

Victims of Circumstance or Independent Agents? Women and the Road to the Islamic State

Jessica Sciarone

Often, western women who migrate to the Islamic State are portrayed as naïve followers of men, infatuated with a romanticized image of life in the Islamic State. Judging from the portrayal of women who have joined the Islamic State, one would certainly believe this is the case. The portrayal of these women, devoid of 'rational agency', does not solely happen in the media, but is also a recurrent theme in scholarly articles and policy documents.¹ Agency, in this context, refers to capacity of a person to take a conscious, rational decision based on their own free choice. After the San Bernardino shootings, a terrorist attack on a benefit corporation, carried out by a husband and wife, the first few questions asked about the female shooter were focused on how a woman could be involved in violence, especially given the fact that she was a mother.² Those same questions were not asked with regards to her husband. In portraying women in this way, their agency is taken away and the accountability for their crimes disappears. The portrayal of men and women differs; men are regarded as rational actors, whereas women are seen as misguided and naïve. However, women can undertake violent actions for various reasons, but this is often ignored. Their reasons are often similar to the reasoning of men migrating to the Islamic State. The responsibility for their actions is waived and diminished to reasons relating to their circumstances. In this paradigm, their own personal choice is not considered to be a factor and is secondary to a predominant, more logical

and independent male reasoning.³

Several scholars have tried to explain the reasoning of women who undertake violent actions. Marway describes gender stereotypes in conflict, where women are often regarded as 'peaceful women' or 'beautiful souls', whereas men are portrayed as 'just warriors' and 'violent men'.⁴ She further states that when women are involved in conflict it is usually as an innocent bystander or a supporter through roles such as mothers, wives, and protestors. Men are often portrayed as masculine fighters who fight for a bigger cause.⁵ Thus, when women decide to partake in terrorist organizations they move away from traditional gender roles and violate the social order that is set in society.

Sageman's explanation focuses on alienated Muslims in European Diasporas⁶ while Hassan's explanation focuses on the terrorists'

¹ Katherine E. Brown, 'Gender and Countering Islamic State Radicalisation', in *E-International Relations* (18 February 2016), online at <http://www.e-ir.info/2016/02/18/gender-and-countering-islamic-state-radicalisation> (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

² Maartje Somers, 'Zij Schoot als Eerste, Zagen Getuigen', in *NRC Handelsblad* (7 December, 2015), <http://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/2015/12/07/tashfeen-malik-huisvrouw-jonge-moeder-en-gesle-1567921> (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

³ For example: in Sjoberg and Gentry's work it becomes clear that women who commit violent acts are often denied their agency and their womanhood is denied. Gender stereotypes are still in place; 'women are doing "men's tasks" without equality'. Laura Sjoberg & Caron E. 'Reduced to Bad Sex: Narratives of Violent Women from the Bible to the War on Terror', *International Relations*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2008), p. 17. In the same article they state that in the portrayal of violent women their choice in undertaking these actions is diminished, whereas in the portrayal of violent men their choice is considered to be rational. *Ibid.*, p. 18. In committing a violent act, women commit two crimes; their violent act is their first crime, going against gender stereotypes is the second. *Ibid.*, p. 7. In doing so, they are regarded as unfeminine and the responsibility for their violent act is placed upon their unfemininity instead of it considered to be a consequence of a rational choice.

⁴ Herjeet Marway, 'Scandalous Subwomen and Sublime Superwomen: Exploring Portrayals of Female Suicide Bombers' Agency', in *Journal of Global Ethics*, Vol. 7 (2011), p. 222.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

dream to enter Paradise.⁷ Other, wider, explanations have gained increasing attention in the past years as well; Stern distinguishes a wide array of motivations such as humiliation, exposure to violence, occupation, lack of prospects, and modernization and many other motivations.⁸ Ricolfi does the same and distinguishes between revenge and resentment as important motivations.⁹ All these motivations have one common denominator which is the fact that they ignore the independent agency of women. They assign the motivation of women to factors outside their agency, thus taking away their responsibility and agency.

The aforementioned paradigm is also evident when looking at recent research conducted on women who migrate to the Islamic State. Only a handful of scholars, for example Sjoberg and Gentry, focus on the independent agency of women.¹⁰ This article explores the independent agency of four women migrating to the Islamic State. In doing so, the online persona of four women will be analysed and assessed. Regarding their social media posts as part of their life stories, the validity and reliability of these posts increases.¹¹ The social media websites used for this research are Tumblr, a personal blog website, Facebook and Twitter. The four women that are central to this research, Umm Layth, Green Bird of Dabiq, Umm al Baraa and Umm Ubaydah, are all referred to by their online name. These women have been selected on the basis of their online presence, their activity on multiple social media platforms and the fact that they have migrated

to the Islamic State. Throughout this paper other women are mentioned as well; but their profiles did not provide as much information as the profiles of the aforementioned women do. The profiles of these four women will be examined in turn, before assessing the motivation of these women to leave. Finally, some thoughts on the future are offered.

Umm Layth

Umm Layth is one of the most prolific female migrating radicals online. The Scottish Aqsa Mahmood, who writes under the pseudonym Umm Layth, migrated to Syria in November 2013.¹² She emphasizes three main factors regarding her motivations to migrate to the Islamic State. First, she emphasizes the importance of making *hijrah* [migration] to the Islamic State; even before Al-Baghdadi officially established the Caliphate. In popular media it was often asked 'how can this girl, coming from such an affluent neighbourhood with all the opportunities in the world, trade this for life in the Islamic State?' Umm Layth herself provides an answer to this question on her Tumblr page: '*Wallahi [I swear to Allah] that's not what we want, and in these lands we are rewarded for our sacrifices involved in our Hijrah for example one is by receiving Ghaniman [spoil of war].*'¹³ This quote shows that she believes that the hardships she faces in her earthly life will provide her with a high place in the afterlife. She also notes that the women she has met '*have been in university studying courses with many promising paths, with big, happy families and friends and everything in the Dunyah [earthly life] to persuade one to stay behind and enjoy the luxury.*'¹⁴ She deliberately left behind the luxuries of her life in Scotland and decided to make *hijrah* to the Islamic State since she was convinced that it is her religious duty. Her decision to migrate to the Islamic State has been an independent decision taken after careful consideration.

Second, the so-called Caliphate of the Islamic

⁷ Nasra Hassan, "An Arsenal of Believers: Talking to the Human Bombs", *The New Yorker* (19 November 2001), online at

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/11/19/an-arsenal-of-believers> (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

⁸ Jessica Stern, *Terror in the name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (Harper Collins, 2003).

⁹ Luca Ricolfi, 'Palestinians, 1981-2003', in D. Gambetta (ed.), *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Laura Sjoberg & Caron Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in International Politics* (Zed Books, 2009), and Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, *Till Martyrdom Do Us Part: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon* (Institute for Strategic Dialogue and ICSR, 2015).

¹¹ James L. Peacock and Dorothy C. Holland, 'The Narrated Self: Life Stories in Process', in *Ethos*, Vol. 21, (1993), pp. 370-372.

¹² Atika Shubert and Bharati Naik, 'CNN exclusive: From Glasgow girl to "bedroom radical" and ISIS bride', in *CNN Exclusive* (5 September 2014) online at

<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/05/world/europe/isis-bride-glasgow-scotland> (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

¹³ Umm Layth on Tumblr - 11 September, 2014 (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

¹⁴ Ibid.

State still needs to be built. The desire to build the Caliphate has been one of the main reasons as to why Umm Layth made *hijrah* to the Islamic State. On Tumblr, she posts that “we must come to understand that this is a new born state with problems here and there but that doesn’t mean we should sacrifice any less for it” and “This newly born state is our responsibility as Muslims from all around the earth, young and old, to help it prosper.”¹⁵ Facing hardships is only logical since establishing a new ‘state’ is not an easy task. Further, in her diary entries on Tumblr she is open about her role as a mother and a wife. Raising children and being a supportive wife results in a stronger Caliphate.¹⁶

Third, her dichotomous worldview plays an important role in her motivation to migrate to the Islamic State. She often posts about feeling disconnected and isolated because of her religion.¹⁷ When talking about this bipolar worldview she states that ‘listen to me I will let you in on a secret, they define you as only [two] selections. You are either for them or against them. And they have made it very clear. They will not let you live a life of peace if you proclaim the testimony of the One.’¹⁸ It is evident that she possesses an ‘us versus them’ worldview, whereby there is a strong bipolarity between two groups. This fits within the traditional patterns of radicalisation and religious-political rhetoric.

Green Bird of Dabiq

Not much is known about the woman who is known as Green Bird of Dabiq, other than that she is of Western origin, due to the nature of her posts on Twitter.¹⁹ The atrocities committed by Assad against the Muslims in Syria and the fact that she perceives bipolarity between the west and the Muslim community are recurring themes in her tweets.

¹⁵ Umm Layth on Tumblr - 28 June 2015 (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Saltman and Smith, *Till Martyrdom Do Us Part*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁸ Umm Layth on Tumblr - 28 June 2015 (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

¹⁹ Anon., ‘The Secret World of ISIS Brides: “U Dnt Hav 2 Pay 4 ANYTHING if U R Wife of a Martyr”’, on NDTV (26 June 2015), online at <http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/the-secret-world-of-isis-brides-u-dnt-hav-2-pay-4-anything-if-u-r-wife-of-a-martyr-775323> (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

First, she shows her dismay by tweeting that ‘Assad kills hundreds of thousands of Muslims and no one cares. Yet the world erupts when some kuff [disbeliever] kills a lion’²⁰ referring to the shock the world has shown when a hunter killed a lion. This shows that she feels that the Muslim community is marginalized and ignored. This discontent is an often heard motivation of these women to migrate to the Islamic State. Secondly, Green Bird of Dabiq often posts about the bipolarity between the Muslim community and the West. When talking about Anjem Choudary, a British political activist and convicted criminal, who, she claims, receives a different treatment when using his right to free speech. She argues that the right to free speech is different for Muslims.²¹ This furthers the notion of a different treatment of Muslims versus non-Muslims. Even though she never specifically mentions her reasoning behind making *hijrah*, the fact that she has tweeted about the perceived bipolarity, indicates that this is one of her motivations for migrating.

Umm al Baraa

Umm al Baraa is also known as Bird of *Jannah* [Paradise] or Shams. She made *hijrah* to the Islamic State when she was twenty-six years and is a trained doctor.²² Examining her posts on social media, her writing shows that she, too, made a deliberate decision to migrate to the Islamic State. Her first motivation is to help the Muslim community in Syria. On her Facebook account she states that she migrated ‘to serve the people because im [sic] a doctor.’²³ This resonates with the call for female doctors for the Islamic State made by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.²⁴

²⁰ Green Bird of Dabiq on Twitter - 29 July 2015 (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

²¹ Green Bird of Dabiq on Twitter - 5 August 2015 (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

²² Saltman and Smith, *Till Martyrdom Do Us Apart*, p. 36.

²³ Ellie Hall, ‘An ISIS Love Story: “Till Martyrdom Do Us Part”’ (17 September 2015), online at <http://www.buzzfeed.com/ellievhall/an-isis-love-story-till-martyrdom-do-us-part#io47g7rMWA> (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

²⁴ Anon., ‘Islamic State Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Encourages Emigration, Worldwide Action’ (July 1, 2014), online at <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/islamic-state-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-encourages->

Secondly, Umm al Baraa emphasizes the importance of making *hijrah* as part of her religious duty, which is demonstrated by her various blogposts on Tumblr. In one of these, she states that *'keep it pure for the sake of Allah alone. You may have few ideas before, delete all of them and renew your intention. The ajr [reward] is too big so don't lose it.'*²⁵ This notion of religion is all the more visible in other posts on social media as well. She often talks about martyrdom and the importance of keeping things 'pure'.

Umm al Baraa is an interesting woman to observe on social media. Not only because she often posts about her life in the Islamic State, but also because she single-handedly deconstructs the argument that all women migrate to the Islamic State because they are infatuated with a romantic idea of marrying a fighter. She does this by stating that *'I never thought of marriage in the first place but later i am agreed for i need a mahram [a guardian]. A life without mahram can be fitnah [trial or distress]. You must understand the difference. Its silly to say my intention changed. I made hijrah not because i want to marry someone nor i contact and make promises for nikah [marriage contract]. [...] intention remains, but we go to what is necessary. [sic]*²⁶ By regarding her marriage as a purely logistical necessity; she needs a husband so that she can do her job, the notion that women migrate to the Islamic State for romantic reasons gets challenged. Earlier in this article, the traditional gender roles were mentioned. She, too, deconstructs these traditional gender norms by talking about her Kalashnikov and by posting pictures of her Kalashnikov, a baby bottle and baby shoes. With this, she unites the traditional masculine roles of a fighter with the traditional nurturing roles of a woman. In doing so, she steers away from the traditional nurturing role often assigned to women.

Umm Ubaydah

Umm Ubaydah, too, is vocal about her motivation as to why she made *hijrah* to the

emigration-worldwide-action.html (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

²⁵ Umm al Baraa on Tumblr - n.d. (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

²⁶ Umm al Baraa on Facebook, via Hall, *'An ISIS Love Story: "Till Martyrdom Do Us Part"'*.

Islamic State. Coming from a Northern European country, but from Somali descent, she migrated around April 2014. She often Tweets under the name 'Al_Khansaa', possibly referring to the famed seventh century Islamic poet.²⁷ Her motivation to migrate is threefold. First, she sees it as her religious duty to make *hijrah* to the Islamic State once the caliphate has been established. When asked on her Tumblr why she does not *'assist your starving fellow Somalis rather than chasing spoiled Arab men in the Levant?'* She responds by stating that *'I prefer the people of sham over those of my heritage simply because Allah SWT [Glory to Him, the Exalted] has preferred them. And the land of the khilafah is dearer to me then what ignorant people on matters of deen [obedience, worship] (and definitely not ignorant on matters of their culture) have to say.'*²⁸ Here, she clearly portrays the importance of her religion over her heritage. Her perceived religious duty is further emphasized when she claims that *'To all those in the west chilling in their homes. Know that just like there is a fardh [religious duty] upon you for salah [obligatory worship] there is one on you for hijrah.'*²⁹

Her second motivation builds upon her first; she wants to help create the caliphate, similar to the motivation shown by Umm Layth. The best way in which she can serve the caliphate is by marrying a *mujahed* [fighter] and bearing his children, who are often referred to as cubs of the Caliphate.³⁰ In raising these children, she can produce a new generation of fighters who will fight for the righteous cause of Allah.³¹ Furthermore, she has tweeted about the beauty of being a *mujahed's* wife and raising his children. Contrary to Umm al Baraa, she does not talk about her motivation to marry. However, seeing the importance she places on her marriage and the fact that she raises the children, it may be argued that she does so

²⁷ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, 'Al-Khansā', online at <http://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Khansa> (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

²⁸ Umm Ubaydah on Tumblr - 11 September 2014 (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

²⁹ Umm Ubaydah on Twitter - 6 April 2014; 2 July 2014 (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

³⁰ Mia Bloom, 'Cubs of the Caliphate: The Children of ISIS', in *Foreign Affairs* (21 July 2015), online at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-07-21/cubs-caliphate> (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

³¹ Umm Ubaydah on Twitter - 5 April 2014 (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

because of her religious duty and her need to help establish a caliphate, along the lines of the women above. Her third motivation is the fact that she too regards the west as being against the Muslim community. She approves of the acts carried out by the Islamic State, since when she is asked what she thinks about the killing of Steven Sotlof, she replies with *'I wish I did it.'*³² Not only does she approve of the acts carried out by the Islamic State, she also talks about the fact that she wishes *'no harm upon any nationality nor religion, however with the war America waged upon Muslims everywhere and with you aiding them whether intentionally or unintentionally with your taxes, I don't exactly like you and don't wish to hold your hand and to go around circles singing it's a 'beautiful world'.*³³ It is her belief that everyone with an American nationality actively or passively supports the war waged on Muslims and in doing so she perceives bipolarity between Americans and the Islamic State.

Four motivations

When discussing the aforementioned cases, four motivations become evident from these four women. These motivations can be summarized into internal and external motivations. Internal motivations are the religious duty these women feel coupled with their identity, and their wish to establish a prosperous caliphate. The external motivations are the cruelties committed by the Assad regime and the dichotomous worldview they possess.

Religious duty and identity

When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the Caliphate, he called upon all Muslims to make *hijrah*. He stated that *"therefore, rush O Muslims to your state. Yes, it is your state. Rush, because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis. The earth is Allah's".*³⁴ With this, he called upon all

³² Umm Ubaydah on Tumblr - 3 September 2014 (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

³³ Umm Ubaydah on Tumblr - 14 September 2014 (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

³⁴ 5 Pillars, 'Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi urges Muslims to make hijrah to the "Islamic state"', in *5 pillars UK* (2 July, 2014), online at <http://5pillarsuk.com/2014/07/02/abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-urges-muslims-to-make-hijrah-to-the-islamic-state/> (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

Muslims to migrate to the Islamic State. This sentiment, the migration to the Islamic State as part of their religious duty, is often shared by the women that have been the topic of this paper. They promote their journey on their social media accounts and devote large parts of their blog posts to this journey. Umm Layth has provided a checklist on how to make *hijrah* to the Islamic State. Another prolific woman online, Umm Usamah, urged her followers to join her by stating that *'I have made it to Dar al-Islam [the home of Islam] and am finally living under the shade of Sharia. Join me and my brothers and sisters.'* With this quote, she emphasizes the importance of living under the rule of the Islam in the Caliphate.

Although these women are often portrayed as jihadi brides, stories on the Al-Muhajirat Tumblr page, a Tumblr page with collections of stories about the women who have migrated to IS and instructions on how to get there, prove otherwise. Here, it is repeatedly mentioned that *"the sisters who leave their families and comfort for the sake of Allah are deserving of being called Muhajirat. Fear Allah with the accusations, we are here for His sake and not to be used, nor are we being used."*³⁵ Posts like these indicate that migrating to the Islamic State is not motivated by marriage, but by religion. Even if they do end up getting married, their marriage, for some, is a manner in which to serve Allah or a mere logistical necessity.

Establishing a caliphate

The establishment of a caliphate is another oft-heard motivation of the women who migrated. This sentiment is expressed in various Tweets and Tumblr posts. They emphasize the importance of patience, as Umm Layth says that *"we must come to understand that this is a new born state with problems here and there but that doesn't mean we should sacrifice any less for it"* and *"This newly born state is our responsibility as Muslims from all around the earth, young and old, to help it prosper."*³⁶ These quotes reveal the essence of their migration, as it is clear that they see the

³⁵ al-Muhajirat on Tumblr - n.d. (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

³⁶ Umm Layth on Tumblr - 8 June 2015 (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

establishment of the caliphate as their responsibility. They frequently urge others to migrate to the Islamic State, as is demonstrated by Umm Usamah's feelings about her own migration when she states that *'the only regret I have is not making Hijrah to the Islamic State earlier.'*³⁷

An important role for these women after migrating is motherhood. Becoming a mother deserves the highest praise of Allah, and it is a way in which they can help build the caliphate. By raising new 'cubs' who will carry out the will of Allah, the Islamic State obtains new, loyal warriors. Great importance is assigned to raising kids and preparing them for the battlefield.³⁸ Umm al Baraa emphasizes the importance of the role of women as essential to the Islamic State by posting a picture of a Kalashnikov and a baby's bottle with the text *'This ummah cannot move forward until the SISTERS [sic] produce a GENERATION [sic] that will move it ahead. The greatest need for this UMMAH [sic] is that the women raise a generation that will take it ahead.'*³⁹ Although raising children is an important task of these women once they are there, it is not the motivation to leave. They migrate because it is beneficial to the establishment of the Caliphate. This is an important distinction.

Cruelties of the Assad Regime

The alleged cruelties committed by the Assad regime are important motivators as well. This closely connects with the need to help the Syrian people and the Muslim community at large. They often post about the fact that they do not understand other Muslims who do not migrate to the Islamic State. This is demonstrated by Umm Ubaydah's tweet when stating that *"By Allah I don't understand how a brother can stay home and not go to jihad. I can never*

*sit back, the ummahs pain is my pain."*⁴⁰ Here, she indicates the importance of the Muslim community and the need to change something about it. The Russian airstrikes⁴¹ in the Fall of 2015 are mentioned in the tweets as well, when Umm Ubaydah taunted Putin on Twitter, claiming that the Islamic State is undefeatable due to the support of Allah.⁴² Furthermore, the fact that these women see the west as a dishonest broker in this conflict, contributes to this motivation. This results in a dichotomous worldview, which is also one of the motivations as to why these women decide to leave.

Dichotomous worldview

This dichotomous worldview that the women possess, closely tie in with the previous argument, and is largely a consequence of the preceding motivation. They perceive the world in a black and white manner, where the west is against them and their way of life. The fact that it is not solely the west that is against them, is demonstrated by Umm Ubaydah's tweets when she says that *'..And I'm labelled as an extremist in my own house'* and *SubhanaAllah these women have gathered in my house and are trying to convince me to get rid of my niqaab'*. This tweet, posted before she migrated to the Islamic State, clearly shows that they are not accepted in their close circles, with their family and friends. Umm Ubaydah has also tweeted about the hatred she feels towards the non-Muslim community and specifically towards the Americans. The women often feel marginalized and discriminated against and the Islamic State provides a beacon of sisterhood and loyalty.

Their hateful feelings against the west are corroborated by Saltman and Smith⁴³, since they argue that these women often receive discriminatory comments about their *hijab* or

³⁷ Umm Usamah on Twitter - 12 October 2015 (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

³⁸ Sister Al, *A Sister's Role in Jihad* (n.d.), online at https://archive.org/stream/SistersRoleInJihad/78644461-Sister-s-Role-in-Jihad_djvu.txt (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

³⁹ Umm al Baraa on Twitter - 8 August 2015 (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

⁴⁰ Umm Ubaydah on Twitter - 27 August 2014 (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

⁴¹ Emma Graham-Harrison, 'Russian Airstrikes in Syria Killed 2,000 Civilians in Six Months', in *The Guardian* (15 March 2015), online at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/15/russian-airstrikes-in-syria-killed-2000-civilians-in-six-months> (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

⁴² Umm Ubaydah on Twitter - 6 October 2015 (last accessed on 25 May 2017).

⁴³ Saltman and Smith, *Till Martyrdom Do Us Apart*, p. 9.

niqab. This only adds to a feeling of isolation from the western community and thus contributes to a binary worldview.⁴⁴ Green Bird of Dabiq has tweeted about the perceived unreasonable treatment of Anjem Choudary by stating that '*but I thought free speech was a #BritishValue. Free speech is only free for the kuffar [disbelievers].*' This contributes to the feeling of marginalization when they perceive that they are treated differently. This only adds to more alienation. Others have tweeted about this supposed binary worldview, with Umm Haritha, a twenty year old Canadian women living in the Islamic State, stating that '*You modern Muslims can sympathize with the kuffar all you want but in the end they will blame you and label you a terrorist, just like us...*'⁴⁵ Thus, even if you are a Muslim, you will still be regarded differently. When the Islamic State provides sisterhood and a sense of community, this can be a very attractive recruitment tactic. Hence, it is easy to see that the binary worldview of these women, where the Muslim community juxtaposes the west is one of the main reasons for joining the Islamic State.

The road forward

Looking at these four motivations, albeit explorative, it seems clear that these women consciously take decisions to leave their home countries and migrate to the Islamic State. Their motivations are similar to the motivations of many men who migrate to the Islamic State. This evokes the question as to why there are different approaches to the radicalization of men and women. The manner in which the women are portrayed in the media differs from the image resulting from this paper. In scholarly articles and popular media alike, women are often portrayed in a binary, almost black and white manner. Women are either nurturing, caring, loving wives, or fierce, unfeminine warriors. These stereotypes are at opposite ends of the spectrum with hardly any middle-ground. These stereotypes have consequences for the academic debate, but also in terms of de-radicalisation and the manner in which we view women, gender and femininity.

In order to develop and establish a well-rounded approach to counter radicalisation, the focus should not be so much on general approaches against radicalisation, but more so on personal cases. The human mind is inexplicably complex and the reasons as to why women (and men) radicalise, differ per person. One can imagine that the four motivations resulting from this paper are only the tip of the iceberg. When trying to develop policy regarding de-radicalisation, the one-size-fits-all approach is not the solution. Countering radicalisation should focus on finding an all-encompassing approach to find the reasons radicalisation pathways happen and how they occur. Women are able to consciously take a decision to leave, based on their own feelings and opinions. They are considered to be vulnerable followers and mere jihadi brides. Their agency is denied and by focusing on their naivety and dependence, we dissuade attention from the above-mentioned underlying motivations for their migration. This should be taken into account when developing policy and when writing about women in scholarly articles and popular media.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 10.