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Media portrayals of female terrorists: a narrative review using ambivalent sexism theory

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Abstract The literature suggests that female terrorists are portrayed through personal and emotional narratives rather than ideological motivations, which obscures perpetrator agency. This study examined these representations through the lens of Ambivalent Sexism Theory (AST) and offers one of the first attempts to systematically link representations of female terrorists to the benevolent/hostile components of AST. The approach was a narrative review. The scope covered Turkish- and English-language literature published between 2000 and 2024 that were searched on Google Scholar and Web of Science; peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and theses were considered. Inclusion criteria primarily covered studies on media representations of female terrorists. Additionally, complementary research on women's motivations was used to support or challenge media-derived themes. Themes were deductively derived from prior research, and matching with AST was conducted at an interpretive level. The results reveal five recurring frames: (1) Personal Revenge, Family Ties, and "For the Sake of Love," (2) Boredom, Naivety, and Irrationality, (3) Physical Appearance and Hypersexuality, (4) Insufficient Femininity and Sexuality, and (5) Feminism and the Desire to Deviate from Gender Roles. Benevolent sexism is evident across all themes; hostile sexism is particularly salient in frames (3)– (5). Some studies support these representations as stereotype-driven; others offer alternative explanations. Generally, these frames personalise and depoliticise women's agency, obscuring ideological motivations. The implications are to recommend prioritising perpetrators' own words and organisational context, avoiding stereotypical labels, and developing AST-aligned analyses. The originality of this study lies in bridging ambivalent sexism theory with media portrayals of women's political violence, providing an explicit HS/BS mapping of media frames.

Keywords: terrorism; woman terrorist; ambivalent sexism; media

INTRODUCTION

Terrorism is one of the most contentious ideas in scholarly discourse, with no single, universally acknowledged definition existing. Most definitions, however, stress that terrorism is a tactic aimed at audiences beyond the intended individuals and seeks to instil fear in them, as well as the pursuit of a political ideology through violent actions aimed at enforcing that ideology (Hoffman, 2006; Laqueur, 1987; Schmid, 2011). Terrorism involves individuals, irrespective of gender, employing violence to advance a political agenda. Nevertheless, when women are implicated, these political goals are frequently disregarded, and female terrorists are instead depicted as driven by personal motives.

In fact, when women and violence are mentioned together, women are typically portrayed as victims. However, in reality, women engage in a range of violent behaviours, from gang involvement to acts of harassment (Marway, 2011). One such form of violence is terrorism. Women may have become terrorists for a variety of reasons, shaped by their individual

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experiences and cultural contexts. However, the literature often portrays them as a homogeneous group with uniform motivations (Talbot, 2000). The assumption that women engage in terrorism for fundamentally individualised reasons is rooted not in objective analysis, but in social stereotypes and sexist attitudes. In the case of female terrorists, the media plays an active role in generalising and reinforcing certain stereotypes. The media extensively highlights the personal lives of female terrorists, while rarely doing so for men. News coverage of female terrorists often includes detailed personal narratives and sensational headlines, likely because their actions are perceived as violations of gender norms traditionally associated with men (Sternadori, 2007). For example, in terrorism news, individual explanations are used more for female bombers than for male perpetrators, while for men, situational justifications are put forward to explain the execution of the mission (Marway, 2011). Mainstream media extensively emphasises personal aspects while analysing the motivations of female terrorists (de Weert, 2021). Notably, male perpetrators are at times framed via personal or emotional lenses (e.g., mental illness, family turmoil, or irrationality), though such framings appear less systematic (Bendfeldt, 2024; Powell, 2011, 2018; Pronin et al., 2006). Some academic studies further claim that female terrorists are more often driven by personal motivations compared to men (Bodziany & Netczuk-Gwoździewicz, 2021; Rodermond & Thijs, 2022; von Knop, 2007). However, when such studies are examined closely, gender stereotypes are often found to align with media representations.

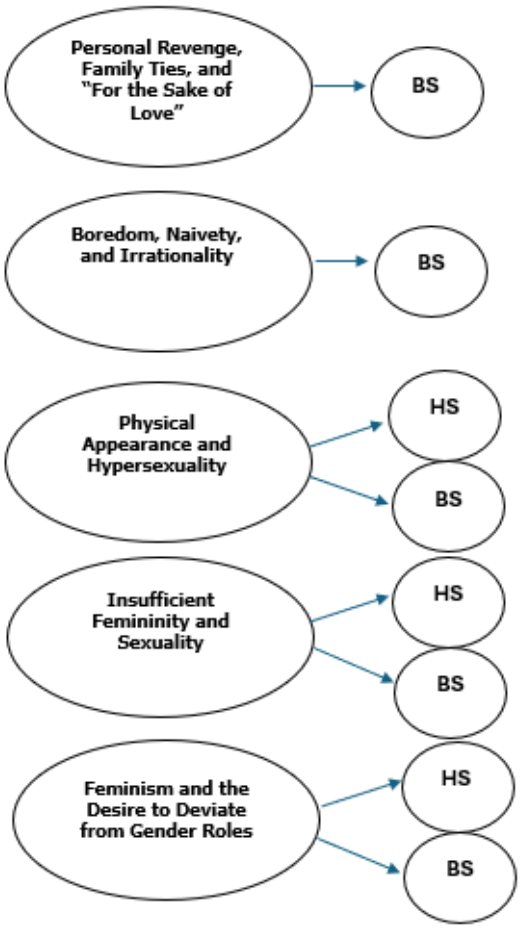
Sexism is commonly divided into two interrelated forms: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Both are essential for understanding gender inequalities and prevailing social attitudes toward women. Hostile sexism refers to overtly negative attitudes and beliefs about women. It typically involves perceiving women as manipulative or untrustworthy and reinforces their subordinate societal position. This form of sexism legitimises aggression and discriminatory practices, often targeting women who challenge traditional gender norms or demand equality. It reflects direct animosity and promotes the idea that women are inherently inferior to men (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Benevolent sexism, on the other hand, is a more subtle and seemingly positive form of prejudice. It portrays women as pure, in need of protection, and inherently gentle, while reinforcing their alignment with traditional gender roles (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Together, these two constructs constitute the concept of Ambivalent Sexism, which is frequently measured with the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996). ASI comprises 22 items assessing two dimensions: Benevolent sexism and hostile sexism. Items for Hostile Sexism reflect overtly negative beliefs about women (e.g., 'Women gain power by taking control over men', 'Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash'). Benevolent sexism, which emphasises ostensibly positive but essentially condescending attitudes, includes three subscales: protective paternalism (e.g., 'Women should be cherished and protected by men'), complementary gender differentiation (e.g., 'Women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility') and heterosexual intimacy (e.g., 'Every man ought to have a woman he adores').

According to Glick and colleagues (1997), hostile and benevolent sexism are not contradictory but complementary belief systems. Their coexistence is made possible by the fact that they target different subtypes of women. While hostile sexism is directed at women who are perceived as challenging male dominance, such as feminists or career-oriented women, benevolent sexism is reserved for women who conform to traditional roles, such as homemakers. This division helps reinforce gender norms by rewarding conformity and punishing deviation. The researchers also showed that men who score high on hostile sexism tend to hold negative attitudes toward career women, whereas those high on benevolent sexism express positive views toward women in domestic roles. These attitudes directly shape the roles and perceived motivations of women across various domains. For instance, King et al. (2012) found that although women had access to the same number of professional development opportunities as men, they were less likely to be assigned to challenging tasks due to benevolent sexist attitudes. As another example, Sakalli-Ugurlu and Beydogan (2002) showed that individuals who viewed patriarchy favourably and exhibited high levels of hostile sexism were found to have negative attitudes toward female managers. These dynamics may help explain the persistent underrepresentation of women in stereotypically male-dominated areas.

These gendered attitudes also shape how women are perceived in the context of political violence, especially in the media. The media, through framing, shape the public's perception and evaluation of an event by selecting and highlighting certain elements from among numerous details and placing them within a specific narrative framework (Entman, 1993). In news production, media professionals constantly make choices regarding content, actors, and presentation style. In terrorism news, certain frames are particularly important because they significantly shape public perception and response (Nacos, 2005). In this sense, while female terrorists are sometimes represented in the media in ways that reflect reality, gendered framing has been observed to be influential. This can be understood from the fact that, when it comes to women, whether they are politicians or terrorists, they are framed based on stereotypes and through personalisation (Nacos, 2005).

Moreover, as highlighted by Gidengill & Everitt's (1999) 'gendered mediation', news reports filter politics through 'masculine' norms and narrative patterns, evaluating the performance of female politicians by these criteria, thus marginalising women. This framing fosters a focus on superficial elements such as appearance/style, a downplaying of content and competence, and a presentation of women as 'outliers' in politics. In terrorism as a political field, female terrorists are similarly marginalised, with the focus on their individual characteristics, such as appearance, rather than their political ideas.



*HS= Hostile Sexism, BS= Benevolent Sexism
Figure 1. Mapping recurrent media frames of female terrorists onto ambivalent sexism components
Source: Author Compilation (2025)

These frames can also be understood with intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), which makes visible the simultaneous privileges and exclusions produced at the intersection of gender with religion, race/ethnicity, class, and status, which single-axis explanations overlook. This multiple positioning is also evident in social representations of terrorist identities. For example,

one study shows that news reports are more likely to use the term 'terrorist' when the perpetrator is Muslim (Betus et al., 2021). The same logic can operate in representations of female perpetrators. While the terrorist label already triggers strongly negative attitudes, the intersection of this label with femininity can exacerbate and transform these attitudes. Furthermore, these female terrorist identities combine with other identities to shape attitudes. For example, the "ISIS bride" label obscures the political agency and subjectivity of the female perpetrator by constructing an image of a 'protected/seduced' woman linked to Islam, reproducing benevolent/hostile sexist frameworks.

Together with media framing theory (selection/salience), gendered mediation (masculine norms filtering coverage), and intersectionality (religion/ethnicity/class intersecting with gender), AST offers the explanatory link between how women are framed and which sexism dimensions those frames instantiate. Women who defy traditional gender norms are often framed as irrational, dangerous, or unstable through hostile sexist lenses, while those portrayed as emotional, naïve, or motivated by love and grief are framed more sympathetically, aligning with sexist attitudes. Common narrative themes such as revenge, romantic devotion, victimhood, and sexualisation reflect gendered assumptions that weaken women's political agency and reinforce enduring stereotypes in how female terrorists are portrayed in the media. As an orienting guide, Figure 1 was created to present a conceptual mapping that links recurrent media themes about female terrorists to hostile versus benevolent components of the AST.

In this context, the present study synthesises existing research on media portrayals of female terrorists alongside academic literature, aiming to demonstrate that men and women may be similarly motivated in their participation in terrorism. Specifically, the current study aims to illustrate that these portrayals are influenced by sexist beliefs and to analyse the motifs that arise in these depictions, drawing on existing research in this domain. While prior work catalogues stereotypes, few studies synthesise media representations of female terrorists through the framework of ambivalent sexism. This study aims to fill this gap by examining representations of female terrorists through the lens of hostile and benevolent sexism and to reveal how media frames intersect with academic discourses. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: RQ1: How do themes identified in prior studies on media representations of women's participation in terrorism correspond to the benevolent and hostile sexism sub-dimensions of Ambivalent Sexism Theory? RQ2: In what ways do narratives in academic literature reproduce or challenge prominent media representations of women's participation in terrorism?

METHODOLOGY

A narrative review method was used to examine the media representation of female terrorists through the lens of sexism. Given the challenges of directly accessing individuals involved in terrorism, a review approach was deemed more appropriate than conducting empirical research. The study focused on key and influential publications, providing interpretive commentary rather than aiming for exhaustive coverage of the literature. Accordingly, this review does not claim to represent the entire body of research; rather, it aims to highlight recurring patterns in the literature, offer a theoretical lens, and draw conceptual inferences, since a literature review method does not encompass a comprehensive and systematic search that addresses the entirety of the area and instead includes a narrative synthesis (Grant & Booth, 2009).

In the current narrative review, the descriptive literature search method was conducted according to the criteria of 'A scale for the quality assessment of narrative review articles (SANRA)' (Baethge et al., 2019). Accordingly, in line with SANRA, the information sources, search terms, and types of literature included were reported, rather than providing flowcharts detailing search strategies as in systematic reviews.

This study covers literature published between 2000 and 2024. This period was chosen due to the increase in terrorist activities in various regions after 2000, such as 9/11 and ISIS attacks, and the concentration of studies on the representation of female perpetrators during this period. The inclusion criteria primarily included studies examining the media representation of female terrorists. Additionally, complementary research directly addressing women's motivations for participation in terrorism was used to support or challenge media-derived themes. Furthermore,

rather than classifying the groups included in this study as terrorists or non-terrorists, this research refrains from assigning such labels, instead respecting the categorisations provided in the original studies and focusing on the core issue under investigation.

The literature search was conducted through Google Scholar and Web of Science (WoS). The search abstracts were required to include at least one of the terms 'women' OR 'female' and at least one of the terms 'terrorism*' OR 'suicide bomb*' and 'motive*'. Because of the scope of representation, the first 50 records listed in Google Scholar using the keywords were screened. A search of WoS using the search query identified 86 studies at the abstract level, and a preliminary screening was conducted based on title and abstract. Additionally, the bibliographies of the selected studies were examined retrospectively through citation search, allowing for additional studies to be included. Turkish and English sources were included in the study; book chapters, peer-reviewed articles, and theses were included as well. Conference proceedings and similar grey literature were excluded due to the sensitivity of the topic. The review was not limited to empirical studies; studies that conducted media content analysis, those based on direct interviews with perpetrators, and those that offered interpretive/essay inferences were also considered. Ultimately, 14 prominent studies were included in the narrative review. In addition, six studies were subsequently incorporated to illustrate the counterargument, demonstrating that prominent male terrorists were also portrayed individually in the media and to provide evidence or counterevidence to representations of women's terrorism. The review prioritises studies that offer numerous and well-explained examples, thereby enabling a more nuanced understanding of recurring frames.

Themes related to the representation of female terrorists in the media were generated using a deductive approach based on the framework provided by previous research (Nacos, 2005); these themes were reinterpreted within the context of Ambivalent Sexism Theory (AST). The matching of themes with AST is a theoretical/interpretive reading; formal content coding was not applied. Accordingly, the results should be read as an argumentative synthesis rather than as quantified coding findings, consistent with a narrative review approach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perceptions and narratives of female terrorists

In this section, alongside the motivations that influence women's involvement in terrorism within broader society, the media representations of female terrorists will be examined. These stereotypical portrayals are significant because the media plays a major role in shaping public perceptions of terrorism. The impact of terrorism extends beyond the direct victims of violence; it acts as a psychological weapon aimed at society. As Speckhard (2008) notes, terrorism is a form of violence designed to pressure societies into acknowledging and implementing the political ideologies promoted by perpetrators. Depending on it, examining media representations is essential for understanding the broader narrative context. The themes presented in this section are not derived directly from media content but rather are informed by the findings of academic studies examining media representations. Therefore, the examples presented are based on the analysis and interpretation of relevant studies. Furthermore, the themes below are an argumentative synthesis of the literature; links established with AST are based on theoretical discussion.

Personal revenge, family ties, and 'for the sake of love' motifs

A common narrative emphasised by the media is that women's participation in terrorism is portrayed as atypical and primarily driven by personal connections and emotional motives. For instance, Nacos (2005) noted the media's frequent use of the term 'Black Widow' when reporting on Chechen female terrorists, portraying them as vengeful widows whose husbands were killed by Russian forces. These women were depicted as widows who had lost the will to live and were easily manipulated, brainwashed. In this framing, women's involvement is reduced to a reaction to personal trauma. However, many of these women were, in fact, politically motivated rather than driven by personal revenge (Nacos, 2005; Sternadori, 2007). Media explanations for male perpetrators can also invoke 'family ties'. Unusual family situations are highlighted, such as divorced parents and the father's boom-and-bust career cycle, or an odd/overprotective mother–son relationship (Bendfeldt, 2024). Accordingly, while the media generally emphasises terrorists' personal life stories to increase news value, the focus on family ties among female

terrorists is framed as loyalty to men and revenge for their absence, as seen in the case of Chechen women.

The media also frequently presents the narrative that women join terrorist organisations in search of romantic relationships. For example, women who joined ISIS were often described as irrational or emotionally inadequate individuals who entered the group to find a husband. This led to widespread use of the 'jihadist bride' trope, which implicitly suggests that these women are incomplete and seeking wholeness, thereby eliciting public sympathy (Martini, 2018). However,, such depictions are misleading. Testimonies from some ISIS women indicate that they remained in the group even after their husbands had died, asserting that their participation was not motivated by romantic relationships (Martini, 2018).

Another dominant media frame involves women becoming terrorists 'for the sake of love'. This narrative portrays women as driven to terrorism by romantic involvement with men already in terrorist groups. Yet, male terrorists are rarely described in such emotional terms, despite evidence that some also joined due to romantic partners (Nacos, 2005). For instance, Belgian suicide bomber Murielle Degauque was depicted as having been involved with several Muslim men and as having been brainwashed while married to a radical Islamist (Sternadori, 2007). In another example, when covering the case of Tali Fahima, portrayed as a political criminal, the media framed her story around romantic sacrifice, describing her as a woman who gave up her life 'for love'. Her connection to Zakaria Zubeidi was emphasised, and her political commitment was reinterpreted as emotional vulnerability. As a result, Fahima was depicted as irrational and emotionally driven, further reinforcing gender stereotypes (Lavie-Dinur et al., 2015).

Thus, this love/kinship/revenge framework is more visible in organisations and fields where women are mobilised in the roles of wife, mother, and martyr, and where war leaves numerous widows/relatives. Therefore, narratives of 'jihad bride/for love' have become prominent in ISIS and some Palestinian factions, which explicitly emphasise marriage and belonging. The 'Black Widow' epithet has become prominent in the Chechen conflict due to the high male casualties. Especially within the context of stereotypes of Muslim masculinity, women can be seen in media representations as deceived and manipulated by love and familiarity.

As can be seen in the examples, the dominant view is that women participate in a terrorist movement, which is a violent act, only with the presence of a 'man' and emotionality. These media representations are particularly parallel to the views of women in benevolent sexism, who complement men, make emotional rather than rational decisions, and need protection. From the perspective of the sub-dimensions of benevolent sexism, these narratives can be seen to intersect particularly strongly with heterosexual intimacy. This dimension constructs male-female unity as a prerequisite for individual integrity; in media discourse, love and male attachment frame the female perpetrator as a subject 'completed by a man'. Thus, the motivations of female terrorists are personalised and detached from the political agenda through assumptions of the man's incompleteness without a woman and the woman's inseparable presence by his side. Related to this, the protective paternalism sub-dimension of benevolent sexism also comes into play: the recognition of women's fragility and need for protection reinforces the tendency to explain women's agency under the protection/supervision of a man rather than their own decisions. These readings centred on 'completion' and 'male protection' can be clearly observed in the 'jihadist bride' narratives, which are constructed around the motivation of finding love, and in the example of Murielle Degauque.

Boredom, naivety, and irrationality

Another common media narrative portrays female terrorists as bored individuals, suggesting that their involvement stems from aimlessness or a lack of purpose. Notably, similar motivations are rarely, if ever, attributed to male terrorists in news coverage (Nacos, 2005). In addition, women involved in terrorism are frequently depicted as naive, easily manipulated by men, and fundamentally defenceless (Laster & Erez, 2015; Marway, 2011; Nacos, 2005). According to this perspective, women do not rationally choose to engage in terrorism; instead, they are coerced or deceived by those they trust, leaving them with little agency or alternatives (Marway, 2011). Although women are often portrayed as brainwashed or coerced into joining terrorist groups, evidence shows they generally make such decisions of their own volition (Öztop, 2023). Contrary to the view of women as passive victims, they assume active roles as fighters, supporters, or

leaders as seen in men's involvement. Nonetheless, gendered experiences within terrorist organisations can differ depending on the group's internal norms and ideological structure (Öztop, 2023). Male terrorists are also seen represented in the media under this theme; for example, the 9/11 attackers were frequently portrayed as illogical and biased in the American press (Pronin et al., 2006). However, as highlighted, the media presentations of male terrorists as irrational is highly rare.

This problem is especially salient in media portrayals of women from Islamist groups, where female terrorists are conflated with Western stereotypes of Muslim women, which are passive, oppressed, and dependent on male authority. As a result, media reports tend to emphasise individual and emotional explanations for women's radicalisation, portraying them as politically unaware or intellectually incapable. However, such portrayals overlook the rational and strategic elements of their decisions. As Martini (2018) argued, these women often demonstrate considerable political awareness and intentionality in joining terrorist groups. As an example, Lavie-Dinur et al. (2015) found that Israeli media commonly frames female terrorists as innocent victims. Likewise, in representations of female ISIS members, the media emphasises their youth, vulnerability, and naivety and often frames them as individuals who have been manipulated by the group and are in need of rescue (Martini, 2018). However, such portrayals frequently diverge from reality. Also, in the case of male terrorists, the emphasis on the 9/11 attackers as irrational and biased could support a portrayal of irrationality and oppression at the intersection of Islam and terrorism. However, when it comes to female terrorists, this deluded image is thought to be even more pronounced, driven by prejudices surrounding the representation of women in Islam.

In these portrayals, it becomes evident how widespread benevolent sexism is in media representations. These representations frequently align with stereotypical portrayals of women as individuals who are always acting with men's thoughts in mind, lacking rational agency, and inherently in need of protection. Particularly when considered in terms of the protective paternalism sub-dimension of benevolent sexism, it is believed that by assigning the role of 'victim' to female perpetrators, female terrorists in various organisations like ISIS are positioned as vulnerable, in need of protection, and in the shadow of male authority. Furthermore, in terms of the complementary gender differentiation sub-dimension, these representations may indicate that they reproduce the emphasis on women's purity and moral superiority.

Physical appearance and hypersexuality

Female terrorists are often portrayed through a lens that emphasises their physical appearance. Their attractiveness or beauty is frequently highlighted, with the implication that such traits somehow facilitate their involvement in terrorism. In contrast, the physical appearance of male terrorists is typically mentioned only in the context of identifying suspects or explaining investigative details (Easteal, 2015; Nacos, 2005). It is common for women who commit political violence to be described in sensationalised terms such as 'sexual deviants' or 'sex bombs'. Their clothing and behaviour are often portrayed as sexually provocative (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008; Sternadori, 2007). The focus on sexuality in these narratives can be interpreted as a way of reinforcing the idea that violence is incompatible with femininity. Female terrorists are thus reduced to their sexuality, with 'whore' tropes used to delegitimise their political agency (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008).

For example, in 2006, a fake Playboy magazine cover circulated widely online, featuring an image of a woman wearing a bikini and a burqa under the headline 'Women of Al-Qaeda'. This reflects the broader tendency to sexualise female terrorists in ways that are not applied to their male counterparts (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008). Similarly, Auer et al. (2019) found that media coverage of the so-called 'White Widow', Samantha Lewthwaite, often focused on her physical appearance and sexuality to make sense of her transformation from an 'ordinary' British woman into a terrorist. In another example, the media focuses on Begum's clothing and pregnancy, repeatedly invoking the 'jihadi bride' trope. These media narratives overemphasise her appearance before analysing her behaviour, highlighting her Western characteristics (Krona & Caskey, 2023). However, the current study compares the motivational narratives of the female terrorist Begum with those of Cuspert, a male terrorist who also served as an ISIS militant. Unlike Begum's portrayal in the media as driven by personal motivations such as appearance, Cuspert is portrayed as driven by rational motivations such as devotion to ideas and audience support, further revealing the asymmetrical standards in how male and female terrorists are portrayed

(Krona & Caskey, 2023). These patterns suggest that, since terrorism is culturally constructed as a male-dominated domain, women who engage in such acts are explained through stereotypical narratives such as the idea that their beauty enabled their entry rather than through political or ideological motivations (Nacos, 2005).

This framework is not specific to any religious or ethnic context; rather, it is fuelled by news values (unconventionality, personalisation, visual salience) and the need to explain the beauty-violence discrepancy. For young, attractive female perpetrators with abundant visual and personal material, the media gravitates toward 'femme fatale/sex bomb' stereotypes that centre on the body and sexuality rather than political agency. Thus, the act is detached from its ideological context and translated into a narrative of deviance from feminine norms. This mechanism recurs across different organisational types and geographies and becomes more visible in stereotypical media ecosystems.

The emphasis on women's physical characteristics and sexuality is also rooted in sexism. In other words, terrorist women are portrayed as individuals who display excessively sexual presentations or behaviours that deviate from 'appropriate' female norms. Consistent with these portrayals, a study showed that men with high levels of ambivalent sexism (both benevolent and hostile) have been shown to characterise women as sexually deviant, using terms such as 'whores' (Glick et al., 1997). Looking from a hostile sexism perspective, women who step outside of traditional roles are seen as morally and sexually threatening. When female terrorists are presented in the media with excessive sexuality and physical characteristics, they are represented as immoral, outside the norm, and dangerous. While looking at benevolent sexism, women are seen as having gone beyond the ideals of being innocent and honourable, and as having deviated from the norms of the ideal woman. From this perspective, it can be said that hypersexuality representations may be particularly related to the complementary gender differentiation sub-dimension of benevolent sexism.

Insufficient femininity and sexuality

In addition to the narratives that emphasise women's hypersexuality, another recurring theme links terrorism to women who are portrayed as sexually inadequate or unable to fulfil men's sexual expectations. These portrayals suggest that female terrorists lack conventional femininity, appear masculine rather than feminine, and fail to perform traditional gender roles, which allegedly leads them to commit acts of violence (Lavie-Dinur et al., 2015; Marway, 2011; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008; Talbot, 2000). This deviation from what is considered a 'normal woman' is often framed as madness. In other words, female terrorists are frequently depicted as pathological or mentally unstable to make sense of their transgressive behaviour, distinguishing them from 'normal' nonviolent women (Marway, 2011). For instance, in addition to emphasising the physical characteristics of the 'jihadi bride' Begum as mentioned in the previous theme, she is also associated with abnormal feminine behaviour or madness, which is conveyed as incomplete femininity (Krona & Caskey, 2023). The term 'mentally challenged' generally appears in discourse directed at terrorist groups; such references are also made to male terrorists. For example, the media emphasises that Luke Helder, a terrorist who served as a bomber, is mentally unstable despite his family ties and intelligence (Powell, 2011). Also, in another example, Tennessee shooter Mohammod Abdulazeez having bipolar disorder, was highly mentioned in the media (Powell, 2018). However, unlike the emphasis on pathological motivation in male terrorists, the emphasis on being mentally challenged in women appears to come with an emphasis on a perceived lack of femininity that would not be expected from normal women. Such framings likely stem from the perception of terrorism as a male-dominated domain, with female participation often being dismissed as an imitation of male aggression. Indeed, Rakhshandehroo and colleagues' (2023) systematic review indicates that empirical findings on psychopathology in female terrorists are quite limited; therefore, the 'mental illness' framework does not offer a strong explanation.

This perceived deficiency in femininity is not limited to appearance or behaviour but extends to roles like motherhood. A lack of maternal care is often highlighted in media portrayals. For instance, Reem al-Reyashi, Hamas' first female suicide bomber, was portrayed as a failed mother. Media reports frequently emphasised images of her with her children and weapons to underscore this perceived failure (Sternadori, 2007). Deviations from expected

feminine roles are also reinforced through narratives of failed marriages or domestic instability, further suggesting that women who do not conform to traditional gender expectations are more prone to deviance and violence (Martini, 2018).

The framing of 'insufficient femininity' in media representations becomes more pronounced in structures and arenas where the norms of femininity are seen as axis-bound by motherhood, intimacy, and obedience. In the context of ISIS, the news discourse, embodying the image of the 'jihad bride', essentially positions women in the roles of wife/mother and bearer of chastity, thus presenting even the slightest deviation as 'lacking femininity' or 'imbalance'. In news reports concerning certain Palestinian factions, the centrality of motherhood-martyrdom ideals fuels narratives that code female perpetrators as 'failed mothers' or figures who neglect domestic responsibilities. In short, the theme of 'insufficient femininity' becomes more visible in the media in contexts where female roles are clearly delineated, and their violations generate high social repercussions.

As both benevolent and hostile sexism frame women through their sexuality, they also contribute to the categorisation of some women as sexually deficient (Glick et al., 1997). This portrayal can be interpreted as a deviation from the normative and idealised image of women, rooted in the belief that acts of terrorism are not feminine and therefore not expected from women. Accordingly, by depicting these women as lacking femininity and proper womanhood, such acts are framed as masculine and as belonging to the domain of men. Especially as in the theme of hyper sexualisation, here too, in terms of hostile sexism, they can be conceptualised as 'dangerous' images deviating from the norms of femininity, and in terms of benevolent sexism, as violations of innocence and purity.

Feminism and the desire to deviate from gender roles

Another explanation found in the literature regarding female terrorists' motivations is the idea that their actions stem from feminism or a desire to challenge traditional gender roles. Although this perspective was more prominent in earlier discourse, media reports today still frame women's involvement in terrorism as a pursuit of gender equality or an expression of feminist resistance (Nacos, 2005). For example, one news report indicated that the Palestinian suicide bomber who attacked Israel framed her action as also being motivated by gender empowerment. It further emphasised that the funeral of the first female suicide bomber, Wafa Idris, was transformed into a feminist celebration (Nacos, 2005). However, some researchers commonly emphasise that female suicide bombers do not generally associate their actions with a quest for gender equality; these studies indicate that women reject such feminist frameworks, are aware that their actions will not achieve equality, and interpret these actions more in terms of alienation from societal expectations or the restoration of lost dignity (Speckhard, 2008; Talbot, 2000; Witlox, 2012).

In a supportive manner, Gardner (2007) found that the notion of feminist motivation is not derived from the terrorists themselves or their acquaintances but is constructed by journalists and academics. This suggests that feminism is often misrepresented as the root cause of women's participation in terrorism. In fact, Gardner claimed that women's involvement has been sensationalised by the media through the lens of feminism or equality-based motives. These explanations, while appearing to support gender equality, depoliticise women's actions by reducing them to personal issues rather than addressing structural or ideological factors. Whereas the media commonly attributes women's terrorism to personal motives, such attributions are rarely made for male terrorists. This raises important questions about the credibility of such portrayals. Gardner (2007) noted that a gap exists between the motivational narratives expressed by female terrorists and those projected by the media. Audiences are often exposed to second-hand interpretations by journalists rather than the women's own words. This reliance on mediated perspectives can distort the reality of their motivations and reinforce gender stereotypes.

In organisations that emphasise equality and women's representation, such as the PKK, a Kurdish separatist and militant organisation based in Turkiye, internal discourse and visible female cadres encourage framing of women's participation in the media as challenging gender roles or feminist rebellion. To make such a comment, it is necessary to look at the functioning and norms of the terrorist organisation. For example, in the case of the PKK, women's participation is framed through discourses of challenging traditional gender roles, supported by

ideological and political training. However, despite rhetoric promoting gender equality, these ideals are practised within a hierarchical structure. In contrast, ISIS promotes participation through adherence to conservative religious norms and reinforcement of traditional gender roles. Still, women have found space to exert agency, particularly through roles such as educating children or assisting recruits. While ISIS does not challenge gender norms, some women join the group as a form of self-realisation, seeking to live out religious ideals in alignment with the organisation's doctrine, even if that means deviating from broader societal expectations (Öztop, 2023).

Table 1. Typological framework for media representations of female terrorists

Theme	Typical media narrative	Relevant ASI sub-dimension	Illustrative cases	Counter-evidence	Implications for perceived agency
Personal revenge, family ties, and 'for the sake of love'	Women join organisations because of the death of their husbands, family losses, or romantic relationships.	Benevolent sexism (emotional, dependent on men, in need of protection)	Chechen 'Black Widows' (Nacos, 2005); Tali Fahima (Lavie-Dinur et al., 2015); ISIS 'jihadist brides' (Martini, 2018)	Women staying in the organisation after their husbands died and expressions of political motivation (Martini, 2018)	Portrays women as emotional, dependent, and irrational, thereby obscuring their political agency.
Boredom, naivety, and irrationality	Women are aimless, irrational, and susceptible to manipulation by men.	Benevolent sexism (deceived by men, naïve)	The 'innocent victim' frame in Israeli media (Lavie-Dinur et al., 2015); young and vulnerable ISIS members (Martini, 2018)	Women join organizations consciously and strategically, they are not brainwashed (Öztop, 2023)	Reduces women to passive, deceived victims who are not political subjects.
Physical appearance and hypersexuality	Women's beauty, attractiveness, and sexual behaviour is highlighted.	Hostile sexism (moral threats, sexual deviants) and benevolent sexism (exceeding the ideal of innocence, deviating from the norms)	Samantha Lewthwaite, 'White Widow' (Auer et al., 2019); Playboy magazine cover (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008)	The appearance of terrorist women is overemphasised before the actual actions (Krona & Caskey, 2023)	By eroticising women's political motivations, their political agency is diminished.
Insufficient femininity and sexuality	Women's involvement is linked to 'insufficient femininity' or failures in roles such as motherhood, mental illness	Hostile sexism (deviates from the norm is a threat) and benevolent sexism (non-conformity to ideal femininity is cast as deficient)	Reem al-Reyashi 'unsuccessful motherhood' (Sternadori, 2007)	There is limited research supporting the view of mental illness (Rakhshandehroo et al. 2023)	By presenting women as 'abnormal' and 'deficient', it explains their political agency through deficiency.
Feminism and the desire to deviate from gender roles	It's a form of feminist rebellion, a quest for equality, or an escape from gender roles.	Benevolent sexism (deviating from proper women roles) and hostile sexism (the threatening, radical, and disruptive image)	PKK (Öztop, 2023); Palestinian suicide bombers (Nacos, 2005).	Women reject this framework and sometimes conform to gender roles (Speckhard, 2008; Talbot, 2000; Witlox, 2012)	Ignoring women have different political motivations besides feminism.

Source: Author Processed Data (2025)

While these representations emphasise equality, when considered from the perspective of Ambivalent Sexism Theory (AST), the presentation of female terrorists through feminist imagery reproduces this discourse within the context of benevolent sexism, implying that women deviating from the roles of 'proper femininity', namely, roles that complement men, are innocent and require protection. Conversely, from the perspective of hostile sexism, portraying women as feminists serves to position them as threatening, radical, and disruptive figures. In other words, these deviant acts of violence are perceived as part of the feminist image of women.

The synthesis of these findings is summarised in Table 1. The table provides a typological framework for media representations of female terrorists, illustrating themes, typical media narratives, their relationship to sub-dimensions of ambivalent sexism, case studies, counterevidence, and the potential impact of these representations on women's perceived agency as perpetrators.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that media representations of female terrorists are predominantly framed through personalised and depoliticised explanations, which can be systematically linked to sexist attitudes via the components of benevolent and hostile sexism. A significant body of research indicates that personal reasons are not disproportionately prevalent in women's motivation to participate, thereby reinforcing the central argument of the present work. For instance, Eggert (2023) conducted interviews with male and female members of terrorist organisations such as the Lebanese Communist Party. The study revealed that both genders frequently cited war-related injustice and security threats as key motivations for joining such groups. Reinforcing this finding, Speckhard (2015), who conducted extensive interviews with terrorists and their families, proposed four interrelated motivational factors: affiliation with a politically motivated group, an ideology that legitimises terrorism, social support for terrorist acts, and individual vulnerabilities shaped by conflict environments, which are independent of gender. In both men and women, particularly in conflict zones, motives such as trauma and the desire for revenge were found to be predominant. Another study examining male and female terrorists during the Intifada found comparable background profiles and motivations. The only notable difference was the choice of method: approximately one-third of male terrorists used firearms, whereas no female participants did (Sela-Shayovitz & Dayan, 2019).

In contrast to the position supported in this study, some research suggests that female terrorists are more often driven by personal motivations than their male counterparts. These studies often highlight motivations such as grief and revenge (Bodziany & Netczuk-Gwoździewicz; von Knop, 2007, 2021), poverty and socioeconomic hardship (Bodziany & Netczuk-Gwoździewicz, 2021; Jacques & Taylor, 2008), family problems and escape from forced marriage (Bodziany & Netczuk-Gwoździewicz, 2021), emotional distress (Jacques & Taylor, 2008), and the influence of romantic or marital ties (Rodermond & Thijs, 2022). Some of these narratives suggest that women are drawn into terrorism through relationships with male partners or by attempts to assert parity through demonstrations of violent capacity (von Knop, 2007). While these accounts offer insights into individual-level motives, they may inadvertently reinforce gender-stereotyped portrayals by framing women as emotionally reactive or dependent on men. Also, in these studies, analyses are derived primarily from secondary sources and media representations rather than from motivations articulated by terrorists in their own words, which may undermine the reliability of claimed motivations for female terrorists. Although direct access to female terrorists is challenging, obtaining insights from their own narratives is the most dependable approach for comprehending their reasons.

While this study focuses on representations of female perpetrators, there are scattered examples in the literature where male perpetrators are also represented along the axis of personalisation and emotionalisation (e.g., Powell, 2018; Bendfeldt, 2024; Pronin, 2006). However, these examples are not as systematic in scope and completeness as the representations of women. A rough synthesis suggests that men's news is more frequently framed within the ideology/rationality framework, depending on the context, while in women's news, personalisation-emotionalisation intersects with HS/BS, more visibly obscuring the perception of agency. Witlox (2012) observed that attributing women's involvement in terrorism solely to psychological or emotional aspects undermines their agency and influence, thereby minimising their potential positions inside terrorist organisations. This viewpoint not only conceals the political objectives driving women's acts but also neglects their potential for violence and leadership.

Furthermore, the intersectionality of identity is also highly salient. For instance, the label ‘ISIS bride’ intersects with the dimensions of AST, both by situating women within a romantic and emotional framework and by evoking prejudices associated with Islam. Thus, when intersectionality is considered, it becomes evident that diverse forms of benevolent and hostile sexism are reinforced not only through gender but also through religious and ethnic stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

Terrorism is often regarded as a ‘man’s domain’, making the presence of women in this field appear unusual or deviant. Both media narratives and societal discourse actively seek to explain this perceived anomaly, often resorting to stereotypes to justify women’s involvement in terrorism. While individuals of any gender may join terrorist organisations for a range of personal

and ideological reasons, women's motivations are more frequently framed as personal or emotional. Media representations commonly attribute women's participation to themes such as love, family ties, boredom, feminism, or victimhood. These representations predominantly correspond with the attitudes and stereotypes regarding women that delineate suitable feminine norms, as articulated in the benevolent and hostile sexism. In other words, women are anticipated to embody naivety, composure, femininity, engagement in traditional female duties, and self-sacrifice, as societal norms dictate. Although these sentiments are especially common among individuals with elevated levels of sexism, it may be contended that the media also portrays representations that reflect these attitudes, thereby creating a reciprocal relationship in which sexist attitudes shape media portrayals and the portrayals in turn reproduce sexist attitudes in society.

The current study offers important insights. It is particularly novel in reconciling ambivalent sexism theory with media portrayals of women in violent actions. Most notably, it bridges media representations and academic findings, providing a dual lens through which to understand the motivations of female terrorists by providing a guide through studies conducted on media representations. Moreover, by emphasising that women are capable of engaging in violent and harmful behaviour, the study challenges traditional gender assumptions and highlights the influence of sexism. In this way, the research contributes to dismantling gender-based stereotypes and calls for a more nuanced understanding of women's roles in political violence.

Despite its contributions, the current study has some limitations. First, due to the challenges of accessing direct testimonies from female terrorists, the analysis relies on previously published literature rather than firsthand accounts. Second, the study adopted a narrative review approach, focusing on prominent and relevant works, rather than conducting a comprehensive systematic review. Although this method reveals a general distribution, it may prevent a more direct result from being obtained by examining the literature comprehensively. Third, the current study establishes a comprehensive framework based on women's participation in terrorism, rather than differentiating between terrorist groups and their actions. However, as evidenced by the findings, certain themes appear to be more salient within specific terrorist organisations, depending on the gender roles and dynamics inside these organisations. Considering the salience of identity intersectionality within terrorist groups, future organisational-level research should be diversified by accounting for these intersections. Fourth, the study is limited to studies conducted in English and Turkish, which limits the universality of the findings due to studies published in different languages. Also, studies that include direct testimonies from female terrorists themselves are quite limited. Therefore, analyses are largely based on media representations or academic commentary, limiting the ability of the findings to reflect the perpetrator's own perspective. Lastly, while some examples of male terrorists being represented for individual reasons (e.g., the 9/11 attackers, Cuspert) (Bendfeldt, 2024; Powell, 2011, 2018; Pronin et al., 2006) are presented in the current study, these examples remain rather exceptional, and systematic comparisons of male representations seem limited. The predominant focus of most studies on female representations further narrows the scope of inferences about men. Future research would benefit from employing systematic methodologies to capture broader and more representative samples. In particular, a comparative examination of media content from different regions and groups can contribute to revealing cultural differences in representations of female terrorists. Furthermore, future research in this domain should examine terrorist organisations individually, considering their gender dynamics. Finally, a coding scheme compatible with the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory could be developed, and sexist stereotypes could be systematically measured when analysing content.

As practical implications, as Agara (2017) suggested, policymakers and media professionals have to cease regarding women's involvement in terrorism as odd and deviant. Rather, it must be acknowledged as a deliberate and reasonable choice made by individuals cognisant of the repercussions, akin to male offenders. While media professionals report on female terrorists, they should, if possible, use the perpetrators' own words directly and avoid attributing stereotypical motivations based on second-hand sources. In addition, editors involved in the news publication process should monitor and correct sexist stereotypes such as the label 'black widow.' Moreover, media organisations should include editorial guidelines that restrict the use of stereotypical expressions lacking a factual basis. Furthermore, researchers in

the field of terrorism should be careful not to reproduce the stereotypical narratives portrayed by the media. They should critically assess the credibility of these narratives and focus on the testimonies of female terrorists themselves. Additionally, researchers should conduct empirical studies with female terrorists whenever possible, even if it is difficult to access participants. Finally, the study also has practical implications for policymakers and NGOs. For example, they can contribute to the development of media literacy programs that address stereotypes and raise public awareness in this regard.

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