JOURNAL FOR DERADICALIZATION

Spring 2020
Nr. 22
ISSN: 2363-9849

Femme Fatale: Analyzing the Visual Representation of the Radical(ized) Woman in Danish Media

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Abstract

Is there a visual discursive space for the radical(ized) woman or is she invisible? The following paper develops an analytical framework to further the understanding of the interplay between gender and security in radicalization studies. Drawing on visuality research and feminism in security studies, this paper provides a new perspective on the visual representation of female agency. The agency of the violent extremist woman is, for the most part, visually (re)constructed through or with a masculine gaze - as defiance, allure and/or coercion. We argue that the connotations of images are shaped within and by an intervisual and intertextual dynamic that (re)produces understandings of female violence as pathologized, victimized and/or sensationalized and contingent on/in relation to male politics. Using this framework, we analyze the interplay between a textual and visual representation of Hasna Ait Boulahcen labeled 'The first European female suicide bomber' in Danish media following a violent incident in Paris in 2015. Our analysis illustrates how gendered markers of identity continuously reproduce what is possible in securitized discursive realms insofar that a process of Othering Hasna is gendered. This gendered discursive approach contributes to the understanding of deradicalization by underscoring the role of Silencing and Othering of violent extremist women in shaping and narrowing the discursive realm of political opportunities. The paper thus highlights the role of media representations in limiting the discursive possibilities within and therefore efficacy of deradicalization research, policy and programs.

Article History

Received Feb 7, 2020

Accepted Mar 5, 2020

Published Mar 27, 2020

Keywords: Feminist Security Studies, Radicalization, Deradicalization, Agency, Terrorism

Introduction

Women can be violent, women can be extreme and women can kill. These actions are well documented and have been displayed across international media (Bloom 2011; Banks 2019; Speckhard 2015). The radical(ized) woman, however, poses a unique challenge to feminist

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research. Feminists scholars that analyze war and terrorism in International Relations have primarily focused on 'male violence' and its devastating impact on women. Such approaches emphasize wartime rape, sexual slavery and other types of physical and emotional violence that raise strong concerns about the security of women (Campbell et al. 2019; MacKenzie 2009, 2010; Hansen 2006; UNSC 2019)[2]. These research agendas are undoubtedly crucial and to this day notoriously underfunded. Not diminishing this important work, we propose broadening the research on women, violence and security to also include studies on women who commit violent acts themselves. The notion of the female terrorist contests and challenges the representation of women as subjects of male (violent) politics while maintaining a critical view of the male understanding of women as naïve and inherently incapable (Cohn 2013; Christien & Turkington 2018).

Among the women who have been implicated in, and associated with, violent extremism is Hasna Ait Boulahcen. She became affiliated with the Islamic State led Paris attacks of 2015 and was subsequently made the centre of media attention in several European media outlets. Newspapers in Denmark, France and the UK noted that the 26-year-old woman was born in France by parents who immigrated from Morocco in the early 1970s. Hasna grew up in the suburban area of Saint-Denis and spent most of her childhood in foster homes (Le Monde 2015; Jyllands-Posten 2015; BBC 2015). She was later believed to have committed suicide using an explosive device during a police raid on the 18th of November 2015 killing several others (Bertho 2018). The following days were characterized by a comprehensive contestation of not only her but the phenomenon 'violent woman', as international media (re)constructed a narrative about Hasna and the vile incident in which she was situated. This paper provides a new perspective on the visual representation of female agency by analyzing the visuality of female violence in a context of securitized discourse. Firstly, we introduce an analytical framework that draws on a gendered discursive approach to 'speaking' security through images. This framework underscores how images' connotations are shaped by and

[2] We acknowledge that violence and sexual violence do not only affect women and that especially male survivors of sexual violence are often silenced (Chynoweth & Buscher 2018).

interact with their immediate *intervisual*, *intertextual* and wider *social*, *political* and *historical* contexts. Secondly, the analytical framework is applied to the case of Hasna analyzing whether images of her have the ability to 'speak' security. In this regard, we examine how the images' connotations relate to dominant securitized discourses on violent extremist women and how they shape the perception of female agency. Finally, we discuss the implications of Silencing and Othering violent extremist women in shaping and narrowing a discursive realm of political opportunities in a deradicalization perspective.

A gendered discursive approach to 'speaking' security through images

In political science, the study of women and violence has long been dominated by naturalistic arguments that discursively ascribe stereotypical characteristics to the male and female sex. These essentialist presentations maintain and (re)produce an understanding of women as victims and/or natural peacemakers, whereas men are portrayed as inherently more controlling, aggressive and violent (Cohn 2013: 25-26). Scholars in the field of gender and security have drawn attention to the implications of these presentations when women are *victimized* as passive recipients of male politics (Cohn 2013: 34-35; Wadley 2010: 49). For example, Lila Abu-Lughod has stated that the victimization of the female sex is especially prominent in a Middle Eastern context where an understanding of Muslim women needing 'special protection' prevails (2013). Additionally, Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry note that conventional depictions of women originate from assumptions about 'appropriate' female behavior that deny the possibility of female agency (2007)[3]. Mia Bloom has also elaborated on a common assumption that women are not perceived as violent even when they are implicated in violent events (2011). When women commit acts of violence, it is often presented as something out of the ordinary. Hereby, female violence becomes *sensationalized*. Bloom notes how suicide attacks committed by women, on average, have received eight times

[3] On the discursive representation of women and violence, see also: Banks (2019), Jacques & Taylor (2009), Winterbotham & Pearson (2016), Weinberg & Eubank (2011) and Agara (2015).

as much media attention as similar attacks committed by men (2011: 23). However, female violence is (re)constructed differently when identity markers such as ethnicity and religion are present. Iraqi female suicide bombers affiliated with al-Qaeda have gained marginal attention in Western media compared to Western-born women who committed similar acts (Gentry 2011: 176).

Bloom's analysis of women who act violently has been challenged due to its focus on personal motivation. Other feminist scholars highlight that women - just as men - can be driven both by personal and political motivations (Pearson & Winterbotham: 2017; Banks: 2019; Christien & Turkington 2018). Within gendered stereotypes, female violence is often ascribed an inherent need for explanation, as the actions are seen as unexplainable and extraordinary. In this, the stereotype of a violent woman is that she is abnormal, vulnerable and from a troubled background (Jacques & Taylor 2013: 41; Landauro & Flynn 2015; BBC 2015). Thereby, the violent female is *pathologized.*

Although violent women have been theorized in prior work, 'women and violence' remains a novice field within International Relations and has not been centered around the visuality of radicalization. In this context, Lene Hansen has pioneered a theoretical framework for the study of images that 'speak' security (2011; 2015). In this analysis, we draw on a three-pronged strategy to analyze images inspired by a semiological approach, meaning that images are analyzed with a focus on their composition. Firstly, images' meanings are derived from their immediate intertextual context. Thus, the image and the text in its proximity are understood as mutually constitutive. Secondly, images are understood in connection with their immediate intervisual context, meaning that images are understood through and by other images that they are discursively similar or related to. Finally, the meanings ascribed to images are understood as interacting with a wider social, political and historical context on women and violence. Hence, we view images as *polysemic* in the sense that they have no essentialist or universalist connotation (Adler-Nissen et al. 2020: 78). In other words, we hold that images are constituted in discourse through a complex structure of meaning that is

(re)produced both intertextually and intervisually while acknowledging the historical, political and cultural context in which they are situated.

Our analytical framework is rooted in two assumptions about agency. The first concerns the broader concept of agency in poststructuralist research. The humanist concept of agency implies a notion of exogeneity; a pure, uncorrupted Self acting autonomously[4]. A poststructuralist perspective rejects this understanding of agency as any individual is subjected in discourse. In a Foucauldian perspective, one locates herself (her Self) in constructed *subject-positions* that enable her to best fathom the discourse and therefore becomes 'subject' by 'subjecting' to discursively embedded power and meanings (Hall 1997: 56). Agency is thus not something one can possess or individually enact. Instead, agency is a discursive position that one is (re)constructed as being in possession of; it is performative, transitory and relational, which implies that it can be occupied within one discourse while being absent from another. Drawing on these insights, we understand agency as fundamentally *illusory* as any action is always a *reaction* to the subject-positions one can enact in a discursive realm.

The second assumption is related to the intersection between gender and security. In accordance with Jacques Derrida, we view language as a system of binary hierarchical oppositions (dualisms) in which a sign's connotation is not a product of the signified (*signifiant*) itself but of its opposite in a series of juxtapositions (1976). Individuals that are positioned in opposition to privileged signs in dualisms such as Western/non-Western, man/woman and pathological/healthy are rarely acknowledged as legitimate 'speakers' and are positioned as having little or no agency. This capacity for agency (or lack thereof), however, does not stem from the person herself, but from the subject-positions that are available to her in the discourse, she inhabits. Well before Derrida's writings, Simone de Beauvoir presented a similar argument in 'The Second Sex' (1949). Women are, according to Beauvoir, *"defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her*

[4] Humanism as developed by Friedrich Niethammer is a philosophical tradition that highlights the intrinsic value of human agency as 'free will' (Mathäs 2020: 14-15).

(...) he is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other" (1949: 346). By drawing attention to the body as a complex phenomenon with a comprehensive field and history of embodiment, Beauvoir asserts that the act of being itself is phenomenologically influenced by sex and gender[5]. The human body is not a constructed entity in and by itself but appears in two perceptual categories: male and female[6]. The subjectivity of the woman is (re)constructed in her relative position to the (hu)man. Therefore, her agency is dependent on *him*. Thus, sex and gender have a privileged position in limiting women's available subject-positions in discourse. Within gender norms that understand men as securitizing and women as receivers of insecurity, violent women are thereby *victimized, pathologized* and *sensationalized*.

The visuality of the radical(ized) woman: the case of Hasna Ait Boulahchen

One of the distinct characteristics of images is their ability to evoke *immediate* emotional responses from the viewer in a way that transcends some of the limits that apply to texts, such as language barriers (Hansen 2011: 56). A part of this is the authenticity through which an audience understands an image. The two images displaying Hasna (A and B) both appear to originate from a private setting and not from a professional photographer. Image A is displayed in low quality and is blurred albeit being an up-close motive of her face. This can point towards a higher degree of perceived authenticity of the image that brings the audience closer to the subject of the article, Hasna. The two images appear to be among those most widely circulated in Danish and international media in the wake of the incident (Atlantico

[5] This also applies to our research, which in a similar manner is limited and influenced by the discourses in which we are continuously situated.

[6] The distinction between the male and female does not imply a naturalistic ontological view of sex and gender in Beauvoir's work. *Gender* is positioned as a social and cultural construction of characteristics that are ascribed to the woman and man, which do not necessarily comply with the anatomical *sex*. As such, this view is not opposing arguments and theoretical understandings in *Queer* theory (Butler 1986). In this paper, gender refers to norms within the binary categories of 'male' and 'female' as these are seen as manifestations of traditional gender representations in relation to war, conflict and violence. While the binary is understood as the dominant discourse on gender, we acknowledge that other gender representations can be constructed and performed (Wilcox 2017; Butler 1993).

2015; Daily Mail 2015; Le Monde 2015; The Telegraph 2015). Image B was allegedly posted by Hasna on social media (DH Les Sports 2015; Kepel 2017: 161), while the origin of image A remains unclear. The uncertainty of the origin evokes considerations concerning the editorial choice of the use of these specific images. Media outlets are usually the first to distribute information about an incident and are thereby part of shaping public perceptions (Happer & Philo 2013: 14). Choosing to analyze a media-discourse thus allows us to discuss how the case of Hasna potentially challenges and interacts with gendered and religious stereotypes that are (re)produced through language in - and by - Danish media with the widest circulation (Bruun-Hansen 2015)[7]. The two images of Hasna that were published by online Danish newspapers are analyzed as part of, and interacting with, the immediate intertextual and intervisual context in which they are shared.

Image A

Image B

The caption accompanying image B describes Hasna as *'The first European female suicide bomber'* (Berlingske 2015; BT 2015a). This enables the audience to instantly visually identify her as the face of both a female, a European and a suicide bomber. The interplay between the visual image of Hasna and this caption creates a visual identification, which

[7] In this paper, the circulation of each media functioned as a selection criterion to ensure that the articles' narratives reached a wider audience. Media outlets included in this analysis that published stories of Hasna in the days following the incident are Berlingske, Information, BT, Jyllands-Posten, Ekstrabladet and Politiken (Bruun-Hansen 2015).

evokes emotions among audiences given the sensationalized headline. This is noteworthy as, firstly, women have throughout history taken on different roles within none-state actor groups and participated in acts of terrorism (Darden et al. 2019)[8]. Yet, their participation is still seen as something out of the ordinary (Bloom 2011; Pearson 2018; Pearson & Winterbotham 2017; Banks 2019; Gentry & Sjoberg 2011; Speckhard 2015). Secondly, at least one other recent case exists that was labeled Europe's first female suicide bomber (Brown 2011)[9]. In image B, Hasna's face and upper body are shown. She is looking directly into the camera, and while her facial expression can be interpreted in multiple ways, the image does not display any distinct visual markers of emotional reactions such as tears or a smile. Her hands are positioned in a horizontal 'V' sign. The visual display of hand gestures underscores the *ambiguity* of image-interpretation as such a sign can be understood differently depending on cultural, social and historical contexts. Image B will likely evoke different emotions compared to image A (albeit contingent on the audiences) due to the significance of the religious symbol of the hijab as opposed to her hair displayed as long and curly in front of her face. The ambiguity of an item such as the hijab is particularly interesting as a veil can be interpreted as both a symbol of female empowerment and suppression (Abu-Lughod 2013: 17-18). An explicit mention of the veil is brought in the two articles displaying image B. The veil is placed as part of a broader textual context in both articles through a paragraph where a neighbor describes how Hasna *"started to wear a Muslim veil (niqab) 9 months ago"* (Berlingske 2015; BT 2015a). The editorial choice to include this parenthesis highlights a discrepancy between the textual representation of Hasna (wearing a niqab) and the visual

[8] It is beyond the scope of this paper to further elaborate on the roles of women within Jihadism as well as other extremist groups. In our poststructuralist approach, we focus on the discursive representations of women and not whether these comply with empirical events. An account of whether the representations of violent women correspond with an 'empirical reality' is, within this context, not ontologically nor epistemologically possible as any such analysis would also be influenced by dominant discourses on (violent) women.

[9] Muriel Degauque was a Belgian woman who in 2005 became known as 'Europe's first female suicide bomber'. Several media outlets in Belgium and across Europe covered her life and death extensively in the weeks and months following a suicide car bomb that she allegedly placed in a U.S. military convoy (Brown 2011).

representation (wearing a hijab)[10]. This apparent misstep implies an expression of Hasna as seen through a Western gaze, which is underscored by a lack of knowledge on the significance of different types of veils and an assumption of audiences not noticing (or attributing meaning) to this variation. Nonetheless, the inclusion of this textual context provides the audience with an understanding of a religious aspect of Hasna as, seemingly, important to understand her actions and, in this, implies a transition. The immediate textual context of image B similarly constructs a transitory element that can explain the apparent paradox of the caption *'The first European female suicide bomber'*[11]. In this, Hasna is firstly associated with being a part of a Western, European Self, secondly, with being a female and lastly with violent acts of extremism. In understanding her 'transition' from Western identity markers, it is underscored how she used to wear jeans, which becomes a textual contrast to the visual representation of her wearing a veil. Moreover, it is textually noted that she *"ate at KFC"* – a well-known American fast food chain and that she *"drank alcohol"* (BT 2015a). In this context, Hasna is also described as a 'cowboy' and thereby presented with a masculine (Western associated) noun. In addition, it is noted that she yelled *"help me"* before the bomb detonated (BT 2015b; Berlingske 2015). This particular quote, however, changes in the texts ascribing meaning to the same image posted later.

The following day, image B is presented with a similar, yet different textual context. This appears to be connected to new findings by the French police, indicating that Hasna did not detonate the bomb. In this, the *'help me'* remark is quoted again, yet this time the audiences are told how the police *"firstly believed this was to lure them into a trap"* but now believe it to be *"a cry for help"* (BT 2015b). The first assumption points to an understanding of Hasna as acting violently out of *allure* when indicating that she yelled with the intent to trick police officers closer to the scene - presumingly prior to detonating the bomb. Using the word 'lure' gives the impression of an underlying sexual tone. The second assumption

[10] The niqab is considered an important Islamic religious dress and artefact. It is the Arabic term for face veils, which cover women's hair, neck, shoulders and face, except two eyes are visible. In Islam, the niqab is also associated with a wider meaning of modesty, privacy and morality (Chowdhury et al. 2017: 60).
[11] The caption was also used in articles not displaying an image of Hasna (Information 2015; Politiken 2015).

understands her outcry as indicative of *coercion* in that she is in need of help and thereby not acting on her own will. In this, her yell is presented as an act of *defiance*. Moreover, the most recent textual context for the image uses a female identity marker when referring to her as a 'cowgirl' who – in passive tense – *"was killed by a third terrorist"* (ibid.). The intertextual and intervisual context of image B thus (re)produces an understanding of Hasna's agency as being dependent on a man. She is thereby (re)constructed in line with traditional gendered understandings of women. In these, a prerequisite for comprehending potentially violent actions is providing audiences with an explanation of her as acting with an intent to lure men and/or by being victimized and in need of assistance (Gentry & Sjoberg 2016: 145; Gentry 2011: 186; Wadley 2010: 49). The discursive realm thus becomes contingent on agency being enabled through and by a man, evoking associations to the concept of a *femme fatale*[12].

The two images of Hasna were circulated both in Denmark and abroad. In the Danish articles, Image A displays a close-up of Hasna's face. However, the image was cropped. Another version was shown in its (presumed) entirety in, amongst others, the UK and French media (Atlantico 2015; The Telegraph 2015). In these, Hasna's full upper body is displayed, and she is wearing a tight t-shirt. She is leaning - and looking straight - into the camera, which could be interpreted as a suggestive pose. The invisibility of her body in the Danish articles visually removes parts of her (female) bodily markers of identity whereas other circulated versions of the image do the opposite in making her body visible. The focus on Hasna's body is also prevalent in the textual emphasis on graphic details from the incident. Two of the articles displaying image B published a quote claiming that her spine was blown out and *"her head rolled down the street"* (BT 2015a; 2015b). The textual destruction of Hasna's body removes any part of her that could be considered a threat. The (threatening) Otherness is thereby taken away from her as she is literarily and bodily destroyed. Focusing on, especially

[12] Women have historically been referred to as mythical, biblical, cultural and literary icons understood as femme fatale characters in which women act violently and/destructively towards - and thus in relation to - men. Amongst others, see characters such as Lilith, Delilah, Alban Berg's Lulu and George Bizet's Carmen (Dams 2013; Elhallaq 2015).

Muslim, women's *bodies* has been ascribed to historic and cultural roots of misogyny and may be an underlying expression of gendered norms (Atia 2015).

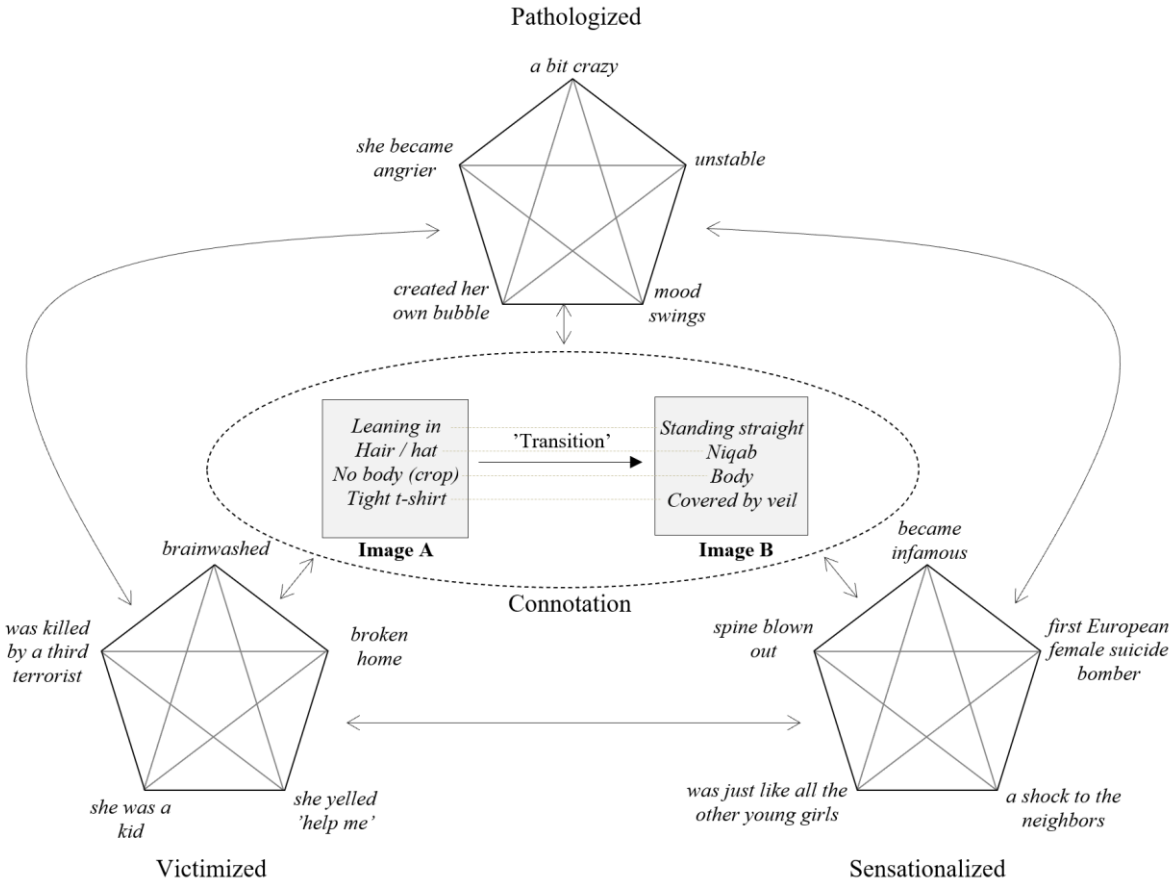
The further textual context of image A echoes an understanding of something being 'off' about Hasna and implies that a transition or change must have occurred to *explain* her actions. The audiences are informed that *"this is a story of a young woman from a broken home with many mood swings"* (Jyllands-Posten 2015; Information 2015). Hasna is, in this understanding, firstly victimized as someone from a broken home, which indirectly can act as an explanation for her – seemingly unbelievable transition towards - violent acts and, secondly, pathologized by emphasizing mood swings. Similar arguments have historically characterized the representation of women as irrational and unstable understood as being in opposition to men as rational and stable (Tasca et al. 2012; Hansen 2006: 20). Textual quotes from people in Hasna's network note a related understanding in illustrating the lack of connection between her and the (violent) act of detonating a bomb. In these, she is described as *"being unstable"*, *"a bit crazy"* and *"creating her own bubble",* underscoring how something was 'off' about her and thereby providing an underlying explanation for how she could act (violently) (Information 2015; Jyllands-Posten 2015).

Moreover, it is textually underscored that Hasna did not study religion or read the Quran. Instead, her (apparent and taken for granted) transition towards participating in the incident is ascribed to her being '*brainwashed*'. In the immediate textual context of the image, Hasna is discursively placed within a securitized discourse on terrorism as a *'deadly Islamist'* (Jyllands-Posten 2015; Information 2015). However, her (violent) actions are not ascribed political or religious motives, as is often the case in descriptions of male violent extremists. Instead, she is ascribed personal and emotional motivation, thus reproducing existing traditional discourses on violence and women (Cohn 2013: 25-26; Gentry & Sjoberg 2016: 145; Pearson & Winterbotham 2017: 60).

The textual context for both images (and the article displaying no image) includes references to Hasna's relation to the other person(s) present at the incident. She is described as the cousin of the *'terrorist mastermind'* (Berlingske 2015; BT 2015a) or the cousin of *"the*

supposed brains of the Paris attacks" (Jyllands-Posten 2015; Information 2015). She is thereby placed in a subordinate position in relation to a presumed, and implied, intelligent male counterpart. In relation hereto, it is also interesting how an apparent quote from the incident is textually placed in connection to image A (and the article without an image). In this, a police officer allegedly asked, before the bomb detonated, "*where is your boyfriend?"* to which Hasna is said to have *"yelled in a shrill voice"* that *"he is not my boyfriend"* (ibid.). The editorial choice to present a potential masculine (romantic) partner indicates that audiences receive an understanding of *what* or *who* could have made Hasna act the way she did, thus making her potential for agency contingent on a male partner. This is in line with a traditional gendered understanding of violent women as being *'pawns of men'* (Bloom 2011: 233). The adjective describing her voice as *'shrill'* also appears not to be necessary for the context. This could be seen as echoing underlying, misogynistic understandings of women's higher pitch voices as being unstable and less intelligent (Cheng 2016).

We understand the interplay between the intertextual and intervisual contexts of image A and B as a transformative Othering of Hasna in Danish media. The transition from a Western non-threatening woman towards a violent extremist Islamist appears both to be textually and visually presented through the lenses of dominant discourses on gender and extremism in enabling a very limited discursive realm of agency. The enactive visual representation of the Othering of Hasna is illustrated in Figure 1 below.



Note: In cursive are textual and visual markers from articles in Danish media. Text has been translated from Danish to English by the authors.

Figure 1. Analytical framework applied to the case of Hasna Ait Boulachen

As illustrated visually in the figure above, the two images (re)construct an identity of Hasna firstly as being a sensation as the *'first European female suicide bomber'*. The initial presentation of Hasna as part of a European Self appears challenged by her presumed violent actions. Markers of Otherness are then textually attributed to her when constructing a sense of meaning that is in line with discourses of masculinized terrorism. Violence by women is often sensationalized in traditional gendered representations hereof, in which especially violence committed by Muslim women is sensationalized by media *"within a highly gendered and*

even racialized context" (Gentry 2011: 178). Hasna's actions were *"a shock to the neighbors",* and she is discursively pathologized as *'unstable', 'crazy'* and with *'mood swings'* (Berlingske 2015; Information 2015; Jyllands-Posten 2015). These are common historical ways of ascribing meaning to the apparent paradox of women stepping outside of expected roles. She furthermore becomes a victim of circumstance through her background from a 'broken home' in foster care and by being 'brainwashed' (ibid.).

The textual references to alcohol in articles displaying image A and image B further underscore the paradox of the violent woman. Hasna's alleged alcohol intake can be given a twofold meaning as understood as an emancipatory marker that connects her to Western European norms, which is implied as the opposite of Islamic traditions regarding alcohol. In this, she is connected to a Western European Self in the constructed 'before'. However, noting her alcohol consumption can also be a way of highlighting instability and suggesting a lack of personal judgement, which becomes part of the explanation for her 'transition' towards violence. An Othering process thus appears twofold in the interplay between the visual and textual representation of Hasna in discursively limiting both markers of a female and a Western identity in the seemingly necessary explanation of a 'transition' towards the - otherwise - inexplicable violence.

Our analysis illustrates how the images of Hasna cannot 'speak' security insofar their connotations are understood in relation to the dominant securitized discourse on violent extremist women. The interplay between the immediate and broader textual context and visual connotations of the images shows how the meaning ascribed to Hasna is in line with traditional gendered understandings of women and violence. This denial of (political) agency implies that a female violent extremist is radicalized, yet never radical; she is victimized in order to maintain an idealized notion of femininity as peaceful, naïve and nurturing (Enloe 2014: 51; Cohn 2013: 25-26; Bloom 2011: 5).

We argue that this analytical framework of (re)constructing women acting violently within an understanding of being sensationalized, pathologized and/or victimized can be understood in relation to a wider political contestation of the (violent) woman. No discursive

realm is enabled for political agency in the intersection between gender and security when discursive understandings of violent acts committed by women consistently are ascribed to men. When such understandings are textually and visually (re)produced, it hinders a more nuanced understanding of women's involvement in terrorism regarding both engagement and disengagement.

Silencing and Othering's implications for the understanding of deradicalization

In this final part of the paper, we ask: what are the potential implications of gendered understandings of violent extremism for the discursive realm of deradicalization efforts? As Cohn argues *"war and conflict are not solely masculine stories. This would be to simplify the world and be blind to the many ways in which gender affects the discourses on war"* (2013: 8). Understanding women through male fictionalizations of available subject-positions not only applies to media discourse. We argue that a male view of female violence also applies to the policies developed to counter and prevent violent extremism. Within a predominantly male political sphere, gendered discourses unquestionably have implications for the choice of policy instruments that seem available to deradicalization efforts.

Just as the concept of radicalization is widely debated (and contested) within academia and amongst policymakers[13], so is the concept of deradicalization. Nonetheless, there is a widespread consensus of a processual understanding of radicalization towards extremist views/actions (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010: 798; Horgan & Braddock 2010: 279; Crone 2016: 591; Koehler 2017a: 67)[14]. Preventative policies are often aimed at preventing individuals from recruitment into groups defined as violent extremist and from adopting ideas that may

[13] For definitions of radicalization and extremism in official Danish documents, see Warrington (2018: 129-130).
[14] Crone analyzes the interplay between violent extremist ideas and prior involvement in violent environments as well as social, intellectual and bodily processes in critically discussing conceptualizations of radicalization (2016).

lead to acts of terrorism[15] (Koehler 2017b: 91). Such measures thus include both a physical and an immaterial dimension. While prevention policies are typically directed at those not involved with violent extremism or those considered in 'early stages' of a radicalization process, deradicalization policies[16] strive to disengage those already considered 'radicalized' and thereby counter potential violence. It also often includes elements of social inclusion and a concept of reintegration (Berthelsen 2015; Koehler 2017b: 91; Saltman & Smith 2015: 58).

The way women are understood in relation to violent extremism has implications for policies of prevention and disengagement. Recent studies from the Radicalization Awareness Network conclude that women who seek to disengage from violent extremism often find that available programs and policies do not meet their needs (RAN 2019: 5). On the one hand, this could open a policy opportunity to focus more on female empowerment within deradicalization and disengagement policies. On the other hand, such an approach does not come without challenges. Other studies have found that assumptions of what empowerment entails are often based on gendered stereotypes of what constitutes an 'empowered woman' within a certain societal or cultural context. In these, the agency that is enabled becomes contingent on outside determined normative understandings of empowerment, which could reproduce existing power dynamics and indirectly undermine the purpose of the efforts. The paradox of *assigning* agency and thereby removing the potential for such agency illustrates the complexity of constructing these policies. This is not only prevalent regarding gender but also religion. In their study, Winterbothan & Pearson find that 'Islamophobic' stereotypes prevail in policies countering and preventing violent extremism when implying that Muslim women require 'specific empowerment' (2016: 59). When (re)producing understandings of violent women as victimized and pathologized, implications are that policies of empowerment

[15] Several definitions of terrorism exist. For discussions on critically assigning meaning to the concept of terrorism, see Jackson (2009: 3-4) and Jackson et al. (2011: 119).
[16] Disengagement and deradicalization refer to different methods and policies with different aims depending on the case or issue. For discussions of conceptualizations of measures and impact, see Koehler (2017a: 164-165), Horgan & Braddock (2010: 280) and Saltman & Smith (2015: 58-59).

navigate in a narrow, discursive realm in which women (and Muslim women in particular) remain bound by pre-existing subject-positions.

On one hand, the sensationalization of female violence means that cases involving violent women often receive a large amount of media attention (Bloom 2011: 23). On the other hand, female violence is Silenced and seemingly impossible to grasp. Violent women are solely ascribed personal and emotional motivations for their actions, thus limiting the availability for agency within a discursive political realm of opportunity (Banks 2019: 183; Saltman & Smith 2015: 69). A study by Alexander & Turkington finds that *"terrorism-related offenders who are women are less likely to be arrested, less likely to be convicted, and receive mere lenient sentences compared to men"* (2018: 24). This underscores the impossibility of comprehending the concept of a violent woman. The implications of textually and visually reproducing an Othering process in attempting to explain female violence as something other than what it is – *female* and *violent*, vary. Maintaining a fixed discursive understanding of violent women could lead to not acknowledging a threat, which, ultimately, could cause devastating impact if a violent attack were to occur. Conversely, insufficient disengagement policies may also lead to further recruitment of others into violent extremism. By not focusing on understanding gender specific dynamics of violent extremism, conversations are not opened for how gendered empowerment policies could be constructed differently in a context of deradicalization and disengagement. The highly salient policy issue of returning men, women and children from areas formerly occupied by the Islamic State highlights the importance of addressing these concerns. Developing deradicalization and disengagement policies are contingent on the discursive realm in which the policies are constructed. Reducing women who travelled to Syria and Iraq to solely being seen through a narrative of 'Jihadi brides' significantly limits the realm for understanding them as individuals and as national policy issues (Saltman & Smith 2015: 69-70; Milton & Dodwell 2018: 16). We acknowledge that a vast number of women are victims of 'toxic' and violent male behavior and are in dire need of protection - also in the context of violent extremism. Nonetheless, this paper aims to supplement and broaden current conceptualizations of female

violence to *also* include the potential for political agency. Additional studies are encouraged to apply the analytical framework to other cases of women implicated in violent incidents related to extremism to further an understanding of how media representations of female violence might vary across political, cultural and temporal contexts.

Concluding remarks

Is there a visual discursive space for the radical(ized) woman or is she invisible? In this paper, we have analyzed the case of Hasna Ait Boulahcen, labeled the *'first European female suicide bomber',* in Danish media following a violent incident in Paris in 2015. Through a gendered discursive approach to 'speaking' security through images, we have shown that connotations of images are (re)constructed in and by the intervisual and intertextual dynamics as well as their situation in wider social, political and historical contexts. In these, violent women are presented as *pathologized*, *victimized* and/or *sensationalized* and female violence is contingent in relation to male politics. This analytical framework illustrates how the interplay between both the immediate intertextual and the intervisual representation of Hasna follows traditional gendered understandings of female violence. In these, the available discursive subject-positions limit the potential for political agency in that a violent woman is radicalized, yet never radical. This gendered discursive approach contributes to an understanding of deradicalization policies by underscoring the role of Silencing and Othering of violent extremist women in shaping and narrowing the discursive realm of political opportunities. Textually and visually Silencing female violence and Othering violent women firstly removes an option for understanding their specific dynamics and, secondly, limits the potential to develop policies and programs to address concerns related to the matter, as the matter does not conceptually exist. Within a narrow and reductionist understanding of female violence, the political realm of opportunity itself becomes limited. Our paper has thereby illustrated how gendered and religious markers of identity (re)construct and (re)produce available subject-positions within securitized discursive realms, as in the case of Hasna. Deconstructing

these markers underscores how new avenues of research are necessary to reveal the radical, violent woman who, for now, remains invisible.

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ISSN: 2363-9849