



university of
 groningen

Female ISIS returnees: Challenges of Gender-Sensitive Policies and Actions. The Case Study of the Netherlands

Helena Hamera (S5068525)

Campus Fryslân - Rijksuniversiteit Groningen

Bachelor Thesis - BSc Global Responsibility and Leadership

Supervisor: Alex Belloir

June 6, 2025

Word Count: 10 548

Abstract

This thesis explores why gender considerations are significant in returnee strategies and to what extent Dutch policies are gender-sensitive in addressing female returnees, particularly those linked to ISIS. Framed within the feminist theory, this study argues that current approaches often reinforce binary narratives, viewing women as either victims or perpetrators, rather than acknowledging the complexity of their roles and lived-experiences. Using a qualitative research design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with experts in the fields of counterterrorism, security, radicalization and gender, alongside with a document analysis of Dutch policy frameworks and terrorism threat assessments. The findings suggest that while the Netherlands promotes a “gender-neutral” and case-by-case approach, it is not based on a meaningful gender analysis and therefore risks marginalizing female returnees by failing to meet their gender-specific needs. The thesis concludes that a more nuanced, intersectional perspective is necessary. One that actively includes gender-sensitive insights, as well as female agency in risk assessments, reintegration programs, and policymaking. The study contributes to broader counterterrorism and security research by underscoring the need for policies that address structural gender biases and calls for future research to expand gender analysis beyond the female category to include male returnees and wider gender dynamics.

Keywords: ISIS returnees, RATGs, feminist theory, gender-sensitive policy, the Netherlands

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	3
Theoretical Framework: Feminist Theory.....	7
Chapter 1. Methodology.....	10
1.1 Data Collection and Analysis Methods.....	10
1.2 Ethical Considerations.....	12
1.3 Limitations.....	12
Chapter 2. Conceptual Framework.....	14
2.1 Terrorism.....	14
2.2 Labelling Foreign Terrorist Fighters.....	15
Chapter 3. Background Understanding of Women as RATGs in the Dutch Context and Beyond.....	18
3.1 Women's Agency.....	18
3.1.1 Motives.....	18
3.1.2 Roles.....	19
3.1.3 Perceived Risk - Motives and Victim/Villain Dichotomy.....	20
3.2 Repatriation Frameworks and Policies in the Netherlands.....	21
Chapter 4. Findings.....	24
4.1 The Significance of Inclusion of Gender Considerations into Policies towards Female RATGs.....	24
4.1.1 Importance of Including Gender.....	24
4.1.2 Risks Related to Non-Inclusion of Gender.....	26
4.2 Gender Considerations in Dutch Policies.....	29
4.2.1 Female RATGs' Position in Reports and Written Strategies.....	29
4.2.2 Gender Neutrality.....	31
4.2.3 Experts vs Politicians - Current Approach.....	32
4.2.4 Female Overrepresentation in Criminal Proceedings.....	33
Chapter 5. Analysis, Discussion and Recommendations.....	34
5.1 Analysis and Discussion.....	34
5.2 Recommendations: Shaping Returnee Strategies Through a Feminist Lens.....	38
Conclusion.....	40
References.....	42

Introduction

In recent years the phenomenon of returning associates of terrorist groups (RATGs) has emerged into a strongly opinionated political and public debate about national security, as well as about identity, belonging, justice and gender-stigmas. This is particularly true of European Union (EU) states, including the Netherlands. According to the available estimates, since 2001, 4 000 to 5 000 European citizens have travelled to engage directly or indirectly with conflicts including terrorist activities, mainly in ones in the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). As of 2017, out of these individuals 30% made a return to their home country (European Council, 2017). Estimates from 2018 claimed that there were 50 returnees on the Dutch soil, women being a third of that number (Coolsaet & Renard, 2018a). Following the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris committed by French returnees, the at the-time mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb, announced in a public speech that Muslims who are not willing to integrate into the Dutch democratic values should “piss off” (Coolsaet & Renard, 2018a, p. 58). On a similar note, the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte commented on the notion of returnees that “he would rather see the foreign terrorist fighters killed in the conflict than to have them come back to the Netherlands” (Coolsaet & Renard, 2018a, p. 58). These opinions are boosted by the fact that according to the most recent Dutch Terrorist Assessment from December 2024, the risk of a terrorist attack in the Netherlands is rated to be four out of a five point scale and it is mainly deriving from ISIS affiliated organisations (National Coordination for Counterterrorism and Security, 2024; NCTV NL, 2024). Identifying women in the available data on RATGs and seeing how they contribute to this perceived risk is challenging. Currently, the Dutch government, in comparison to other EU members, adopts a more repressive approach to prosecuting and

repatriating women associated with terrorist groups due to the fact that there has been a shift in understanding the extent to which women are allowed to participate in ISIS. Women are now seen as being able to give “the Dutch jihadist movement a boost, by way of networking and support activities”, however it is still assumed that they lack combatant experience compared to men (National Coordination for Counterterrorism and Security, 2022a, p. 10). In cases when repatriation takes place, it is mainly women and children who are its subjects. Since July 2021, two male and six female returnees have gone back from Syria and Iraq, and out of those individuals, five women were repatriated by the Dutch government (National Coordination for Counterterrorism and Security, 2022a).

Although in academia there is a growing awareness of the situation of women returning from terrorism contexts and of how female returnees require different policy approaches, an in-depth analysis of the significance of *gender-sensitive*¹ approaches and their inclusion in the Dutch policies and their frameworks is still lacking. What is more, even the existing scholarship does not exhaustively inform political choices which in turn leads to ill-informed public debate and low effectiveness of solutions designed to address challenges of female RATGs. The academic literature recognizes the fact that the issue of female ISIS returnees poses complex challenges for Dutch counterterrorism policies and that it must balance security concerns with rehabilitation and reintegration. However, no solutions are offered on how to make sure that nuanced policies are created and implemented.

¹In general terms, *gender-sensitive* refers to the recognition and inclusion of the different needs, roles, and experiences of individuals of all sexes and gender identities. However, in the context of this thesis, the term is used in a more specific sense. It refers to policies, strategies, and actions directed at female returnees that explicitly take into account the lived experiences, risks, and reintegration needs of individuals of the biologically defined female sex.

Traditionally, Dutch political and media discourse tends to oscillate between viewing female returnees as either victims or perpetrators. For example Bossen and Badran (2024) highlight how media in the Netherlands and Belgium portray women in the frames of criminal, terrorist, victim, regret, mother, and bad parent and how that in turn affects their chances of being repatriated. They argue that the public perception has a substantial influence on if and how the government performs repatriations. Mehra et al. (2024) report on how women are placed in the Dutch system of dealing with returnees. They develop on the characteristics of each stage that a returnee must go through and acknowledge that women might face difficulties due to a lacking gender perspective. They mention the fact that women are being prosecuted for child neglect as an example of the additional charges that women might face compared to men. They conclude that while roles and motives of women in ISIS are recognized as distinct, they are not differentiated in sentencing or reintegration strategies. Kanhai and Abbas (2020) provide valuable insights from Dutch Muslim women, who express mixed views on reintegration. While many sympathize with female returnees as victims of coercion or trauma, concerns about ideological adherence persist. The study underscores the importance of community acceptance and emotionally supportive networks for successful reintegration, suggesting that gender-sensitive approaches must engage Muslim women as key stakeholders in deradicalization. Therefore arguing for the importance of female representation in counterterrorism and security policy making. Continuously, European and international frameworks stress the necessity of gender-sensitive responses to female returnees. Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) (2022) and Stenger and True (2019) emphasize that women's experiences of trauma and motherhood under ISIS ideology, as well as social isolation upon their return, require specialized support, including trauma counseling, assistance in redefining

motherhood roles and reintegrating into society. Both of the sources indicate that practitioners often lack gender-specific training, leading to gaps in addressing women's unique needs during rehabilitation and reintegration.

The academic literature argues that gender matters because women's roles in ISIS, their pathways to radicalization, and their post-return challenges differ from the ones that men face (Andreeva et al., 2024; Capone et al., 2023; Cook et al., 2024). Women may be both perpetrators and victims of violence, and ignoring these nuances risks ineffective policies that either over-criminalize or under-support them. Despite recognition of the importance of gender considerations in returnee strategies, a significant gap in empirical analysis exists in explaining in detail why these considerations matter and whether the returnee policies and practices in the case of the Netherlands are genuinely gender-sensitive in addressing female ISIS returnees. Most existing studies focus on discourse analysis, community perceptions or broad policy outlines but lack detailed evaluation of policy implementation and outcomes from a gender perspective.

Therefore this thesis aims at addressing the identified literature gap and at providing critical insights into the state of the current Dutch returnee strategies, informing more nuanced, gender-responsive policies that balance security with rehabilitation and human rights. In light of the above, this thesis is centred around the following research question:

Why is the inclusion of gender considerations in returnee strategies significant and to what extent are Dutch strategies gender-sensitive in addressing female ISIS returnees?

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Theory

In order to critically examine the significance of gender sensitivity in returnee strategies and the extent of its considerations in the Dutch context, this research is grounded in the feminist theory of social studies. Feminist theory in social studies research generally argues that gender is inherent for power relations in public institutions and the knowledge system that is followed in politics (Bryson, 2016). In her book, Hughes (2009) discusses the core beliefs of feminist theory in social studies, emphasising the “difference” between men and women, as well as race, class, sexuality, age etc. She defines these features as the core concepts of feminist theory while further arguing that it is their acknowledgement that allows for adopting an intersectional approach of feminist theory. Hughes (2009) characterises the intersectional approach as a tool of researching in an open manner, allowing for multiple meanings and voices, rather than fixed truths. Intersectionality in the study of female returnees in the Netherlands and the relevant institutional strategies allows to boost claims about the necessity to consider gender in counterterrorism and deradicalization policies and actions.

One of the most prominent feminist theorists that contributed to the developments of feminist theory used in research connected to social studies were Scott and Enloe. Scott (1986) promoted the idea of gender being a socially constructed relationship that is influenced by the perceived differences between sexes. Throughout her work she emphasized the need to reject and critically assess the binary categories of gender that strengthen the oppositions between women and men and the importance of examining how these binaries support the system of power. Scott (1986) expanded her view of the operationalisation of gender not only in family and sexuality but also in political institutions, public discourse and nation-building. Gender in politics is delved into in Enloe’s (2014) book *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of*

International Politics. Enloe (2014), similarly to Scott (1986) pictures gendered relationships and assumptions as inherent for international politics, claiming that it can be noticed in domestic roles, as well as in higher levels and structures of politics. As one of her main arguments constituting the feminist theory, Enloe (2014) states that paying attention to women and gender radically transforms one's understanding of power, policy and global politics. Therefore, a need for challenging the *status quo* of political systems in place and seeking a gender analysis is crucial.

The relevance of feminist theory in analysing the topic of this thesis lies in arguments stating that, similarly to any domestic and international politics areas, the politics of terrorism and counterterrorism are fundamentally structured by gendered, racialized and heteronormative logics (Gentry, 2020). Scholars in security and counterterrorism following a critical approach, have used feminist theory as their theoretical framework before, proving its relevance to the ISIS returnees subject. For example, Alexander and Turkington (2018) in their article *Treatment of Terrorists: How Does Gender Affect Justice?* importantly analysed the complexities between gender and the judicial system. Whereas Gentry (2020) in her book *Disordered Violence* presented a thorough feminist and gender analysis of the structures of terrorism. These authors argue that women associated with violent extremist groups, including terrorist organisations, are rarely seen as having political agency and are often framed within gender-blind narratives. Which in turn, reduces their agency and conforms with the binary assumptions of gender, making them seen as either naive victims or monsters (Alexander and Turkington 2018; Gentry, 2020).

Feminist theory provides a framework within which the posed research questions can be effectively answered. This thesis' argumentation is boosted by challenging the gendered and

male-homogenised structures of political systems (in this thesis - the systems of counterterrorism measures and returnee strategies), rejecting the binary approach that undermines female agency and arguing for a nuanced and intersectional approach within strategies and frameworks for female ISIS returnees in the Netherlands.

Hence, to answer the research questions, the first chapter describes the methodological design of this thesis. Continuously, Chapter 2 provides the definitions of terrorism, as well as the controversies around the term foreign terrorist fighter and indicates which terminology will be used throughout the thesis. Chapter 3 follows with background information on women's agency in ISIS and the system of dealing with returnees that is in place in the Netherlands. Chapter 4 discusses the findings of this study, drawing on results from the semi-structured interviews, as well as the document-based research. This chapter is divided into sections accordingly following the structure of the research question. Analysis and discussion are presented in Chapter 5, where the findings are critically assessed by triangulation and thick description and through the lens of feminist theory, recommendations for how policies for returnees in the Netherlands should be designed are provided in the closing part of this chapter. The thesis' conclusion presents a summary of the findings, analysis and recommendations but mainly the answer to the research question. Lastly, brief recommendations for future research are stated.

Chapter 1. Methodology

This thesis follows a qualitative research design which allows one to aim at “exploring and providing deeper insights into real-world problems” through gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of female ISIS returnees, security and terrorism in general (Tenny et al., 2022, p. 1). Furthermore, this research is of an exploratory nature. By forming the research question with the inclusion of the word *why*, it constitutes for the approach of exploring and having an open-ended way of answering the research question (Tenny et al., 2022).

1.1 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

There are two basic qualitative methods of data collection used for the purpose of this study. Firstly, to gain a deeper understanding of the broad topic of terrorism, ISIS, RATGs, and women’s agency within these themes, document-based research was conducted using two types of sources. Academic and peer-reviewed articles, books, and journals provided in-depth insights into women’s motivations to engage in foreign terrorist conflict, their roles abroad, reasons for returning to their countries of origin, and the perceived risks they pose upon return. The second source type consisted of primary documents, among which, Dutch policy frameworks and terrorism threat assessments played a key role.

Secondly, semi-structured interviews with specialists in counterterrorism, security, radicalization and gender were conducted. This interview format was chosen as it allows for “two-way interactions in which a participant may query the researcher about some broad topic (beyond a mere clarification)”, which fits the purpose of this study to not only gather information absent in literature but also gain a broader understanding (Yin, 2016, p. 142). Three participants were interviewed separately via online platforms of their choice. As agreed through a verbal

consent before each interview, all personal information was anonymised. Each interviewee was assigned an acronym: Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3. Participant 1, from criminology academia and the Dutch National Police Force, was interviewed on 16 April 2025. Participant 2, involved in academia on Islamist extremism and gender-based violence, was interviewed on 23 April 2025. Participant 3, an expert on counter-terrorism and violent extremism both internationally and in the Netherlands, was interviewed on 6 May 2025.

The data collected through these two methods was analysed using two qualitative tools: triangulation and thick description. Triangulation helps prevent the intrinsic-bias that might come from the usage of a single data source analysis (Denscombe, 2010). It establishes the accuracy and reliability of qualitative data, guarding against misinformation (Lamont, 2022).

The second tool, thick description, often associated with ethnographic methods, was coined by Geertz (1973) and is often applied in interpretative studies (Lamont, 2022). It situates “a researcher’s observations within its broader social and political context”, untangling attempts to uncover social scientific laws (Lamont, 2022, p. 105). This method proved particularly important in analysing the semi-structured interviews. Interpreting the “web of meanings” that forms social reality was crucial to understanding the insights shared by the participants in their specific contexts. As Lamont (2022) argues, when studying identity, gender, race and ethnicity, thick description becomes especially relevant.

This study followed a single case study approach. Such studies allow researchers to draw on multiple sources and types of data (Denscombe, 2010). While single case studies are sometimes perceived as unconvincing approaches, as they render “it incapable of providing generalised conclusions”, this thesis argues that focusing on one country enabled a relevant and meaningful analysis (Talpahewa, 2016 p. 11). The Netherlands was chosen due to its dual-nature

repatriation policies, advocating repatriation yet not recording high numbers of returnees. Additionally, the author's position as a student at the University of Groningen provided first-hand access to data and a more insightful perspective on the topic.

1.2 Ethical Considerations

The topic of this research is of an ethically fragile nature. However, the scope of this research is to interview specialists on counterterrorism and security, especially on ISIS returnees in the Netherlands and not the returnees themselves. Hence, the study did not risk touching upon interviewees' lived experience or trauma, because participants did not account for a vulnerable group.

However, in order to provide a safe and ethical space, at the beginning of each interview a consent form was verbally presented to the interviewee. The interviewee was informed about the anonymity of the interview and that any direct quotation or specific parts of their responses would be consulted upon before use in the final submission of the thesis. Furthermore, the data will be deleted after the end of the research, according to the rules of research under supervision of the University of Groningen.

1.3 Limitations

The limitations of this bachelor thesis research mainly concerned the small sample of interviewees. Due to time constraints and limited resources, fewer interview participants were reached than initially anticipated. Connected to this, out of the three participants only one of them was an expert on counterterrorism and security in the Netherlands specifically. Therefore, although all three participants provided insides for the general topics of women as ISIS returnees, gender-sensitive strategies and its importance, only one participant had insights for the

status of gender-sensitive policies in the Netherlands, which might influence the national accuracy of the results of this study. Moreover, the analysis of Dutch returnee strategies relies heavily on publicly available documents, which may not fully capture internal decision-making processes or informal practices within institutions. Furthermore, following a case study approach of the Netherlands allows for an in depth insight into this specific country, however the risk of generalizability must be accounted for. The applicability of this study's results to other countries must be explored upon each specific case.

Due to the limited existing research and scope of this project, the focus was solely on the categories of biologically defined genders, female and male. It is acknowledged that following this binary excludes the experiences of non-binary and transgender individuals, whose specific challenges in the context of returnee policies and reintegration remain underexplored. Future research should aim to incorporate a broader and more inclusive understanding of gender².

² This broader and more inclusive understanding of gender should specifically incorporate how gender is constructed and experienced within Muslim contexts, acknowledging the diversity of cultural, religious, and social norms that shape these experiences. It is important to avoid analyzing gender solely through a Western lens, as this risks misrepresenting or oversimplifying the roles, motivations, and reintegration needs of individuals, especially women, from different cultural and religious backgrounds.

Chapter 2. Conceptual Framework

Exploring the topic of security and counterterrorism, especially Islamic terrorism, equals entering a field of many unknowns and missing definitions. Although it is a subsection of politics and international relations, one cannot write about it without having to mention religion, culture and numerous ethical dilemmas. To start this section on conceptual background, I would like to note that, due to limited time, resources and experience, this thesis cannot cover every complexity. Hence, I acknowledge that the topics discussed are multidimensional and at times controversial.

2.1 Terrorism

In order to understand the subsequent issues with terminology, *terrorism* itself must be defined. Terrorism has no single widely agreed upon definition, neither among scholars nor international frameworks like the United Nation (UN) or EU. Since 1994, the UN refers to terrorism by using different descriptions, however the one stated in 1994 is to date the most prominent one. It describes terrorism as

Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them. (United Nations General Assembly, 1994, p. 4).

The EU has adopted a definition of terrorism, firstly in the Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and later on developed on it in the Directive (EU) on combating terrorism 2017/541. This definition is built upon two parts (European Union, 2017; Vasiliauskienė &

Vasiliauskas, 2020). The first states “the list of serious acts/offences (objective element)” and the second one includes “the description of the terrorist aim (subjective element), which both are necessary to consider a particular action a terrorist crime” (Vasiliauskienė & Vasiliauskas, 2020, p. 93). Hence, although the EU has its own definition of terrorism it is one built upon multiple points and hard to operationalise in a research of a small scope. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, I will use the definition of terrorism presented by Doosje et al. (2016) that argues that “terrorism is an act of violence (domestic or international), usually committed against non-combatants, and aimed to achieve behavioral change and political objectives by creating fear in a larger population” (p. 79).

2.2 Labelling Foreign Terrorist Fighters

When analysing literature on the topic of foreign terrorist fighters, many terms are used interchangeably, such as *foreign terrorist fighter* (FTF), *foreign fighter* (FF), *returnee*, and others. These terms are all subject of use when referring to ISIS affiliated individuals, including men, as well as women. The reason why this diverse terminology might be problematic is explained by Baker-Beall (2023). He argues that the lack of distinction between what those different labels mean leads to oversimplifying and homogenizing the motivations and roles that individuals take when engaging in foreign conflicts. Furthermore, it blurs the lines of actions that should be treated as terrorist-affiliated and prosecuted with counterterrorism frameworks (Baker-Beall, 2023).

Despite the diverse use of terms, the most prominent one in literature is foreign terrorist fighters and although it leads to misconceptions when applied to any individual returning from conflict zones, in this case ones from ISIS territories, women are the most negatively affected by it. The usual connotation is that a foreign terrorist fighter directly engaged in criminal terrorist

activities, when speaking about male fighters, whereas women are mainly associated with the term jihad brides and seen as “brainwashed fools that arrogantly rejected their position as ‘western women’” (Margolin & Cook, 2023, p. 11). These misjudgements are often rooted in the long-standing notion of female absence in politics and therefore, in the case of Islamic extremism, they are regarded as ones that “are ‘pulled into’ extremism because of their relationship with men, including boyfriends, husbands, sons, fathers, or brothers” (Margolin & Cook, 2023, p. 10). Whereas, it appears that the actual motives behind women’s association with ISIS or Islamic extremism in general are much more complex and differ depending on every individual case (Capone, 2019; Margolin & Cook, 2023). Simply said, the term foreign terrorist fighter is highly politically charged (Cuyckens, 2021). It instantly assumes criminality behind one's actions, which in turn leads to countries and prosecutors often misjudging or rather simply beginning the assessment of the returnees’ engagement in terrorism with a top-down assumption of it being criminal (Brady, 2024; Cuyckens, 2021).

Scholars that acquire a more critical approach often challenge the usage of this terminology and try to propose new ones. One of those approaches is using the word “returnee” when referring to individuals returning from ISIS territories. It is a broad label, however it allows to refer both to individuals that have and have not engaged in terrorist activities. Although it has only become prominent in recent years, when analysing academic sources related to returning terrorism-affiliated individuals, more and more scholars refer to them as “returnees”.

One of the most inclusive and intersectional approaches found is the term *returning associates of terrorist groups* (RATGs), proposed by Brady (2024). She argues that this term better allows one to “explore the various categorisations of individuals connected with ISIS, while not assuming they were all FTFs” (Brady, 2024, p. 765). This framework seems to also

reduce the perpetrator-connotation that the term FTF has, allowing for a more interdisciplinary approach and going beyond the victim-perpetrator framing when it comes to assessing women upon their return from abroad (Brady, 2024).

With the aim of this research being inclusive and respectful of the various complexities and dilemmas surrounding the topic of ISIS-affiliated women and their position upon their return to the Netherlands, the terms of RATGs and returnees are interchangeably used to avoid politicised connotation and misuse of labels like FTF or FF.

Chapter 3. Background Understanding of Women as RATGs in the Dutch Context and Beyond

3.1 Women's Agency

3.1.1 *Motives*

It is important to note what effect the framing and propaganda of ISIS itself has on the motives that women followed to join *jihad*, the holy war (Afsaruddin, 2019). Through years ISIS has been diversifying the role that women are allowed to undertake in jihad. Historically, jihadist ideologies and their leaders agreed that women's roles are to be more traditional, involving family rather than actively participating in combat. However, since the establishment of the caliphate in 2014 and spreading jihadi ideologies more internationally, for example through magazines like *Dabiq*, the roles and commandments for women have noticeably expanded (Margolin & Cook, 2023). As Termeer and Duyvesteyn (2022) argue, the propaganda that ISIS spread was highly gendered by promoting travelling to ISIS in ways that applied directly to female gender roles and positions in Islam. They identified three narratives in the propaganda discourse. Women as the builders of the *ummah* (community), as representatives of Islam and, later on, as the guardians of the caliphate. The first one referred to the idea that these women were needed there to use their most "valuable ability" and reproduce the "lion cubs", the next generation of fighters (Termeer & Duyvesteyn, 2022, p. 475). Importantly, it is argued that this deception of women was not to frame them as passive but as ones that would be empowered with the most difficult and important role. The second one targeted criticising modern gender norms that the West promotes and picturing ISIS as "a liberator of women while considering them as crucial to the survival of the Islamic community" (Termeer & Duyvesteyn, 2022, p. 476). Lastly,

the narrative of women as “guardians” developed over time. Coming with the territorial struggles, ISIS emphasized the need for women to increase in political engagement, which suggested them taking up arms and actively engaging in combat (Termeer & Duyvesteyn, 2022). These propaganda tools aimed at and resulted in targeting the desire for empowerment that women in the West often found themselves lacking. The desire for respect and social purpose was finally feasible by joining ISIS (Bjørgum, 2016).

Although efforts made by ISIS to attract and recruit women proved to be effective in many cases, one cannot diminish the diverse personal motives that played a role in deciding to engage in jihad. Contrary to what most Western research believed in, some women did actively decide to support ISIS and join jihadism (Europol, 2019, p. 31). For many women, joining ISIS was connected to a feeling of lost identity and the need to find a new meaning in life, which the utopian world of ISIS seemed to be able to render. In other cases, the motivations derived from economical, cultural or other personal reasons (Bjørgum, 2016; Margolin & Cook, 2023). Thus, women’s motives to engage and travel to ISIS were a combination of personal push and pull factors; push factors being “(...) individual motivations rendering individuals more vulnerable to extremist propaganda, such as personal victimisation, discrimination or other historical, political and personal grievances” and pull factors standing for “positive incentives facilitating entry into a terrorist organisation, as these point to yearning for a sense of empowerment or adventure, belonging or “social solidarity, friendship or familial ties, idealistic socio-political aspirations, or a romanticisation of the experience” (Termeer & Duyvesteyn, 2022, p. 465).

3.1.2 Roles

Women were not mere bystanders in ISIS. Whether it was fully voluntary or not, women were assigned specific roles to undertake. As argued by Cook and Vale (2018), “women played a

variety of roles beyond those of simplistic ‘jihadi brides’” (p. 26), under-acknowledging that and assuming that their only roles were to serve their jihadi husbands and reproduce can miss important insights into their motives to return to their countries of origin (Cook & Vale, 2018).

Generally, these roles can be divided into ones from the public and private sphere. Public sphere roles included nurses, teachers, or policing roles. Additionally, in 2014/15 women were recruited into roles that required an active participation in the structure and enforcement of ISIS. Joining the morality police, *hisba*, was one of the most prominent active roles. This position required combatant training, as well as direct use of violence and rules enforcement against other women (Cook & Vale, 2018). On the other hand, private sector roles were ones that are more widely known to the public eye and connotated with the label of ‘jihadi brides’. The main private sector role was simply serving as a wife but women’s roles as caregivers, wives and mothers, included also educating their sons on jihad. However, even the domestic roles involved exercising abuse by women, as many households would keep slaves which were often “premises” of the woman’s husband (Cook & Vale, 2018).

3.1.3 Perceived Risk - Motives and Victim/Villain Dichotomy

The perceived risk that female returnees pose to their state of origin can be based on two perspectives. The first one is that the threat perception is built upon the information about the main drivers behind women’s return from ISIS territories and the second one, what dichotomy does the state generally acquire - female returnees being victims or villains. Generally, one additional factor comes into place, being the time of the return. States perceive any returnees, including women as substantially more threatening to the security if the return occurred after 2014/2015. This is explained by the longer time spent in the conflict zone and thus possibly earning extensive experience and receiving combatant training. Furthermore, many of these later

returns were forced rather than voluntary due to the territorial losses of ISIS (Coolsaet & Renard, 2018a). However, speaking directly about motives, literature identifies more motives connected to women being dissatisfied with the life and treatment in ISIS (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020). That includes perceptions of being mistreated, lacking basic needs mainly regarding children of those women, as well as developing a moral dilemma with the amount of violence and external attacks that ISIS was committing (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020).

Although an actual analysis of female returnees' motives could lead to a good understanding of the possible security threats, states seem to acquire dichotomies that suit their visions and policies. This topic is widely criticised and discussed by scholars that follow a feminist approach to counterterrorism. As Stenger (2022) argues state's dichotomy is heavily influenced by the ways in which the media portray female returnees and this has varied between "active security concern" and duped "victim" labels (p. 10). Countries that see female RATGs as victims tend to shift any responsibility away from them, assuming that they were tricked into joining a terrorist organisation and therefore seen as non-threatening. However, states that refer to them as villains form a threat narrative. Women are framed as a threat to national security, which therefore explains introducing harsh returnee strategies.

3.2 Repatriation Frameworks and Policies in the Netherlands

Although international frameworks, like several UN resolutions do legally bind countries to introduce counterterrorism strategies, European frameworks "have failed to adopt any clear collective policy or joint strategy towards the repatriation and prosecution of ISIS returnees" (Zingg, 2019, p. 104). Therefore, EU member states vary across the policies towards prosecution and repatriation of RATGs, which is caused by the legal gaps and lack of definitions in the European and international frameworks (Rigotti & Barboza, 2021). The Netherlands is usually

associated with the group of countries that pursue the approach of conditional repatriation, meaning that based on a case-by-case basis a decision is made whether to repatriate the individual (Stenger, 2022). Generally, the Netherlands promotes their approach as a multistakeholder and tailor-made one. Within this framework there is an emphasis on bringing relevant actors into collaboration and therefore developing a personalised approach to deal with the radicalised individual (Coolsaet & Renard, 2018a; 2018b). These actors involve the core parties (municipality, police and Public Prosecution Service), case parties (Child Protection Council and Probation Service Netherlands) and external case partners (various (care) organizations) (Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit, 2023).

Currently the Dutch national counterterrorism and security strategies towards RATGs are mainly established around two frameworks, *The Netherlands Comprehensive Action Program to Counter Jihadism* adopted in 2014 and *The National Counterterrorism Strategy for 2022-2026*. These documents have been developed by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV), which serves as one of the main actors in developing frameworks and terrorism threat assessment reports (Veiligheid, 2021). Although partially considered as outdated, *The Netherlands Comprehensive Action Program to Counter Jihadism* serves as an outline and base for all of the counterterrorism and jihadi measures in place, as well as is one of the first documents that tries to explain the phenomenon of RATGs. Actively followed is the *National Strategy for 2022-2026*. In this model, four sections are developed: procurement, prevention, preparation and prosecution. Each of these sections describes the needs and strategies that must be followed in order to prevent terrorist attacks in the Netherlands (National Coordination for Counterterrorism and Security, 2022b). The section on prosecution well illustrates the approach that the Netherlands has to prosecution and repatriation. It is mentioned that although there is an

emphasis on prosecution and repatriation, “where possible, the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst (IND)) withdraws the Dutch citizenship or residence permits of individuals who have been irrevocably convicted of a terrorist offence or pose a threat to national security” and the goal for the 2022-2026 time period is to increase “maximum sentence for participation in a terrorist organisation to 20 years” (National Coordination for Counterterrorism and Security, 2022b, pp. 21, 22).

Chapter 4. Findings

4.1 The Significance of Inclusion of Gender Considerations into Policies towards Female RATGs

4.1.1 Importance of Including Gender

4.1.1.1 Nuanced Approach. The most prominent topic discussed among interviewees when referring to why the inclusion of gender in returnee strategies matters was emphasizing the need for a nuanced approach. All participants concluded that acquiring a gender-sensitive approach would allow for a nuanced and non-binary approach. The importance of moving beyond a simplistic victim-perpetrator binary when referring to female RATGs was identified as a substantial goal. This was supported by arguments that binary framing might lead to inefficient policy responses, as well as that “understanding push and pull factors that drive the motivations to radicalise is only possible with a nuanced approach”, as stated by Participant 3.

Participant 2 stressed the difficulty of acquiring a nuanced approach by stating the characteristics of legal systems currently in place. They argued that due to our world being inherently gender biased and built on stereotypes, it is difficult to make institutional structures not based on those values as well. They stated that “women are being trailed for neglecting parental duties; that is not gender neutral”, exemplifying the lack of a nuanced approach. Another example where the discussion around the implementation of a nuanced approach arose was the system in place that can be seen in some Balkan countries, like Kosovo. Two participants mentioned that in Kosovo there was a general rule of not prosecuting women but rather immediately reintegrating them. Participant 2 referred to this kind of rule as a “blanket approach” and then later stated that appliance of rules through a blanket approach can have

negative effects. Similarly another participant agreeingly stated that a blanket approach that applies a general rule of not prosecuting female RATGs and treats them solely as victims is, similarly, like seeing them only as perpetrators, not a nuanced approach.

Apart from considering gender in that nuanced approach, two interviewees discussed the need for age-sensitive strategies as well. Participant 1 even argued that focusing on age is more relevant to gender by saying that “children are suffering the most. Children can’t be held responsible for the acts committed by their parents”.

4.1.1.2 Inclusion of Gendered Experiences. Connected to acquiring a nuanced approach is the inclusion of gendered experiences when developing policies and taking action in dealing with female returnees. All participants discussed the differences between male and female experiences and emphasized that since they are different they should also be viewed from separate perspectives. One of the interviewees considered the understanding and inclusion of the gendered experience as crucial in order to understand the radicalisation processes and the consequences of it. Furthermore, they have mentioned that it is precisely those gendered experiences that shape needs and risks of female RATGs and further indicate how policies should be built.

An imminent aspect of gendered experiences inclusion was pointed to be the terminology used when referring to female RATGs. Specifically, Participant 2 focused on discussing it. They criticised the term “jihadi brides” and referred to it being orientalist, sexist, racist and an underrepresentation of female agency. The lack of female agency is not only seen to be reflected in the terminology but also in the way that the term itself was developed. Referring to females as “families of foreign fighters” was similarly considered to be undermining female representation. Finally, when asked whether the issue of female agency’s underrepresentation in the terminology,

as well as in policies, was a topic of discussion in academia, two participants confirmed, however said that it is not in the political world.

Participant 2 identified female representation in policy making as a meaningful part of contributing to the gendered experiences inclusion. They stated that it is always helpful to have women in the policy making sector, as it allows for an input of their own lived experience. However, one must “always be a bit cautious, because there's this whole notion of, if women were the president, we would have less wars. Women can be just as violent and cruel as men”.

4.1.2 Risks Related to Non-Inclusion of Gender

4.1.2.1 Effectiveness of State Response. Generally participants agreed that excluding gender considerations ultimately weakens the overall response to radicalization and reintegration. Programmes that are blind to these dynamics cannot address the deeper causes of marginalization or prevent future threats.

4.1.2.1.1 Policies. All of the interviewees discussed what influence do gender considerations have on the development and effectiveness of policies or rather what will be the consequences of the non-inclusion. Participant 1 broadly stated that “on those biases, you can’t build policies”, indicating that following stereotypes and assumptions rather than having a nuanced approach based on a gender analysis will harm the policy making and their effectiveness. Furthermore, participants strongly argued that policies and strategies need to be gender sensitive and include collaborations with adequate personnel and experts, especially regarding dealing with trauma. It was further stated that an inadequate approach and inclusion of experts will fail to provide the returnees with gender-specific needs. Participant 2 one gave the example of assigning a male *imam* to a female RATG that might have experienced sexual

violence. They argued that because the experiences of sexual violence differ between males and females, a male imam might not be able to approach it well.

4.1.2.1.2 Inadequate Understanding of Radicalization Pathways and Missed Opportunities. Inefficient and non-gender-sensitive policies were found by interviewees to be caused by misunderstanding of radicalisation pathways and therefore contributing to missing the opportunity of allowing females to reintegrate well into the society. The starting point for that problem was identified as not including women's voice and knowledge in developing policies and strategies. One of the participants gave an example of a woman that once joined ISIS and after returning to her country of origin, deradicalised. Since she herself went through the process of radicalisation, joining ISIS and then deradicalizing, she considered it a valuable knowledge and managed to contribute to her local government's policy building for female ISIS returnees. The interviewee indicated that more countries and political actors should actively include women's knowledge and experience in cases like exemplified.

Participant 3 further argued that not understanding the radicalisation path and how it differs between women and men risks failing in fully reintegrating females into the society. They stated that if "you're blind to a certain extent, to these gender specific elements in those trajectories, you will also not be able to effectively address that". They later added that an in-depth understanding of those gender-specific elements of radicalisation is therefore helpful in reintegration trajectories and makes them more effective.

4.1.2.2 Oversimplified Narratives and Stereotyping. Next was the oversimplification of narratives and stereotyping female RATGs. Overall, participants agreeingly discussed that ignoring the gendered dimensions of the phenomenon of returnees solely reinforces the one-dimensional portrayal of women as either passive victims or active threats, ignoring complexity. According to Participant 2 “the dichotomy moved from being like the victim to now they're only the perpetrator, and I think that's very harmful. It's not good for the justice sector. It's not good for the women themselves and also not for reintegration or rehabilitation”. Additionally, reinforcing stereotypes influences public misconceptions and results in unfair or ineffective treatment for female RATGs which leads to failing in equally delivering justice to everyone.

4.1.2.3 Security Risks - Individual and Societal Levels. Lastly, a prominent topic that was mentioned among the interviewees were the individual and societal risks that might emerge from not taking gender considerations into account when referring to female RATGs and developing strategies. Concerning the individual risks, Participant 2 discussed the risk of women falling back into a cycle of gender based dynamics and violence. They noted that this could be a risk if the state neglects the needed support for women that are, among other situations, released from prisons and about to enter the reintegration process. The neglect could potentially also lead to *recidivism*³. Furthermore, Participant 2 identified patriarchy as a reason why this all can have more detrimental effects on women compared to men.

Touching upon the societal risks, interviewees did not state any specific risk posed by female RATGs that could be threatening the broader society. However, Participant 3 generally mentioned that “if we do not understand that these processes work differently for men and

³ The term *recidivism*, in light of terrorism and ISIS returnees, is understood as the broad notion of an individual being convicted of criminal activities at least twice, with at least one conviction related to terrorism (Renard, 2020).

women and therefore fail to develop the correct reintegration strategies it will have risks to the society”. Importantly, one of the participants expressed concerns about the method of citizenship deprivation and said that it does not address the needs of RATGs, nor solves the issue but rather just avoids it. Finally, Participant 2 indicated that it is best to have a gender-sensitive approach, as the non-gender-sensitive ones “don’t make us safer in any way”.

4.2 Gender Considerations in Dutch Policies

4.2.1 Female RATGs’ Position in Reports and Written Strategies

Although there has been a visible shift in the approach that the publicly available Dutch reports and documents assess women with, the analysis of those reports found little information on the actual involvement of gender-considerations into the appliance of policies and strategies. Nonetheless, an assessment of the terminology used to describe female returnees serves as an indicator of the level of gender considerations in Dutch returnee strategies and policies.

Life with ISIS: the Myth Unravelling is the document that was published in 2016 by the Dutch Intelligence Services to better understand dynamics within ISIS and the way that returnees can affect states upon their return (General Intelligence and Security Service, 2016). Within this document a section on women can be found and the diversities between female and male agency in ISIS are acknowledged for. Although the section is not extensive and does not contain a detailed gender analysis, possibly due to the early stage of research, it does indicate that the phenomenon of returnees is a gender-specific one. Therefore, although the inclusion of the gender-sensitive approach in this report might have shown that this will be the case for the next publications, the analysis showed different.

Serving as the current counterterrorism strategy for the Netherlands, *The National Counterterrorism Strategy for 2022-2026* does not include any information on whether gender differences and consideration within counterterrorism measures are taken into account (National Coordination for Counterterrorism and Security, 2022b). In a 2021 report released by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs titled *Changing needs – need for change: integrating responses to extremist threats*, it is noted that “programmes need to be specific about which populations they are targeting (e.g. age, gender, geographic location, etc.) and include a gender lens” (Policy and Operations Evaluation Department, 2021, p. 64). Continuously, *Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 56* mentions women as a part of the security threat posed by jihadism in the Netherlands, outlining their diverse roles in ISIS, however stating that their role compared to men is rather a non-combatant one (National Coordination for Counterterrorism and Security, 2022a). The risk assessment for 2023 does acknowledge that women might pose different threats than men, however does not further develop on any in depth considerations, whereas the *Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands December 2024* does not mention women once (National Coordination for Counterterrorism and Security, 2023; National Coordination for Counterterrorism and Security, 2024). The diversity of female agency in ISIS and the phenomenon of RATGs is acknowledged for, however it now seems to have shifted more towards seeing women as villains, rather than developing a conscious and in-depth gender analysis and systematically including it throughout documents and reports, as well as in practice.

This analysis thus showed that although the Dutch reports and written strategies seem to acknowledge that gendered assumptions might lead to consequences in not adequately prosecuting and assessing the security risks, they do not seem to develop upon what exact steps and ways are undertaken for putting those gender considerations into practice, leading to a

conclusion that a description of gender-sensitive strategies are lacking or are not visibly included in publicly available documents.

4.2.2 Gender Neutrality

Participant 3, when asked about the approach that the Netherlands acquired when dealing with ISIS returnees, stated that Dutch institutions describe their approach as “gender-neutral”. The interviewee further explained that this approach in the eyes of the institutions is one that should benefit individuals, as it indicates a tailored made perspective. However, based on a research that Participant 3 and colleagues conducted, they found that that gender neutral position actually meant that Dutch public actors and institutions “had no clue what they're talking about”. Therefore, gender-neutrality, although promoted as positive, was found to be the opposite. This claim was followed by Participant 3 stating that there is thus a lack of a gender sensitive or a gender lense perspective, as “if you would have a gender perspective on this [...] you would know that you would need to focus on a couple of more specific elements in why women, for instance, radicalize”. Another interviewee similarly stated that in the Netherlands the public opinion on returnees is that women are the ones who simply engage in problematic situations and men are the ones causing them, proving that this exact perspective indicates lack of a thorough gender analysis.

Interviewee 3 indicated that formerly there was a much more simplified approach to female returnees in place. The returning women were mainly seen as “jihadi brides” and that was taken as a status quo. However, after the Dutch Intelligence Services came out with reports that contributed to explaining female agency and roles of women in ISIS, more women started being brought back to the country and prosecuted. Nonetheless, Participant 3 stated that despite the growing research and understanding the idea of female agency is still broadly based on the

traditional men versus women dichotomy. They further described that approach as one that is “pretty much linked to the household, to them, bringing up the children, staying at home, playing that role as a mother in the family. So it's not the real sense of agency that for some women, was also very much the motivation for them to actually travel to ISIS territory”.

4.2.3 Experts vs Politicians - Current Approach

Another theme that emerged was the differences between how the current approach towards returnees differs between experts and politicians. Participant 3 explained that among experts and practitioners on the topic of returnees there is certainly a nuanced approach, however the situation is different among politicians. As stated, “they don't do nuance. Nuance and politicians don't go well together, so they rather go for that very clear distinction”. This lack of nuance among politicians therefore results in policies missing that specific gender lense. Yet, it is to be noted that the Dutch strategy does include an individual, case-by-case approach, similarly to the ways of exercising it. The tailor made approach was explained by Participant 3 as one that considers both risks and needs of the returnees. Meaning that during incarceration, rehabilitation and reintegration the combination of risks and needs is accounted for and the role of the facilitators is “constantly trying to match their personal needs, which could very much accounted for whether that's victimhood or not, but in a way to help them find that way back into society, as well as still seeing that there are these particular risks; so the perpetrator side of things”. The interviewee stated that there is definitely room for the understanding of threats and needs to exist simultaneously if approached from a nuanced perspective. Lastly, they concluded that it is positive that there is a gender-neutral criminal law focusing on terrorist acts and that it can be applied to every individual no matter what pronouns they identify themselves with and that it is certainly how returnees are approached in the Netherlands.

4.2.4 Female Overrepresentation in Criminal Proceedings

The last prominent topic of discussion that derived from the interviews was explaining why there is a notion of women being prosecuted for crimes that among men there is no such prosecutions for. This discussion arose when asked about the opinion on cases of women being prosecuted for child neglect and the reason for why men are not seen to be pressed with those charges. Participant 3 explained that it is difficult to assess whether men would or would not be prosecuted with crimes like child neglect due to substantially lower numbers of female versus male prosecutions. The reason for that was indicated to be the higher numbers of deaths among men while still residing on the ISIS territory compared to women and furthermore lower general percentage of men returning to the Netherlands. Thus, although it could be concluded that gender equality in the responsibility for parental neglect would be accounted for if not for the uneven representation of women and men in trials, there still seems to be more effort put into prosecuting women, as exercising more trials *in absentia* for women than for men exemplifies. However, when brought up, this was left with no further comments from the interviewee.

Chapter 5. Analysis, Discussion and Recommendations

5.1 Analysis and Discussion

Enloe repeatedly argued that once one starts paying attention to women but also gender in general, this will radically alter their understanding of the structures of power and politics (Enloe, 2014). Enloe's work has shaped how scholars and practitioners in security and counterterrorism adopt critical perspectives through a gendered lens. This influence was reflected in the responses of this study's interviewees, who consistently emphasized the importance of gender in shaping power relations and echoed Enloe's view that gender is fundamental to both political processes and security policies. Numerous arguments brought up in the interviews mirrored a feminist approach to the topic of gender considerations in returnee strategies generally, as well as ones specifically in the Netherlands. According to what has been said in the findings section, all interviewees emphasized the importance of acquiring a nuanced approach when dealing with ISIS returnees. This followed with a critique of undertaking a binary dichotomy both when referring to female agency in ISIS, along with comparisons and assumptions based on binary, female and male, standards. The recognition of female agency and how gender shapes stereotypes around it, and therefore how policies and strategies are shaped, is central to the arguments of feminist theorists, as well as literature on gender-sensitive practices in counterterrorism and security. The importance of including gender considerations is based on the acknowledgement that since terrorism is gendered, the response to terrorism requires gendered perspectives (Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism (COE-DAT), 2021). Therefore, it can be seen that in counterterrorism and security academia there is an understanding of the role that gender plays and what should be done about it, however, as indicated by interviewees, this approach is lacking in the development and application of policies towards ISIS returnees.

Thus, although findings on why gender-sensitive ways of dealing with ISIS female returnees matter fall into the feminist theory framework, that extent is different when analysing whether these considerations, and therefore feminist theories, are included in the policies and actions in the Netherlands.

Gender “neutral” approach in the Netherlands is the foremost controversial part of the Dutch system of dealing with ISIS returnees. It is characterised by assessing returnees with a case-by-case method that is supposedly serving as a gender sensitive one that adapts to the needs of returnees by separately reviewing each case. However, based on what Participant 3 said, the gender neutral position does not mean that Dutch public actors and institutions actually know what gender-sensitivity is. The lack of gender-sensitivity in most parts of the strategies in the Netherlands, which is referred to as a gender “neutral” approach, risks reflecting and reinforcing existing inequalities rather than overcoming them (Bryson, 2003). This is argued by feminist theory as the risk of reflecting male priorities in systems, which is in fact the case in the Netherlands. As Andreeva et al. (2024) found, most returnee policies and programmes that are considered as gender-neutral are actually gender-blind and hence reflect male needs. This leads to women remaining invisible in considerations for a need to exit or deradicalize, mainly when it comes to recognising their ideological motivations. This, in turn, is a result of how terrorism is understood. Complying to the assumption that male-needs-based frameworks will fit women is misleading and simply views terrorism and counterterrorism under the assumption of male-as-agent and female-as-victim binary. It therefore identifies the agency of the returnee by looking at who stereotypically has the capacity for violence, conforming to the misogyny of counterterrorism (Gentry, 2020). This “neutral” approach can hence lead to a phenomenon of *disordered violence*, coined by Gentry (2020), which explains why terrorist violence committed

by women disrupts the social order more than when performed by men. Females engaging in terrorist violence are treated as “disordered”, unnatural or shocking, as it contradicts with the dominant ideas of femininity. This in turn, allows for an explanation of why after more research in the Netherlands was conducted on women’s agency in ISIS and their active roles were discovered, women started automatically being perceived as perpetrators rather than victims. This is reflected in the Netherlands in how female ISIS returnees now receive between thirteen months and six years of imprisonment compared to eight months in 2014-2017 (Mehra et al., 2024).

Another point that can be drawn from feminist theory on the system in the Netherlands is that there seems to be a lack of intersectionality in the approach towards Dutch ISIS returnees. One of the risk assessment tools used in the Netherlands is the Risk and Advise Tool (RISc). It has been found that within the process of assessing the risk that returnees pose upon their arrival, there are no ideology matters addressed, not to mention that there is no information whether any gender considerations are taken into account. Because intersectionality is key to uncovering various means of what power does and how it works to discredit those associated with terrorist violence, not having intersectionality in the Dutch approach prevents it from being inclusive and considerate of gender differences (Gentry, 2020). Furthermore, the lack of intersectionality was also mentioned to be an issue by two participants, who indicated lack of age considerations, which by one of the interviewees was considered to be even more crucial than gender considerations.

The absence of intersectionality reflects itself in confirming the deeply historically rooted binary dichotomy of seeing women as either villains or victims. According to the findings from the interviews, as well as what the document analysis showed, the Netherlands historically

switched from one extreme to another and while in the past women were seen mostly as victims, now they are most often referred to as villains. Although, among researchers and specialists a nuanced approach is followed, politicians and public actors tend to assign binary labels to the female returnees. Interestingly, however, these women, when seen as perpetrators, are not viewed as equipped with agency. There is still a notion in place to be seeing female returnees without them being independent agents of change. This can be seen as a product of *militarised femininity*, which shapes the ideas of femininity through how women are usually placed in conflict and seen more as caregivers, mother or victims (Enloe, 2000). In the Netherlands, despite harsher prosecution, the framing of female returnees often still hinges on assumptions of passivity or motherhood.

What seems to be the underlying cause of the gender “neutral” system in the Netherlands and the reason for the lack of understanding of structurally rooted gender biases, as well as the importance of questioning it, is the insufficiently done gender analysis. Nevertheless, it can not be omitted that in publicly available reports and documents the need for more gender-sensitivity is briefly acknowledged for. However, as Scott and Bryson, along with Enloe, argue, the challenge is not to simply acknowledge that women are excluded from considerations but to examine how binary constructs and taken-for-granted assumptions legitimize political arrangements, therefore also investigate how policies towards returnees are developed (Bryson, 2016; Enloe, 2014; Scott, 1986). Hence, the inconsistency of gender considerations in the Dutch documents and the fact that even the current Dutch counterterrorism strategy does not mention women, leaves one questioning whether gender-analysis is conducted and taken into account when developing policies and reports. Similarly to what Participant 1 stated that “when we're talking about gender and the Netherlands, it is often limited towards women having problems

and men causing them”, specialists indicate that, indeed, gendered norms and stereotypes are present and exercised by public institutions (Cook et al., 2024).

One crucial method used in the Netherlands that has been both critiqued by interviewees, as well as pre-existing literature, as one that does not account for gender differences is citizenship deprivation. Accordingly, citizenship deprivation affects women more severely than men, as it is usually women who are left with children and are forced out of the Netherlands to a country that they have often never been to. This can lead to severe distress and can impact the mother’s ability to take care of the child (Mehra et al., 2024). This inability can be both caused by mental health issues, as well as low financial means preventing women from providing the child with medical care, education and other. As a consequence, the risk of women rejoining the terrorist network or becoming criminals is much higher (Mehra et al., 2024). Finally, it is worth emphasizing that feminist theory and critical counterterrorism and security specialists argue that although the main focus, when referring to gender analysis, used to be on women, a stronger emphasis on masculinities should be exercised, as gender analysis must explore both female and male determinants. That will allow for an intersectionality based approach that will benefit the understanding of RATGs (Cook et al., 2024; Gentry, 2020).

5.2 Recommendations: Shaping Returnee Strategies Through a Feminist Lens

Since the need for a nuanced approach served as the main topic of discussion among interviewees, combined with feminist theory, the first recommendation for improving the inclusion of gender-sensitive considerations into the Dutch strategies for RATGs is acquiring a nuanced and intersectional approach. This should be based on the idea of rejecting gender biases and understanding gender as a structure of power (Scott, 1986). Emphasis on including gender-based analysis not solely in theory but mainly in practice should be accounted for (Cook

et al., 2024). Furthermore, intersectionality should be introduced into the general understanding of the phenomenon of female ISIS returnees but specifically into risk assessment tools like RISC, reintegration and rehabilitation plans, as well as prosecution and sentencing.

Following Enloe's theory, women's inclusion must be meaningful, not tokenistic. As she argues, adding women to policy making is not the same as actually feminising policies (Enloe, 2014). Therefore, including women in policy-making on the subject of RATGs should empower them with real influence in the form of including their knowledge and experiences rather than just a symbolic representation. Nonetheless, as one of the interviewees emphasized, this should not be mistaken for acquiring a belief that feminisation of policies should be solely based on a female-based gender analysis, as that would lead to acquiring another binary dichotomy.

Finally, there should be a general recognition for questioning the *status quo* and acknowledging that politics and counterterrorism are gendered and in order to improve the system that is currently in place in the Netherlands, one must begin at the root of the problem. Based on what has been analysed through the feminist theory lense, the change in ISIS returnee policies and its implementation should move beyond simply adding women to the existing structures but to questioning the very system that excluded them. This means that policy makers and specialists in the Netherlands must rethink the effectiveness of citizenship deprivation as a method of dealing with female ISIS returnees, assess and redesign risk assessment tools that are based on male radicalization pathways and focus on investigating the actual, gender-sensitive needs of returnees.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed at exploring the questions of why is the inclusion of gender considerations in returnee strategies significant and to what extent are Dutch strategies gender-sensitive when addressing female ISIS returnees. Conducted interviews with counterterrorism and security experts, as well as an analysis of publicly available Dutch documents and reports on returnee policies and actions allowed for an in-depth exploration of the stated research question. Seen through the lenses of feminist theory, this research found that due to differences between male and female experiences with ISIS and terrorism in general, gender-sensitivity is crucial. Furthermore, the inherently patriarchal and male-values based systems that counterterrorism and security policies are built on affects women more negatively than men. Regarding the extent to which Dutch strategies are gender-sensitive, a conclusion can be drawn that although there are efforts to fulfill that need by the government and public institutions, the extent to which gender-sensitivity is exercised in policies and actions is insufficient. One must be cautious when assessing the “gender-neutral” approach that is promoted in the Netherlands since the results of this research show that it reinforces gender stereotypes and does not meet the gender-sensitivity approach that, especially, female returnees need.

Acquiring feminist theory as the theoretical framework for this research contributes to the already existing literature by taking a more critical, intersectional and inclusive approach to counterterrorism and security studies. This study developed recommendations that in order to meet the gender-sensitivity need in Dutch strategies towards female ISIS returnees, a nuanced and intersectional approach, built based on a gender-analysis, must be acquired. Furthermore,

governments and public institutions must meaningfully render women with representation and agency in policy making, as well as in the general assessment of the situation of RATGs.

Recognising the limitations of this study, such as the limited sample of interviewees and reliance on publicly available sources, further research should aim at expanding the sample of specialists and gaining access to documents that are not publicly accessible in order to fully assess the implementation of gender-sensitive policies in the Netherlands. In line with feminist theory and feminist perspective on counterterrorism and security studies, future research should move beyond investigating the positioning, agency and needs of women but also explore those of male returnees. This broader focus would allow for a more comprehensive gender analysis and contribute to developing genuinely gender-sensitive policies. Only by acknowledging and addressing the gendered dimensions of counterterrorism and security can RATG strategies truly serve the interests of affected individuals, national security, and social justice.

References

- Afsaruddin, A. (2019). Jihad | Meaning, Examples, & Use in the Quran | Britannica. In Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/jihad>
- Alexander, A., & Turkington, R. (2018). Treatment of Terrorists: How Does Gender Affect Justice? *CTC Sentinel*, 11(8). <https://ctc westpoint.edu/treatment-terrorists-gender-affect-justice/>
- Andreeva, A.-M., Berg, A. von, Ginkel, B. van, Hell, E., Jouve, S., Korn, A., Molas, B., Ruf, M., & Scheuble, S. (2024). Assessing Gender Perspectives in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Practices. *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)*. <https://doi.org/10.19165/2024.7214>
- Baker-Beall, C. (2023). The concept of the foreign terrorist fighter: An immanent critique. *European Journal of International Security*, 8(1), 25–46. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2022.30>
- Bjørgum, M. H. (2016). Jihadi Brides: Why do Western Muslim Girls Join ISIS? *Global Politics Review*, 2(2), 91–102. <https://ideas.repec.org/a/gpr/journal/v2y2016i2p91-102.html>
- Bossen, R., & Badran, Y. (2024). Mothers, terrorists, or victims? The framing of Dutch and Belgian women in the Syrian camps and the question of repatriation in news media. *Journalism*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849241255561>
- Brady, E. (2024). Future security threats arising from the UK's deprivation of citizenship: a model to understand the human rights-security risk landscape. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 17(3), 757–785. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2024.2373857>

- Bryson, V. (2003). *Feminist Political Theory*. Macmillan Education.
<https://xyonline.net/sites/xyonline.net/files/2019-08/Bryson%2C%20Feminist%20Political%20Theory%20-%20An%20Introduction%2C%202nd%20ed%20%282003%29.pdf>
- Capone, F. (2019, September 23). *The children (and wives) of foreign ISIS fighters: Which obligations upon the States of nationality? - QIL QDI*. QIL QDI.
<https://www.qil-qdi.org/the-children-and-wives-of-foreign-isis-fighters-which-obligations-upon-the-states-of-nationality/>
- Capone, F., Christophe Paulussen, & Mignot-Mahdavi, R. (2023). *Returning Foreign Fighters: Responses, Legal Challenges and Ways Forward*. Springer Nature.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-571-3>
- Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism (COE-DAT). (2021). *Gender in Terrorism and Counter-terrorism: Data, Analysis and Responses. Workshop Report*.
[https://www.tmmm.tsk.tr/publication/workshop_reports/12-GENDER_AND_CO-UNTERTERRORISM_REPORT\(2021\).pdf](https://www.tmmm.tsk.tr/publication/workshop_reports/12-GENDER_AND_CO-UNTERTERRORISM_REPORT(2021).pdf)
- Chanaka Talpahewa. (2016). *Peaceful Intervention in Intra-State Conflicts*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315599878>
- Cook, J., Herschinger, E., de Leede, S., & Herschinger, E. (2024). Radicalisation and Gender – What Do We Know? *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)*. <https://doi.org/10.19165/2024.5678>
- Cook, J., & Vale, G. (2018). *From Daesh to “Diaspora”: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State*.

<https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>

Coolsaet, R., & Renard, T. (2018a). *Returnees: who are they, why are they (not) coming back and how should we deal with them ? Assessing policies on returning foreign terrorist fighters in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands* (Vol. 101). Egmont. https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2018/02/egmont.papers.101_online_v1-3.pdf

Coolsaet, R., & Renard, T. (2018b). *The Homecoming of Foreign Fighters in the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium: Policies and Challenges*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - ICCT. <https://icct.nl/publication/homecoming-foreign-fighters-netherlands-germany-and-belgium-policies-and-challenges>

Cuyckens, H. (2021). Foreign fighters and the tension between counterterrorism and international humanitarian law: A case for cumulative prosecution where possible. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 103(916-917), 581–603. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1816383121000308>

Denscombe, M. (2010). *The Good Research Guide for Small-Scale Social Research Projects* (4th ed.). Open University Press.

Doosje, B., Moghaddam, F. M., Kruglanski, A. W., de Wolf, A., Mann, L., & Feddes, A. R. (2016). Terrorism, radicalization and de-radicalization. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 11(11), 79–84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsy.2016.06.008>

- Enloe, C. (2014). *Gender Makes the World Go Round: Where Are the Women?* In *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt6wqbn6>
- Enloe, C. H. (2000). *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*. University of California Press.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt14qrzb1>
- European Council. (2017). *EU fight against terrorism - Consilium*. Europa.eu; European Council. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/fight-against-terrorism/>
- European Union. (2017). *Directive (EU) 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and amending Council Decision 2005/671/JHA*. Official Journal of the European Union, L 88, 6–21.
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2017/541/oj>
- Europol. (2019). *Women in Islamic Propaganda: Roles and Incentives*.
https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/women_in_islamic_state_propaganda.pdf
- Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit . (2023). *Multidisciplinair Casusoverleg*. Socialestabiliteit.nl.
<https://www.socialestabiliteit.nl/si-toolkit/interventies/multidisciplinair-casusoverleg>
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Basic Books.

General Intelligence and Security Service. (2016). *Life with ISIS: the Myth Unravelling*.

<https://english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2016/01/15/publication-life-with-isis-the-myth-unravelling>

Gentry, C. (2020). *DISORDERED VIOLENCE : how gender, race and heteronormativity structure terrorism*. Edinburgh Univ Press.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv10kmdf6>

Hughes, C. (2009). *Key concepts in feminist theory and research*. London Sage Publ.

<https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857024459>

Kanhai, A., & Abbas, T. (2020). A Second Chance? Dutch Muslim Women on the Reintegration of Female Returnees from Islamic State. *DOAJ (DOAJ: Directory of Open Access Journals)*, 22. <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/137958>

Lamont, C. (2022). *Research Methods in International Relations*. Sage Publications Limited.

Margolin, D., & Cook, J. (2023). The Agency and Roles of Foreign Women in ISIS. *The Centre for Justice and Accountability*.

https://cja.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Margolin_Cook_agencyandrolesofforeignwomen.pdf

Mehra , T., Renard , T., Herbach, M., Hecker, M., & Koller, S. (2024). *Female Jihadis Facing Justice: Comparing Approaches in Europe* . The Hague: ICCT Press.

<https://icct.nl/publication/female-jihadis-facing-justice-comparing-approaches-europe>

National Coordination for Counterterrorism and Security. (2022a). *Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands* 56.

<https://english.nctv.nl/topics/terrorist-threat-assessment-netherlands/documents/publications/2022/05/17/terrorist-threat-assesment-for-the-netherlands-56>

National Coordination for Counterterrorism and Security. (2022b). *The National Counterterrorism Strategy for 2022-2026*.

<https://english.nctv.nl/binaries/nctv-en/documenten/publications/2022/06/the-national-counterterrorism-strategy-for-2022-2026/the-national-counterterrorism-strategy-for-2022-2026/National+Counterterrorism+Strategy+%28NCTS%29+2022-2026.pdf>

National Coordination for Counterterrorism and Security. (2023). *Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands December 2023*.

https://english.nctv.nl/binaries/nctv-en/documenten/publications/2023/12/12/terrorist-threat-assessment-for-the-netherlands-december-2023/240207_DTN+December+2023_EN_def.pdf

National Coordination for Counterterrorism and Security. (2024). *Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands December 2024*.

https://english.nctv.nl/binaries/nctv-en/documenten/publications/2025/02/11/terrorist-threat-asseessment-for-the-netherlands-december-2024/DTN+December+2024_DEF_UK+%281%29.pdf

NCTV NL. (2024). *NCTV: chance of an attack still real*. Nctv.nl.

<https://english.nctv.nl/latest/news/2024/12/17/nctv-chance-of-an-attack-still-real>

Policy and Operations Evaluation Department. (2021). *Changing needs – need for change: integrating responses to extremist threats*.

<https://www.iob-evaluatie.nl/binaries/iob-evaluatie/documenten/rapporten/2021/1>

- [0/12/rapport_evaluatie_contraterrorismebeleid_20211012/IOB_Integrating_responses_to_extremist_threats_changing_needs_need_for_change_202109.pdf.pdf](#)
- RAN. (2022). *Responses to returning foreign terrorist fighters and their families 2 nd*.
https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/7cbeded1-383c-4b58-b74b-88ececeb93f0_en?filename=ran_manual_responses_returning_foreign_terrorists_and_their_families_en.pdf
- Renard, T. (2020). Overblown: Exploring the Gap Between the Fear of Terrorist Recidivism and the Evidence. *CTC Sentinel*, 13(4), 19–29.
<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/overblown-exploring-the-gap-between-the-fear-of-terrorist-recidivism-and-the-evidence/>
- Rigotti, C., & Zomignani Barboza, J. (2022, February 18). *Unfolding the case of returnees: How the European Union and its member States are addressing the return of foreign fighters and their families*. International Review of the Red Cross.
https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/unfolding-the-case-of-returnees-eu-and-member-states-return-of-foreign-fighters-916#footnote1_q1luxy6
- Scott, J. (1986). Gender: a Useful Category of Historical Analysis. *The American Historical Review*, 91(5). <https://doi.org/10.2307/1864376>
- Speckhard, A., & Ellenberg, M. (2020). ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 In-depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 13(1), 82–127.
<https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.13.1.1791>

Stenger , H., & True , J. (2019, August 3). *Female foreign fighters and the need for a gendered approach to countering violent extremism*. Monash Global Peace and Security Centre.

<https://www.monash.edu/arts/global-peace-security/news-and-events/articles/2019/female-foreign-fighters-and-the-need-for-a-gendered-approach-to-countering-violent-extremism>

Stenger, H. (2022). Victim versus villain: Repatriation policies for foreign fighters and the construction of gendered and racialised “threat narratives.” *European Journal of International Security*, 8(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2022.28>

Tenny, S., Brannan, J., & Brannan, G. (2022, September 18). *Qualitative study*. National Library of Medicine; StatPearls Publishing.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470395/>

Termeer, A., & Duyvesteyn, I. (2022). The inclusion of women in jihad: gendered practices of legitimization in Islamic State recruitment propaganda. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 15(2), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2022.2038825>

United Nations General Assembly. (1994). *Measures to eliminate international terrorism: Resolution adopted by the General Assembly (A/RES/49/60)*.

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/172281?In=en&v=pdf#files>

Vasiliauskienė, V., & Vasiliauskas, M. (2020). DEFINITION OF TERRORISM AND EU COUNTER-TERRORISM POLICY. *BORDER SECURITY and MANAGEMENT*, 3(8), 88–99. <https://doi.org/10.17770/bsm.v3i8.5362>

Veiligheid, M. van J. en. (2021, November 10). *Counterterrorism - Themes - National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism*. English.nctv.nl.

<https://english.nctv.nl/themes/counterterrorism>

Yin, R. K. (2016). *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

Zingg, Genevieve. "European Counterterrorism Policy after the Caliphate: Repatriating and Prosecuting ISIS Fighters and Families." *City Law Review*, 1, 2019, pp. 99-134. *HeinOnline*,

<https://heinonline-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/ctylwrvw1&i=100>.