Victims, perpetrators or actors? How the UK press represents women in the Syrian conflict.

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Abstract

The Syrian revolution, starting in February 2011, sparked one of the most destructive conflicts in modern history: the Syrian fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Isis). Historically, the media has represented women as victims of this conflict, vulnerable against the quintessentially male force of destruction. However, growing sects of Kurdish Syrian women currently make up nearly a third of Syria’s total fighting force, indicating that women are not solely victims; they are also perpetrators of violence. This dissertation will analyse how women within the conflict are represented, whether female contribution is marginalised and their victimhood is heightened, or whether their agency and ability to be political actors and perpetrators of violence is celebrated. By examining some of the most widely disseminated gendered reports within UK newspapers of the Syrian conflict, this dissertation draws on Moser and Clark’s (2001) three categories, which typify how women are framed within the press. The first is victims; the second, actors within conflict; and the third active perpetrators of violence. Discourse analysis helps in examining the gendered framing of women’s roles within the Syrian conflict in the UK press, contributing to the wider range of literature surrounding women’s roles within Middle Eastern conflicts.
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## Contents

### Introduction

5

### Literature Review

8

- Gender roles within conflict
- The Syrian conflict
- Female involvement in the Syrian conflict

14

15

### Methodology

21

### Findings and Discussion

25

- Victims: violence against women
- Actors: women as powerful agents within conflict
- Perpetrators: women committing acts of violence

32

36

### Conclusion

44

### Bibliography

49

### Appendix of newspaper articles

55
Introduction

This dissertation will analyse how women are represented in the UK press in relation to the current conflict in Syria. Its title "victims, perpetrators or actors" is inspired by Moser and Clark's (2001) book “Victims, perpetrators or actors? Gender, armed conflict and political violence”. This categorisation of women is used as a starting point to look at the ways in which women are portrayed to the UK public in the press. The main research question will be how are women represented within this conflict? The representation of women is not only dependent on their agency within the Middle East, but also on the bias of the UK newspapers framing this coverage. Thus, this dissertation also analyses how the Western perspective of the treatment of women within the Middle East is represented within these newspapers, as women are perceived to be more oppressed in the Middle East than in the Western world. By looking at the cultural climate of gender roles within Syria, I attempt to give some clarity regarding why they are portrayed in this manner.

The Syrian revolution, beginning in February 2011, sparked one of the most destructive conflicts in modern history: the fight against Isis. Studying how the women involved in this conflict are represented is important as it contributes not only to the wider range of literature surrounding the complexities within the conflict, also acknowledging the disparities between genders within conflict. Often the media, and more specifically the UK press, tend to overlook female contribution within warfare. Nearly 15,000 women are active fighters taking part in fighting against radical Islam, making up 35% of Syrian forces (Bengio,
2016; Kastrinou, 2014). British females have also contributed to this conflict; some have emigrated to fight and others have accompanied their families to support either side of the war, becoming facilitators of this conflict. Therefore, I also attempt to analyse how these women's achievements and contributions are represented in the UK press, whether their involvement is undermined and underplayed, or celebrated and heightened. On 1st December 2016 the UK government decided to send air missiles into Syria to halt the expansion of Isis and, as such, support rebel groups within Syria and the Middle East.

The ways these women's involvements in the conflict are framed is also dependent on the side they are fighting for; this is because newspapers have a partisan agenda that will influence how they frame news. The three newspapers analysed: The Daily Mail, The Guardian and The Telegraph cover a spectrum of the British press, from the tabloid style The Daily Mail which sensationalises news and has a right-wing leaning, to the broadsheets The Guardian (left-wing leaning) and The Telegraph (right-of-centre) (Markham, 2012; Carruthers, 2011). I am analysing three months prior to and post the decision to send air missiles to Syria, as it is the period that this conflict is most heavily reported on in the British press. The framing of this conflict within these newspapers is likely to differ due to their agenda, stance and audience.

Traditional gender roles within conflict acknowledge that women are victims of violence. Men are simultaneously their protectors, while other men are the perpetrators of these acts of violence. There has been a noted development in the roles and involvement of women in the conflict. The UK press frames
conflicts to suit its partisan agenda, serving to either heighten or diminish women’s involvement and autonomy (agency). When examining the idea that women are perpetrators of violence, this dissertation will look in detail about how their actions are either presented to heighten the brutality of them, or if these newspapers attempt to excuse their violence or frame their actions in a way that aligns these women more with the victim representation. For the sake of this dissertation it should be remembered that from a Western perspective, Middle Eastern women would have less autonomy and freedom and occupy a lower status than men.
Literature Review

Gender roles within conflict

The most prominent role that women play in war narratives is that of victim. Women can suffer rape, torture, or death during war, giving the male soldier the special duty to protect her from such consequences.

Kumar (2004: 297)

Traditionally, conflict has been represented as a hyper masculine sphere in the media, where men are the main perpetrators of violence. Within this narrative women are predominantly depicted as weak and passive, unable to protect themselves. Scholars such as, Conboy (2011), Enloe (1988) and Baaz and Stern (2014) discuss how female vulnerability is heightened due to their powerlessness against violence in conflict. Within this narrative binary oppositions are seen: female victims with little ability to help themselves and men as heroes protecting women from violence. Kumar (2004), Elshtain (1987), Ette (2013) and Dowler (2002) state that two clear depictions of men are seen in the press: heroes of war and perpetrators of violence. This ability for men to be heroes and villains simultaneously highlights their agency within the media, as they are able to construct their own role within conflict.

One reason for the clear differences in the media’s representation of gender is due to the power balance between men and women. Society and media framing tend to favour more powerful social and political actors (male) than less
powerful ones (female) (Conway and McInerny, 2012; Him and Hosgör, 2011). As a consequence, society values the traits of action, aggression and decision-making over that of matters of the home and family, areas traditionally associated with women (Ette, 2013). Therefore, continued representations of women as weak serve to uphold each traditional gender roles and already established perceptions and power dynamics within society. Kahf (2000:149) discusses that they way women are portrayed in the Western media ‘takes in data about women from the Arab world mainly by using conventions emergent from a long history of Western stereotypes about the Arab peoples and the Islamic religion’.

Therefore, the UK press tend to limit the roles of women Islamic women can play, mainly as victims due to the patriarchy and male power dominant in the region. That has experiences less gender equality that Western society.

Baaz and Stern (2014) discuss the impact that culture has on depicting gender roles within the media. By analysing UK newspapers, the values of women within the Middle East are reported on from a Western viewpoint that has a higher level of gender equality than their Middle Eastern counterparts. Female agency is constructed by society, religion and culture (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2009; Lobasz, 2008; Allan and Zelizer, 2004). Therefore, their contribution within the fighting effort would be significantly limited due to their social standing within Syrian culture.

Currently, the most prevalent depiction of women in conflict within the UK press is that of a victim. Within this narrative men are the soldiers and the heroes of
war whose role is to protect women. Kumar (2004) and Dowler (2002) note that the most prominent way that this representation is articulated in the media is through the women being victims of sexual violence. The way sexual violence is reported in the media is specific to how newspapers are representing women. Baaz and Stern (2014) acknowledge how occasionally the media frame sexual violence as a consequence of bad soldier discipline or as a way for men to reclaim their masculinity within war. Indicating that violence towards women is an accepted part of warfare and Western audiences have become immune to their suffering as the media institutionalise female suffering within conflict. This depiction within the media upholds traditional gender ideals where women suffer, defenceless against violent men (Aday, 2005; Handley and Rutigliano, 2010; Parks, 2002).

McNair (2011) and Allan and Zelizer (2004) argue that the media continually frame women as victims – even when there is evidence of their active involvement in conflict – because this depiction is more comfortable for Western audiences. This is because it conforms to traditional gender norms of female passivity and weakness, situating Middle Eastern women within their culturally assigned roles. The victim narrative operates on a number of levels within UK press. It undermines female's ability to protect themselves. Rather than acknowledging the efforts that women are making in political activism; it focuses on their suffering and it undermines their ability to act as soldiers (Ette, 2008; Ette, 2013).
Gender mediation, the process in which the media selectively choose words and images to designate one gender as dominant and the other as subordinate, reveals how violence and aggression are viewed as masculine constructs within Western media (Cockburn, 2004; Enloe, 2000). Therefore, when women are active decision-makers within conflict, they are frequently framed in relation to their nearest male companion (father or husband) in order to situate these women in relation to men. This is because having women actively taking part in battle challenges the notion of woman’s ‘proper place’ in society and poses a threat to traditional gender roles because traditional assumptions about labour practices within war are challenged (Conway and McInerny, 2012).

Although the media tend to reinforce traditional images of weak and vulnerable women, there is evidence to suggest that women's involvement within conflict is severely under looked. Kumar (2004), Ette (2008), Bengio (2016) and Elsthain (1987) discuss how the expansion of women’s roles within the military and in conflict in the Middle East have enabled them to assert themselves as actors and agents of change within the developing social, economic and cultural context. Female agency consists of women’s ability to speak out and make their own decisions about their lives and be independent from their ties to men or the domestic realm, impacting female roles within conflict and a wider range of categorisation of women can be seen rather than just: victim, perpetrator or actor. However, it can be argued that the UK press disproportionately represents women, as it does not reflect the multiplicity of their roles within the Middle Eastern conflict. This can be seen to the process of gender mediation within the press, which results in coverage of women that focuses on their victimhood and
not their ability to contribute to war. Del Zotto (2002) and Shirazi (2012) state that the media frame women as such to uphold patriarchal gender discourses, which have been exacerbated by the culture of oppression traditionally seen for women in the Middle East. This results in inner frequency for the press to ignore women's participation and management of their achievement.

This can be seen in the representation of women as active fighters and perpetrators of violence. The press has a tendency to deconstruct female fighters’ character, they discuss their childhood and feature interviews with family members to place these women in the domestic realm and presenting a more humane depiction of these women, rather than as barbaric fighters. Moser and Clark (2001) discuss how the use of emotive language and personalised accounts are ways in which the press frame these females to sit more comfortably in the victim categories and the perpetrator category, making them more comfortable for the audience. Additionally, Conway and McInerny (2012) discuss how women who are active within this complex are represented as foolish and idealistic, undermining the significance of their contribution to the war effort. The gendered nature of this coverage is highlighted in relation to how male soldiers represented in the UK press. Elshtain (1987) and Moser and Clark (2001) acknowledge that men are depicted with less impassioned language, represented as more rational and their decisions to fight more reasoned. Absent from the male soldier narrative within the press is the risk to their family when they leave to fight, whereas women as are often discussed with the worry of how their families will perceive them and what will happen if something negative comes to them. This coverage indicates a gendered narrative of the press by
highlighting the sensitive and idealistic nature of women comparatively to their more logical male counterparts.

Studying the process of gender mediation within the UK press is important, as the media is influential in constructing public opinion on a local, national and global scale. Therefore, the continued perpetuation of women predominantly as victims of conflict provides Western audiences with the idea that women’s contribution to the war effort is negligible, and they are predominantly victims in need of help (van der Veer and Munshi, 2005: Thussu and Freedman, 2003, Tibi, 1998). While there is a large body of work on the representation of women in conflict, little research has highlighted the disproportional representation of women within conflict in Western media. Thussu and Freedman (2003) and Tumber and Palmer (2004) argue that UK press marginalise the role of women within conflict in the public sphere in order to maintain traditional gender norms. Enloe (1988) and (Him and Hosgör, 2011) state this is because within patriarchal society, masculine traits such as aggression and violence is held in higher regard than traditional feminine qualities of compassion and kindness within the media’s gendered narrative. As a result, what can be seen is a frequent stereotypical depiction of women in conflict as victims rather than as active fighters. The analysis of a Western perspective on Middle Eastern values of women within conflict can be useful in establishing how women are framed within Western press and subsequently their status within both Western and Middle Eastern society.
**The Syrian conflict**

Throughout the 21st century, there has been much unrest in the Middle East, which has negative economic, political and religious impacts for civilians and international policy. The Syrian Revolution that began in February 2011, with civilians rising up against President Assad’s violent dictatorship and demanding secular and democratic policies (Schueftan, 2016; Cockburn, 2014). Defectors from the military formed rebel groups, such as the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in an attempt to overthrow the government led to the descent into civil war. Many citizens heavily opposed Assad’s rule and their lack of freedom fuelled resentment towards the Syrian government. The key opposition to these rebels comes from jihadist fighters, Isis (Bengio, 2016). They seek to reshape the world and disseminate their ideology by slaughtering those that do not believe in their extremist interpretation of Islam. Other groups fighting within this conflict include: the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) and their female lead version (YPJ), the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Peshmerga, which have been influential in halting the growth of Isis. The rise of rebel groups active within the Middle East has resulted in a widely unstable political climate as these groups conflict with one another. The wide spread violence has prompted actions from international world leaders to attempt to subdue the growth of Isis, however there are conflicting views as to which of the rebel groups will bring the most positive outcome. Indeed, Schueftan (2016) states that Syria’s social, political and economic structures are crumbling, however the conflicting political and religious cultures within the Middle East makes peace virtually impossible.
Isis emerged in northern eastern Syria in 2013 after rapidly taking control of large portions of Iraq due to their 'commitment to terror' that fuels their violence (Sekulow, 2014). The extremist nature of this group has led to their notoriety and allowed the fast pace rise in power. Within this religious group's ideology, women are viewed as having lower status than men. Bengio (2016) notes the extremist religious beliefs that have historically situates women as subservient to men. Widely seen within Isis and within the press' representation of Isis is the abuse inflicted upon women (Shirazi, 2012, Kumar, 2004 and Gökalp, 2010). Sekulow (2014) emphasises the threat that Isis pose to Western society. Their rapid advancement across the Middle East and their wide spread brutality has prompted significantly negative press coverage worldwide.

**Female involvement in the Syrian conflict**

In the coverage of the Syrian conflict, journalists frame women either by reporting on gender-based violence and women's marginalisation and victimisation, or by celebrating their agency. Mlodoch (2012) argues that Kurdish Syrian women have been victims to this regime. Supported by evidence such as the International Federation for Human Rights (2012) documenting the rise of sexual violence against Syrian women since 2011. Others such as del Zotto (2002), al-Natour (2013) and Hughes (2013) draw attention to the increased violence against women in Syria as a result of this conflict. When these women are featured in the UK press, they demand viewers’ sympathy, as well as their financial and military support. While these studies indicate the wide spread violence towards women, they tend to paint a dichotomous picture, either heightening female victimisation or elevating the occasional acts of female
resistance. An examination of gender framing within the Syrian conflict reveals that it serves to reinforce the power imbalance between men and women and the gendered nature of representing war is achieved through devices such as: failure to acknowledge women's capacity to be perpetrators of violence (Carruthers, 2011), their representation predominantly within the private, domestic realm (Baaz and Stern, 2014), and their association with the nearest male figure when being discussed in the media (Kellner, 2004).

While there is evidence of increasing social mobility for women, strong patriarchal hierarchies are still prevalent and political initiatives promoted by women are yet to completely combat gender equality (Mlodoch, 2012). In this respect, the media representations of Kurdish women may not be presenting a gendered bias in favour of men. Rather, they may be reflecting the turbulent political landscape and within it the complex status of women. However, there is disagreement among commentators about media representation of Kurdish women, with some arguing that, not only is their active war and political contribution under represented in the press, but the press places importance on the post-war awards of love, home and family in the war narrative in order to coincide with the traditional view of women (Yesil, 2004; Dowler, 2002). On the other hand, Bengio (2016) tends to disagree with this perspective and claims that Kurdish women in Syria are free and liberated through their active participation in combat and that the press reflects this rather than disregards it. Through analysis of Syrian women, it can be established that they are more powerful than their Isis counterparts.
There is a common assumption in the West that Middle Eastern women are oppressed within conflict, with the exception of some extraordinary individuals (Szanto, 2016). However, there are female groups that have been influential in halting the growth of Isis across the Middle East, this comes most notably from Kurdish Syrian women that form the YPJ and units of female Peshermga fighters (Kastrinou, 2014; Mlodoch, 2012). The YPJ and the YPG are fighting under the banner of the SDF and have been backed by the US-led coalition. These women are featured in the press as ‘the new heroines of the Syrian uprising’ (Szanto, 2016:303). Women have featured prominently in fighting for the last 15 years, making up 30% of the PKK and 35% (roughly 15,000 females) of the entire Syrian Kurdistan forces taking part in active fighting against radical Islamists (Bengio, 2016:36; Kastrinou, 2014). These women’s contribution to the war effort is vital in halting the growth of Isis, famed them in Western media. When these women are featured in the press they exude youth and energy, symbolising females that have overcome social and governmental control, who yearn for political freedom after decades of dictatorship (Szanto, 2016). They can be analysed to acknowledge the way Western press covers their role as to whether or not it is proportionate to their contribution.

These female fighters have triggered more social mobility for women, loosening gender hierarchy and improving their status within society. Through this development, more women have assumed political leadership roles such as Meysa Ebdo, YPJ commander (Bengio, 2016). It can be seen that women within Syrian Kurdish society are more autonomous and powerful with the ability to make their own decisions, unlike their Isis counterparts. Since the Syrian
Revolution in 2011, 75% of Kurdish women have been politically active, giving an indication of the strong sense of agency that women have within this region. These women are able to exercise their political consciousness through different avenues, emphasising their sense of agency.

Although there is evidence to suggest that women are largely victimised within conflict, Shalhoub-Kevorian (2009) acknowledges that from their experiences these women progress to campaign for human rights and become powerful actors promoting peace within the Middle East. Analysis of how these women are represented in the UK press is significant as the media can either frame these women as victims of conflict, or as actors and agents of changes. The former representation would serve to uphold gender ideals, while the latter would indicate a great respect for female contribution within the war effort, focussing on these women’s agency rather than their previous suffering. Çelik (2014) documents the rise of female civic activism attempting to promote peace in the historically unstable region, indicating that there is evidence to suggest the positive contribution that Syrian women are making is not negligible and should therefore be included in the coverage of the Syrian conflict in the UK press.

Iisis largely rejects women’s participation in armed forced because it ‘is practically impossible for a woman to fight be accompanied by a close male relative’ (Szanto, 2016:310). This is key as it indicates the strong religious ideology at the heart of this party’s ethos. Although Isis does not employ female fighters, it has established two all female brigades: al-Khansa and Umm al-Rayyan. They were established in February 2014 to patrol checkpoints and to
discipline women who do not conform to its strict rules (al-Bahri, 2014). These women’s focus on enforcing other women to comply with the patriarchal regime indicates that women are not overturning patriarchal norms, but are escaping from them temporarily.

While there is evidence to suggest that Isis are now employing women to further their ideology an encouraging them to commit barbaric and violent attacks as suicide bombers (Shirazi, 2012), Al-Ali and Pratt (2009) state that the majority their contribution is negligible. When these women are featured in the press, their support for oppressive regimes is considered deluded and deceived (Kahf, 2000). It could be argued that this allows women that are perpetrators of violence to also be considered victims, due to the total indoctrination of ideas unto them. Foreign women who have joined Isis are seen as having insulted Western notions of freedom by abandoning the supposedly endless possibilities to them in their home countries (Saul, 2015). By highlighting the choices these women make on their own, they undermine their agency and freedom, a feature that often audiences cannot comprehend. However, within Isis most women are victims of the oppressive extremist regime. The main violence committed by this group is by men, resulting an ‘evil’ stereotype of male Isis fighters perpetrated across Western media (Kellner, 2004:121).

This study aims to contribute to the growing literature on women in conflict and to indicate how media framing is partly responsible for perpetuating stereotypical representations of women, which do accurately reflect the actions of women within conflict. By paying attention to certain women rather than
others, the press shapes social perceptions and evokes either sympathy or apathy from audiences regarding these women. Future research can be undertaken to create a more robust study of the roles that women play in order to establish a more positive media narrative for the depiction of women in conflict. Consequently, analysing the gendering of the Syrian conflict in UK newspaper coverage has the potential to make a contribution to the understanding of the marginalisation and subordination of women in war narratives. Moser and Clark (2001) identify three key depictions of women within conflict: victims, perpetrators, and actors. These depictions form the foundation for this study and will be used to analyse the complexities of how women are represented in the media during the Syrian conflict.
**Methodology**

In conducting this research I qualitatively analysed 90 UK newspaper articles covering the three months prior and post the U.K.’s decision to send air missiles into Syria on Thursday, 1 December 2016 (Thursday, 1 September 2016 to Wednesday, 1 March 2017). Using critical discourse analysis I have examined how these journalists create meaning through the use of particular words and phrases, and how it is intended to attribute meaning and importance to particular aspects of female representation (Wodak and Meyer, 2016; Machin and Mayr, 2012; Richardson, 2007). Using this method of analysis I investigated the ways in which the victimisation of women is largely accepted by the Western media and the tendency for newspapers to undermine female contribution in war in order to support these newspaper’s particular agendas. Discourse analysis is helpful for this as it focuses on the detail and nuances within language in order to establish how meaning is created and where it is attributed within media texts (Kenney, 2009; Long and Wall, 2009; Fairclough, 2003). This is important as media texts have the ability to shape the views of society, therefore analysing the language used will provide more information into the newspaper’s ideologies and agenda. However, Belsey and Chadwick (2006) note a limitation of discourse analysis. He states that its subjectivity can result in weak findings compared to content analysis that quantifies results to heighten their validity. It can be seen that the impact of discourse analysis greatly depends upon the skills of the researcher, therefore a weakness of discourse analysis is that it’s findings will not be convincing if the researcher is not critical enough (Kenney, 2009).
Newspapers are analysed as I believe that investigation of the written word can be more in depth than the oral word. This is because there is the sense that the spoken word is more fleeting, for example within radio broadcasts, whereas these articles are constructed specifically to portray viewpoints, giving their words more weight. Kenney (2009:203) states that discourse analysis is most effective when focusing on authoritative texts that attempt to claim it is portraying ‘the truth’, newspapers aptly fit into this criteria. This is because rather than simply reflecting reality, journalism presents specific preferred versions of reality to suit their agenda. Therefore newspaper journalism features an ideology which journalists themselves are able to construct.

The style and nationalised context of the news media is important to consider as it impacts how they frame women. The British press has a reputation for being “opinionated, partial and imbalanced” (Gavin, 2007:13); therefore, it can be argued that they frame and manipulate information in order to portray news that supports their agenda. The Daily Mail is regarded as a tabloid paper, which has sensational styles of reporting (Markham, 2012). This can be an issue within war reporting as it prioritises entertainment stories that appeal to the average reader over the impartiality of facts. Additionally, Cowley and Kavanagh (2016) discuss its polemic stance, stating that it is known to be highly critical of the government. The style of a newspaper’s reporting in Britain is dependent on its agenda. Broadsheet newspapers The Telegraph and The Guardian have a liberal left-of-centre political stance that is often reflected in their coverage. In addition, the liberal voice of The Guardian provides a wide scope of UK newspapers in contrast to the conservative nature of The Telegraph (Cowley and Kavanagh,
The coverage of women within the Syrian conflict will therefore have the additional filter through each newspaper in order to fulfill their partisan agenda. This could become even more prominent when Britain opts to send air missiles into Syria, as our involvement will be heightened. This event was chosen as the middle date in which to source my articles due to the increased involvement of the UK within this conflict that resulted in it being extensively reported on in the UK press. Schlesinger (1991) and Carruthers (2011) discuss how British news media tends to frame conflicts with favour to the government by highlighting the success of British involvement and positively portrays the home government’s involvement. In relation to the Syrian conflict, it can be noted that the UK made the decision to air strike in order to halt the growth of Isis and support the Syrians (BBC, 2017). Therefore, the way these newspapers favour Syria and the UK government’s decision to involve airstrike can be analysed.

Within the date range, 30 articles from each newspaper were purposefully chosen to ensure they would be relevant to the discussion of the Syrian’s fight against Isis. These articles were sourced through Lexis Nexis, accessed through the Leeds University website. To find articles relevant to the key depiction of women within the Syrian conflict a variety of keywords were searched: ‘women’ and ‘Syria’, ‘women’ and ‘Isis’, ‘Yazidi’, ‘Peshmerga’, to find 30 useful articles per newspaper. For ease of the reader these articles have been coded with a letter and a number, details of each article are included in the appendix. Each Daily Mail article start with D, each Guardian article will start with G and each Telegraph article will be T. They are 1-30 as 30 articles were analysed from each newspaper, for example D13 would be The Daily Mail article number 13. I spent
time on each article analysing the language used, the hermeneutics of the text and the potential meaning embedded within the language and made detailed notes on printed out copies of each article.

Discourse analysis is preferable to this study as it sufficiently analyses the patterns of language and rhetorical conventions within these articles that are intended to reinforce traditional viewpoints about women (Paltridge, 2012). I was able to give close analysis of the type of literary conventions as well as provide over arching themes that were present that highlighted the common representations of women and the similarities and differences of these representations across all three newspapers.
Findings and Discussion

The main representations found in the newspapers analysed for this dissertation included: women as victims, especially as refugees; women having less value than men; women's role in supporting men to fight Isis; women directly engaged in fighting Isis and women as childish and foolish individuals. Throughout all these depictions, contradictory ideological messages are mixed together, with the result that representations showing that women have agency and actively participate in the war were undermined. However, some articles that discuss the conflict simply did not include women at all – their absence was a prominent feature of the coverage as it undermines their contribution.

Victims: Violence against women

Within Moser and Clark’s (2001) categories, women are most commonly represented as victims in the Syrian conflict. Their vulnerability and lack of agency is heightened as they are described in ways that undermine their ability to act and control their own circumstances (Conboy, 2011). This theme was particularly prevalent across all three newspapers when discussing the plight of Bana al-Abed and her family in, D26, D28 G11, G22, T10 and T8. Bana and her mother, Fatemah, were trapped in the siege in Aleppo and gained worldwide notoriety by live tweeting their struggles. Within the analysis their victimisation is heightened, however the way they are framed differs.

*The Daily Mail* reduces Bana's and Fatemah's power, they are framed as vulnerable females who are dependent on the benignness of their surroundings
for survival. This can be seen through the tweets the journalist has included in the article: ‘I am very afraid I will die tonight?...? Bombs will kills me now’ (D26). It is clear that their future is entirely dependent on the decisions of those active within the conflict that have the power to halt this warfare. Emotive language is key in constructing the image of the helplessness of these females. Most notably the title of D26 ‘PLEASE STOP THE BOMBS... TRAGIC TWEETS OF GIRL, 7, IN BESIEGED ALEPPO’. The pleading nature of this title adds to the desperation of these females. A similar theme of desperation and begging can be seen in D28, in which Bana attempts to send a message to UK Prime Minister Theresa May stating, ‘PLEASE HELP US– STOP THE BOMBING’. In The Daily Mail's coverage they highlight the desperation of these females and their powerlessness within the situation, supporting Dowler’s (2002) statement that women are helpless within warfare and their future is dependent on the male perpetrators and decision makers within conflict.

Contrastingly, The Guardian focuses on the bravery of these females, describing the twitter account as a way for these females to give themselves a platform to be heard. The article selects tweets that highlight the unjust occurrences, with one reading: ‘why is the world not hearing us? Why is nobody hearing us?’ and another tweet stating ‘We want the world to hear us’ (G11). The twitter account is seen as a way for these women to document their situation, using rhetoric to draw attention to the issues within Syria, rather than being passive victims of their situation. The representation within G11 and G22 acknowledges these women's agency, positively depicting them as females who although are victims of the conflict, are exercising the little power they do have to help themselves.
This representation supports Shalhoub-Koverkian’s (2009) argument that even when victimised, women have some sense of agency.

Similarly to The Guardian, The Telegraph does not over emphasise the victimisation of women as The Daily Mail has done. While emotive and impassioned language is featured in Bana’s tweets such as ‘This is my last moment to either live or die’ (T10). What is more common is the depiction of how practical and resourceful these women are. T10 acknowledges the horrific situation without presenting these women as submissive victims. The article states that there are reports of ‘women committing suicide, in order not to be raped by marauding soldiers’. The idea of begging for mercy could be reflective of Moser and Clark’s (2001) argument that the media highlights women’s weaknesses when suffering due to their inability to remain as strong as their male counterparts. Alternatively, it is a stronger argument to suggest that this highlights female resistance due to their refusal submit to these male perpetrators. The Telegraph’s coverage can be seen as a middle ground to The Daily Mail’s tendency to over victimise females, and The Guardian’s emphasis on their autonomy within the situation. This is because although it acknowledges the ideas expressed by Kumar (2004) and Ette (2008) regarding female agency, ultimately these women are not actively able to change their own future, rather they have power in bringing more attention to their situation. However they cannot prevent the violence perpetrated. Therefore, while these females can be seen as actors within conflict, they are not submissive of their fate.
One of the most prominent ways women are represented as victims in the UK press is through the frequency of sexual violence. Indeed, al-Natour (2013) and Hughes (2013) document the wide spread suffering of women, with violence of a sexual nature one of the most prominent ways Isis treat women, most notably with the coverage of ‘Yazidi brides’. Sexual violence towards women is featured in D18, G3, G26, T2 and T14; however, the way they are framed by each newspaper defines how they are categorised as either victims or actors within conflict. A common finding was that female sexual abuse victims are generalised, the names of the women are not included in the articles, and rather they refer to mass suffering as a result of violence. This can be seen prominently in articles D2, G18, G19 and G20. These articles feature statements that describe the horror in broad terms, ‘thousands were killed, sometimes buried in mass graves, thousands more taken captive and often sold into sexual slavery, and hundreds of thousands were forced to flee’ (G19); ‘the murder, rape, torture and sexual slavery of Yazidis in Syria and Iraq, perpetrated by Isis’ (G18); ‘Isis militants overran [Yazidi] homes ... killing and enslaving thousands of women and girls’ (G20). The inclusion of the large numbers victimised as a result of Isis brutality is indicative of Sekulow’s (2014) findings that the rise of Isis has brought about monumental suffering, not only for women but also for men who do not comply with their extremist ideology.

By analysing this coverage a paradox is seen; one argument could state that the impersonalised reporting reduces the struggle of these women while the other regards the lack of personalisation as a further way to reduce these females agencies and thus heighten their victimisation. Framing these events through
non-specific accounts of violence that lack detail has the consequence of institutionalising sexual violence within war (Aday, 2005; Handley and Rutigliano, 2010; Parks, 2002). Baaz and Stern (2014) and Yüksel (2006) argue that often within warfare sexual violence is accepted, as it is a way for men to reclaim their masculinity. It could be argued that these articles perpetrate this viewpoint as generalised reporting does not heighten the horror and incite the same emotion as reading a personalised account could.

Alternatively, there is a stronger argument to suggest that this generalisation of female suffering due to sexual violence heightens the impact of the victim narrative. Women are framed as victims, as they have little autonomy and as such are unable to protect themselves (Conboy, 2011; Enloe, 1988; McNair, 2011). Rather than impersonal accounts undermining the struggles of Syrian women within this conflict, these articles culminate in a comprehensive and cohesive depiction of women as victims on an increasingly large scale. This can be seen through emotive language, although it does not refer to specific individuals they serve to emphasise the horrific treatment of women throughout Syria. The titles, ‘ASSAD’S 21ST CENTURY HOLOCAUST’ (D11) and ‘HORROR OF HUMAN SHEILDS’ (D29) are indicators of the widespread violence within the region and emphasises suffering without giving personal accounts. Supporting Enloe’s (2000) claims of the increasing occurrence of sexual violence directed at women within this conflict. These women are framed as victims through this generalised reporting as they are no longer significant enough to be described by name, they are one of many victims who are totally powerless to the brutality of Isis and are thus represented this way within these articles.
Impersonalised reporting of female sexual violence victims was common across all three newspapers analysed. However the coverage differs when specific victims are discussed. Nadia Murad, a Yazidi woman was awarded the European Parliament Sakharov Prize for freedom for her efforts in campaigning for human rights after being held as a sex slave by Isis. Nadia is a complex female, as she does not easily fit into one category that Moser and Clark (2001) set out. This is because although she has been the victim of violence, from this she has become an actor within war, using her agency to take part in civic activism. Joining an expanding group of Syrian women in their attempt to reduce violence and come closer to peace (Çelik, 2014). The Daily Mail spends the majority of D6 describing her imprisonment using emotive and distressing language to depict her suffering, such as ‘blood poured from her mouth and nose, while her body was covered with bruises’ and ‘the men began attacking us, touching us and kissing us’. While the title of this article ‘The face of raw courage’ leads the reader to believe that the focus will be on Nadia’s bravery, rather than her activism and courageous behaviour in escaping and now campaigning for human rights. It is given very different attention in this article and only mentioned in the last few paragraphs. What is also excluded is the mention of the award Nadia has won, thereby undermining her contribution and respect. The overall depiction in this article is a victim, through graphic detail of her imprisonment; the audience is presented with the image of a vulnerable and powerless female. The newspapers emphasis that it was her uncle that saved her and another local man who gave her temporary respite. Supporting Kumar (2004) and Elshtain’s (1987) statement that often the press uphold traditional gender stereotypes to present
women as weak victims of violence, and men as either the heroes saving women
or as as the perpetrators of the violence.

*The Telegraph* (T7) and *The Guardian* (G17) provide two similar accounts of
Nadia’s story, which differs quite strongly from *The Daily Mail’s* coverage. Their
coverage supports Afshar’s (2003) statements that the press reflects women in a
multiplicity of roles, not just that of victim. Both newspapers present a more
factual and less emotive viewpoint, highlighting her achievements and focusing
on her role as a political actor, attempting to make change within this conflict.
G17 and T7 focus the article on her agency and ability to promote change, they
go into detail about Nadia’s award and her campaigning efforts. These articles
depict Nadia in a way that highlights her agency and allows her to become an
active political actor within conflict. Nadia Murad and Bana al-Abed have both
suffered as a result of this conflict, however they have not allowed their
circumstances to discredit their agency entirely. A pattern can be seen here in
the difference in coverage across the three newspapers. *The Daily Mail* has a
tendency to overemphasise female powerlessness through emotive language and
focussing on the horrors these women have undergone at the hands of men.
Whereas, *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* tend to provide more balanced
accounts, acknowledging these women’s bravery and their attempts to regain
power. The difference within these stories is that Nadia was able to escape
becoming an actor within conflict, whereas Bana was ultimately a victim at
mercy to the violence surrounding her.
One way the category of women as victims within this conflict is represented in the UK press is through the ideology of Isis where extremist Islamic religious beliefs situate women as subservient to men in a far more explicit way than in the West (Bengio, 2016). Lobasz (2008) states that extreme Islamic culturally assigned rules on clothing force women to be passive and, therefore, their representation in UK newspapers is frequently as second-class citizens who lack agency. For example, G14, T23, D17 and D5 discuss how women must dress respectfully, covering themselves under the oppressive regime of Isis. D5 states that ‘women whose clothes failed to conceal their bodies faced the wrath of biters’, all-female morality police armed with metal pincers that mark offenders for life by ripping out chunks of flesh’. Although Islamic beliefs enforce this dress code in order to ensure the women remain respectful, the UK press frame this as an additional way in which women are less powerful than men. Not only do men control how they act and their role within society, but they also dictate what the women can wear.

**Actors: women as powerful agents within conflict**

The victim narrative present across all three newspapers undermined females’ agencies and their powerlessness within conflict. However, the categorisation of women as actors indicates how women grasp their agency to be active participants within conflict, but not perpetrating the acts of violence themselves. A clear way this categorisation of actors is represented in these newspapers is through the coverage of female journalists who each suffered in some way at the hands of Isis (G7, G12, T2). These women are important as they cooperate with society’s traditional views about women being weak and passive due to the
suffering they have experienced (Conway and McInerny, 2012); however their roles as active journalists allows them to take part in constructing public opinion about these events (der Veer and Munshi, 2005; Tibi, 1998). Therefore, the aspect of their character that is highlighted – either their victimisation or their power as actors – within this conflict gives more understanding into how UK newspapers frame women within this conflict.

G12 covers Wa-ad al Kateab, a female journalist from Aleppo who documented the horror of living under siege. This article discusses Wa-ad’s bravery and heroism, winning two Amnesty International awards the week before this article was published, notably on the same day the UK decide to airstrike Syria (1st December 2016). However, the main focus on this article discusses the brutality of the situation, using emotive and descriptive language to heighten the sense of desperation Wa’ad is experiencing living in Aleppo. Although Wa’ad is an award-winning filmmaker, this article concentrates on her lack of agency, dependent on the violence around her. Wa’ad states, ‘we are helpless [my emphasis] in front of the horrors [my emphasis] of annihilation’. This article draws parallels with the coverage of Bana al-Abed (D26, D28 G11, G22, T10, T8), because although these women have some power in documenting the struggles of those around them in Aleppo, ultimately they are less powerful than the male perpetrators and their future is dependent on their actions. The focus on her victimhood rather than her contributions as a film-maker documenting the conflict undermines Wa’ad’s contribution to the conflict (Çelik, 2014; Shalhoub-Kervorkian, 2009). Thereby challenging the argument that women make valuable contribution to the war effort as social and political actors.
G7 discusses Lindsey Snell, an American journalist who has been captured twice by Isis whilst documenting the war in Syria. It highlights her foolishness by emphasising the accusations of ‘recklessness thrown at her from her fellow [male] journalists’. Additionally, the article notes that a male saved her, supporting the argument that women are in need of protection by men, due to their inability to take care of themselves (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2009). Both G7 and G12 are reflective of the gendered nature of reporting, as when women are covered in the press their vulnerability is heightened and their dependence on men is included. Western media continues to support traditional gender roles within conflict as when women are discussed as active fighters within conflict, their significance as fighters is reduced (Shirazi, 2012; Yesil, 2004; Conway and McInerny, 2012).

Motherhood was central to the construction of women’s femininity within many articles. Indeed, out of the 90 articles analysed, 19 feature a reference to motherhood (D4, D7, D8, D9, D10, D10, D29, G2, G4, G10, G14, G17, G21, G29, T3, T4, T8, T10, T12 and T13). 7 of these were from The Daily Mail, 7 from The Guardian and 6 from The Telegraph, indicating that this is a prominent theme that each newspaper believes to be a significant aspect of women within conflict. Parks (2002) states that women’s close affinity to motherhood limits their ability to act as perpetrators within the realm of war. Therefore, it could be argued that by the newspapers associating women so closely with motherhood their agency and capacity to act as perpetrators of violence is limited. A key way this is seen is through the coverage of brave women who are then framed solely as mothers
within these articles. This can be seen prominently in G10, discussing Safa, a refugee who has come to Britain from Syria. The first sentence in the article states that Safa is ‘bouncing a chattering toddler on her knee, [with] a patterned headscarf framing her broad smile’. This is interesting as she is immediately introduced with a baby, highlighting that the most important thing about her was the fact that she is a mother. Supporting Minne and Clarke’s (2007) statement that UK press coverage strips women of their identity and minimises their accomplishments through analysing them within the family and domestic realm. In this article, Safa’s bravery in building a new life for herself in the UK while escaping her victim status in Syria is ignored through the focus of her as a mother and her worrying about the safety of her child.

When women are experiencing violence at the hands of male perpetrators, it is to be expected that these newspapers will emphasise their suffering. However, the clearest indication that the UK press tend to undermine their agency and highlight their victimisation is by how they frame women that are active in conflict. For example, D9 describes how Tania Choudhury, from Britain, accompanied her husband to Damascus in Syria in order to fulfil his ‘ever-growing desire to see the establishment of a Caliphate’ by fighting as a solider for Isis. This representation is problematic because there is debate as to whether Tania is a victim of her husband’s controlling nature or an active agent, responsible for facilitating violence. Bengio (2016) discusses how women are active in combat and that the media reflects this rather than diminishes it. This view can be seen in D9 where Isis expert and Canadian journalist Gaeme Wood describes Tania as a woman who ‘endorsed slavery, apocalypse, polygamy and
killing. She aspired to raise seven boys as holy warriors one to conquer each continent’. Later on in the article he writes ‘Tania was no victim: she signed up for jihad, and she passed up nearly a decade of opportunities to ditch [her husband] and take her kids somewhere, anywhere far from his dreams of murder and mayhem’. This depiction presents her as active and murderous. At the same time, however, D9 features the view of women as foolishly idealistic, using language such as ‘this was my dream’ and other emotional adjectives which serve to reduce the legitimacy of their active choices within the conflict. Furthermore, she describes her own victim status through her Facebook posts that were included in the article. These state ‘I’m still so in-love with [him]... Nonetheless I’m tired of being pushed over the edge by him’, that are included in D9. The portrayal of Tania in this article is not entirely favourable, it emphasises her materialistic nature and includes interviews with authoritative figures to undermine Tania’s own account of being a victim of her husband’s abuse. Indicating that not all women are depicted as victims in the media. Some are active and violent decision makers, this is because they are enablers of war, standing by and sometimes encouraging of the violence.

Perpetrators: women committing acts of violence

There are examples of UK newspaper articles featuring women as active fighters who are complicit in violence within Middle Eastern conflict. For example, G6 states that a report into Boko Haram discovered that ‘female members of the brutal organisation were almost as likely as men to be deployed as fighters, challenging a widespread perception that these women are mainly used as cooks, sex slaves and suicide bombers’. G4 corroborates this as it states that ‘al-
Qaeda and Isis have made increasing use of female attackers in bomb plots ... in recent months.' This coverage supports Shirazi’s (2012) and Stroubl’s (2016) discussion of the rise of violent women within Isis, describing how the male leaders of the group encourage women to commit barbaric and violent acts. Additionally, D2 discusses violent women within Isis who have been accused of torturing other women that are not dressed modestly. Although these women are perpetrators of violence, Kahf (2000) and al-Bahri (2014) argue that their support for this oppressive regime where women’s agency and autonomy is negligible makes them victims of the conflict as they have been completely indoctrinated with ‘evil’ ideology and are thus powerless in making their own decisions. However, the representation of brutal and violent women within the conflict is significantly less than victimised women.

When these violent women are discussed in G6 and G4, they are given very little attention; they are referred to in a sentence or two in factual language with little description attached to them. This could be because of the press’s attempts to uphold traditional gender norms within the portrayal of women, by reducing their agency and thus their significance within the fighting effort. Alternatively, it could be argued that the lack of reference given to them is due to the infrequency of these events and therefore the lack of coverage regarding these types of women would be proportionate to the contribution they make. Kumar (2005) and Gökalp (2010) discuss the treatment of Isis women within the region, stating that the majority of women are victims within the party, they suffer abuse at the hands of men and would support the idea that the large number of articles that discuss victimised women is proportionate to female involvement within Isis.
The majority of women depicted as fighters tended to have their seriousness and ability to fight undermined in different ways. This can most notably been seen by the newspapers’ coverage of Kimberly Taylor, a British former maths student believed to be the first British woman to join the fight against Islamic State in Syria. This event was covered in D3, D7, G24, T1 and T25 and was represented in different ways. The Daily Mail’s depiction of ‘Kimmie’ (D7) was personalised, delving into her character to find a logical reason for her emigration. They use first hand accounts from her Facebook posts and speak to her father and friends. The overall representation of ‘Kimmie’ is one of a rational ‘clever’ girl whose father says that although he was ‘upset in the first instance upon learning of Kim’s intentions ... and worry[ed] about her safety’ he is ‘very proud of who she is and what she stands for’. This coverage gives her respect as a fighter who is dedicated to helping to defeat ISIS. While this depiction might be favourable of Kim, it still supports Ette (2013) and Conway and Mcnerny’s (2012) statement that while women fighters are covered in the media, traditional gender discourse is upheld by placing her in the familial realm by interviewing Kim’s father and including her childhood nickname, that allows Kim also to be seen as a young and potentially naïve female, rather than that of simply a perpetrator of violence.

The Telegraph takes a more critical approach of Kim’s decision to fight. T1 describes how she is a ‘self-styled “revolutionary”’ ‘who has no military experience’. The article undermines her bravery by indicating how unprepared she is. T25 states how Kim is “‘willing to give [her] life for this”’ highlighting her idealistic and potentially foolish nature through dramatic statements.
Additionally the article states that Kim ‘did not tell her parents she was travelling to the war zone until she arrived’. This is poignant, as she is further being shown as reckless and unprepared.

Contrastingly, The Guardian (G24) features a positive representation of Kim; she is a pioneer using her power to help other female victims. Rather than include her childhood nickname as The Daily Mail has done, it mentions her Syrian name ‘Zilan Dilmar’ giving authority to her contribution. Whereas The Telegraph stating that she had no military experience, G24 states that ‘she had spend the last 11 months learning Kurdish and studying regional politics, weaponry and battlefield tactics at the YPJ’s depicted military academy’. The representation of Kim in this article represents her ability to perpetrate violence as a good quality, using her power to help others. However, out of the three newspapers it is only this one that commends her actions, indicating that the representation of heroic females is still vastly less than male heroes within the Syrian conflict (Kastrinou, 2014; Szanto, 2016).

The depiction of Kim as overexcited and under informed could be contrasted against the representation of male soldiers who go off to fight. G16 describes two British male students who fled to join Isis in Syria in a more logical and less idealistic light. Rather than featuring quotations from friends and family members as the articles about Kim did, it features Raffaello Puntucci, Director of International Security Studies at the Royal United Services Institute and author of a book on British foreign fighters. When the British students were featured in an Isis propaganda film he states that Isis “is a group that’s eager to show it’s not
just a bunch of guys chopping off heads, it’s doctors, engineers, everyone. And having these well-spoken British kids showing up and saying these sorts of things was quite useful for that cause.” This is interesting as it highlights Moser and Clark’s point (2001) that men are not covered as sons or fathers who risk worrying their family members by going to war, highlighting the unequal construction of gender in the media. Additionally, these men are placed in the realm of logic, learning and intellect, whereas women are more emotional and idealistic. This supports Enloe’s (2000) idea that men are framed in these ways to reinforce traditional views about women’s proper place within society.

D21 presents a different depiction of male fighters, citing Mohammed Reza Haque, a British extremist. He is portrayed as a brutal Isis fighter who features in a ‘chilling video’ for Isis propaganda to scare the West. In this video he chants ‘Burn British soldiers, burn in hell’ and ‘they thought they were safe, but God shamed them, and they will be slaughtered by this knife which will slaughter those like them’ in reference to the men he is about to behead who are accused of being US spies. This depiction is vastly different from G16’s depiction of male soldiers, however, it still serves to reinforce traditional gender roles through representing male fighters as logical and calculated, but also barbaric and ruthless, rather than emotional and compassionate (al-Natour, 2013). Other articles that portray men as violent and occasionally barbaric in committing acts of violence are: D1, D16, D22, G25, T18, T20, T17. In these depictions, men are perpetrating acts of extreme violence, supporting the idea that men are consistently represented as strong and active players in committing violence (Baaz and Stern, 2014; Elshtain, 1987).
The depiction of female fighters is complex. Even when they are committing violence acts the media often tends to downplay this and present a more vulnerable and idealistic element to these women to make them more digestible to their audiences. This can be seen clearly in G8, which discusses a Danish woman, Joanna Palani, who fought against Isis and now faces jail in Copenhagen for her actions. The article describes the ‘hypocrisy of her treatment compared with returning Isis fighters’ due to her facing jail for fighting with the YPJ – the side that is supported by international coalition forces. The coverage of Joanna’s predicament is interesting because it attempts to get the audience to sympathise with her and consequently reinforces her victimhood. Joanna states that “it doesn’t seem like anyone is on my side”. This sounds fairly juvenile and serves to increase her vulnerability as someone who is being punished for attempting to do what she believes is right. Gökalp (2010) and Shalhoub-Kevorian (2009) note how the expansion in diversity of the media’s depiction of women allows them to have the capacity to be not only victims, but heroines as well. However, what can be seen is the merging of these categories. Joanna might be a heroine to those in danger in Syria, but to the UK audience she is still portrayed as in need of help and protection, thereby reinforcing traditional gender roles. Therefore, the development of women’s roles within the Syrian conflict has led to conflicting and complex accounts of women: they are no longer either marginalised and victimised or hailed as heroes, but can be a mix of the two. This indicates that Moser and Clark’s (2001) categories of victim, perpetrator or actor need updating in order to reflect the developing roles of women within the Syrian conflict.
Conway and McInerny (2012) argue that women involved in active conflict receive significantly less press coverage than their male counterparts. This idea is upheld in my analysis as only eight articles out of the 90 analysed discuss female combatants. These articles were: T1, T25, D3, G6, G8, D7 and G13. However, it could be argued that the few number of articles is representative of the little impact female fighters have within the conflict. Szanto (2016) supports this argument, stating that only a few exceptional females escape their culturally assigned victim role within the oppressive Middle Eastern society. Additionally, it appears that the media are hesitant to present a female who is brutal and unapologetic for her actions. Rather, they are portrayed as foolish and naïve, and in need of punishment for their actions, or they are regarded as being unfairly punished for their actions and are in need of sympathy and help.

My literature review identified that women are mostly depicted as victims in the UK media, while men are mostly shown as soldiers and heroes of conflict. On the whole, this idea had many similarities with my findings. What was particularly interesting is the way that women are defined by the patriarchal ideological and cultural beliefs within the parties fighting in Syria, but at the same time the patriarchal ideological narrative that UK media outlets are trying to portray also defines them. For example, when women were active as the perpetrators of war violence, the newspapers attempted to personalise the characters, link them to their family position and the domestic realm, downplay references to their violence, presenting them as foolish and appeal to the audience's sympathy. The effect of such reporting was to more closely align these women with the victim
narrative. However, it is more likely that these newspapers highlighted the idealistic nature of women in order to exculpate them from blame - if they are not wholly aware of their actions, then they are less responsible for them. A clear contrast can be seen with how women fighters are represented in relation to their male counterparts. Male fighters were described with reason and logic, whereas women’s childish nature was highlighted with emotive and unreasoned language. Overall, my findings acknowledge that there are some depictions of women as strong and brave, however these representations in the articles are problematic and do not legitimise the argument that women are depicted as free and liberated with media. Through analysis it is my belief that the media underrepresent and occasionally misrepresent strong women who have been influential in halting the growth of Isis, particularly the YPJ movement. UK reporting too frequently undermines women’s ability to be active soldiers to be claimed as an accurate reflection of women’s involvement in the Syrian conflict.
Conclusion

Victims, perpetrators or actors? This dissertation attempts to analyse the different ways in which the UK press represents women in the Syrian conflict. Analysing the literature surrounding gender roles during war revealed that traditionally women are presented as passive and weak within warfare, categorising them as victims rather than as perpetrators of violence. This is highlighted when contrasted to how men are represented in conflict. Men are commonly seen as heroes and perpetrators of acts of violence, whilst women's lack of agency in conflict is evident (Enloe, 1988; Baaz and Stern, 2014). The press portrays the gendered discourse of war through mediation that upholds this traditional gender hierarchy, with men being more powerful than women. As a result, while female military roles have expanded within the Middle East, the press has not successfully mirrored this development due to the most frequent depiction of women as victims. Discourse analysis allows me to go into detail as to how women's roles within war are constructed in UK newspaper articles.

Overall, the most prominent representation of women was that of victim. These articles use incidences such as the kidnapping of women and children, and sexual violence, framing them in such a way that reduces their agency, without acknowledging the power they do have to help themselves. Additionally, women are commonly referred to as ‘mothers’ and ‘daughters’, thereby limiting the roles they are capable of undertaking within warfare. Arguably, this is representative of the role of women within this conflict as largely they are victims of oppressive
Middle Eastern culture (Szanto, 2016).

Embedded within the press coverage of this conflict is the idea that the low status of women is due to the ideology of Isis that does not value women. Extremist Islamic religious beliefs dictate that women are subservient to men. Therefore, a way women are represented as victims is by men being able to dictate how women should act and dress, justifying their actions by citing their religious beliefs. My analysis discovered that sexual violence was one of the most common ways in which women were presented as victims. Different types of sexual violence such as: children being forced to marry older men, sexual slavery and widespread sporadic rape of women and children, were present within my analysis. My findings align with the idea in my literature review that women are often represented as weak and passive within conflict; they are not capable of making their own decisions and often find themselves in need of protection from a male. Present within my analysis is the importance that the cultural climate has on the way women are represented. While sexual violence is commonly reported on throughout all three newspapers, the newspapers have a tendency to generalise the suffering of women. It could be argued that the presence of sexual violence happening to a large number of women within Syria and the widespread acceptance of this violence by society has resulted in sexual violence being institutionalised by the UK press through the generalised reporting (Aday, 2005; Handley and Rutigliano, 2010). Alternatively, the lack of acknowledgement of specific details and females could serve to reduce their agency further, supporting the victim narrative. Both arguments however, highlight the frequency of women as victims within the UK press.
The depiction of women as actors within the war can be seen in two distinctive ways. One representation was the female journalists present in Syria. However, the depiction of female journalists is not wholly empowering for women. Although these articles acknowledge their efforts, both articles that feature a female journalist (G7 and G12) undermine their representation as capable and powerful women. By using other, male, journalists to critique these women’s experience and describing both women as wives and giving weight to their husbands, *The Guardian* reduces the capability of these women by constructing their femininity in ways that ensures they are perceived to be less powerful than their male counterparts. The rhetoric of wives supporting their husbands when they leave the UK to fight Isis is prominent. The depiction of women in this instance is complex because although they are still heavily embedded in the domestic realm, and fulfilling their traditional female duties as wives, these women are also active participators within the conflict, even though they are not committing violent acts themselves. Indeed, in this instance, the articles attempt to reduce the females’ blame, by emphasising the argument that they had little choice and were afraid of their husbands.

While there are slight disparities as to how each newspaper article presented the same events within the conflict, or recounted the same story about a particular female differently, on the whole there are clear patterns in regard to the representation of women that are consistent over all three newspapers. This might be because although the filters of right and left wing politics are implicit, ultimately the Western perspective is explicit. Notably, the exception to this
uniformity is when a British woman leaves her Western roots to join the fight in Syria. This can be seen in the coverage of Kim Taylor's move to Syria to fight Isis. *The Daily Mail's* coverage heavily features emotive language, it discusses the strain Kim's decision has put on the family and the fears for her safety. Contrastingly, *The Telegraph* represents the facts, ridiculing her actions by focusing on her lack of experience and her idealistic picture of what she is doing. By comparison, *The Guardian* portrays the most positive and empowering picture of Kim, discussing her weaponry experience and features first-hand information that acknowledges her agency, styling her as a pioneer of British female fighters in Syria. The disparities in this coverage are representative of the different stances of each newspaper and their willingness to uphold traditional gender norms, which undermine female agency.

Only eight of the 90 articles analysed referenced women who are active fighters within this conflict. What can be seen is a clear tendency for all three newspapers to underplay the barbarity of women's actions. When discussing female Isis perpetrators they acknowledge the pressure exerted by their husbands on these women to commit these acts. Also featured is the discussion of brutal females who harm other females to further the cause of Isis and its ideology. The lack of articles then discuss female brutality indicates that the UK press coverage is not proportionate to their contribution to this conflict.

To conclude, women make up a significant contribution to the Syrian war effort however this is not reflected in the UK press coverage as these examples are largely outnumbered by the representations of women as victims. Further
analysis could be undertaken to examine the extent to which the UK newspaper coverage is disproportionate to the contribution of Kurdish Syrian fighters with greater focus on the exact roles women have in conflict and their status and job roles within fighting forces. Alternatively, a mirrored study to my dissertation could be undertaken however rather than analysing UK newspapers, Middle Eastern newspapers could be examined to provide more detail as to how Western framing skews gender roles within conflict. Due to the patriarchal regimes within the Middle East, it could be expected that the coverage of female contribution would be reduced further, providing more detail as to how different society’s and country’s valuation of women affects their representation and inclusion in the press in the Syrian conflict.

Overall, it can be established that the most common representation of women within the Syrian conflict in The Daily Mail, The Guardian and The Telegraph is that of victim. Whether the narrative is that they are wholeheartedly victims or have some involvement with the continued war effort, these women are framed to emphasise their vulnerability and need for protection, reinforcing traditional gender norms within war discourse that men are the protectors and women are the victims.
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Appendix of newspaper articles

The Daily Mail
D1: IF ONLY JIHAD RONNIE HAD BEEN BLOWN UP, 24.02.2017, Richard Littlejohn
D2: INVASION OF THE JIHADI BRIDES, 19.02.2017, Omar Wahid
D3: I'D GIVE MY LIFE FOR THIS, 10.02.2017, James Tozer and Richard Marsden
D5: THE BLOODBATH BEGINS, 20.10.2016, Colin Freeman
D6: THE FACE OF RAW COURAGE, 08.01.2017, Ian Birrell
D7: MY 3-HOUR FIREFIGHT WITH ISIS, 11.02.2017, Paul Bracchi
D8: INSIDE THE CITY OF HELL, 05.11.2016, Richard Pendlebury
D9: HAS THE BRITISH BEAUTY WHO FLED HER ISIS LEADER HUSBAND REALLY CUT ALL TIES WITH HIM, 14.01.2017, Barbara Davies
D10: NO ONE HERE IN FORSAKEN ALEPPO EXPECTS TO LIVE - STILL THE WORLD SITS ON ITS HANDS, 11.12.2016, Waad Al-Kataeb
D11: ASSAD'S 21ST CENTURY HOLOCAUST, 12.02.2017, Ian Birrell
D12: THE RAILWAY CHILDREN, 15.01.2017, Ian Birrell
D13: DRONE VS DRONE: NEW UK REMOTE CONTROL AIRCRAFT TO TACKLE JIHADIS, 28.02.2017, Larisa Brown
D14: NOW IS HIDES BOMBS INSIDE TEDDY BEARS, 31.10.2016, Andrew Levy
D15: UNDER ARMED GUARD, THE BOSS BRAVING THE TERROR TRONT LINE, 30.10.2016, Louise Cooper
D16: RAF POUNDS IS IN BATTLE TO RETAKE MOSUL, 18.10.2016, Larisa Brown
D17: PAINTBALL TEENS ACCUSED OF PLOT TO FIGHT FOR ISIS, 26.02.2017, Omar Wahid
D18: NEW WAR ON TERROR, 21.01.2017, Stephen Wright
D20: GUILTY, JIHADI PAIR WHO USED HENNING AID TRIP TO FUND IS, 24.12.2016, Rebecca Camber
D22: THIS AGE OF LIES, 29.10.2016, Stephen Glover
D23: THEIR STRATEGY IS CLEAR: ISIS WANT TO PROVOKE HATRED ACROSS EUROPE, 23.12.2016, John R Bradley
D24: EVEN IF OUR INSTINCT IS TO TURN AWAY FROM THIS HORROR, WE MUST LEARN IT’S BLOODSOAKED LESSONS, 6.10.2016, Stephen Glover
D25: GRINNING JIHADI AND A SHAMEFUL LEGACY TORTURE, 23.02.2017, Jack Doyle
D26: PLEASE STOP THE BOMBS...TRAGIC TWEETS OF GIRL, 7, IN BESEIGED ALEPPO, 06.10.2016, Andy Dolan
D27: BLUNDEERS THAT LET JIHADISTS GRAB BRITISH BENEFIT CASH, 07.12.2016, Daily Mail Reporter
D29: HORROR OF THE HUMAN SHIELDS, 30.10.2016, Barbara Jones
D30: TROOPS GO BACK TO HELP SYRIAN FIGHTERS AFTER TRAINING FIASCO, 25.10.2016, Larisa Brown

The Guardian
G1: Met chief: 'brutalised' Isis supporters soon to return to Britain, 16.12.2017, Vikram Dodd
G2: Indonesian women being radicalised into would-be suicide bombers –
G3: UK will fund scheme to get refugees to move to Asia and Latin America,
03.02.2017, Peter Valker
G4: Eight-year-old American girl 'killed in Yemen raid approved by Trump',
01.02.2017, Spencer Ackerman, Jason Burke and Julian Borger
G5: The young refugee girls who are being pushed into marriage and violent relationships, 06.11.2016, Helen Nianias
G6: Islamic militant groups' recruits likely to be well educated, study finds,
05.10.2016, Jason Burke
G7: A journalist went to document the war in Syria, was captured twice - and lived, 28.10.2016, Jared Goyette
G8: Danish woman who fought against Isis faces jail sentence, 19.12.2016, Lara Whyte
G9: Thousands of Aleppo residents in limbo as transport fails to arrive,
18.12.2016, Emma Graham-Harrison
G10: Labour of love: the volunteers helping fellow refugees give birth,
17.12.2016, Hattie Garlick

G11: 'I need peace': seven-year-old Bana tweets her life in besieged Aleppo,
3.10.2016, Kareem Shaheen

G12: Wa'ad al-Kateab is an award-winning film-maker. And she is in grave
danger, 1.12.2016, Ben de Pear

G13: Fighting for every yard: on the ground with Kurdish forces in Mosul,
17.12.2016, Martin Chulov

G14: Battle for Mosul, day two: 'This is going take a long time - Isis won't give up',
18.12.2016, Martin Chulov

G15: Islamic State using hostages as human shields in Mosul - UN, 28.10.2016,
Luke Harding

G16: British students killed in Iraq after joining Isis, 01.03,2017, Alice Ross, Mark
Townsend and Martin Chulov

G17: Isis survivor says UK could save lives of Yazidi women by admitting
refugees, 09.12.2016, Liz Ford

G18: UK government faces calls to shelter Yazidi refugees persecuted by Isis,
26.11.2016, Karen McVeigh

G19: Charity helping Yazidi survivors of Isis sexual slavery shut down,
12.01.2017, Emma Graham-Harrison

G20: Refugees needing urgent medical care may see treatment hopes dashed by
ban, 15.02.2017, Amanda Holpuch

G21: Iraq's Marsh Arabs test the waters as wetlands ruined by Saddam are
reborn, 18.01.2017, Peter Schwartzstein


G23: Syria: Turkey takes fight to Isis in assault on western base of al-Bab,
04,01,2017, Martin Chulov

G24: Blackburn activist becomes first British woman to join fight against Isis in
Syria, 9.02.2017, Matt Blake

G25: Car bomb kills dozens after Isis driven out of Syrian town, 24.02.2017,
Karen Shaheen

G26: Isis commanders 'liaised with plotters planning to attack UK in past year',
24.12.2016, Vikram Dodd
G27: Forced evacuation of east Aleppo was war crime, says UN, 01.03.2017, Martin Chulov

G28: Islamic State using hostages as human shields, 28.10.2016, Fazel Hawarmy and Emma Graham-Harrison

G29: The Raqqia Diaries by Samer review - brutal and powerful, 23.02.2017, Robin Yassin-Kassab

G30: Syria peace talks: a year of little progress, 22.02.2017, Patrick Winter

The Telegraph

T1: I’m willing to give my life, says woman fighter, 10.02.2017, Josie Ensor

T2: 74 journalists killed in line of duty this year, 19.12.2016, James Rothwell

T3: A city surviving on little else but pride and hope, 24.10.2016, Raf Sanchez

T4: A place of greater safety?, 22.10.2016, Sally Williams

T5: Sunni fighters with Iraqi forces accused of settling scores against Shia civilians in Mosul, 03.11.2016, Raf Sanchez

T6: Deadline approaches in bloody battle for Aleppo, 4.11.2016, Josie, Ensor

T7: Former sex slaves with (Euro) 50,000 prize from EU, 28.10.2016, news bulletin

T8: West must learn from the slaughter in Aleppo, 14.12.2017, Con Coughlin

T9: Malnourished, dehydrated, traumatised, 30.12.2016, Raf Sanchez

T10: From siege to slaughter, battle for the heart of Aleppo is over, 14.12.2016, Josie Ensor

T11: Assad forces test ceasefire to breaking point with airstrikes near Damascus, 03.01.2017, Josie Ensor

T12: ‘Stop the butcher who tortured me in jail’, 20.02.2017, Josie Ensor

T13: Aleppo’s fate is sealed as the regime closes in, 13.12.2016, Josie Ensor

T14: Chaos reigns as travellers fall victim to Trump edict, 30.01.2017, Ruth Sherlock, Joseph Ataman

T15: UK terror threat to grow as Isil fighters return, says QC, 19.01.2017,

T16: Living Dangerously, 25.02.2017, Colin Freeman

T17: Isil used desert sinkhole to execute 4,000 people, 25.02.2017, Florian Neuhof

T18: Car bomb kills scores at rebel-held village, 25.02.2017
T19: Bomber used taxpayer cash to fund Isil cell, 24.02.2017, Robert Mendick, Patrick Foster, Christopher Hope, Josie Ensor
T20: Sniper versus sniper will decide the fate of Mosul, 23.02.2017, Campbell MacDiarmid
T21: Let's fly the flag and beat famine again, 22.02.2017, Priti Patel
T22: Germaphobe' Trump denies encounter with Moscow hotel prostitutes, 12.01.2017, Harriet Alexander, David Lawler, Ruth Sherlock
T23: Ground assault launched on western Mosul, 20.02.2017, Sara Elizabeth Williams
T24: Welby attacks cap on child refugees, 10.02.2017, Steven Swinford
T25: British woman who is waging war against Isil, 10.02.2017
T26: Assad regime accused of 13,000 secret hangings, 07.02.2017, Raf Sanchez
T27: 'The foreigners are coming in, populating, and their goal is to kill us', 06.02.2017, David Lawler
T28: Britain's answer to fundamentalist Islam is an example to the world, 02.02.2017, Allister Heath
T29: Snowy ditch out of the US leads to a new life for asylum-seekers, 23.02.2017, David Millward
T30: Two-pronged attack on Isil cities in Syria and Iraq, 27.10.2016, Josie Ensor