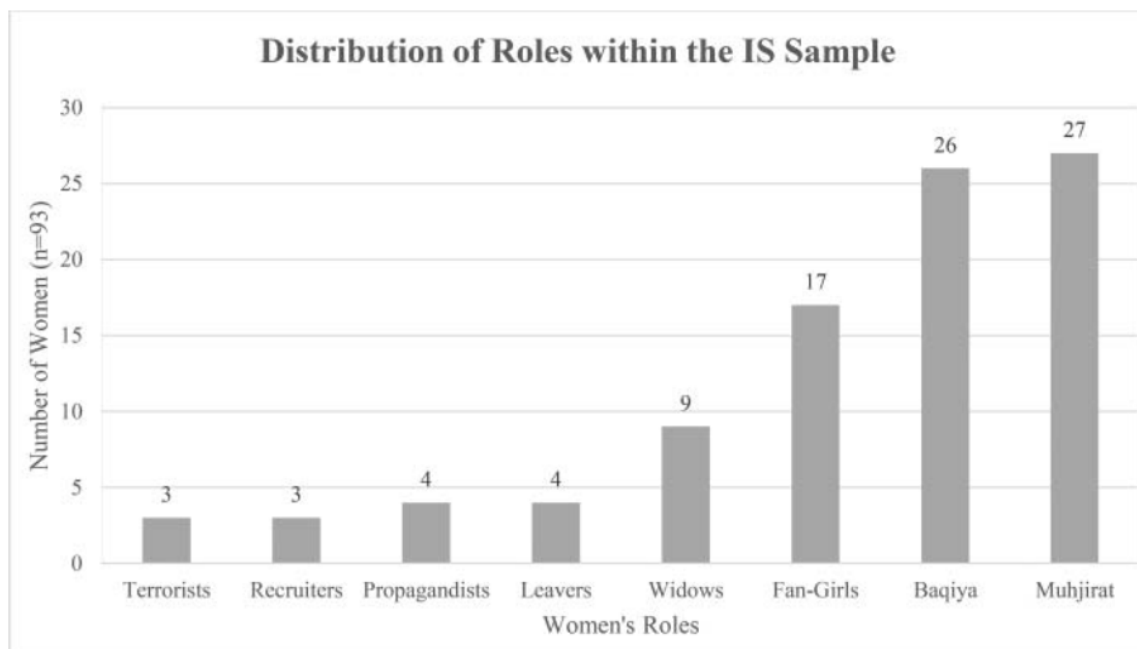
social media to request financial and emotional assistance. Counter Extremism Project, 2024. Baqiyah. In *Glossary*. <https://www.counterextremism.com/glossary#:~:text=Baqiyah,project%20strength%20despite%20territorial%20loses>.

³ *Muhajirah* (singular)/ *Muhijrat* (plural) defines women who publicly announced their migration to the Caliphate. Lee, B. (2023). Different Participation in Siege Culture. *LARPocalypse part two* (Report No. 23-042-01). CREST Research. https://crestresearch.ac.uk/download/4692/23-042-01_larpocalypse_part_two_report_v2.pdf

What is most interesting about this study is that it introduces the multifaced presence of females both in the online and offline society of the organization, dividing them into precise categories to provide an overview of their relevant contribution both in ideological and more practical and operational terms. The analysis finally underlines how females' non-military support is highly valued within the community, due to its vital and effective contribution to the spreading of the organization's ideology, retracting the general misconception of women passively not being involved neither making a difference in jihadist extremist organizations.

As shown in the below graph (Figure 2), the study demonstrates how especially *muhjirat*, *baqiya* members and fan-girls of the analyzed sample are vital to the survival, development and enlargement of the ISIS community of worshippers.

Figure 2. Roles undertaken by ISIS women within the research sample.



Huey et al. (2019)

The emerging role of ISIS fan-girls has been the object of the social network analysis of Huey and Witmer (2016). What is interesting for the purpose of this thesis is that the majority of those considered in the analysis' sample (twenty Twitter accounts) did not represent a direct jihadist security threat over the short-term, having deleted or not actively using their profiles. Nonetheless, their contribution to the Islamic State's survival, endurance and online presence is considerable, as the "most of the fan girls are [...] high volume tweeters and thus it was not uncommon to see

individuals posting upwards of 50 to 100 tweets per day. Further, these tweets also indicated that these girls were also fairly active on other social media sites – ask.fm, Facebook, snapchat, kik and surespot – and were using these sites to advance friendships and other relationships with IS network members” (Huey and Witmer, 2016, p.5). Therefore, notwithstanding their temporary and consequently limited contribution to the spreading of ISIS ideology, it is worth to mention that the high volume of posted content definitely plays a role advantaging the global outreach of the IS’s propaganda.

An additional interesting contribution in assessing the extent to which ISIS female recruiters and propaganda disseminators contribute to the organization's survival, recruitment efforts and online presence is provided by Varanese (2016). In his study, the scholar investigates, through the conduction of social network analysis, how influential women’s agency is on Twitter’s pro-IS networks, as well as how strong their ties are with other ISIS sympathizers.

Similarly to the previously mentioned studies, the analysis confirms that accounts associated with female users are more influential than their male counterparts as far as Twitter radical networking is concerned. These profiles appear to play the function of hubs and bridges holding the broader network together and at the heart of the links within it.

Interestingly, this study represents an added value for the purpose of this research, as it specifies how even online dissemination of radical information can be highly gendered: men tend to post more violent content openly inciting the use of violence, while women, when engaging with the concept of physical *jihad*, usually act as supporters praying for fighters and terrorist attack perpetrators, embodying and reproducing a traditional view on gender roles, conceived as in the thesis’ theoretical framework.

Additionally, the study finds that in its sample, made of twenty initial pro-IS female Twitter accounts active since August 2016, the broader network is not strongly tied, demonstrating how users, having diverse backgrounds and perspectives, interact differently with ISIS and its propaganda. This also implies that women often represent the bridge within these online milieus, which is crucial to ensure the widespread presence of the content among differently engaged audiences. The study also underlines how social media, especially Twitter, can stimulate the creation of such weak ties, meaning to make interact users that would not be connected otherwise, through its capacity to create hyperlinks to other websites and communities.

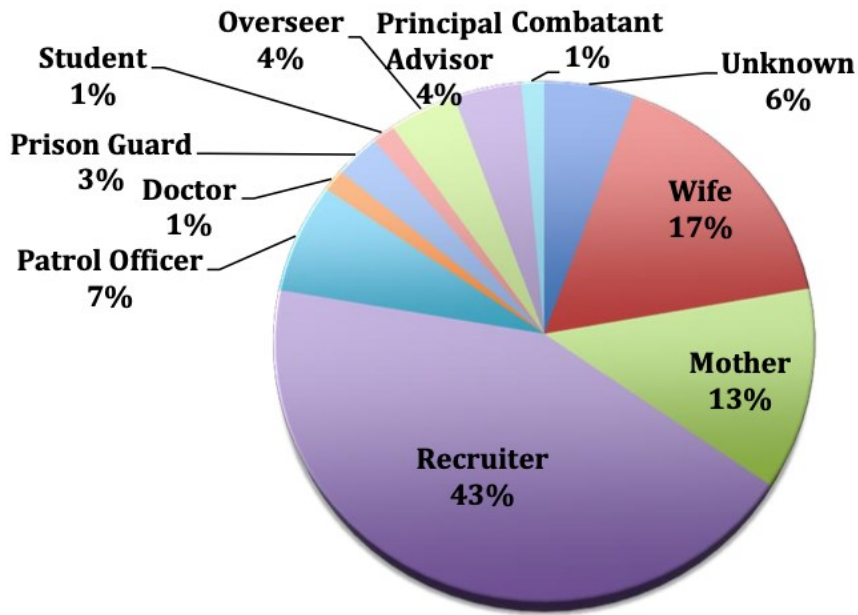
Women’s contribution as ISIS propaganda disseminators and recruiters is also part of the research by Gan et al. (2019), which focuses on the use of thematic analysis to illustrate how the role of women in the Islamic State has evolved over time, firstly encompassing only familial and supportive roles, progressively including also more active ones. Among the latter, the authors

identified the possibility for females joining the organization ideologically and, to some extent, physically, to work as moral police officers for other women, as in case of Raqqa's al-Khansaa Brigade, exercising power over other females and therefore being acknowledged as an individual of higher status in the Caliphate's society, while physically embodying the concept of propaganda dissemination and enforcement. Another possibility for them, which is fundamental to reply to this thesis's research question, is to operate as online recruiters, providing emotional as well as operational support to women interested in physically joining the Caliphate, while sharing their personal stories to motivate them to follow their footsteps. In this context, the research reports how, thanks to evolution of women's role in ISIS towards active propaganda-related online roles, 13% of foreigners joining the IS between 2014 and 2019, meaning almost 5400 individuals, were women (Khomami, 2018 in Gan et al., 2019). Furthermore, not only the study mentions the relevance of female propaganda disseminators, but also introduces the figure of the female official propaganda spokesperson, mentioning that women can even contribute to the production of official content within the Caliphate's state propaganda machine, for instance being interviewed and having their stories published in official propagandistic channels and magazines as Dabiq and Rumiya.

In their study, German and Pennington (2019) confirm that, being the ISIS society strongly segregated on a gender basis, women tend to be recruited by other females. The analysis outlines different typologies of females' participation in the spreading of the Caliphate's ideology, ranging from contributions in propaganda writing and editing, to the production of online articles on blogs and magazines and propaganda dissemination. Among them, some women such as Iman Mustafa al-Bugha and Umayma al-Zawahiri are mentioned as they have become popular online through their dissemination activities acquiring prestigious positions in the online community of sympathizers (Lahoud, 2018).

Women's contribution to ISIS physical and global digital endurance is also part of Spencer's research (2016). Through the analysis of 72 profiles of females who migrated to or reside in the Islamic State's territory, Spencer identifies their roles within the peculiar society they belong to. The findings of this project are particularly interesting as they provide knowledge about how different women's societal positions in the Caliphate interact with the subjects' nationality, age, technical skills and husband's societal position.

Figure 3. Primary role of the ISIS women in the research sample within the Caliphate’s society.



(Spencer, 2016)

Remarkably, as shown in the above visual representation of the project’s findings (Figure 3), 31 women in the sample are primarily recruiters, despite the majority of them playing several roles at once. This once again shows how female recruiters contribute as an “irreplaceable asset” (Spencer, 2016, p.91) to the Islamic State in terms of spreading its ideology and consequently ensuring its success and survival. As far as their nationality is concerned, the research finds that, as the available data and literature is mainly Western-based, foreigners are over-represented in the sample. The project interestingly discovers that Western women are preferred for recruitment purposes, thus explaining the remarkable lead of the recruiter role in the chart. Furthermore, it appears how authoritative positions within the Caliphate’s territory are instead granted to local women, due to their deeper knowledge of the language, societal and cultural environment. Regarding age, the research shows how older women tend to be engaged in higher advisory positions. As far as technical skills and the husbands’ positions are concerned, the lack of information on the selected sample led to the selection of two case studies demonstrating how both played an influential role in determining women’s social climbing in the propagandistic and recruitment system of the Islamic State. Altogether, this project once again is useful to underline how women’s active contribution in ISIS’s ideology spreading, recruitment efforts and survival strategies is fundamental.

To better understand the how impactful the role of women is for the Islamic State, the use of governmental-based data becomes equally crucial.

A global picture of the relevance of women's presence and contribution in Daesh is provided by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation. The authors of the related report, Cook and Vale (2018), have developed a detailed analysis of the number of women and minors in the IS drawing information from governmental sources covering the period between 2013 and 2018. Interestingly, the research shows how the majority of foreigners affiliated to Daesh come from Russia, Tunisia, France, China, and Morocco, demonstrating the effective impact of ISIS propaganda's global outreach. Furthermore, the report underlines how most women joined after the official establishment of the Caliphate, with a culmination of Europeans between 2015 and 2016.

Regarding the European continent, a 2019 report by the Institute of International Relations Prague mentions how, among Western countries, the majority of ISIS foreign joiners comes from France, and 30 % of them is female, similarly to the German rate. Analogously, the article underlines how the phenomenon of female participation and contribution to such organization should not be underestimated, as more than 50 Dutch women have relocated to the Caliphate bearing around twenty future ISIS combatants. These European countries are followed by the UK, from where more than fifty women have made *hijrah* to the Islamic State (Orozbakieva, 2019).

In general, the entity of this global phenomenon is significantly underestimated, especially due to lack of government-based gender-disaggregated data (Khomami, 2018), demonstrating once again how much gender stereotypes about women being not inclined to be politically active, much less extremist, play a role in the analysis, understanding and, consequently, addressing and tackling of such phenomenon.

5.1.2 Offline

Women also disseminate propaganda and recruit in person. Their contribution in this sense ranges from the activities undertaken within the familial sphere to those as a civil servant in the Caliphate, as the following paragraphs will reveal. These, added to the mentioned functions of online dissemination of content and recruitment, represent a valuable contribution for the existence and endurance of the Islamic State over time. As it will be shown in the below sections, the primary functions allocated to women in the Caliphate are exercised within the household, as "wives, mothers, caregivers, homemakers, community builders, and symbols of national unity" (Jacoby, 2015, p.533).

In particular, the role of mother is vital to the successful growth and development of what aims to be the restoration of the Islamic Caliphate aiming to bring it back to its glorious times: through the education of their children, women position themselves as responsible subjects for the transmission of extremist values and messages to the future of ISIS, embodying the figure of the propaganda disseminator in their parental role. As mentioned by Fraihi (2018, p. 24) “Her words are her power”, being her the child’s first teacher. Furthermore, through this empowering role, the woman “lays the foundation of the architecture framework of the global *jihad*” (Fraihi, 2018, p. 28), upbringing the next generation of valuable jihadists, therefore fighting their own *jihad* behind the scenes. From this perspective, the role attributed to women can be considered as even more empowering and relevant than that of the fathers, for, without the ideological commitment, no physical *jihad* would successfully take place. In addition, while the physical battle is highly dependent on the existence of the Caliphate itself, the ideological one can be effective outside the war zone and throughout time, independently from the success or failure of ISIS: the effective indoctrination of the youth by their mothers may imply the possible survival and consequent emergence of a global security threat supporting the cause long after its disintegration (Dølo, 2018). Children represent the future, and women are tasked with the empowering responsibility of guaranteeing the success of ISIS ideology over time (Margolin & Cook, 2023).

However, as noted by Jacoby (2015), this has not always been the case. In fact, at the beginning its evolution, ISIS dissuaded women from enlisting to its cause; this perspective has changed with the successful expansion, acquisition of territories and therefore need to inhabit them with loyal recruits tasked with the procreation of future joiners. This is the assumption from which the strategic propagandistic picture of motherhood is created: females are divinely tasked with the sacred duty of motherhood, as mentioned in the Quranic texts and underlined in ISIS state propaganda magazines, to accomplish Allah’s plan (Spencer, 2016).

5.2 ISIS, propaganda, and gender roles

5.2.1 Picturing female emancipation: agency in Dabiq and Rumiya

The following paragraphs will attempt to address the research sub-questions providing some insights on ISIS propagandistic content available online. In this context, it is important to underline how the Islamic State has been particularly effective in the dissemination of propaganda on a global scale, as

its content has been tailored for “specific audiences and demographics, taking into account the unique social and political circumstances of different nations and locations” (Macnair & Frank, 2017, p.235). To undertake this sophisticated activity, the Islamic State has developed a media branch called al-Hayat Media Center, with a specialization in the production of content pleasing and attractive also for Westerners. This state media agency has used not only written sources but also produced high-quality visual content to invite its audience to swell its ranks. As far as online periodical magazines are concerned, Dabiq and Rumiya surely represent an innovation in the realm of jihadist online propaganda, as their content ranges from ideological aspects, to interviews, reports from the battlefield, appeals to the Umma, as well as terrorist attacks and global events. This balance in terms of content has been proven particularly effective in terms of recruitment (The Carter Center, 2015). In this context, women got progressively introduced and addressed in the magazines, taking more and more space in each issue, having “even” a whole dedicated section.

In particular, Dabiq has been published online from 2014 to 2016 in fifteen issues, until the control over the related city was lost and the magazine was replaced by its successor, Rumiya, published until 2017 (Stempień, 2021). The publications have introduced content purposely concerning and targeting women to demonstrate how, from its own perspective, the IS actually values and cherishes women, considering their role as critical to the self-proclaimed Caliphate and the continuation of its holy war.

After the first content dedicated to ISIS female sympathizers in its fourth issue, mainly concerning the institutionalization of slavery of inferior infidel women and the ideological justification of sex crimes within the Caliphate, Dabiq focuses on women in its seventh publication (2015a), interestingly providing information to its female audience on how a good Muslim woman should behave. In order to do so, Dabiq strategically presents the information in the shape of an engaging interview with the wife of a jihadist attacker who had successfully killed civilians in a Parisian grocery store. In spite of the lack of possibility to verify the authenticity of this interview, the content clearly identifies the ideal profile of the good ISIS woman, providing sisterly advice to the audience. Introducing a female voice in its magazines depicts an instance of female agency, giving the impression that women have a voice in the Caliphate. Thus, subjects looking for empowerment may find this aspect of agency particularly appealing (Lahoud, 2018).

Among the most interesting content for the purpose of this work, the following sentences are hereby reported (Dabiq, 2015a):

My sisters, be bases of support and safety for your husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons. Be advisors to them. They should find comfort and peace with you. Do not make things difficult for them. Facilitate all matters for them. Be strong and brave.

It is essential for you to love Allah and His Messenger more than your own selves, your husbands, your children, and your parents.

Be patient. Patience is a great virtue.

What is outstanding about these words is the identification of a precise list of qualities a good ISIS woman should aim to: piousness, supportiveness, peacefulness, strength, courage, and patience. She must be focused on her faith and her family, being her the center of the hearth, patiently taking care of it.

In its eighth issue, Dabiq (2015b) proceeds addressing women in its section “To Our Sisters”, with an article entitled “Women are the twin halves of men” (Dabiq, 2015b, p.33). These paragraphs, allegedly written by a woman, focus once again on the feminine figure within the Islamic State. Particular attention is brought to the issue of *hijrah* in the following passages (Dabiq, 2015b):

The opponents often repeat that those who perform hijrah to the Islamic State belong to a marginalized class in their former lands, living in difficult conditions between unemployment, poverty, family problems, and psychological disorders. But I saw something contrary! I saw sisters who divorced the Dunyā and came to their Lord, striving. I saw sisters who abstained from a life of luxury and abundant wealth. I saw sisters who abandoned a beautiful home and luxurious car, and ran for the cause of their Lord.

Some of their husbands were killed, some were amputated, some were paralyzed, and some were imprisoned, but their wives were firm like the firmest of mountains. The tribulations did not increase them in anything but firmness and patience. Do not forget that reward is in accordance with the degree of hardship.

Firstly, to have a better understanding of the mentioned concepts, it is crucial to comprehend the inestimable value of *hijrah* in the Islamic religion and tradition. The term originally referred to the sacred migration of the Prophet, along with the first community of his followers, from Mecca to Medina. On a spiritual level, this pilgrimage represents the evolution from the state of darkness, ignorance and sin, *Jahiliyyah*, to the light and knowledge within God (EUROPOL, 2019).

In the mentioned issue of Dabiq (2015b), women are strongly encouraged to perform this migration to ISIS territories. The experience is depicted as a challenging but empowering journey providing

them with a fulfilling reward in the afterlife. Interestingly, difficulties relating to such choices are not denied, but celebrated as an occasion to prove females' patience and firmness. Once again, those are underlined as crucial characteristics of the good Muslim woman. Remarkably, this practice is not only allowed, but also permissively supported, despite the traditional Islamic Law tending to limit women in travelling alone for security reasons, considering the organization's need to attract women to swell its ranks (Lahoud, 2018). Once again, the perspective of such empowering journey is particularly appealing to an audience seeking empowerment.

The passage also denies the perspectives promoted by the infidels about ISIS members being poor, marginalized and mentally unstable, presenting *hijrah* as a rational and conscious choice humbly made for a greater good, in the exercise of the believer's agency.

The ninth issue of Dabiq (2015c) is innovative in changing the title of its section dedicated to women to "From Our Sisters". The paragraphs regard the institutionalization and justification of sexual slavery of female war captives (Dabiq, 2015c):

The right hand's possession (mulk al-yamīn) are the female captives who were separated from their husbands by enslavement. They became lawful for the one who ends up possessing them even without pronouncement of divorce by their harbī husbands.

By Allah, we brought it back by the edge of the sword, and we did not do so through pacifism, negotiations, democracy, or elections. We established it according to the prophetic way, with blood-red swords, not with fingers for voting or tweeting.

So whoever thinks that the ultimate aim of saby is pleasure, then he is a mistaken ignoramus. Otherwise, why did the Sharī'ah urge kindness towards slaves as well as good treatment of them even if they are kuffār whom Allah humiliated by making them into slaves owned by the people of Islam. Yet He [...] made their liberation from the lands of kufr a way for their salvation and guidance towards the straight path.

And I swear by Allah, I haven't heard of nor seen anyone in the Islamic State who coerced his slave-girl to accept Islam. On the contrary, I saw all of those who accepted Islam had done so voluntarily, not against their will.

Are slave-girls whom we took by Allah's command better, or prostitutes – an evil you do not denounce – who are grabbed by quasi men in the lands of kufr where you live? A prostitute in your lands comes and goes, openly committing sin. She lives by selling her honor, within the sight and hearing of the

deviant scholars from whom we don't hear even a faint sound. As for the slave-girl that was taken by the swords of men following the cheerful [...], then her enslavement is in opposition to human rights and copulation with her is rape?! What is wrong with you? How do you make such a judgment? What is your religion? What is your law?

In the mentioned lines, not only the magazine officially institutionalizes sexual slavery of war captives, but also presents this custom as an act of kindness towards female prisoners as they are owned by a true Muslim, specifying how they have the opportunity to experience life in the Caliphate without being obliged to convert to Islam, exercising their agency in choosing their faith. Furthermore, women's morality outside ISIS is questioned: the accusations made towards the Islamic State on sexual slavery are compared to prostitution, which is instead described as sinful and dishonorable, demonstrating the enemy's incoherence. Once again, this representation is presented as a juxtaposition to the true, chaste, pious, humble, modest Muslim woman.

Morality and piousness are recurring themes also in the following issue of the online magazine, where the problem of having an apostatic husband is introduced. In this case, Dabiq (2015d) specifies how "it is not permissible [...] in any case to remain under the same roof with someone who has removed the noose of Islam from his neck, and the marriage contract between you and him was nullified the moment when he apostatized from the religion of Islam" (Dabiq, 2015d, p.44).

The eleventh issue (2015e) is probably the most relevant for the in terms of gender-based propagandistic message, as it clearly outlines the role of the woman in the Islamic State. Being entitled "A *Jihad* without fighting", the section describes in detail how females are vital to the existence of ISIS over time. Some of the most relevant passages can be found below (Dabiq, 2015e):

[...] the absence of an obligation of jihād and war upon the Muslim woman – except in defense against someone attacking her – does not overturn her role in building the Ummah, producing men, and sending them out to the fierceness of battle. [...] Therefore, I write this article for my Muslim sister, the wife of a mujāhid and the mother of lion cubs.

You are in jihād when you await the return of your husband patiently, anticipating Allah's reward, and making du'ā' for him and those with him to attain victory and consolidation. You are in jihād when you uphold your loyalty to him in his absence. You are in jihād when you teach his children the difference between the truth and falsehood, between right and wrong. Indeed, you, my precious sister,

are today the wife of a mujāhid, and tomorrow you might be the wife of a shahīd, or an injured fighter, or a prisoner – so how ready is your supply of patience and steadfastness?

As for you, O mother of lion cubs [...] And what will make you know what the mother of lion cubs is? She is the teacher of generations and the producer of men. I inform you of the statement of the Prophet, “... the woman is a shepherd in her house and is responsible for her herd.” So have you understood, my Muslim sister, the enormity of the responsibility that you carry? O sister in religion, indeed, I see the Ummah of ours as a body made of many parts, but the part that works most towards and is most effective in raising a Muslim generation is the part of the nurturing mother. And for that reason, you are in need of a lot of patience and goodness and what suffices of beneficial knowledge in order to build a generation capable of bearing a trust that the heavens, the earth, and the mountains have all declined to bear.

You know that acquiring knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim and every Muslimah, and Allah has blessed the Islamic State, which has not been stingy towards its women in providing institutions and courses on the entirety of the Shari’ah sciences. Because you will enter fierce battles between truth and falsehood.

The first element that is noticeable in these lines is the absence of an obligation of waging war against the infidels for women. Females are seen as producers and supporters of men, both children and husbands. They are supportive wives and nurturing mothers and teachers, in charge educating the next generation of fighters, ensuring the survival of the Caliphate through the exercise of their agency. The passages portray multiple times the image of the lioness and her cubs to indicate the centrality of the motherly figure in actively raising her children as brave, righteous, strong, valiant paladins committed to *jihad*. Values that are emphasized as founding pillars for true female believers are, once again, patience, loyalty, goodness, and piousness. The section mentions several times how important the role allocated to women is in winning the battle against ignorance and apostasy, specifying how, differently from men, the weapon assigned to women is knowledge. This victory is therefore conceived in these agents’ hands.

Another characteristic that is valued by the al-Hayat Media Center in the dissemination of Dabiq is openness to polygyny, which is institutionalized in the Caliphate and described in the twelfth issue of the magazine (2015f), just as patience and loyalty in the practice of the four months and ten days of the mourning of the husbands, *ihdād*, mentioned in the thirteenth issue (2016a).

Finally, a valuable contribution in terms of informative propaganda for ISIS women can be found in the last issue of Dabiq (2016b), which focuses on the evil values promoted by the West in contrast with the principle of Islamic *fitrah*, which applies to the entire Umma, with specific indications and implications for women (Dabiq, 2016b).

[Since the beginning, Western society has been dominated by] *financial interest and sexual instinct. Criminals were looked upon as being helpless, misunderstood individuals. The role of man and woman was mixed up, as was the responsibility father and mother had towards daughter and son. Woman need not be a mother, a wife, or a maiden, but rather, she should work like man, rule like man, and have intercourse like an animal, without being conscious of her Lord watching both her and her heinous partner in crime.*

The deviance carried on until the so-called “Brave New World” of America and Western Europe began legalizing marijuana, bestiality, transgenderism, sodomy, pornography, feminism, and other evils, allowing the Christian pagans of Europe, America, and Australia to break the crime record of every disbelieving nation to precede them in history [...].

In this first part, the issue focuses on the sinful values promoted by Western society, which led to a gradual correspondence of the masculine and feminine roles and attributes concerning not only the individuals' broader contribution into society, but also their sexual life. Women are accused to wrongly aim to be like men, denying their inner nature of nurturers and educators. Interestingly, the section indeed reports feminism as one of the evils ruling Western society, unable to distinguish right and wrong due to the absence of *fitrah*. The latter is defined in the second part of the section (Dabiq, 2016b):

Allah also created man and instilled in him the fitrah, a disposition to recognize His lordship and worship Him alone. [...] So this fitrah is what causes man to distinguish between monotheism and polytheism. It also aids him in generally distinguishing between pureness and filthiness, between decency and obscenity, between mercy and cruelty, between justice and tyranny, between truth and falsehood, and between right and wrong. [...] Essentially, the fitrah inclines man to stay clean, healthy, sober, and faithful.

The fitrah is also the attraction of man to woman and of woman to man, while submitting this attraction to the laws of marriage, divorce, and slavery dictated by Allah.

The fitrah is also the motherhood and mercy of mother for child. [...] this motherhood entails nursing the child at home, while his father works as the breadwinner and she obeys her husband as his wife.

[...] righteous women are devoutly obedient, [...] men have a degree over them [in responsibility and authority].

The fitrah also entails modesty and chastity.

The fitrah is also that woman does not imitate man. The Prophet cursed those men who emulate women and those women who emulate men. [...] The fitrah is also that woman does not rule man.

The fitrah is also that women are not responsible for waging war, rather it is man who is judged for his abandonment of physical jihad.

After a first general definition of the concept, the paragraphs proceed outlining what are the implications of applying the principle of *fitrah* on women. It is reiterated that they must be obedient, patient, pure, pious, modest, chaste, taking care of their husbands and children, complementing men, respecting Islamic laws about marriage, divorce and slavery. In addition, the section specifies how women are not entitled to conduct and engage in physical *jihad*, as it is a function attributed to men only. Finally, the editorial feature dedicated to women proceeds criticizing the West and Christianity (Dabiq, 2016b):

[...] pagan Christians [...] claim that Jesus' mother is the "Mother of God," while portraying her in a humble manner, both in her demeanor and garments. However, they encourage the Western woman to be everything opposite to Mary. The Western woman is encouraged to compete with men in the workplace, to display of her body what no man ever displays, and to be more promiscuous than any prostitute has ever been. There is no resemblance in the Western woman to what is found in Mary, just as there is no resemblance in the Western man to what is found in Jesus the Messiah of humility, religiosity, and chastity.

And as the fitrah continues to be desecrated day by day in the West and more and more women abandon motherhood, wifehood, chastity, femininity, and heterosexuality, the true woman in the West has become an endangered creature. The Western way of life a female adopts brings with it so many dangers and deviances, threatening her very own soul. She is the willing victim who sacrifices herself for the immoral "freedoms" of her people, offering her fitrah on the altar of secular liberalism. [...] The solution is laid before the Western woman. It is nothing but Islam, the religion of the fitrah.

The words mentioned above demonstrate how ISIS portrays the enemy as its complete opposite, leveraging on how Western women and men are not following their religion's examples, behaving in the contrary manner. This discrepancy between societal and religious values represents the basis of the crisis of the Western woman, who is trapped between the oppression of feminism and "her very own soul" (Dabiq, 2016b, p.25). The only possible resolution of this existential predicament is actively choosing the true Islam promoted by the IS.

Notwithstanding Dabiq's centrality in innovatively addressing women in the spreading of propaganda, the magazine is only one of the several means of communications used by ISIS to promote its radical message. As mentioned before, after the northern Syrian town was lost, the magazine was replaced with Rumiya, published online from 2016 to 2017. To enlarge its audience, Rumiya has been translated into 10 languages, including English, Bosnian, French, German, Kurdish, Russian, Turkish. The topics of its articles range from religious matters to gender roles and terrorist attacks (Stempień, 2021, p.48). Among the other counterparts, Rumiya, as its predecessor, specifically addresses women in its first edition (2016), in an article entitled "O women, give charity". In this section, females in the Islamic State as well as ISIS sympathizers and future joiners are invited to practice *jihad* in economic terms (Rumiya, 2016):

Belief in Allah and waging jihad for His cause with wealth and soul are emphasized here, and jihad using one's wealth is mentioned first because wealth is used initially in order to prepare equipment and arm the troops, and because jihad using one's physical self (soul) has exemptions – those who are excused from fighting – and the woman is exempt therefrom.

As such, it is an obligation for women to wage jihad with their wealth, if they have any surplus.

Once again, the concept of women not participating in physical war is reiterated. Nonetheless, they are invited to contribute economically, as well as socially, to the success of the battles against the infidels, thus exercising their economic agency.

Nevertheless, ISIS ideological position on the role of women in combat roles has been quite ambiguous: on one hand, this possibility has been sharply excluded as mentioned in several official propaganda documents. On the other, this idea has evolved over time, changing from source to source, opening a window to the implementation of this social practice. However, this issue is still highly debated, and clarity lacks about the extent of its actual realization.

A foretaste about the possible role of women in combat has been discussed in another valuable contribution from ISIS state media channels: this can be found in the Khansaa Manifesto, published online in 2014, whose author has claimed to be an affiliate of the al-Khansaa Brigade. Due to the high sensitivity of the document's extremist content, the original text could not be found online. Therefore, an analysis of its salient sections by Winter and Margolin (2017) is provided to develop a better understanding of how women in ISIS society are depicted from official and semi-official propaganda sources.

What is most important for the purpose of this research is that the creator of this manifesto, a member of the morality female police unit in charge of enforcing Sharia on women in Raqqa, has once again specified that the true and just women's role is "in the house, with husband and children." (Winter, 2015, p.22 in Winter and Margolin, 2017, p. 26), mentioning that they could leave their households only under extraordinary situations, such as to study their faith or perform medical work. Regarding the possibility of engaging in combat roles, the manifesto specifies how this was plausible only "if the enemy is attacking [their] country, and the men are not enough to protect it, and the imams give a fatwa⁴ for it" (Winter, 2015, p.22 in Winter & Margolin, 2017, p. 26).

An additional interesting aspect about the manifesto is its focus on the idea that "foreign states had failed Muslim women" (Vale, 2019, p.3) from various perspectives, ranging from not allowing them to wear religious apparel freely, dishonorably forcing them to show their bodies to everyone, to distancing them from their inner nature of peace, calmness and steadiness providers in the private realm, pushing them to seek a fake empowerment through labor equally to their by then emasculated male counterparts, as imposed by the sick ideals of Western feminism, which neglects women's agency. Contrarily, the manifesto underlines the importance of seeking protection and safety in the private sphere, where women can responsibly accomplish their sacred mission within their families, actively choosing to populate the Caliphate with the future generation of honorable jihadi fighters.

According to Winter and Margolin's (2017) research, this possibility for women to be directly engaged in the battlefield has been reported more openly in one of the last issues of Rumiyaah, in July 2017, at a time of greater struggle for the Islamic State. In an article entitled "Our journey to Allah" the following passage is reported (Rumiyaah 2017, p.13 in Winter & Margolin, 2017, p.24):

⁴ A *fatwa* is defined as "an official statement or order from an Islamic religious leader". Cambridge University Press. (2024). *Fatwa*. In *Cambridge English Dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fatwa>

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 jihad, their desire to sacrifice for the sake of Allah, and their desire for Jannah. Among those blessed women were Umm 'Amarah Nasibah Bint Ka'b al-Ansariyyah. [...] She fought with courage and her hand was cut off in battle [...].

As far as these lines are concerned, it is interesting to note how these sentences are mentioned in the last section of the article, in the majority of which traditional support and familial roles are instead described. The final concepts, nonetheless, express the possibility for women to participate to physical *jihad* as men, following the example of a female fighter and companion of the Prophet who defended him on the battlefield (Winter & Margolin, 2017).

Being this controversial issue about contradicting information particularly intriguing for the purpose of this thesis, the results of the triangulation activities undertaken through online research and comparison with media and academic reports, as mentioned in the methodological section of this project, are explicitly reported.

As officially outlined in an analysis provided by the American think tank Wilson Center (2019, para 1) “By December 2017, the ISIS caliphate had lost 95 percent of its territory, including its two biggest properties, Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, and the northern Syrian city of Raqqa, its nominal capital”, as also declared by the US Department of State and reported by the New York Times and a precise timeline about ISIS-related operations developed by scholars of Crisis Group, as well as Al Jazeera, the Guardian and other major international media outlets (US Department of State, 2024; Burke 2017; International Crisis Group, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2017; Coker et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the existence of an influential all-female police unit like the al-Khansaa Brigade in Raqqa and the possibility for women to participate in its activities represent another strategic element contributing to the success of ISIS propagandistic message in empowering terms. By presenting the chance for a female ISIS sympathizer of joining such powerful and, consequently, empowering group, the Islamic State strategically depicts its interest in women’s agency, not only portraying them as equally involved members of the Caliphate’s society, but also underlining their strengths and potentialities which render them even more valued within its societal and organizational structure.

The Brigade, in charge of the enforcement of moral rules imposed on women by the Caliphate, was introduced in 2014 following an increasing number of murders of commanders committed by males dressed as women in religious garb (Spencer, 2016). The tasks of this influential group of women range from patrol activities to information collection and sharing, both about potential

dissenters to male supervisors and propagandistic content for recruitment purposes to sympathizers. To accomplish its objectives, these female police officers openly use brutal violence, including the deployment of torture on other women and girls (Spencer, 2017; Gan et al., 2019). This exercise of power by this all-female religious police unit represents a form of social climbing in the Islamic State context, demonstrating how women potentially can reach their apex of dedication to Allah's plan according to the IS ideology, while being allowed to work exceptionally leaving their households due to the peculiar circumstances of their duty.

Similarly to the al-Khansaa Brigade, other religious police units have been progressively introduced by ISIS authorities for local recruitment and moral patrol purposes, starting from the Al-Dawa Battalion, the first all-female unit in charge of spreading ISIS ideology locally in its first phase of expansion, providing incentives to locals in need ranging from food to stipends in exchange for their participation to the cause. Among the following groups several battalions figure, including the Aumahat al-Moaminin, Amaliat Khasa Khadija Bintu Kwaild, Al-Zarqawi, Bintu al-Azwar Battalions (Almohammad & Speckhard, 2017).

What emerges from the analysis of their characteristics and tasks is that, whether the battalion is consisting mainly of Westerners, in the case of al-Khansa' or the Al-Zarqawi Battalions, or locals, mainly Syrians and Iraqis, the commander must report to male heads of division, and officers are accompanied by male counterparts in patrol operations or special missions targeting men. Moreover, the study of these groups shows that ISIS has progressively involved women in operational and propagandistic roles, starting from a door-to-door soft approach to be known and supported locally, to providing recruited females with sophisticated infiltration tactics and intelligence training to undertake special missions nearby and outside the Caliphate's territory. Furthermore, another noticeable aspect concerns the progressive evolution of the Islamic State's recruitment efforts and propagandistic strategy from a local dimension to a global one, involving the online environment, as well as its Western recruits, usually charged with tasks useful to extend its global reach to their counterparts (Almohammad & Speckhard, 2017).

5.2.2 A chameleonic gender-based propaganda strategy

An additional outstanding aspect concerning ISIS propagandistic message and recruitment strategies is their ability to easily adapt to different audiences, means of communication, being strategically tailored on the needs and the sociocultural context of its recipients. What is relevant for the purpose of this research is how the concept of female emancipation and female agency are differently

considered in diverse dissemination and recruitment contexts. To provide a better understanding of this peculiar aspect of the Islamic State's efficient propaganda machine, different studies are useful.

Among these, the discourse analysis undertaken by Nassar (2019) on different official state propaganda articles is crucial to shed light on how women are actually perceived in the Caliphate environment. The study indeed demonstrates how, on the messages translated in multiple languages, and therefore tailored for an international public, the language employed by the IS tends to be inclusive, welcoming, and understanding of women's uncertainties and difficulties. Contrarily, the lexicon choices associated with the propaganda content for local distribution and dissemination has a more authoritative tone towards its female audience which is, beyond all, described as subordinate to their male counterparts, openly neglecting their agency. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that, while for foreign audiences the objective evolves around the provision of a sense of identity and agency by showing how women are valued and respected, this is not the case for middle eastern women, who are mostly motivated by deprivation, exclusion, suppression, imperilment and attracted to a message that ensures them a redemption firstly on earth and then in paradise (Margolin & Cook, 2023).

In parallel, confronting these results with those of a report published by the EUROPOL in 2019, it is possible to confirm that, notwithstanding the general adoption of a conservative approach, the content disseminated abroad is more dedicated to women as active agents and contributors, while in articles published locally, as in the case of al-Naba', the official Arabic weekly newspaper of the IS, content is not only limited but also mostly derogatory. This includes mentioning that they are slaves of their husbands, who must complete their cognitive deficiencies, as well as reinforcing stereotypes about females being inclined to circulate rumors, protest for futile reasons, be superficial and excessive. This aspect is mentioned also in a study undertaken by Lahoud in 2018 for UN Women, which depicts the descriptions as "overtly sexist" (Lahoud, 2018, p.6). On the other side, the propaganda also mentions how, to compensate their tendency towards ignorance, they are stimulated to join religious courses offered in the lands of the Caliphate. The same invite is mentioned in Dabiq in its eleventh issue (2015e), albeit with another tone (Dabiq, 2015e):

You know that acquiring knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim and every Muslimah, and Allah has blessed the Islamic State, which has not been stingy towards its women in providing institutions and courses on the entirety of the Sharī'ah sciences. So shake off the dust of laziness and procrastination and come forth, free yourself from ignorance and learn the matters of your religion.

Despite being authoritative, the message is delivered in a more motivating manner, underlining the power of women's agency and their responsibility in changing the course of the events "freeing themselves from ignorance" (Dabiq, 2015e). The lines also refer to women and men together, picturing an idea of equality between the sexes.

Interestingly, the Islamic State ideology does not encompass education for females that goes beyond the requested social functions within the family or as a civil servant. Therefore, their study plan is adapted accordingly, with subjects ranging from religious teachings to cooking classes and stitching (Margolin & Cook, 2023). However, concurrently, the IS needs skilled individuals to undertake its basic state functions as providing basic healthcare, infrastructure and services. This need does not exclude women, mostly Westerners, who actively join the Caliphate to help this utopian perfect Muslim reality, being granted a waiver to exercise professional roles outside their households (Spencer, 2016).

Furthermore, the EUROPOL report (2019) underlines how a recurring argument in official state propaganda is the need for salvation of Sunni Muslim women from foreign, Western, as well as Shia members and apostates. This, once again, demonstrates how ISIS's propagandistic message is highly gendered and aims to reinforce traditional gender roles rather than challenge them.

This discrepancies in terms of granting women agency in the Caliphate can be also found in the propaganda messages concerning the institution of sexual slavery, less easily acceptable by foreigners than local women due to cultural reasons and, therefore, depicted as advantageous for both women and men in magazines designed for a foreign audience (Lahoud, 2018), showing attention to women's concerns about this social practice.

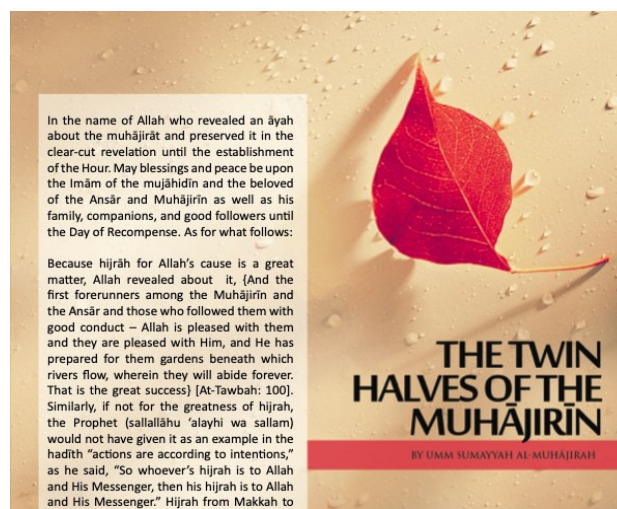
Other differences concern instead discrepancies between the official state propaganda and social media posts shared by disseminators, recruiters, and sympathizers. Those will be explored in the following paragraphs.

5.2.3 Propaganda as tool to reinforce gender roles: the role of aesthetics and visuals

An additional remarkable aspect in determining the success of ISIS propagandistic message is its production of sophisticated, high-quality content, not only in terms of ideological and textual

composition, but also regarding visualizations and design. These, just as the written content, reinforce the strict gender roles applied to the Caliphate’s society and the related gender segregation. In fact, observing the layout of the propagandistic online magazines, it is possible to affirm not only that the message dedicated to women is strictly separated from the rest of the sections, but also how these pages look dramatically different as far as choices of colors, shapes, fonts, symbols are concerned. In particular, pictures are emblematic in showing this divulgation methodology. To illustrate this peculiar strategy employed by the Islamic State propaganda machine, the below examples from Dabiq’s issues 8 (2015b) and 11 (2015e) are reported (Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 6):

Figure 4. Dabiq’s propagandistic article addresses women as the “twin halves” of men.



(Dabiq, 2015b)

Figure 5. Dabiq’s section about female *jihad* as mission within the familial sphere.



(Dabiq, 2015e)

Figure 6. A picture of a beautiful sunset in Mosul romanticizes *hijrah*.



(Dabiq, 2015b)

In the eighth issue (2015b), focused on stimulating women's to migrate to the Caliphate, a picture of a beautiful sunset in Mosul is presented to romanticize the adventurous experience of *hijrah*, while a delicate picture of a leaf is tactically employed to accompany the propagandistic text together with a powerful slogan indicating that women are the “twin halves” of men, attempting to strategically provide the female audience with a sense of empowerment. Such appealing content attempts to ideologically “depict a utopian society where all Sunnis are prospering”, women included (Gerstel, 2016, p.1).

As far as the eleventh issue is concerned (2015e), the dominating topic of the section dedicated to women is about the undertaking of *their jihad*, meaning to be pious and righteous mothers, wives, and educators of the next generation of fighters, ensuring the survival of the Islamic State through their powerful agency. Again, the layout of the pages is tactically chosen to evoke a sense of responsibility towards children and the endurance of the Caliphate. By contrast, the below pictures (Figure 7, Figure 8) represent “visually impressive” (Gerstel, 2016, p.2) scenes of war from the battlefield, portraying masculinity in the related “manly” sections of the magazine.

Figure 7. Heroic ISIS fighters celebrating victory on the battlefield.



(Dabiq, 2015b)

Figure 8. Saudi fighter killed by the ISIS combatants.



(Dabiq, 2015e)

5.2.4 Emancipation in official and unofficial propaganda

Despite the sophisticated institutional propaganda machine that the Islamic State has built and developed throughout time, the official state propagandistic content creation would not suffice in explaining the worldwide success of the spreading of its ideology. Therefore, to better understand how ISIS has become attractive not only to locals, but also, and quite interestingly, to Westerners and citizens from all continents, it is fundamental to take into account the contribution provided by the online propaganda disseminators and, more in general, ISIS sympathizers.

To understand how the concept of agency and the idea of female emancipation interact with ISIS propaganda, the analysis provided by Saltman and Smith (2015) proves to be particularly useful. The report focuses on social media posts of female migrants to the Islamic State, investigating their backgrounds and motivations, to provide recommendations to tackle the increase of violent global extremism. The most interesting aspect of the research is the identification of several push and pull factors that cause a significant number of women to choose to make *hijrah* to the Islamic State and fully embrace the related extremist ideology. These factors consist of motivations ranging from the feeling of isolation within the surrounding dominant society, to the romanticization of this adventurous and sacred experience. Analyzing them through the lens of agency, it is possible to affirm that while the push factors focus on deeper and gender-neutral themes, the pull-ones are tightly related to the individual's sex. In fact, while push factors focus on the perceived segregation and rage against Muslims on a global scale, as well as the lack of action to protect them of the international community, whereas the pull ones are based on the ideological possibility to contribute as a state-builder to the utopian society of the Islamic State, the feeling of camaraderie with like-minded sisters, and the idealization of a romantic adventure experience (Saltman & Smith, 2015), especially by the youngest (Figure 9, Figure 10, Figure 11, Figure 12, Figure 13):

Figure 9 & 10. Pictures posted on Twitter show the concept of sisterhood and adventure within the Caliphate.



(Saltman & Smith, 2015)

Figure 11. Twitter post of a female ISIS sympathizer asking for religious advice about piercings.



(Saltman & Smith, 2015)

Figure 12. ISIS fan-girl's Tweets from 2015.

“radicalize is my new fave word btw”

“someone radicalize me yo”

- Tweets from a fan girl, 2015.

(Huey & Witmer, 2016)

Figure 13. Picture posted on Twitter showing children in ISIS apparel.



(Klausen, 2015)

Analyzing the content posted on social media by these young women, what can be interestingly observed is that it mainly refers to “superficial” desires, doubts, issues and opinions referring to everyday life facts, friendships, romance, and the sense of responsibility derived from their religious duties. In this context, these women’s agency in ISIS is perceived in the shape of feeling personally emancipated, valued and included within their community of like-minded peers, being an independent decision maker to courageously migrate alone to the Caliphate, and of possibly being socially highly valued through the acquisition of the status of martyr’s widow. In this sense, ISIS is practically seen by women as a safe alternative to freely practice the true Islam, finding real friends to share this sacred experience with, without being criticized for wearing a *niqab* or a *burqa*⁵, and to find a true Muslim husband, being rewarded in the afterlife for his eventual death.

In reality, these pull factors could be considered as similar to those of male foreigners joining the Caliphate. However, they are framed significantly differently because of the drastically diverse roles performed in the strictly gender-segregated society of the IS (Saltman & Smith, 2015).

Nonetheless, an outstanding element emerging from this research is that the deeper sense of injustice referring to the above-mentioned push factors is less visible yet present in the social media shared posts by women. The concept of agency intended as deeper and broader emancipation from the western-centric dominating global society, burden shared with their male counterparts, is rather openly present in the official state propaganda targeting citizens abroad, as seen, for instance, in the analysis of Dabiq’s content. As previously discussed, in the magazine female agency is framed as a reinforcer of traditional gender-based societal roles, depicting women as game changers in the exercise of roles evolving around marriage, maternity and the education of their children. Therefore, it appears that the analyses exclusively evolving around the idea of sexual desire and romance as propagandistic drivers are “a product of analysis based largely on social media profiles” (Ingram,

⁵ A *Niqab* is a Muslim female’s piece of cloth covering the woman’s body but not her face. Cambridge University Press. (2024). *Niqab*. In *Cambridge English Dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/niqab>

The *Burqa*, instead, covers the entire female body, with an exception for little holes enabling women to see. Cambridge University Press. (2024). *Burqa*. In *Cambridge English Dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/burqa>

The employment of such apparel was progressively imposed by ISIS authorities to preserve the pureness of women and to ensure their safety from unwanted male attentions. (Margolin & Cook, 2023). The free use of such clothing in ISIS is strategically used as a propagandistic argument to counter the enemy, namely the infidels and their dishonorable society, where pious Muslims are not able to wear their religious apparel freely, being shamed because of their religious identity (EUROPOL, 2019).

2016, para 2) rather than considering also official propaganda sources. Even in the case of *hijrah*, state propaganda specifies how the reasons to embark in this adventure must not evolve around romance, rather religious affiliation, as the husband will most likely lose his life in combat, and she will be encouraged to re-marry soon (EUROPOL, 2019).

Another difference that emerged in the conduction of this research in terms of propagandistic content shared online compared to the information present in the official state media outlets concerns the possibility for women to engage in combat.

Despite the below viral picture (Figure 14) uploaded on Twitter and reported by major international media outlets such as CNN and the New Zealand Herald (Shubert, 2015; New Zealand Herald, 2016) representing an impactful symbol of developing women's agency in the Caliphate, the official position of ISIS towards this issue is debated.

Figure 14. Picture posted on Twitter by Zaynab Sharrouf representing ISIS women in fighting attire.



(Saltman & Smith, 2015)

The photo has been uploaded on Twitter by Zaynab Sharrouf, who was only a teenager at the time of her family's *hijrah* in Daesh's territory but has later become influential in propaganda spreading in the Australian extremist online environment. The picture, which became popular globally among ISIS sympathizers, has been published a year later than the dissemination of the 2014 al-Khansaa manifesto previously mentioned in this section. This could imply that a certain degree of acceptance towards women's participation in physical combat roles was present in the Caliphate at the time. However, as previously mentioned, the entity of such phenomenon is rather unclear. As seen before, the possibility for women to engage in defensive *jihad* has been introduced in Rumiya only in 2017, at a time of crisis for the Islamic State (Margolin & Cook, 2023). In this context, it is worth to mention that the 2014 manifesto was not published directly by the state official media outlet, but

by an associated brigade. This is fundamental in understanding the degree of institutionalization of such practice in ISIS strongly patriarchal society, where gender segregation figures as one of the founding pillars. In fact, as noted by Lahoud (2018), this segregation would make it difficult to justify women's participation in combat roles.

In this context, it is worth to mention how, in 2018, ISIS has released a video showing women engaged in the battlefield against PKK fighters, together with disabled and wounded men. However, this does not ensure that this practice is actually taking place and is socially accepted in the Caliphate, beyond propagandistic purposes; rather, that *even* women and injured jihadists join the fight in extreme circumstances. The message behind this representation is therefore an invitation to commit martyrdom and an admonishment for true Muslims to push them to undertake suicide operations, in a time where the Islamic State is facing greater and greater difficulties (Lahoud, 2018). Therefore, the ambiguous position towards the role of women in physical combat demonstrates on one hand that it is not a broadly accepted custom, while, on the other, that it may be envisaged in the shape of a suicide operation, therefore neglecting the actual concept of agency in the capacity of undertaking of military action on the battlefield, as it will be further discussed in the following section on this thesis.

6. Discussion

This study has aimed to shed light on how women contribute to the Islamic State's survival, endurance, and propagandistic global outreach, as well as on how they interact with gender roles and the idea of female emancipation, attempting to deepen the general knowledge of the extent to which their role makes a difference in the organization. The purpose of the following section is therefore to discuss the findings of the study answering the research question and sub-questions, attempting to provide an added contribution to the scholarly debate on the topic.

These research's findings are relevant as they challenge dominant perspectives on the topic, which tend to relegate women to the status of victim, neglecting their agency and political identity when engaging with violent extremist ideologies and activities. Furthermore, the research provides a different framework to engage with the issue of female participation in ISIS, challenging the dominant idea of them being only dominated passive subjects, specifically exploring how they act as key players in the realm of the organization's propaganda dissemination and recruitment activities. In parallel, this thesis has introduced the possibility of picturing an alternative perspective about female empowerment and emancipation, although in a patriarchal gender-segregated society like the Islamic State's, to explain how its successful propagandistic message attracts women globally, picturing their agency as autonomy in decision-making rather than aiming to equality within society.

6.1 Women as ISIS propaganda disseminators and recruiters: an invaluable resource

Firstly, the analysis previously conducted has demonstrated how, despite this aspect being often underestimated, female recruiters and propaganda disseminators contribute to ISIS endurance, development and outreach to a considerable extent, both online and offline.

6.1.1 Online

In general, the Internet and social media represent a potential silent enabler for individuals, especially for categories that are traditionally at disadvantage in society, like women. In a highly gender-segregated society like the Islamic State's, women can find a dimension of empowerment through the possibility of freely sharing and exchanging ideas, sentiments and opinions with concordant

individuals, feeling part of a community actively contributing to a bigger cause, while facing “fewer gender norm constraints” (Huey et al., 2019, p.448). In parallel, subjects that suffer from isolation in their everyday life environment feel welcomed, understood and valued among similar individuals in the online extremist community.

Online, women contribute largely to the Islamic State’s propaganda dissemination as well as recruitment activities, especially via Twitter, where they can expose their thoughts freely, especially if radical ones (Huey et al., 2019). As demonstrated by the selected findings from several analyses conducted on social media profiles of ISIS female members and sympathizers, women often are more influential than their male counterparts in the online environment: their positions in the online society range from simply being fans of the Islamic State, acting as mouthpiece of the IS message, having more active roles as closer members of the radical community, directly testifying tweeting about their experience from the Caliphate after having joined it physically, or actively recruiting their peers online. The existence of such a wide range of roles occupied by females in the propaganda dissemination and recruitment activities demonstrates how vital their agency is to the endurance of the radical organization. Furthermore, findings demonstrate how, compared to men, women are more efficient as digital bridges between radical profiles in the broader online extremist network, representing the foundation of its key linkages. In addition, as showed in the previous section, women can act as propaganda representatives, for instance having their interviews shared in the official state propaganda magazines disseminated worldwide, meaning having their voice heard on a global level as women’s spokesperson. Online, women strategically appeal to their radical audiences through posting a wide variety of content: when based in the Islamic State, they mainly share their everyday routine in the Caliphate demonstrating its advantages, depicting their new life as normal but extraordinary at the same time. Outside the combat zone, instead, the majority of posts concerns fan-girls content, meaning constant reposts of radical information and shared everyday thoughts.

Therefore, it is possible to affirm that women are empowered in contributing to the IS cause through their online content posting and sharing activities, becoming real key players in the spreading of the jihadist ideology, making the difference in the Islamic State’s online global presence: as reported by Margolin and Cook (2023), in 2015 a woman was present in radical networks at least every seven men (Berger & Morgan, 2015, in Margolin & Cook, 2023).

In addition, their vital contribution is also demonstrated by the presence of a dedicated section in the official propagandistic sources shared by the Caliphate online. If women were not as vital and efficient in terms of recruitment and ideology spreading, such efforts of including them with specific

content in magazines as *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* would not have been made in terms of time, resources and ideological commitment.

6.1.2 Offline

Offline, women embody the function of propaganda disseminator in the exercise of their roles within the family and acting as civil servants.

Their contribution as mothers is vital in terms of guaranteeing ISIS survival and success: through the education of their children, women prepare the future of the Caliphate indoctrinating them to the values of *jihad*. This role grants women a powerful position in determining the fate of the IS, being the ideological foundation of the future generation of jihadists the key element of its success. Therefore, as mentioned in the official propaganda magazines, women are tasked with a huge responsibility to accomplish the restoration of the golden age of Islam. The contribution they actively provide to ISIS in terms of indoctrination is so crucial that the status of motherhood is recurrently mentioned and described as sacred and divine in propaganda articles. This, from the females' perspective, grants power to their agency, representing a chance to shape history (Pinto, 2018).

As seen, in addition to their familial tasks, women may have the opportunity to join the Islamic State as professionals. Among the available functions to contribute as public servants, women may have the possibility to join moral police brigades, working as a Sharia law enforcers along with other females, therefore contributing as propaganda physical disciplinarians in the Caliphate territories.

Hence, the active contribution that females provide in terms of recruitment and propaganda dissemination is vital online, but also, and for some aspects mostly, offline, especially in the family domain, for the survival and development of the Islamic State over time.

6.2 Gender, agency and empowerment in ISIS's propaganda: picturing emancipation?

As previously introduced in this thesis' analysis section, ISIS society is highly segregated on a gender basis. Consequently, the propagandistic message of its ideology is entirely characterized by the maintenance of a rigid division in the gender dimension, reinforcing traditional conservative gender roles. However, looking at women's participation in ISIS from a different perspective, it could arguably be seen as instead challenging gender norms, providing a space for an alternative discussion on female emancipation.

6.2.1 ISIS propaganda as empowering force

Female jihadists can arguably represent “feminism’s other side of the coin” (Jacoby, 2015, p.542). ISIS constitutes an unprecedented case of success in its relations with women as well as their integration in the organization’s societal sphere. Through the development of a propagandistic discourse evolving around the concepts of agency and empowerment, the group has been able to successfully swell its ranks populating the Caliphate, consequently ensuring its survival over time.

Women represent an integral part of ISIS society, bringing a valuable contribution to its success in terms of population, recruitment, propaganda dissemination, and indoctrination of the future generation of ISIS warriors: their presence ensures the continuation of the struggle towards the realization of the Caliphate utopia. Due to this peculiar status of being vital resources, females have been granted more space as agents in the Islamic State compared to other jihadist organizations, especially due to its statal ambition.

Differently from other extremist groups sharing a similar ideology, ISIS has provided women with an alternative picture of their position within the Caliphate, leveraging on the concepts of agency and empowerment, offering them a possibility to change the course of the events not only in their personal lives, but also in terms of revolutionizing the destiny of the global Muslim community, joining the organization and contributing to the spreading of its ideology.

Moreover, ISIS has strategically and openly addressed women in a direct manner, showing their valuable position within its society, presenting an appealing picture of studying, working, and contributing opportunities in the Caliphate. Among these, the possibility of joining a moral police brigade such as the al-Khansaa is particularly appealing to subjects motivated by the idea of empowerment, for this represents an opportunity to demonstrate their active contribution into the community, having a degree over others, exercising power while gaining a valuable position within the organization (Margolin and Cook, 2023).

The Islamic State has also been particularly successful in the development of its propaganda narrative as it has pictured the roles attributed to women as part of their religious duty, leveraging on their sense of responsibility.

Moreover, foreigners have been attracted to join ISIS through the empowering act of *hijrah*, courageously overturning the social codes existing in their original surrounding environment, for instance disobeying to their family members and consciously deciding to leave to swell the IS ranks.

If on one side it is true that ISIS bases its propaganda on the reinforcement of traditional gender roles, on the other it is also possible to affirm that the institutional propagandistic message does not leverage on the gender-based narratives based on stereotyped romance. In fact, the main focus of ISIS official propaganda is the centrality of women for the realization of the “global victory of Islam” (Biswas & Deylami, 2019, p.1204), through the underline of their vital contribution for the salvation of their community against the deprivations of the infidels. These globally dominating sinful ideals are desecrating the divine order; women are therefore tasked with its restauration, going back to traditional femininity, reclaiming their divine position in society within the hearth as well as their religious values, actively building a better future for themselves, their children, and their peers towards redemption.

As noted by Dølo (2018), women and men are both manufacturers of their destiny in joining Daesh. Females are attracted to the promises of empowerment articulated in the IS propaganda and often migrate to ISIS, exercising their agency, to promote an alternative form of feminism, which frees them from the alienating context they have previously lived in, and allows them to be free in acting respecting their beliefs. Therefore, from this perspective, their free choice of embracing ISIS societal values represents the expression of their empowerment.

Moreover, looking at the issue from this point of view allows to develop a deeper understanding on how women themselves perceive their own decision to migrate to the Islamic State, attributing themselves “agency by demonstrating their capabilities, determination, endurance and strength in a challenging situation” (Dølo, 2018, p.61).

In Dabiq, the opportunity given to women to express themselves in a section dedicated to other females implies providing an instance of female agency in the Caliphate. This strategically results as being particularly appealing to its female audience, which may identify with the experiences and feelings mentioned by the protagonists, enhancing its proximity to them and developing a greater sense of closeness and belonging to the same community. Moreover, this strategic narrative directly addressing women provides readers with a sense of empowerment, as their role is described as extremely valued in the ISIS society: propaganda messages leverage on females’ sense of duty tasking them with a divine mission, providing them with the powerful possibility to determining the course of the events within their community.

If on one side it is clear that the societal values promoted by the Islamic State are patriarchal, meaning “relating to, characteristic of, or designating a society or culture in which men tend to be in positions of authority and cultural values and norms are seen as favouring men” (Oxford Dictionary,

1970), the free choice of women of being part of such system voluntarily migrating to the Caliphate can be seen as a form of female empowerment. Notwithstanding their participation, maintenance and promotion of patriarchal values, it is indisputable that, freely deciding to join it, they desire to live in a society promoting these values, as they consider it as a better option. Their rational choices therefore challenge the existing stereotypes on women as exclusively as either mentally deviant, brainwashed, or inherently peaceful and therefore victims of a man who imposed them to participate in it.

Arguably, ISIS female propagandists and propaganda disseminators' activities are similar to those of feminist activists: they both challenge existing values, promoting alternative social norms; they engage in political activity by spreading their ideology; they advance their own gender discourse within the society they belong to; they build in-person and online communities to raise awareness and advance their cause. Contextually, and oppositely, ISIS women see the empowering ideals promoted by Western as well as Islamic feminism as oppressive towards females, whose divine nature of mothers and nurturers is repressed. Therefore, their empowerment is conceived as tackling those societal constraints, in a sort of “anti-feminist feminism” (Offerein, 2018, p.51).

Therefore, despite them traditionally being associated with passive, non-agent roles, this alternative approach demonstrates how women represent quite something else. In parallel, ISIS choices in introducing such empowering themes in its propaganda message demonstrates the centrality of this alternative narrative.

Arguably, therefore, women joining ISIS can be considered feminist in their own way, as “this lifestyle is at once a manifestation of empowerment, worship, and participation” (Rafiq & Malik 2015, p. 20), according to the values of the so-called jihadi feminism introduced in the literature review chapter of this thesis.

6.2.2 ISIS propaganda as instrumentalizing conservative force

Looking at the issue from a broader and deeper perspective, this thesis has demonstrated how, in reality, not only the conservative themes and narratives employed by ISIS in its propaganda reinforce traditional gender roles, but also how their interpretation in relation to an alternative idea of female emancipation presents several limits. Despite the development of an efficient propagandistic narrative about women's position within the Caliphate, “ISIS women are merely exchanging one patriarchy for

another, probably more restrictive one” (Jacoby, 2015, p.542), not granting them any real freedom nor power.

Firstly, from the analysis of Dabiq, it emerges how women are primarily assigned roles within the domestic sphere. In fact, despite them being strategically described as the “twin halves of men” (Dabiq, 2015, p.33), their functions are clearly identified as being “*bases of support and safety for your husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons*” (Dabiq, 2015a), “*producing men, and sending them out to the fierceness of battle*” (Dabiq, 2015e), “*the wife of a mujāhid and the mother of lion cubs*” (Dabiq, 2015e), “*the teacher of generations and the producer of men*” (Dabiq, 2015e). The magazine also specifies how “*motherhood entails nursing the child at home, while his father works as the breadwinner and she obeys her husband as his wife*” (Dabiq, 2016b). Therefore, it is possible to affirm that this perspective is ideologically located far from the conceptualization of female emancipation intended as towards the objective of gender equality. Rather, this viewpoint is based on the idea of “complementarity” between men and women. At the same time, however, official state propaganda disseminated by ISIS specifies how “*men have a degree over them*” (Dabiq, 2016b), openly asserting their power over their wives.

In fact, men in every ISIS family are tasked with women’s guardianship, *qiwama*, being judged in front of God for each of their woman’s morality (EUROPOL, 2019). Consequently, in the Caliphate, several limits are imposed to women restricting their freedoms, including having to ask for permission to move from the house, being obliged to be quiet and completely cover themselves in religious apparel, to avoid any dangerous or sinful accident.

Secondly, notwithstanding the possibility that women can be offered in career terms, their roles are even so exercised within a strongly patriarchal framework. For instance, if considering the members of the female police units, it is true that members can exercise their agency in contributing to law enforcement activities in the Caliphate. However, this possibility is realized through the imposition of power on other women, while being subjugated in a patriarchal legal system. This working position, potentially considered as a form of social climbing, is however limited in its “emancipatory” function: as mentioned in the previous section, even if a woman manages to “climb the corporate ladder” within a policing brigade, she will always have to report about her actions to a man. Moreover, she cannot undertake any operations involving men without being flanked by one of them, as imposed by the rigid rules on gender segregation in the IS society.

In addition, the foundation of the al-Khansaa Brigade to face a growing number of killings carried out by men disguising themselves as women wearing religious attire further exemplifies the

instrumental reasoning behind the foundation of female policing brigades, rather than demonstrating ISIS willingness to offer them an empowering opportunity within the Caliphate's society.

Thirdly, another aspect that must be considered when evaluating narratives about a woman's agency and emancipation degree in the Islamic State context is her relationship with the surrounding social environment. Precisely, as shown in the analysis section of this thesis, findings demonstrate that the husband's societal status plays a determinant role in influencing a woman's social climbing as a propaganda disseminator, recruiter, moral police officer or, generally, civil servant. Some may have access to sensitive discussions, but this always depends on the husband's rank within the organization (Spencer, 2016).

Similarly, as seen before, another possibility of gaining a higher social status in terms of both respect and practical acquisition of a higher position within the online and offline communities is widowhood. However, once again, this does not depend on women's capacities, aspirations, talents, motivations, or agency, rather on the death of the man they were married to.

In addition, as previously argued, if on one hand it is true that ISIS values the education of women due to their peculiar role in the indoctrination of the next generation of jihadi fighters, it is also important to underline how this opportunity is limited to the functions that the Caliphate's society imposes to its women. In fact, as explained by Spencer (2016), the Islamic State does not allow women to freely enroll in and complete a degree program mastering subjects of their choice, as their education must be justified for gender-assigned purposes. As explained in Dabiq (2015e) addressing its female audience, "*My Muslim sister, indeed you are a mujāhidah, and if the weapon of the men is the assault rifle and the explosive belt, then know that the weapon of the women is good behavior and knowledge*" (Dabiq, 2015e, p.44), education is considered only in functional terms to conduct ideological *jihad*, rather than to empower women with the objective of helping them reaching their best potential.

However, on the other side, it is important to underline how ISIS at the same time strategically recruits highly skilled women for its purposes. These subjects, mainly joining the Islamic State from Western countries, are vital to the Caliphate, as they can be exploited as in the fields of propaganda editing and production, medicine, accounting, communications. Nonetheless, even in this case, the recruitment is strategic to the Caliphate's purposes, to conduct its state functions as well as to use them as an example to perpetuate the empowerment argument while spreading its ideology.

The instrumentality of women's recruitment in ISIS, as seen in the previous section of this thesis, is revealed by the progressive change of perspective in women's recruitment and participation in the Caliphate. As mentioned in this thesis, women were not welcomed to join the IS in its first phase: this ideological shift has come along with the successful territorial conquests and expansion and the need to populate the newly founded State, as data reported in the previous section demonstrates, indicating a peak of female foreign joiners corresponding with the official foundation of the Caliphate.

Furthermore, the previously mentioned findings have shown that the language claiming the empowering argument is instrumentalized for propagandistic purposes. As previously seen, the different tones employed to address women strategically adopted by ISIS propaganda that tactically change from audience to audience, once again demonstrate how the publications are not actually promoting female empowerment within the Caliphate, rather females' service to the state and its patriarchal practices. In fact, the sensitivities adopted to direct foreigners cannot be found in the Arabic content, which openly addresses its female audience considering it inferior to men. This aspect reflects not only different cultural sensitivities, but also tendencies in the ambitions of female ISIS joiners: those who have previously lived in the area probably perceive their participation in the organization simply as living under a new rule, whereas long-distance travelers tend to ambitiously aim to actively and ideologically contribute to the IS cause (Margolin & Cook, 2023), thus demonstrating the instrumentalization of Daesh's communication style.

As previously analyzed, the strict reinforcement of traditional gender roles can be also seen in the visual dimension of ISIS propaganda. Notwithstanding the attempt to depict the decision of joining the Caliphate as empowering for women's greater good, choices in terms of style and design in official state propaganda sources demonstrate once again the preponderant gender-segregated aspect of its society and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles, perpetuating the idea of a delicate, passive, emotional, fragile, divine femininity.

Furthermore, women in ISIS are exploited by the system for propaganda and recruitment purposes in terms on ideological content creation.

If on one hand, according to ISIS propaganda, women feel welcomed and valued in the IS, on the other all indoctrinating messages are tactically tailor-made for their public. Speaking about Dabiq and Rumiya, magazines designed for a global audience, it is highly probable that literate women with knowledge of Western languages have been employed for the production of its articles dedicated to females, both because of the omnipresent societal gender segregation and due to the peculiar linguistic choices, particularly appealing to their peers.

Moreover, the “lighter” messages independently spread online by ISIS female sympathizers, disseminators and recruiters, depicting everyday life scenes and valorous fighters hugging kittens, are highly engaging for the audience. The strategic alternance between “normal” content and openly propagandistic one has proven particularly effective for recruitment purposes. Such sentimental appeals are indeed efficiently made to female recruits, implying that ISIS will stand up for them and defend them against any form of injustice (Huey et al., 2019), while they can live a life that is incredibly special, as part of a divine project, and normal at the same time. In their social media profiles, propagandists and recruiters online depict life in the Caliphate as a life-changing experience, rich in opportunities, an empowering journey for the individuals’ spirit and their personal growth. Doing so, they often show more freedoms than those corresponding to the real picture of females in the Islamic State’s society. On its hand, the inherently high level of decentralization of social media networks plays in ISIS’s favor in its propaganda spreading. Being the content posted and shared on social media hard to control, the organization does not discourage the free dissemination of messages promoting these empowering narratives, showing women as valued agents, being aware of social networks’ high spreading capacities in terms of capillarity. However, this colorful picture, notwithstanding its online popularity, does not necessarily always correspond to the institutional and factual reality: some complaints have emerged among users, especially from Western women, about the difficult life conditions experienced in the Caliphate. These range from issues regarding not being able to actually physically join the fight; lack of services, infrastructure, and social support; adverse environmental circumstances (Saltman & Smith, 2015). However, these critiques are nullified by the overwhelming amount of positive content posted on which ISIS relies as a key determinant for its propagandistic success, even if in partial contradiction with its official sources, as seen in the previous section of this thesis, due to the efficiency of this “decentralized but self-policed’ messaging method” (Saltman & Smith, 2015, p.50).

Despite the widespread distribution of popular images of armed, combat-ready women online, an additional controversy concerns the ambiguous position on the possibility for women to engage in physical combat, which denotes a lack of concrete intention to make them actually participate in *jihad* on the battlefield alongside men.

If on one side it is true that the role of females within the organization is expanding, potentially encompassing more active functions, on the other it is also difficult to accommodate the societal pillar of gender segregation and the possibility to deploy women in combat positions.

Interestingly, this ideological shift in the realm of physical war has been taking place, as previously seen, in a time of serious difficulties for the organization. Ideological openings about the possible participation of women in physical *jihad* are therefore once again instrumental, as this move

denotes a strategy shift, “including desperation due to a rapid weakening of the group” (Dølo, 2018, p.62). The lack of will for a concrete evolution of the role of females at war can be seen in the official propaganda documents and visual content. In fact, those mention at first that their participation can take place only in extreme defensive circumstances if men are not sufficient doing so, and, later, to “*Rise with courage and sacrifice in this war*” (Rumiyah, 2017, p.13), alluding to martyrdom operations rather than to a concrete contribution into the battlefield. This is not only easier to reconcile with the strict social norms on gender segregation, but it also provides the organization with added international media coverage due to attacker’s gender, which shockingly defies the common stereotypical view of women as necessarily peaceful.

This position is also confirmed by the message spread in the previously mentioned video which strategically associates women to wounded men, inviting them to commit suicide for Allah. The absence of determination in concretely allowing women in the battlefield can be explained by mentioning the description of three ISIS female successful suicide attackers in Mombasa, in 2016: notwithstanding their appearance on the first page of the Arabic propaganda magazine al-Naba’, they are associated with the term of *munasirat* (supporters) of IS, not with soldiers, as their male counterparts (Lahoud, 2018; EUROPOL 2019), neglecting their agency. Nonetheless, the presence of examples of women undertaking such operations demonstrates their will to participate in combat, if *allowed* to do so.

The strength of ISIS propaganda relies on the irresponsibility of the organization through the instrumentalization of religion. Daesh is not taken accountable for the measures that are undertaken in its territories, nor for the ideological rules imposed on its women and men, as every aspect is, according to its ideology, dictated by God. Therefore, its members, whether physically present or connected online, are subjected only to the rule of God and must surrender and obey to the related commandments to be granted salvation in the afterlife.

In parallel, ISIS conducts and supports practices that clash with the idea of females’ empowerment. Not only men are religiously legally in charge of *their* women, limiting their agency in all aspects of their life, also through the exercise of control over their bodies, but also practices as sexual slavery are socially accepted and even celebrated. Women are included in this project as instrumentalized state-builders rather than empowered individuals. Their subordination to men is part of a divine order to which all devoted individuals must submit to. Consequently, rather than women’s empowerment and agency, ISIS promotes *its own* empowerment *through* them. Divine justice is so dispensed by compliance with God's Law, not via individuals’ freedoms (Lahoud, 2018).

Contextually, as previously seen, ISIS strategically depicts itself as “a genuine crusader for women's rights” (Spencer 2016, p.80). Through the employment of a strategic propaganda strategy, ISIS is attractively presented as “a real agent of change grounded in social justice that avenges the long-suffering faithful” (German & Pennington, 2019, p.39). This approach, grounded on the audience’s sense of justice, is a key determinant of its success. The organizational commitment to the construction of an alternative just societal order enhances individuals’ motivation to contribute to this upright cause, especially if in disagreement with the conditions dictated by the dominating and oppressive surrounding social environment.

Furthermore, as specified by EUROPOL’s comprehensive analysis previously provided (2019), “Female jihadis believe that Islam granted women a superior status to that given to them in modern-day Western societies” (EUROPOL, 2019, p.12). This message, strategically conveyed by ISIS authorities, has multiple objectives: firstly, it demonizes the enemy, by picturing it as the real subjugator of women, secondly, it provides them with a better alternative, namely, to choose to free themselves from this ideological enslavement.

This strong rhetoric juxtaposition between the pious believers and the infidels is tangibly represented by dramatically different perspectives on females’ dress code. According to ISIS ideology, women in the Caliphate are free to dress modestly with religious apparel without being ashamed, rather celebrated, by their peers. On the contrary, females outside Daesh are forced to abandon a piece of their identity to conform to the surrounding apostatic societal values. Religious clothing is so brought into the propagandistic conversation to reinforce its emancipatory discourse, inviting women to revolutionarily reclaim themselves and their religious independence, becoming a tangible symbol of female emancipation in ISIS.

Rather than an agent of change, ISIS so demonstrates to support a conservative revolution of society, reinforcing traditional gender roles and perpetuating gender segregation. On one hand, the organization does so justifying women’s subjugation on religious foundations, while on the other hand it strategically recruits and exploits them for its own empowering objectives, masquerading its conservative restoration under the façade of a reverse concept of agency and empowerment.

Therefore, as this thesis has attempted to demonstrate, women’s activities in the realm of propaganda dissemination and recruitment are vital to the endurance and global outreach of the Islamic State, contributing to its success on a considerable extent, despite their input being traditionally underestimated. Being women such crucial assets for the organization, ISIS strategically employs gender-based apparently empowering themes and narratives to swell its feminine ranks,

tactically responding to different perspectives on female emancipation by providing an alternative framework of female agency and liberation, in reality calling for a reinforcement of traditional gender roles in a patriarchal gender-segregated system justified through religious means.

Nonetheless, being agency differently perceived based on individual as well as collective values, it is important to understand that, from these women's perspective, their chosen loyalty and devotion to ISIS is an empowering act. This standpoint is helpful to understand, and therefore tackle, this growing phenomenon, which proves the stereotypical visions on their passivity or mental instability wrong. To do so, it is crucial to acknowledge their potential as agents in embodying and fostering this ideology as in-person and online recruiters and disseminators.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Review of the Study and key findings

To conclude, this study has aimed to investigate the extent to which ISIS female recruiters and propaganda disseminators contribute to the organization's survival, recruitment efforts and global outreach, as well as how the Islamic State's propaganda machine employs gender-based narratives to respond to, and reinterpret, different perspectives on female emancipation.

The research has been conducted through the use of a qualitative framework that examines the topic through the lens of agency and its interaction with societal gender roles, propaganda, and the roles of recruiter and disseminator, innovatively contributing to the current academic debate on the issue, as it argues that this growing phenomenon is not exhaustively addressed from a gender women-based scholarly perspective, considering females as agents rather than passive subjects.

Hence, the motivation behind the creation of such framework is overcoming the existing stereotypes on women's position in the organization, alternatively assessing the extent of their contribution in terms of propaganda spreading and indoctrination, as well as how the empowerment narratives employed by the organization are efficient in swell its feminine ranks. Furthermore, employing this framework and a flexible and integrative research approach, this thesis has sought to deeply explore how concepts as agency and empowerment can interact with such patriarchal and traditionalist propaganda messages, understanding how the subjective meaning of individuals' experiences, cultural values, aims and perceptions can translate into action in relation to ISIS extremism. By analyzing the topic through the lenses of agency, intended as a general autonomous decision-making capacity, this thesis strived to deepen the existing knowledge on the efficiency of ISIS convincing and appealing propaganda in integrating females to its utopian society, providing them with an alternative perspective on female emancipation.

In its first part, after having introduced the object of investigation and its scope, the research has provided a general overview of the existing scholarly literature on the topic, presenting different perspectives on the participation of women in violent extremist activities, exploring previous contributions on the role of women in ISIS, how their recruitment has been previously analyzed providing a gender-based explanation, as well as mentioning different academic viewpoints on how female emancipation can be interpreted.

Secondly, the thesis has introduced its theoretical framework of analysis, focusing on the definitions of agency, recruiter, disseminator, and gender roles, providing some conceptualizations of the notions and a visual representation of the interaction between them.

Furthermore, the project has proceeded presenting the chosen methodology, providing an explanation for selecting ISIS as case study, introducing the methods of data collection and analysis as well the project's limitations.

In the analysis section, selected studies, newspaper articles, academic reports, and primary propagandistic sources released by ISIS were employed to attempt to provide the elements to answer this thesis' research question and sub-questions interpreting them through the selected theoretical framework. To accomplish its objective, the project has reported and commented academic findings and social media content to provide a picture of the relevance of ISIS women's contribution in the propagandistic and recruitment domains in both online and offline dimensions. Furthermore, the project has aimed to address the research sub-questions by providing, commenting and analyzing some insights on ISIS propagandistic content available online from the official magazines Dabiq and Rumiya, social media posts, and additional information from previous research. Starting from the analysis of these documents, the project has introduced the following discussion on the position of women in ISIS propaganda and society and the related ideological contradictions and discrepancies, highlighting its chameleonic character in addressing narratives on women's agency and emancipation, in terms of both content and visualization.

Moreover, in its discussion section, this thesis has addressed the project's question and sub-questions showing its findings. In its first paragraph, the chapter has illustrated how women contribute to the Islamic State's survival, recruitment efforts and global outreach to a crucial extent, both online and offline. Their roles as fan-girls, *baqiya* members, propagandists, recruiters, *muhijrat*, and widows, as well as digital community bridges, propaganda spokespersons, mothers and nurturers are fundamental to the endurance of the organization. In its second section, findings have demonstrated how ISIS propagandistic contradictions, notwithstanding the efficiency of the organization in presenting an alternative picture of female empowerment within its society, aim to reinforce a conservative social revolution that upholds traditional gender roles and segregation, exploiting women for its purposes rather than empowering them. Reading it through the lenses of women's agency, it is possible to affirm that it can be exercised only in the framework of the Islamic State's interests, despite the existence of apparently empowering propagandistic narratives. This successful strategy is able to oppress women based on religious principles while concealing its conservative restoration behind the guise of a different understanding of empowerment and agency.

However, being the latter's interpretation subjective, it is critical to consider that, in these women's eyes, choosing ISIS freely and independently is an emancipatory act. Understanding this perspective, disproving existing stereotypes on women's passivity and deviance, is crucial to address this emerging security issue. It is therefore critical to recognize these agents' capabilities, starting from their contribution as propagandists and recruiters, in representing and promoting this ideology.

7.2 Recommendations and directions for future research

Starting from this thesis' findings and previously mentioned limitations, which underscore the complexity of the subject of analysis, the following paragraph will propose directions for future research.

Firstly, as mentioned, the underestimation of women's agency in the analysis of their relationship with violent extremism has critical security implications. Female ISIS returnees, both since the Islamic State lost control of the last territories it had taken over in March 2019 and in the period before its downfall, represent a tangible security menace. As analyzed in this thesis, their role as propaganda disseminators and recruiters has potentially severe security implications, considering not only their online contributions notwithstanding the development of social media takedown policies, but also their role of nurturers of future radicals, who may represent a future global security threat aside from the collapse of the physical Caliphate. This is relevant especially considering that "women who voluntarily returned from Syria and Iraq before ISIS established its caliphate in 2014 were not as systematically investigated and prosecuted as those who returned later" as they were "initially perceived mostly as victims" and that "gender-specific aspects are frequently taken into account [...] during sentencing" (Mehra et al., 2024, para 3).

Secondly, the underestimated argument evolving around the concepts of agency and female emancipation should be considered in the development of counter-narratives to target the emergence of this global phenomenon. In order to do so, the provision of alternative viewpoints and their targeted counter-dissemination could represent a valuable asset in efficiently addressing the issue. In this context, examples of previously mentioned social media posts regarding complaints about harsh living conditions in ISIS, as well as regretful returnees' counter-narratives about their experience in the IS, could constitute valuable resources in the undertaking of such counter extremism activities.

Finally, as far as the methodology of this research is concerned, future research could be more comprehensive in considering both primary and secondary sources in other languages. This would result in a more accurate delineation of the research sample, obtaining more precise conclusions which would better represent diversity in the sample's representation. Alternatively, to overcome any methodological limits relating to the use of biased or incomplete secondary sources, the exclusive use of primary documentation and the direct undertaking of field research could be implemented, still considering the related concerns and limitations in terms of security, information accessibility, ethics, time, and resources.

8 References

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