

## MEDIA ACCOUNTS OF FEMALE TERRORISM THE CASE OF THE “COMMANDO OF NOTRE-DAME”

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper proposes avenues for reflection on the different discourses mobilized by media accounts of female participation in Islamic terrorism. Based on the attempted attacks by a group of women in Paris and Boussy-Saint-Antoine in September 2016, the author identifies four categories of narratives. The first emphasizes the monstrous and pathological nature of the involvement of women in jihadist organizations. The second interprets this involvement as being motivated by affect and feelings of love. The third considers that jihadist organizations have represented a last resort for women lacking a sense of direction, animated by suicidal thoughts. Finally, the fourth insists on the instrumental dimension of said “female complicity” in a terrorist undertaking. These four categories of narratives have in common that they highlight the irrational and pathological dimension of this women's commitment in jihadist organizations. In general, they echo “standard narratives” surrounding women involved in acts of political violence in the Western world.

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE NARRATIVE SURROUNDING WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS

The involvement of women in so-called “jihadist” organizations has become increasingly visible in recent years. Long considered harmless and reduced to being the wives of combatants, women have gradually emerged as full-fledged actors of terrorist violence. The attention paid to Hayat Boumeddiene, one of the 14 defendants tried with those allegedly responsible for the attacks of January 2015, which is taking place in September 2020, bears witness to this evolution.<sup>1</sup>

The failed gas cylinder attack in the Notre-Dame district of Paris and the knife attack in Boussy-Saint-Antoine in September 2016 caused the end of the relative benevolence of the judicial administration towards women involved in terrorist networks. These events gave rise to the emergence of new narratives on female jihadism, breaking with previous descriptions. Before 2016, the radicalization of women was mostly considered as the result of online recruitment of mainly adolescent girls lacking a sense of direction. Those girls were presumably convinced that they were committing themselves to a humanitarian action or partaking in a romantic story and were seen as easy prey to methodical manipulation through social networks, realizing their mistake too late.<sup>2</sup>

However, media coverage of the 2016 events marks a notable break with this type of representation. Women involved in the jihadist channels are now presented as extreme radicalized Islamist actors. They ceased to be considered passive victims of religious fanaticism but are depicted as real threats to public order and security. The recurrent use of the term “female commando”<sup>3</sup> shows that women have become genuine terrorists. Presented as a “cell of fanatics,”<sup>4</sup> the four women arrested in the days following the two attempted attacks in September 2016 are reportedly evidence of the Islamic State’s (IS) intention to “make women into fighters.”<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this article is to analyze the different types of narratives media outlets produced on women’s involvement in armed Islamic jihad. This study will not focus on which factors led women to join the organization; nor their roles played in terrorist attacks and planning. Instead, it will evaluate the press’s understanding and explanation of this phenomenon by inquiring how these women are perceived as a threat to society. The main conclusion reached by this research will demonstrate that the acts of violence carried out by a woman, do not produce the same type of discourse as male violence. For example, while the phenomenon of terrorism is seen through a male-neutral prism, stories about

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1. The companion of Amédy Coulibaly, responsible for the Paris supermarket attack, Hayat Boumeddiene fled a few days before the attacks and was therefore tried in absentia.

2. Pauline Verduzier, “Comment les islamistes radicaux endoctrinent les ados françaises,” *Madame Figaro*, 4 November 2014, <https://madame.lefigaro.fr/actu/ces-jeunes-endoctrines-par-les-islamistes-les-filles-appellent-leur-nigab-mon-doudou-021114> [accessed 15 July 2020].

3. Marc Knobel, “Les djihadistes et les femmes” (blog), *The Huffington Post*, 26 September 2014, [https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/marc-knobel/les-djihadistes-et-les-femmes\\_b\\_5886608.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/marc-knobel/les-djihadistes-et-les-femmes_b_5886608.html) [accessed 29 June 2020].

4. Ludivine Ponciau, “Une cellule de fanatiques prêtes à frapper dans Paris,” *Le Soir*, 10 September 2016.

5. “L’EI entend faire des femmes des combattantes,” *Midi libre*, 10 September 2016.

female terrorists mostly portray their actions as motivated by their emotions. Hence, they are displayed as being characterized by madness or deviant sexuality, as opposed to male rationality.<sup>6</sup>

The study revolves around the figures of Inès Madani, Ornella Gilligmann and Sarah Hervouët, three of the six women implicated in the attempted attacks on 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of September 2016. It is based on the data acquired from nearly forty press articles published online and from French magazines and newspapers. In addition to about a hundred publications of articles from the Europress database, allowing access to both national and regional headlines. Most of the articles studied were published surrounding events that took place in the fall of 2016 and 2019, just after the attacks and during the trial of the alleged perpetrators, respectively.

After a summary of the facts associated with the botched Notre-Dame car plot, the paper will highlight the different categories of narration mobilized by the authors of the various press articles that make up the research basis. They correspond to a set of discursive processes to describe women's political violence as an irrational and unnatural phenomenon. As such, so-called "radicalized" women now appear as threats to the public order. Their threat, however, remains secondary in character within the spectrum of political violence.

## FROM THE FAILED ATTACK ON NOTRE-DAME TO THE SO-CALLED "GAS CYLINDERS TRIAL": A BRIEF RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FACTS

During the night of Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> to Monday September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016, a suspicious Peugeot 607 is discovered on Rue de la Bûcherie in Paris, not far from the Notre-Dame cathedral. The vehicle, whose license plates have been removed, contains five gas cylinders and three cans of diesel. No ignition device is identified, but a half-smoked cigarette on the scene suggests an intent to set fire to the car, thereby setting off an explosion. The subsequent investigation makes it possible for the authorities to identify the presumed perpetrators quickly: the vehicle belongs to Patrick Madani, whose 19-year-old daughter, Inès, is already known to the police because of her activities within jihadist social networks.<sup>7</sup> A print on the handle and passenger belt of the vehicle further point to another woman, Ornella Gilligmann, 29 years old, who also appears on the so-called "Fiche S" (a French radicalization watchlist established by the security services).<sup>8</sup> The police intercepted Mrs Gilligman the day after on the A7 motorway while attempting to flee with her husband. Ines Madani, on the other hand, managed to take refuge in Boussy-Saint-Antoine at an accomplice's residence, a 39-year-old

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6. Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, "Profiling Terror: Gender, Strategic Logic and Emotion in the Study of Suicide Terrorism," *Austrian Journal of Political Science*, 37:2, 2008, 183.

7. "Voiture aux bonbonnes : retour sur cinq jours de traque," *L'Obs*, 9 September 2016, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/attentats-terroristes-a-paris/20160909.OBS7779/voiture-aux-bonbonnes-retour-sur-cinq-jours-de-traque.html> [accessed 22 July 2020].

8. "Attentat 'déjoué' à Paris : une première suspecte mise en examen," *Libération* by AFP, 10 September 2016, [https://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/09/10/attentat-dejoue-a-paris-une-premiere-suspecte-mise-en-examen\\_1492127](https://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/09/10/attentat-dejoue-a-paris-une-premiere-suspecte-mise-en-examen_1492127) [accessed 19 July 2020].

woman named Amel Sakaou, whose radicalization had previously gone unnoticed. Sarah Hervouët, 23 years old, joined the two women after travelling from the South of France to find them. She too is known to the services because of her frequent exchanges with prominent jihadists such as Larossi Abballa, the killer of the Magnanville police couple.<sup>9</sup> These three women seem to be connected by the same man: the French jihadist Rachid Kassim who entered the Iraqi-Syrian zone.<sup>10</sup> Mr Kassim is known to have incited radicalized people to take action on French territory via an encrypted Telegram channel.<sup>11</sup>

On September 8, 2016 Inès Madani, Sarah Hervouët and Amel Sakaou are reunited in the latter's flat, apparently determined to carry out an attack. The group planned on attacking the Boussy-Saint-Antoine train station before changing their mind and finally turning to a random knife attack on passers-by.<sup>12</sup> Inès Madani's SIM card guided the DGSI (Directorate for Internal Security – Direction générale de la sécurité intérieure) to Amel Sakaou's home, where they then installed a monitoring device to proceed to the arrest of the three women who were unaware of the tracking.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, Sarah Hervouët surprised DGSI investigators by attacking them suddenly as soon as she left the building. She targeted one of them parked in the car park of the residence, seriously injuring him in the shoulder.<sup>14</sup> However, he quickly succeeds subduing her, while his colleagues intercept Amel Sakaou. As for Inès Madani, she violently resists her arrest and receives a warning shot in the leg.<sup>15</sup>

A total of five women were charged and imprisoned following the attempted Notre-Dame car plot. In addition to the four directly involved in the events, Samia Chalel, 26 years old, is suspected of acting as an intermediary between Rachid Kassim and Inès Madani.<sup>16</sup> Each were brought to court in October 2019 and tried in a three-week trial at a special terrorism court (the Paris Court of Assises), where they were condemned to harsh prison sentences.<sup>17</sup> Inès Madani is considered the leader of the group and receives the heaviest sentence of thirty years in prison, in addition to a prior conviction for proselytizing. The court sentenced Ornella Gilligmann to twenty-five years, Amel Sakaou and Sarah Hervouët to twenty years, and Samia Chalel to five years of prison of which one year is suspended.

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9. Stéphane Joahny, "Les coulisses de la traque des quatre femmes qui cherchaient à attaquer Paris," *Le Journal du dimanche*, 11 September 2016, <https://www.lejdd.fr/Societe/Les-coulisses-de-la-traque-des-quatre-femmes-qui-voulaient-attaquer-Paris-808573> [accessed 15 July 2020].

10. Stéphane Sellami (with Zarha Boutlelis), "Un donneur d'ordre nommé Rachid Kassim," *Aujourd'hui en France*, 11 septembre 2016.

11. "Rachid Kassim, le coach des loups solitaires," *Le Journal de Saône et Loire*, 12 September 2016.

12. Soren Seelow, "Terrorisme : Sarah Hervouët, 23 ans, aspirante au martyr," *Le Monde*, 11 October 2016, [https://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2016/10/11/marie-antoinette-23-ans-candidate-au-martyre\\_5011866\\_1653578.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2016/10/11/marie-antoinette-23-ans-candidate-au-martyre_5011866_1653578.html) [accessed 22 July 2020].

13. Stéphane Sellami, "Voiture aux bonbonnes : histoire d'un commando de femmes," *Le Parisien*, 11 October 2016, <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/histoire-d-un-commando-femmes-de-11-10-2016-6192301.php> [accessed 23 July 2020].

14. Soren Seelow, "Terrorisme : Sarah Hervouët, 23 ans, aspirante au martyr."

15. Stéphane Sellami, "Voiture aux bonbonnes : histoire d'un commando de femmes."

16. Three other persons are tried during the same trial: Selima Aboudi, for failure to denounce a terrorist crime and sentenced to three years in prison on probation (she is the only one to appear freely), Mohamed Lamine Aberouz, sentenced to three years in prison on the same charge, and finally Rachid Kassim, sentenced to life in absentia (he has been presumed dead since 2017).

17. Chloé Pilorget-Rezzouk, "Attentat raté de Notre-Dame : jusqu'à trente ans de prison pour les accusés," *Libération*, 15 October 2019, [https://www.liberation.fr/france/2019/10/15/attentat-rate-de-notre-dame-jusqu-a-trente-ans-de-prison-pour-les-accusees\\_1757668](https://www.liberation.fr/france/2019/10/15/attentat-rate-de-notre-dame-jusqu-a-trente-ans-de-prison-pour-les-accusees_1757668) [accessed 23 July 2019].

The so-called “gas cylinders trial” confirmed the active role that women could play in French jihadist organizations and networks. This new awareness resulted in an observable evolution of criminal policy towards them.<sup>18</sup> Between 2016 and 2019, almost forty women have been tried for terrorism, and those who joined a terrorist group in Syria or Iraq since 2017 are systematically subject to legal proceedings upon their return.<sup>19</sup> While women account for nearly a third of French nationals present in Syria in 2017,<sup>20</sup> almost a quarter of the people prosecuted for terrorism that year are also female.<sup>21</sup>

## **MEDIA ACCOUNTS OF FEMALE TERRORISM: BETWEEN RELATIONSHIPS OF SEDUCTION, PSYCHOLOGICAL VULNERABILITY AND BLIND SUBMISSION**

Approximately 150 articles have been scanned in the preparation of this paper. Most were published at the time of the events of September 2016 and during the trial held three years later. Between these two periods, the “commando of Notre-Dame” received little attention.<sup>22</sup> The AFP News agency (Agence France-Presse) provided around half of the body of knowledge about this failed attack and picked up various national and regional newspapers. Other newspapers such as *Le Monde*, *Libération* and *Le Figaro* published feature articles, written by specialized journalists who followed the case over the years and attended the trial.

The study of this collection of articles makes it possible to identify four discursive lines characterizing these publications:

- The first underlines the dangerousness of jihadi women, presented as perverse manipulators, even seductresses. This applies above all to Inès Madani, who is the instigator of the Notre-Dame bombing project and is suspected of virtual manipulation by posing as a man.

- The second line interprets women’s involvement in jihad as motivated by the sentimental online relationships they have with jihadists. The women appear as easily influenced and emotional.

- The third highlights the chaotic nature of the lives of these women, described as lacking in direction and who found in their allegiances to the IS a reassuring setting.

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18. Camille Boutron and Myriam Le Basque, “Combattantes, terroristes ou victimes ? L’engagement des femmes dans la violence armée,” *Les Champs de Mars*, 33, 2019, 107.

19. Louise Darbon, “Attentat raté de Notre-Dame : ‘le rôle des femmes djihadistes a été longtemps sous-estimé,’” interview with Jean-Charles Brisard, *Le Figaro*, 23 September 2019, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/attentat-dejoue-de-notre-dame-le-role-des-femmes-djihadistes-a-ete-longtemps-sous-estime-20190923> [accessed 27 July 2020].

20. Fethi Benslama and Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Le Jihadisme des femmes. Pourquoi elles ont choisi Daesh ?*, Paris, Seuil, 2017, 13.

21. “Françaises djihadistes : les femmes représentent un quart des personnes poursuivies pour terrorisme,” *Le Parisien*, 6 April 2017, <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/francaises-djihadistes-les-femmes-representent-un-quart-des-personnes-poursuivies-pour-terrorisme-06-04-2017-6828957.php> [accessed 17 February 2018].

22. This article uses a common approach for articles published in 2016 and those published in 2019. Further research incorporating the different timelines of publication will be necessary to trace and understand the evolution of discourses according to the different contexts in which it takes place.

- Finally, the fourth emphasizes the instrumental aspect of manipulated female violence by IS agents.

The first type of discourse primarily applies to Inès Madani, who garnered the most media attention. This attention is due to her presumed role as the group's leader, but also the influence she seemingly exerted on social networks to support armed jihad. In the months leading up to the attack, she actively proselytized online on behalf of the IS by posing as a man under various pseudonyms. Presumably, these online activities are how she met Ornella Gilligmann. Convinced that she met a jihadist named Abu Omar, the latter was seemingly seduced to the extent that she separates from her husband and marries Inès/Abou Omar over the telephone.<sup>23</sup> No less than 4,000 messages were exchanged between the two women between the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> of August before they physically meet on August 31. Ornella Gilligmann then assumes she encounters the sister of her virtual lover with whom she "fell madly in love"<sup>24</sup>. She affirms that she had no idea of the manipulation. During her trial, her lawyers insist that she acted "out of love,"<sup>25</sup> thus pointing to a "crime of passion"<sup>26</sup> rather than a terrorist undertaking.

Moreover, she is not the only one to engage in a virtual relationship with Inès Madani thinking they were dealing with a jihadist fighter. The circumstance repeated itself with Samia Chalel who, for several months, exchanged with an apparent Abou Junayid without suspecting that the pseudonym hid another woman.<sup>27</sup> Inès Madani appears as a dangerous manipulator as she doesn't hesitate to impersonate men to instigate violent collaboration and sexual favors. The erotic, "if not pornographic"<sup>28</sup> content of the exchanges between Inès Madani/Abou Omar and Ornella Gilligmann were mentioned several times during the trial, with Madani exhibiting herself as a real heartbreaker, chaining together virtual conquests.<sup>29</sup> Presented as the "radicalized and manipulative mastermind of the operation,"<sup>30</sup> she embodies a threat not only to public safety, but also to the moral order, making her all the more dangerous in public opinion.

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23. Soren Seelow, "Inès Madani, la djihadiste qui se faisait passer pour un homme," *Le Monde*, 7 November 2016], [https://www.lemonde.fr//police-justice/article/2016/11/07/ines-madani-la-djihadiste-qui-se-faisait-passer-pour-un-homme\\_5026435\\_1653578.html](https://www.lemonde.fr//police-justice/article/2016/11/07/ines-madani-la-djihadiste-qui-se-faisait-passer-pour-un-homme_5026435_1653578.html) [accessed 28 July 2020].

24. Marion Cocquet, "Attentat raté de Notre-Dame : 'elle était vraiment amoureuse de moi'," *Le Point*, 1 October 2019, [https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/attentat-rate-de-notre-dame-elle-etait-vraiment-amoureuse-demoi-01-10-2019-2338697\\_23.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/attentat-rate-de-notre-dame-elle-etait-vraiment-amoureuse-demoi-01-10-2019-2338697_23.php) [accessed 28 July 2020].

25. "Attentat raté de Notre-Dame : une des accusées a agi par amour selon ses avocats," *La Croix* with the AFP, 11 October 2019, <https://www.la-croix.com/France/Attentat-rate-Notre-Dame-accusees-agi-amour-selon-avocats-2019-10-11-1301053779> [accessed 28 July 2020].

26. Ibid.

27. Aude Bariéty, Julien Licourt, "Procès de l'attentat raté près de Notre-Dame : qui sont les accusés ?," *Le Figaro*, 23 September 2019, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/procès-de-l-attentat-rate-pres-de-notre-dame-qui-sont-les-accusés-20190923> [accessed 29 July 2020].

28. Thibault Chevillard, "Attentat raté de Notre-Dame : de lourdes peines requises contre les figures du 'djihad au féminin'," *20 Minutes*, 10 October 2019, <https://www.20minutes.fr/justice/2625271-20191010-attentat-ratedame-lourdes-peines-requises-contre-figures-djihad-feminin> [accessed 28 July 2020].

29. Louise Colcombet, "Attentat raté de Notre-Dame : la fausse naïveté d'Inès Madani," *Le Parisien*, 26 September 2019, <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/attentat-rate-de-notre-dame-la-fausse-naivete-d-inesmadani-26-09-2019-8160828.php> [accessed 28 July 2020].

30. Stéphanie Marteau, "25 et 30 ans de prison pour celles qui voulaient faire exploser Notre-Dame," 15 October 2019, [https://www.marieclaire.fr/attentat-rate-de-notre-dame-ines-madani-ornella\\_gilligmann,1324429.asp](https://www.marieclaire.fr/attentat-rate-de-notre-dame-ines-madani-ornella_gilligmann,1324429.asp) [accessed 25 July 2020].

In opposition to her, Ornella Gilligmann readily appears as a woman in the grip of terrorist organizations, whose allegiance to the IS was encouraged by her liaison with Inès Madani/Abou Omar. She would not have hesitated to abandon her husband and children to engage in acts of terrorism, which she believes to be a great love story with a “bewitching messenger that she has never seen.”<sup>31</sup> The media presentation of her case falls into the second type of narration identified where affects appear as the driving forces behind terrorist engagement. Yet, her adherence to the ideology of IS is not new: she had tried to emigrate to Syria with her three children in 2014 before returning to France after spending ten days in Turkey without completing her project. She had appeared on the “Fiche S” and was subject to a ban on leaving the country. Notwithstanding, the press focuses on her ambiguous relationship with Madani. Thus, Ornella Gilligmann is described first and foremost as “a mother,”<sup>32</sup> having been a victim of a manipulation orchestrated by a woman “ten years her junior.”<sup>33</sup> The age difference between the two women is frequently mentioned, emphasizing the supposed immaturity by Ornella Gilligmann. The articles published about her evoke the idea of a woman “manipulated by her young accomplice”<sup>34</sup> who allegedly tried to “entice her into her disastrous project.”<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, the representations developed around Inès Madani, and Ornella Gilligmann work in perfect symmetry: to the dangerousness of the first responds the naiveté of the second. Hence, Inès Madani is presented as a “frighteningly smart”<sup>36</sup> personality, in contrast to Ornella Gilligmann, who appears to be a fragile and easily influenced woman, having been “duped by her accomplice.”<sup>37</sup>

Mrs Gilligman is not the only one whose participation in the planned attack is interpreted as motivated by sentimental reasons. This framework of interpretation also applies to Sarah Hervouët, the “little fiancée of the jihadists,”<sup>38</sup> whose multiple, yet always virtual connections with jihadists were repeatedly highlighted. Thus, Sarah Hervouët apparently planned to marry Larossi Abballa, the killer of the police couple in Magnanville in June 2016. Previously, she betrothed Adel Kermiche, one of the assassins of the priest of Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray, before becoming engaged to Mohamed Lamine Aberouz, also a defendant in the “gas cylinders trial” for failure to report a terrorist crime. According to the press, Sarah Hervouët would have dreamed of “a husband in a house full of children”<sup>39</sup> and finally found in IS a way to “address her suicidal tendencies.”<sup>40</sup>

Accordingly, the terrorist organization represents a framework that allows these women to resolve their emotional and affective malaise. Inès Madani is described as a young

31. Mathieu Delahousse, “Tentative d’attentat près de Notre-Dame : Ornella et Inès, une romance djihadiste,” *L’Obs*, 12 September 2008, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/societe/terrorisme/20180911.OBS2128/tentative-d-attentat-pres-de-notre-dame-ornella-et-ines-une-romance-djihadiste.html> [accessed 27 July 2020].

32. Chloé Pilorget-Rezzouk, “Attentat raté de Notre-Dame : jusqu’à trente ans de prison pour les accusés.”

33. Mathieu Delahousse, “Tentative d’attentat près de Notre-Dame : Ornella et Inès, une romance djihadiste.”

34. “Elles voulaient faire exploser une voiture à Paris,” *La République du Centre*, 9 November 2016.

35. “Terrorisme : de l’attentat raté à Paris à la cellule de Châteauroux,” *La Nouvelle République du Centre-Ouest*, 9 November 2016.

36. Louise Colcombet, “Attentat raté de Notre-Dame : la fausse naïveté d’Inès Madani.”

37. “Elles voulaient faire exploser une voiture à Paris.”

38. “Sarah Hervouët, la petite fiancée des djihadistes,” *20 Minutes*, 5 April 2017, <https://www.20minutes.fr/paris/2044491-20170405-sarah-hervouet-petite-fiancee-djihadistes> [accessed 29 July 2020].

39. Pauline Lallement, “Daesh, Les femmes passent à l’action,” *Paris Match Belgique*, 15 September 2016, 42.

40. Soren Seelow, “Terrorisme : Sarah Hervouët, 23 ans, aspirante au martyr.”

woman whose “fascination for jihad echoes that for death”<sup>41</sup> and whose desire for death would have been the driving force along her path to the attack.<sup>42</sup> The third discursive line identified in the journalistic discourse presents female jihadists as unstable people, poorly integrated into society, and demonstrating great psychological fragility. This applies primarily to Sarah Hervouët, whose “childhood and adolescence are said to be marked by identity problems, between a biological father who made brief appearances in her life and an adoptive father whom she would have liked to be more present.”<sup>43</sup> The IS theretofore represented a response to an “identity quest marked by suffering”<sup>44</sup> – “an identity as a refuge and [...] a way out of her discomfort.”<sup>45</sup> The same applies to Ornella Gilligmann, whose youth was marked by “delinquency and cannabis”<sup>46</sup> and a “violent and alcoholic”<sup>47</sup> father. Even Inès Madani, although considered the leader of the group and the main instigator of the plans, is presented as a disturbed, school drop-out teenager who is “uncomfortable in her own skin because of her overweight.”<sup>48</sup> But while Sarah Hervouët’s and Ornella Gilligmann’s identity crisis is associated with an absentee father,<sup>49</sup> Inès Madani is described as a “lost post-adolescent” who found in her male avatar and the multiplication of her online conquests an escape from everyday life.<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, the IS filled the void left by fathers and offered a setting for women who lost their sense of direction or are in search of a better image of themselves.

The fourth narrative interprets the acts of female jihadists as the fruit of a skillful orchestration from Syria. Rachid Kassim is regularly mentioned as the driver of several IS supporters to commit attacks on French soil. Specifically, he is suspected of being the perpetrator of the assassination of the police couple in Magnanville and the priest in Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray during the summer of 2016. However, the survey conducted on the four women arrested following the failed attack on Notre-Dame revealed that several were in regular contact with him. Most notably, Sarah Hervouët followed his orders to go to the home of Amel Sakaou after he unsuccessfully incited her to carry out an attack in Cogolin where she

41. Caroline Politi, “Attentat raté de Notre-Dame : ‘on se torture l’esprit pour savoir où on a merdé’ confie le père d’une accusée,” *20 Minutes*, 25 September 2019, <https://www.20minutes.fr/justice/2612731-20190925-attentatrate-dame-torture-esprit-savoir-o-merde-confie-pere-accusee> [accessed 31 July 2020].

42. “Procès de l’attentat de Notre-Dame : ‘l’envie de mourir’ de la principale accusée,” *Libération*, 25 September 2019.

43. Caroline Politi, “Attentat déjoué devant Notre-Dame de Paris : Portraits croisés d’accusées à la radicalisation express,” *20 Minutes*, 23 September 2019, <https://www.20minutes.fr/justice/2611367-20190923-attentat-dejoue-devant-dame-paris-portraits-croises-accusees-radicalisation-express> [accessed 29 July 2020].

44. Louise Colcombet, “Attentat raté de Notre-Dame : l’accusée Sarah Hervouët,” *Le Parisien*, 2 October 2019, <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/attentat-rate-de-notre-dame-l-adolescence-perturbee-de-sarah-hervouet-02-10-2019-8165073.php> [accessed 29 July 2020].

45. Ibid.

46. Mathieu Delahousse, “Tentative d’attentat près de Notre-Dame : Ornella et Inès, une romance djihadiste.”

47. “Attentat raté de Notre-Dame : plongée aux assises dans le passé des femmes, djihadistes présumées,” *Ouest-France*, 23 September 2019, <https://www.ouest-france.fr/terrorisme/attentat-rate-de-notre-dame-plongee-aux-assises-dans-le-passe-de-femmes-djihadistes-presumees-6533233> [accessed 29 July 2020].

48. Estelle Maussion, “Procès des bonbonnes, des parents désemparés face à leur fille radicalisée,” *La Croix*, 26 septembre 2019, <https://www.la-croix.com/France/Justice/Proces-bonbonnes-parents-desempares-face-leur-fille-radicalisee-2019-09-26-1201050090> [accessed 29 July 2020].

49. Louise Colcombet, “Attentat raté de Notre-Dame : l’enfance perturbée des ‘sœurs’ du djihad,” *Le Parisien*, 23 September 2019, <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/attentat-rate-de-notre-dame-l-enfance-perturbee-des-soeurs-du-djihad-23-09-2019-8158251.php> [accessed 29 July 2020].

50. Stéphanie Marteau, “Inès Madani, la djihadiste qui voulait faire exploser Notre-Dame,” *La Vie*, 26 September 2019, 18-19.

resided.<sup>51</sup> The Paris Public Prosecutor François Molins evokes a “commando from Syria”. This statement is widely disseminated by the media and gives the impression of women merely carrying out orders.<sup>52</sup> The planned attack no longer appears as the result of a spontaneous action, and lacking the rest of the preparation, but as evidence of the IS’s ability to convince its members to carry out attacks on foreign soil. In this sense, the women involved reveal a new dimension of the dangerousness of the terrorist organization: they are all the more dangerous because they are acting under the orders of well-established jihadists within the terrorist nebula.

These four types of narratives are similar in that they focus primarily on the motivations of female jihadist perpetrators, while also ignoring their political or religious activism and affiliations. Their affinity to the IS ideology is interpreted mainly as an illustration of a malaise, psychic dysfunction, or weakness of character. In this sense, the “commando of Notre-Dame”, even though it showcased the involvement of women in the terrorist threat, only slightly modified the dominant representations of female jihadists involved in terrorist acts.

## **MEDIA DEPICTIONS OF FEMALE JIHADISTS OR THE STORY OF A FAILED FEMININITY**

The thwarted Notre-Dame attack marked a real break in the practices of the judicialization of women involved within jihadist networks, but also the evolution of the narratives produced around this participation, particularly in the media domain. It is no longer a question of talking about teenage girls who have gone to Syria, believing that they will commit themselves to humanitarian action, but real terrorists likely to act on national territory. Although poorly prepared and lacking coordination, the planned attack in Paris, as well as the knife attack in Boussy-Saint-Antoine, established evidence that women, as well as men, could adhere to the extremist ideology of the IS and act on it. Nevertheless, there is an omission in the interpretations put forward by most media outlets. The media appear to be primarily interested in personal motivations and the intimate life of these women, but the reality of their actions suggests that there is an activist dimension to their involvement. In this sense, the emergence of new narratives in which the danger of female jihadists is no longer underestimated but instead emphasized, does not imply that these women are considered as full-fledged, “true” terrorist actors. The violence perpetrated by Inès Madani and her accomplices is represented as the pathological expression of a social maladjustment instrumentalized by the IS.

Therefore, the four narratives that we have identified echo the three ideal-types identified by Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg in their analysis of representations of female

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51. “Procès de l’attentat raté de Notre-Dame : l’ombre du jihadiste Rachid Kassim,” *L’Express* with the AFP, 24 September 2019, [https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/justice/proces-de-l-attentat-rate-de-notre-dame-lombre-du-jihadiste-rachid-kassim\\_2099399.html](https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/justice/proces-de-l-attentat-rate-de-notre-dame-lombre-du-jihadiste-rachid-kassim_2099399.html) [accessed 30 July 2020].

52. “L’attentat ‘déjoué’ à Paris était ‘téléguidé’ de la Syrie,” *Le Point* with the AFP, 10 September 2016, [https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/l-attentat-dejoue-a-paris-etait-teleguide-depuis-la-syrie-09-09-2016-2067303\\_23.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/l-attentat-dejoue-a-paris-etait-teleguide-depuis-la-syrie-09-09-2016-2067303_23.php) [accessed 30 July 2020].

violence in global politics.<sup>53</sup> From the aggregation of articles from the English-speaking press, and court records, but also by relying on several mythological accounts, these researchers identified three main narrative categories in which women were presented in turn as “mothers”, “monsters” or “whores”. Thus, while the “mothers” act out of a desire for revenge to restore family honor,<sup>54</sup> the “monsters” see their femininity called into question, generally because they have gone mad, or because they lack empathy.<sup>55</sup> As for the “whores”, they are presented as sexually deviant women, either by showing tremendous sexual appetite or by being considered sexually frustrated.<sup>56</sup> These three ideals meet in that they present violence against women as irrational and pathological deviancy, in opposition to traditional representations of femininity as a “natural” peacemaker.

Similar patterns can be observed in the different accounts of the thwarted Notre-Dame attack and female jihadists. In particular, the rhetoric of the “whore” can be found in all three cases studied. Inès Madani is a “whore” because she has made a series of conquests on the internet with which she “speaks bluntly about sex”<sup>57</sup>. Ornella Gilligmann did not hesitate to abandon her husband and children to follow her lover. As for Sarah Hervouët, she has been “engaged” on numerous occasions with jihadists who died before their union could be formalized. These accounts suggest that women feel a pathological sexual attraction to jihadists (Gilligmann, Hervouët). They would know how to take advantage of this attraction to satisfy their depraved fantasies (Madani). While it is a commonly accepted idea that Islamic women find it impossible to please men,<sup>58</sup> the sexual issue appears to be a key element in the representations developed around female jihadists. Violent female jihadists present themselves as the corollary of their sexual impulses. Such a vision makes it possible to interpret their involvement in a terrorist organization as the expression of a psychic dysfunction caused by sexual deviance.

This frequent reference to the sex and sexuality of “terrorist women” is not new. These claims were present in the 1970s and 1980s, when women involved in the armed left-wing extremist groups were the subject of eroticized representations associating perversion with sexuality and social deviance.<sup>59</sup> In her research on the media coverage of women’s involvement in the Red Army Faction in Germany and Direct Action in France, Fanny Bugnon speaks of a “gendered depoliticization”. In addition to that, she explains how women who have chosen to defend a revolutionary cause by violent means have their commitment both relativized and stigmatized by the various public opinion multipliers.<sup>60</sup> The same dynamic can be found with female jihadists, whose radicalization is generally interpreted as a conse-

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53. Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics*, London, Zed Books, 2007, 276.

54. Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores. Thinking About Women’s Violence in Global Politics*, London, Zed Books, 2015, 71.

55. *Ibid.*, 94.

56. *Ibid.*, 113.

57. Stéphanie Marteau, “Inès Madani, la djihadiste qui voulait faire exploser Notre-Dame,” 18-19.

58. Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, “Reduced to Bad Sex: Narratives of Violent Women from the Bible to the War on Terror,” *International Relations*, 22:1, 2008, 74.

59. Fanny Bugnon, “Le corps des terroristes. Médiatisation et dispositifs de genre dans la presse française (1970-1986),” in Béatrice Damian-Gaillard, Sandy Montañola and Aurélie Olivesi, *L’Assignation de genre dans les médias : Attentes, perturbations, reconfigurations*, Rennes, PUR, 2014, 76.

60. Fanny Bugnon, *Les “Amazones de la terreur”. Sur la violence politique des femmes, de la Fraction armée rouge à Action directe*, Paris, Payot, 2015, 175.

quence of social marginalization and not a manifestation of their activism in Islamic organizations. The absence of the father, disadvantageous physical conditions, or low professional qualification, are presented as the causes of social isolation, making these women particularly vulnerable. Social networks will accordingly, enable them to weave a set of virtual relationships and provide them with access to a community in which they feel integrated and believe they can achieve an individual social fulfilment.<sup>61</sup> There is little room in this type of narrative to think about the activist dimension of engagement in armed radical Islamism, which is, in most cases, interpreted as an inadvertent mistake. However, it was only after participating in a congress of Islamic organizations in France in 2014 that Ornella Gilligmann tried to leave for Syria.<sup>62</sup> Although her participation is not enough to prove a real militant commitment, it nevertheless shows an interest in radical Islamism that predates the emergence of IS by a long way. This example implies, among other things, that those female jihadists are not confined to maintaining relationships with their peers and do not necessarily switch from day to day, turning the next day to armed jihadism. Instead, they can engage in the process of progressive radicalization combining ideological and personal factors.

Despite the increased media visibility of Inès Madani, Ornella Gilligmann and Sarah Hervouët at the time of their arrest and subsequent trial, the stereotypes associated with women involved in jihadist organizations remain unchallenged. Their visibility on the public stage allows for the development of a narrative of women's involvement in political violence to condemn terrorism explicitly. The term "commando", which comes up repeatedly in media stories relating to the events, represents this reinvestment in politics. Indeed, it is suggested that the two attempted attacks were skillfully planned by women who have undergone military preparation and who demonstrate a high level of real coordination. But in reality, the Notre-Dame attack, like the attack at Boussy-Saint-Antoine shows a high degree of improvisation, since the women involved in these events knew little to nothing about the plan before taking action.

Although they do not make up a homogenous whole and like other categories of actors, remain marked by political, structural and institutional divisions, the media plays a central role in the production of representations associated with the terrorist scene. They create a discourse of moral condemnation of terrorist actions, while at the same time propagating the fascination that can emanate from such brutal acts.<sup>63</sup> Media stories about women involved in the September 2016 terrorist attack plans show a certain uniformity, despite distinct editorial lines. The prevalence of the pathological interpretation of violence against women dominates to a great extent to the detriment of an analysis which focuses on the structural and political dimensions of armed violence. Through their rendering in the media's narratives, the characters of Inès Madani, Ornella Gilligmann and Sarah Hervouët reinforce the

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61. Laura Huey and Eric Witmer, "#IS\_Fangirl: Exploring a New Role for Women in Terrorism," *Journal of Terrorism*, 7:1, 2016, 5; or Thomas Pierret and Mériam Cheikh, "I'm Very Happy here. Female Jihad in Syria as Self-Accomplishment," *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, 13:2, 2015, 242.

62. Stéphane Sellami, "Voiture aux bonbonnes : Ornella Gilligmann, mère de famille devenue terroriste," *Le Parisien*, 12 September 2016, <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/une-mere-de-famille-devenue-terroriste-12-09-2016-6113033.php> [accessed 30 July 2020].

63. Dawn Rothe and Stephen Muzzatti, "Enemies Everywhere: Terrorism, Moral Panic, and US Civil Society," *Critical Criminology*, 12:3, 2004, 333.

idea of a wrong path and a reprovved femininity. This interpretation makes it possible to establish a dual condemnation: women transgressing the moral and sexual order and the IS breaking the implicit rules and conventional organization of the terrorist scene in which women are expected to play the role of victims and not fighters.

The four main types of narratives identified share the depiction of female jihadist violence as an illustration of a failed femininity. Consequently, the focus is deflected from the deviant, violent act and is placed on the fact that a woman perpetrates it. As Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry claimed, the stories of violence against women in the Western world do not inform us about what drives them to act, but rather how *normal* women are supposed to be.<sup>64</sup> These stories reproduce the idea that violence perpetrated by women is above all violence outside common frameworks of analysis, independent of structures and institutional policies. However, as Coline Cardi and Geneviève Pruvost put it, “seeking to exhume, denaturalize, historicize, politicize violence against women is to point out the underlying research bias. Most of the research only examines male violence by mentioning, at the margins, the minority participation of women and without questioning the gendered dimension of the categories employed”<sup>65</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

### FOR A BETTER CONSIDERATION OF GENDER IN THE ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSES ON TERRORISM

Discourses built on the phenomenon of terrorism are inherently gendered. The analysis of how stereotypes about violence against women are mobilized gives us the clues to better understand how gender is constructed and frames different discourses surrounding political violence. The Western media are not alone in producing stories about female jihadists. The terrorist organizations present themselves as dialectic entrepreneurs. These discourses can support recruitment targets, while the IS, which prides itself on being the leading organization to explicitly encourage women to join its ranks to carry out their religious duties,<sup>66</sup> was able to adapt a recruitment propaganda to target women.<sup>67</sup> The media stories developed by the Western press about female jihadists is contradictory to the counternarratives produced by terrorist organizations themselves. These counternarratives can see and respond to the contradictions of the Western world, using gender equality to make them appealing to women. Elaborate stories about female jihadists are thus the subject of a competitive staging revealing the power relations maintained by the different actors of the terrorist scene

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64. Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores. Thinking About Women's Violence in Global Politics*, 24.

65. Coline Cardi and Geneviève Pruvost, “Les mises en récit de la violence des femmes. Ordre social et ordre du genre,” *Idées économiques et sociales*, 181:3, 2015, 22.

66. Andrea Aasgaard, “Migrants, Housewives, Warriors or Sew Slaves: AQ's and the Islamic State's Perspectives on Women,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, 16:1, 2017, 101.

67. EUROPOL, “Women in Islamic State propaganda. Roles and incentives,” EUROPOL Public information, 2019, 37, available at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/europol-specialist-reporting/women-in-islamic-state-propaganda>.

The attraction presented by the Islamic State on women, especially in France is a phenomenon that remains misunderstood by terrorism experts. Considered by some as a “refusal of modernity,”<sup>68</sup> women’s involvement in armed terrorist groups breaks the taboo of female violence and in many ways, proves to be counter-intuitive.<sup>69</sup> While many of these women have grown up in liberal societies, how can we understand their choice to join an organization whose ideology is partially based on male superiority? The stories developed by the media about characters such as Inès Madani, Ornella Gilligmann, Sarah Hervouët, or Hayat Boumeddiene illustrate this difficulty in understanding the motivations for women to undertake the jihadist cause. This commitment challenges the dominant social and political order from which the phenomenon of terrorism supposedly originates, thus calling for new approaches. However, these new approaches can be conceivable only through a theoretical and conceptual renewal, which would consider women as full-fledged actors of violence.

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68. Marc Trévidic, *Terroristes. Les sept piliers de la déraison*, Paris, J.-C. Lattès, 2013, online version (Kindle) location 2129.

69. Géraldine Casutt, “Quand le djihadiste est une femme,” *Inflexions*, 38, 2018, 87.