

The Media's Gender Stereotype Framing of Chechen 'Black Widows' and Female Afghan Self-Immolators

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ABSTRACT

Traditional gender roles derive from the beginning of mankind when men were hunters and women were gatherers. These roles remain widely accepted in the Western world today. This article stems from the terrorism scholar Brigitte Nacos' argument that society resorts to gender stereotypes when trying to understand women acting in inherently masculine roles. The expansion of Nacos' argument has led to the question of how Western media uses gender stereotype framing in the reporting of two illegitimate female actors. Empirically, Chechen Black Widows and female Afghan self-immolators are the case studies represented in the article. The argument set forth here claims that these women are voiceless actors who commit extremely violent acts to gain political agency. However, the media is misrepresenting these actors by resorting to gender stereotypes in order to report comprehensible news on an incomprehensible topic—female violence. The empirical evidence is based on content analysis of media from North America and the United Kingdom. Five gender stereotype frames have been identified to support the claims made here. These frames are: Feminized Imagery, Violence Breeds Violence, Islamic Honor, Manipulation and Male Control, and Irrational Women.

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INTRODUCTION

In the age of gender equality, Western society still finds female violence a gender-bending, incomprehensible anomaly. Brigitte Nacos, in her article, “The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media: Similar Framing Patterns in the News Coverage of Women in Politics and in Terrorism,” gives an explanation for this phenomenon.¹ Nacos argues that society has a difficult time comprehending women in positions that are not conducive to gender norms and perceived as inherently masculine.² This inability to accept female violence comes from women’s traditional role as life giver, not life taker.

In hunter-gatherer societies, there was a well-established and straightforward gender role system. Men were responsible for hunting while women’s responsibilities were gathering, childbearing and nurturing. In many hunter-gatherer societies hunting was associated with war, one being directly connected to the other. It is argued that hunting and war were the “two spheres of social life that excluded women.”³ Thus, this concept of men as the protector and women as the protected was born—forever linking war and violence with masculinity and the rejection to war and violence with femininity.⁴ Society, particularly Western society, carried this mentality and practice within it well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Gender roles can be seen in all elements of society, reaching as far as military organization. Indeed, there are no Western state-sanctioned militaries that use women on the frontline of combat. This is because women, as Eileen MacDonald explains in her book *Shoot*

¹ Brigitte Nacos, “The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media: Similar Framing Patterns in the News Coverage of Women in Politics and in Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 28 (2005): 435.

² Nacos, 437.

³ Joshua Goldstein, *War and Gender* (Cambridge: University Press, 2001), 19.

⁴ Ibid, 19.

the Women First, are seen as irrational, emotional, and wildly unpredictable.⁵ She argues that there are only a few instances when female violence can be understood by society. These instances are: when a woman fights off an attacker or rapist, when she protects her children from threat, and when she protects herself from an abusive partner.⁶ In essence, in any other circumstance of female violence, “they commit a double atrocity: using violence, and in the process destroying our safe, traditional view of [them].”⁷

Just because female violence is traditionally unacceptable does not mean it goes unnoticed, in fact, the contrary: female violence is widely publicized. Maria Barden claims, “Women are at their most newsworthy when they are doing something ‘unladylike’”⁸ and female violence is certainly considered “unladylike.” Women in society can be unruly and aggressive actors, committing all forms of violence which attract public attention. For instance, there is the infamous case of Lorena Bobbitt, the American woman who cut off her husband’s penis⁹ and one of Canada’s most notorious female killers, Karla Homolka, who served a twelve-year sentence for drugging, raping, torturing, and killing young girls.¹⁰ Further, there are cases of female gangs, such as those in Great Britain, where “crimes committed by girls aged 10 to 17... [have] gone up by 25 percent in three years to 59,000 - with significant increases in minor assaults, robberies, public order offenses and criminal damage.”¹¹

⁵ Eileen MacDonald, *Shoot the Women First* (London: Fourth Estate Limited, 1991), 1-241.

⁶ Ibid, 5.

⁷ Ibid, 2.

⁸ Maria Braden, *Women Politicians and the Media* (Kentucky: The University of Kentucky, 1996), 4.

⁹ “Lorena Bobbitt’s Unforgettable Story,” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, April 23, 2009, accessed May 14, 2011, <http://www.oprah.com/world/Lorena-Bobbitts-Unforgettable-Story/4>.

¹⁰ Paul Cherry, “Karla Homolka lives life of birthday cakes and baseball in “adult daycare,” ex-inmate says,” *The Montreal Gazette*, September 22, 2000, accessed May 12, 2011, <http://www.truecrime.net/karla/>.

¹¹ “Violent women ‘stretching police,’” *BBC News*, August 9, 2008, accessed May 12, 2011, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7550755.stm>.

Yet how is it that in the ‘age of gender equality’ gender stereotypes still live on? The media distributes news that reflects society’s biases because the journalists, though required to remain unbiased, are still members of society and have the same entrenched opinions of gender roles. Scholars Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, argue, “Whenever stories of women’s violence in global politics are presented in mainstream media, their authors *explain away* the possibility that women make a conscious choice to kill or injure.”¹² Thus, gender stereotypes remain alive today and they are reinforced daily.

In January 2011, circa the time of the Domodedovo airport bombing in Moscow, I had been skimming through a human interest story published in *Marie Claire* magazine on female self-immolation among Muslim women, particularly Afghan women.¹³ Due to the abundant media coverage that the Moscow bombing was receiving, I noticed similar gender stereotyping between the Chechen Black Widow suicide bombers—who are responsible for the airport bombing—and the article about female Afghan self-immolators. This observation was curious since these actors, on the surface, have nothing in common. Upon first glance, female suicide bombers have the intent to kill themselves and others, while self-immolators only wish to kill themselves. They use different methods of suicide and they are from different parts of the world. Yet, if one peers into their national history, society, and culture it appears that both these groups of women lack political agency and are both voiceless within their societies. Is it the act of violence itself that provides an outlet for them to acquire political agency? Do they rely on media to decipher their messages? After this initial observation, I was led to question whether

¹² Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, “Reduced to Bad Sex: Narratives of Violent Women from the Bible to the War on Terror,” *International Relations*, vol. 22 (2008): 5.

¹³ Kimberly Sevcik, “Why did this woman set herself on fire?” *Marie Claire*, accessed April 2011, www.womenforafghanwomen.org/pdf/MarieClaireMag.pdf.

or not consistent gender stereotyping could be found between these two violent female actors in more media sources and how these stereotypes are used to frame these violent women.

I claim that Western media resorts to gender stereotypes when writing about these two actors in order to comprehend the incomprehensible—female violence. In this article, I argue that Chechen Black Widows and female Afghan self-immolators are voiceless actors and resort to violence as a means to obtain political agency. Additionally, I suggest that Western media's gender stereotype framing could have detrimental repercussions because it distorts the real issues, undermines the actual threat of female violence, and could hinder anti- and counterterrorism measures.

Nacos, who researches the relationship between the media and terrorism, has identified similar gender stereotypes in the media's representation of female politicians and of female terrorists. This argument is the inspiration and basis for my research. She sets forth a convincing case based on the media's framing of these two female actors. Nacos acknowledges that "reporters, editors, producers, and others in the news media make constant decisions as to what and whom to present in the news and how."¹⁴ Thus, the framing is often subjective and highly explanatory. Because of this, she claims that the media has a difficult time explaining these groups of women who are acting in inherently masculine roles. Therefore, the media resorts to specific gender frames which she identifies by analyzing media from the United States (U.S.) and from non-American English language news sources. She identifies six frames in the media—each frame represents a typical female stereotype. The frames are: Physical Appearance, Family Connection, Terrorists for the Sake of Love, Women's Lib/Equality, and Tough-as-Males/Tougher-than-Men.¹⁵

¹⁴ Nacos, 436.

¹⁵ Ibid, 440.

Nacos' article is unique because it is the first to examine media framings in this way. As a trailblazer, it is understandable that she would use a large range of sources to obtain her empirical evidence. For instance, Nacos does not define or limit her case studies to specific regions or groups of actors. She uses Leila Armendariz, a leader of the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), and Leila Khaled of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine when analyzing the Physical Appearance frame of female terrorists.¹⁶ These examples show she is including both separatist and religious groups ranging from Western Europe to the Mediterranean Sea in her study. Furthermore, in the Terrorists for the Sake of Love frame, Nacos moves from the previous established case studies to the Klu Klux Klan of the U.S. Meaning her undefined terrorist organization encompasses white supremacy groups as well, not just religious and separatist groups. This gives her scope a larger set of variables. When analyzing female politicians, she leaps between less known actors like U.S. Senator Barbara Mikulski to globally recognized actors such as Lady Margaret Thatcher. This again shows that her range is very large it would be beneficial if narrowed.

I have narrowed Nacos' range of empirical examples and shifted the cases to two illegitimate female actors: the Black Widow suicide bombers of Chechnya and the female self-immolators of Afghanistan. By choosing these violent actors as case studies, I am able to further Nacos' argument that the media resorts to stereotypes in order to comprehend and process women in inherently masculine roles. More specifically, by focusing Nacos' argument, I am able to use precise empirical examples to show that political agency is a valid rationale for female violence. This is something that Nacos, in her broad empirical research, would not have been able to support.

¹⁶ Nacos, 439.

The case studies have been chosen for very specific reasons—first, a justification for the Black Widows of Chechnya, then a rationale for choosing the female self-immolators of Afghanistan.

By narrowing the focus to the Black Widow suicide bombers, a solid framework has been established. I chose the Black Widows for four very specific reasons. First, the Black Widows are currently an active terrorist group. As mentioned, a Black Widow and her male companion recently detonated themselves in the Moscow Domodedovo airport killing 35 and injuring 100 others.¹⁷ Secondly, the Black Widows are the most successful female terrorists of all modern day groups, killing more people per attack than any other male and female suicide bombers globally.¹⁸ Thus, there is a current and abundant global interest in stopping this group of violent women and the organization backing them. Thirdly, very little scholarly research has been published on the Black Widows and even less about the Black Widows' representation in Western media. It is important to note that if a female suicide bomber is successful, she will not be available for interviews after her attack which has proven to be an obstacle for many scholars in suicide bombing research. Lastly, I have chosen this group of female terrorists because of their name, the "Black Widows." They are the only group of female terrorists currently active with an official title, ironically given to them by the Russian international media.¹⁹

¹⁷ Evan Gastaldo, "Moscow Suicide Bomber Likely a 'Black Widow,'" *The Newser*, January 26, 2011, accessed May 2, 2011, <http://www.newser.com/story/110602/moscow-suicide-bomber-likely-a-black-widow.html>.

¹⁸ Lindsey O'Rourke, "What's Special about Female Suicide Terrorism?" *Security Studies*, vol. 18 (2009): 687.

¹⁹ Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, "Black Widows: The Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists," in Yoram Schweitzer ed. "Female Suicide Terrorists," Jaffe Center Publication, Tel Aviv, Israel (2006): 64.

Chechen Black Widow suicide bombers and female Afghan self-immolators share gender but also religion, culture, and the eagerness to commit suicide. I have chosen self-immolators because of the gender stereotypes observed in the initial reading of this mysterious group and also because of their absence from scholarly literature. Like Black Widows, little is known about the female self-immolators from Afghanistan. Since the fall of the Taliban and the liberation of the Afghan people, self-immolation among women is on the rise.²⁰ However, due to an array of issues—primarily poor record keeping—there is no reliable data on the exact numbers of suicides committed.²¹ This lack of statistical data limits scholarly information about these women. Furthermore, like Black Widows, if a self-immolator has been successful she will not survive to tell her story and in the rare occasion she does survive, she will likely be too afraid to speak for fear she will bring shame upon her family.²²

Nacos identifies six gender stereotypes that the media uses to rationalize a non-violent actor and a violent actor participating in inherently masculine roles. However, my study focuses on two violent actors from specific regions, meaning I could not apply her same frames to my empirical evidence. I identified five gender stereotypes among my case studies. These frames are: Feminized Imagery, Violence Breeds Violence, Islamic Honor, Manipulation and Male Control, and Irrational Women.

This article uses print and online media sources from both North America and the United Kingdom, as they are the largest producers of English language literature regarding Black Widow suicide bombers and female Afghan self-immolators. There have been no

²⁰ Nahid Aziz, “What Self-Immolation Means to Afghan Women,” *A Journal of Social Justice*, vol. 23 (2011): 46.

²¹ Elizabeth A. Campbell and Isabelita Z. Guiao, “Muslim Culture and Female Self-Immolation: Implications for Global Women’s Health Research and Practice,” *Health Care for Women International*, vol. 25 (2004): 788.

²² Ibid, 788.

limitations while choosing the sources because the purpose of the project is to perform content analysis of popular discourse media. The sources range from mainstream newspapers and broadcasters such as *The New York Times* and *BBC* to local newspapers and human-interest pieces like the one found in *Marie Claire*. This is done with the intent to gain a vast knowledge of the overall representation of these female actors. Additionally, throughout this article, I refer to the “West”. It is important to clarify that I am referring specifically to the United States (U.S.), Canada, and the United Kingdom (U.K.), though I am aware many other countries can encompass this vague term.

This article is arranged in three chapters. The first chapter delves into an analytical literature review examining the available literature regarding terrorism and self-immolation. Then it moves into an explanation of my purpose and theoretical contribution. The second chapter introduces the case studies, Black Widow and female Afghan self-immolators, by placing them within historical and cultural context. Additionally, this chapter provides a brief analysis of Western society’s view on the gender paradox of suicide.²³ The third chapter analyzes the five gender stereotype frames I have found in the reporting of Black Widows and female Afghan self-immolators. Though inspired by Nacos’ frames, these are different. The frames are: Feminized Imagery, Violence Breeds Violence, Islamic Honor, Manipulation and Male Control, and Irrational Women. In the first frame, Feminized Imagery, there will be an analysis of the specific language, headlines, and the photographs used in the news article. Thus, this section will depend both on written and photographic representation of the Black Widows

²³ Silvia Sara Canetto and Isaac Sakinofsky, “The gender paradox in suicide,” *Suicide & Life – Threatening Behavior*, vol. 28, no. 1 (1998): 1.

and female Afghan self-immolators. Finally, the conclusion discusses the five frames, the implication these gender stereotype frames have on Western society, and the potential threat women pose to anti- and counterterrorism measures in the West.

CHAPTER 1 – DEFINING THE FIELDS OF ANALYSIS

Both female suicide bombers and female self-immolators are topics with limited scholarly research. This can be attributed to a number of issues, the largest being that neither female suicide bombers nor female self-immolators are able to provide interviews after their attacks. This issue has led scholars to find alternative ways of acquiring data about their background, motives, and the events leading up to the event. In this section, I will breakdown these two fields of study in order to show the holes in the preexisting literature and thereby highlight scholarly contributions that this article makes to the field.

1.1 FIELD OF TERRORISM

According to Robert A. Pape, terrorism research is currently going through a surge of interest. This is because modern terrorism has experienced two major waves.²⁴ The first was in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s when there was a “modest and gradual, rise of violence against innocent civilians and off duty members of security forces by non-state actors against Western societies—particularly in the United Kingdom, Western Europe, Israel and Japan.”²⁵ This wave of terrorist activity influenced the research and study of terrorism, creating what is known today as the first generation of terrorism experts. These experts are scholars such as David Rapoport, Walter Laquier, and Brian Jenkins. The second wave began in the United States after the attacks on September 11, 2001. This event sparked a new wave of interest and a new generation of scholars such as Anne Speckhard, Lindsey O’Rourke, and Mia Bloom.

²⁴ Robert A. Pape, “Introduction: What is New About Research on Terrorism,” *Security Studies*, vol. 18 (2009): 643.

²⁵ Ibid, 644.

The events of September 11th changed the course of modern terrorism. The first generation of scholars thought terrorism was a persistent and meek menace “comparable to individual acts of violence associated with domestic criminals...that could be contained by greater specialized knowledge about particular individuals and groups.”²⁶ The second generation of scholars were forced to add two new elements—large-scale international attacks and suicide attack—to their research and understanding of terrorism after September 11th.²⁷

It is important to acknowledge the extreme difficulty that accompanies terrorism research. First generation scholars such as MacDonald were able to interview reformed insurgents and guerrillas because many were still alive and well-known at the time.²⁸ However, the second generation has encountered a problem with data collection since the form of terrorism has drastically changed. As mentioned above, the second generation is studying large-scale international attacks and suicide terrorism, unlike the first generation who studied isolated accounts of terrorism performed by groups such as ETA or the Irish Republican Army (IRA). This means that scholars have had to rely heavily on secondary sources because the primary sources are either unknown or deceased. It is very unusual for suicide bombers to fail, but on rare occasion their bombs malfunction and they are captured by authorities. For instance, 14-year old Fida Hussain was captured April 2011 at a Sufi shrine in Pakistan after his vest failed to detonate.²⁹ He tried to throw a grenade but it exploded prematurely, blowing his hand off. Thanks to instances like this one, police and anti- and counterterrorism units are able to obtain primary source information about the recruitment, motives, and organization of certain terrorist

²⁶ Pape, 646.

²⁷ Ibid, 646.

²⁸ MacDonald, 6.

²⁹ Khalid Tanveer, “Captured bomber in Pakistan vows attacks,” *The Anniston Star*, April 4, 2011, accessed May 27, 2011, http://www.annistonstar.com/view/full_story/12618999/article-Captured-bomber-in-Pakistan-vows-attacks?instance=2nd_right.

groups. However, there are four major types of secondary sources that are commonly used to acquire information for scholarly research. In the order of most commonly used to less, the secondary sources are: (1) interviews with anti- and counterterrorism experts (2) statistical data/official reports, (3) interviews with families and friends and (4) suicide video.³⁰

Regardless of data accessibility, the second generation of scholars have “sharpened frameworks for considering factors that operate at fundamentally different levels of analysis, improving our understanding of the theoretical connections across strategic, social, and individual levels of causes for terrorist events.”³¹ In other words, the second generation scholars, though limited on primary sources, are asking more in-depth questions such as—What are the tactical advantages of suicide bombing? Are they psychologically damaged? What motivates suicide terrorists? And, most importantly to this article, what is special about female suicide bombers?³²

1.1.1 SUICIDE TERRORISM

Suicide bombing has become a highly feared method of terrorism. It appears that once one organization saw the effectiveness of suicide bombing, others joined in the tactic. Anne Speckhard, a leading second generation scholar, argues, “It has suddenly taken off like a wildfire spreading from Lebanon to Palestine, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Morocco, Indonesia, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Iraq (where there is on average one suicide bomber per day).”³³ Many scholars, Speckhard being one of them, have analyzed reports of past suicide attacks to ask why terrorist organizations use suicide terrorism. Suicide terrorism has become the

³⁰ Concluded by the author, Genevieve Pierce, while reviewing and analyzing all sources for this paper.

³¹ Ibid, 647.

³² Lindsey O’Rourke, “What’s Special about Female Suicide Terrorism,” *Security Studies*, vol. 18 (2009): 681.

³³ Anne Speckhard, “Suicide Terrorism – Genesis of” in G. Fink (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of Stress*. Oxford: Elsevier Ltd. (2006): 3.

preferred form of terrorism for seven reasons: (1) Inexpensive (2) Highly effective (3) Highly lethal (4) Extremely horrifying (5) Nearly impossible to prevent (6) Difficult to trace and (7) In endless supply.³⁴

The benefits of using suicide bombers far surpass other methods of terror. Yet it remains a perplexing and difficult concept to rationalize. Why are suicide bombers dying to kill?³⁵ Many scholars, particularly psychologists, have tried to understand what makes people become suicide bombers and why there seems to be an endless supply of willing volunteers and recruits for missions. This endless supply can easily lead one to believe that these bombers suffer from some sort of psychological problem. However, psychologists and experts have analyzed interviews with families and friends as well as any available suicide videos in order to understand the minds of the terrorist; the conclusion is they do not display psychotic behavior. For instance, Psychiatrist Mohsen Khalil M.D. of the Al-Amal Complex for Mental Health in the Ministry of Health of Saudi Arabia, believes these people are simply devoted to their cause and do not experience clinical psychological problems. He claims, “They are convinced to act by some perceived injustice in their community, but they are not psychopathological.”³⁶ Scholars side with Khalil and agree that suicide bombers do not bear the signs of a true psychopath. This conclusion coincides with the traditional belief that male violence is rational and calculated. Yet the question remains—Are male suicide bombers different than female suicide bombers?

³⁴ This list of seven items is taken from Anne Speckhard’s article “Suicide Terrorism – Genesis of.”

³⁵ Mai Bloom coined the term “dying to kill” in her book entitled *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terrorism* published in 2005.

³⁶ Aaron Levin, “Mid-East Psychiatrists Explore Mind of Suicide Bombers,” *Psychiatric News*, vol. 45, no. 14 (2010): 8.

1.1.2 FEMALE SUICIDE TERRORISM

There are major scholarly contradictions between the motivating factors of male bombers and female bombers. These contradictions are likely caused by the limited data on male suicide terrorism and even less data on female suicide terrorism. Speckhard, after consulting experts and official reports, argues, “Men and women suicide bombers share for the most part the same set of motivations, these differing by the terrorists being radicalized within or outside of the conflict zone.”³⁷ Thus, male and female suicide bombers are fundamentally similar. Yet Karen Jacques and Paul J. Taylor, who analyzed biographical accounts of the terrorists through official reports, argue that male and female suicide bombers are very different, especially in their forms of motivation. According to Jacques and Taylor, men are motivated by dreams of martyrdom, foreign policy, nationalistic reasons, extreme group affiliation, and overt religious beliefs.³⁸ While, in stark contrast, women are mostly motivated by social outsiderism, sexual assault (i.e. rape), suicidal behavior, unhappiness, family problems, personal problems, revenge, and anti-Semitism.³⁹ Jacques and Taylor recognize the emotional connection women have to their motives of terrorism. Lindsey O’Rourke expands this argument and claims that women are in fact driven by uniquely feminine motivations. She argues that female suicide bombers are, on average, higher educated (many having gone to a university), single, and older than their male counterparts.⁴⁰ She comes to her conclusion

³⁷ Anne Speckhard, “The Emergence of Female Suicide Terrorists,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 31 (2008): 1030.

³⁸ Karen Jacques and Paul J. Taylor, “Male and Female Suicide Bombers: Different sexes, Different Reason?” *Studies of Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 31 (2008): 315.

³⁹ Ibid, 315.

⁴⁰ O’Rourke, 709.

through a quantitative analysis of all known suicide terrorist attacks between 1981 and 2008.⁴¹

Additionally, she argues:

In the societies from which female suicide attackers emerge, a high value is placed upon the marital fidelity and maternal role of women. These motivating factors refer to actions that either threatened the sexual honor of the woman or severely damaged her ability to raise a family.⁴²

In other words, their motivation to become suicide bombers is spurred by infertility, rape, divorce, or old age—all being factors that greatly deprive women from performing their expected gender roles and womanly duties. It is important to note that the inability to perform womanly duties in Muslim communities is an undesirable quality that shames families.

Yet O'Rourke continues by arguing that female suicide bombers are far more superior when it comes to effectiveness. She argues this is for three specific reasons: (1) women are less suspicious (2) they can conceal their explosives better and (3) they are not exposed to such severe security checks.⁴³ For instance, Thenmozhi "Dhanu" Rajaratnam, a Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) female suicide bombers, was able to move through a crowd of supporters to reach Rajiv Gandhi, the 1991 political opposition to the prime minister of India. Gandhi had heightened security while on his campaign trail, but Dhanu was able to conceal a bomb under her clothing and travel with ease through the crowd. She managed to reach Gandhi where she stepped out in front of him, bowed at his feet and detonated the bomb, killing herself, Gandhi, and fourteen bystanders without raising any security suspicions.⁴⁴

It is apparent that some second generation scholars have taken a special interest in female suicide bombers. O'Rourke, for example, has asked *what* questions such as the

⁴¹ O'Rourke, 681.

⁴² Ibid, 713.

⁴³ Ibid, 691.

⁴⁴ K. T. Rajasingham, "SRI LANKA: THE UNTOLD STORY Rajiv Gandhi's assassination," *Sri Lanka Library*, accessed May 2, 2011, <http://www.lankalibrary.com/pol/rajiv.htm>.

effectiveness of women versus men. In contrast, there are few second generation scholars that have asked *how* questions. This topic will be returned to later in this chapter, but first it is important—in order to properly assemble the full argument set forth in this paper—to review the literature on self-immolations.

1.2 FIELD OF SELF-IMMOLATION

Self-immolation is the act of intentionally setting oneself on fire. The concept of self-immolation dates back to 527AD when Daodu, a Buddhist monk, climbed to a mountaintop and set himself on fire as an expression of his faith.⁴⁵ Another early account of self-immolation comes from India, where Sati the wife to the Hindu god Shiva, burned herself to death in protest of her father's dislike of her husband.⁴⁶ In 1829, India outlawed the practice of *sati*, the Indian custom of a widow throwing herself (or being thrown onto) her husband's funeral pyre and killing herself in the fire.⁴⁷ Though these ancient tales represented religious practice, no modern religion or society accepts self-immolation as tolerable behavior.⁴⁸ In 20th century, self-immolation transformed from a symbol of religious devotion and sacrifice to a form of political protest and escape.

Nahid Aziz, a scholar who researches self-immolation, argues that the practice of self-immolation is most commonly found in countries in Central Asia and the Middle East such as India, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Iran, Iraq, and more recently, Afghanistan.⁴⁹ However, the first modern form of self-immolation took place in Vietnam in 1963 where Thich Quang Duc, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, set himself on fire in protest of the Vietnam War and the

⁴⁵ "Self-Immolation: A brief history," *The Week*, January 25, 2011, accessed May 8, 2011, <http://theweek.com/article/index/211349/self-immolation-a-brief-history>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Aziz, 45.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

persecution of Buddhists in South Vietnam.⁵⁰ American journalist David Halberstam witnessed Duc's protest while in Vietnam. He wrote:

Flames were coming from a human being; his body was slowly withering and shriveling up, his head blackening and charring. In the air was the smell of burning human flesh; human beings burn surprisingly quickly. Behind me I could hear the sobbing of the Vietnamese who were now gathering. I was too shocked to cry, too confused to take notes or ask questions, too bewildered to even think.... As he burned he never moved a muscle, never uttered a sound, his outward composure in sharp contrast to the wailing people around him.⁵¹

Most available information about self-immolation is similar to Halberstam's account of the events. It is generally produced by special interest media reports, which reflect very journalistic explanations with detailed imagery.

The number of self-immolation cases has been growing in the Muslim world over the last ten years.⁵² The doctors at the Herat Burn Hospital in Afghanistan claim self-immolation is on the rise, especially among women.⁵³ Some media sources have taken interest in this phenomenon and have begun "reporting about the increasing incidences of self-immolation among young Muslim women."⁵⁴ Most information regarding female self-immolation is coming from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Recently, NGOs such as Amnesty International have become interested in self-immolation because of other women's rights issues in the Muslim world.⁵⁵ Self-immolation in "Afghanistan has attracted a great deal of attention... perhaps due to the large number of international organizations present to aid with the reconstruction" after the collapse of the Taliban.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ "Self-Immolation: A Brief History..."

⁵¹ S. Mintz, "The Vietnam War as History," *Digital History*, May 10, 2011, accessed May 14, 2011, <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu>.

⁵² Aziz, 46.

⁵³ Ibid, 46.

⁵⁴ Campbell and Guiao, 783.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 783.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 788.

As for scholarly research about self-immolation, there is very little. This lack of information can be attributed to a number of issues but there are three major reasons. First, the reporting of self-immolation is very low.⁵⁷ There are very few hospitals that are able to help with burns in Afghanistan.⁵⁸ If an incident of self-immolation takes place and it is in the countryside, it is nearly impossible to get the woman the attention she needs due to vast distances, poor road conditions, and lack of transport. Though proof is sparse, doctors believe women die before they can get help or they are extinguished before the burns become lethal and their families simply care for them at home.⁵⁹ Second, suicide in Islam is a sinful and shameful act—only martyrdom is acceptable in Islam, yet even at that, female martyrdom is highly debated.⁶⁰ Regardless, if a woman is fortunate enough to get medical attention, she is often too afraid to admit she tried to kill herself because she does not want to shame her family. Third, the family does not want the girl to confess her sin, so they claim it was an accident—the most common excuse being a “cooking accident.”⁶¹ Thus, it is easy to see why the statistics regarding female self-immolation are inaccurate.

Scholars interested in female self-immolation generally obtain their raw data from NGOs working in the region and from personal interviews with survivors of self-immolation—those willing to admit their burns were self-inflicted. Self-immolation researchers, Alireza Ahmadi and Reza Mohammadi, try to pinpoint accurate statistics regarding self-immolations. They argue that self-immolation “may be among the most dramatic, most violent, and most

⁵⁷ Campbell and Guiao, 788.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 788.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 788.

⁶⁰ David Cook, “Women Fighting in Jihad?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 28 (2005): 380.

⁶¹ Ibid, 789.

difficult personal acts to understand.”⁶² Though the data regarding this phenomenon is still extremely limited, more and more scholars are trying to understand this misunderstood act of female violence by asking one of the most vital questions—What motivates women to self-immolate?

There appears to be two plausible reasons for female self-immolation, according to Elizabeth Campbell and Isabelita Guiao, whose information comes primarily from NGOs. First, some women set themselves on fire as a “form of protest against the political and social discrimination facing women in Islamic society.”⁶³ This act is usually done in front of other people in order to invoke feelings of shame, guilt, and remorse.⁶⁴ Second, some women perform self-immolation because they feel “they have no other choice [and] find death preferable to living a life of domestic violence and suffering.”⁶⁵ Thus, Campbell and Guiao confirm that female self-immolation is used as both a form of protest and a form of escape.

1.3 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

Second generation terrorism scholars have asked questions about the tactical advantages of suicide bombing, the mental state of the bombers, their motives, and their effectiveness. Some second generation scholars have contributed a significant amount of attention to gender, as those before them did not, yet there are holes in the gender aspect of the literature. These holes are primarily seen, as mentioned above, in the scholar’s failure to ask *how* questions. Thus, existing literature’s greatest weakness is that many scholars have overlooked gender and left many questions unanswered. These questions have likely remained unanswered because of

⁶² Alireza Ahmadi, Reza Mohammadi, David C. Schwebel, Habibolah Khazaie, Naser Yeganeh, Afshin Almasi, “Familial Risk Factor for Self-Immolation: A Case Control Study,” *Journal of Women’s Health*, vol. 18, no. 7 (2009): 580.

⁶³ Campbell and Guiao, 787.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 787.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 787.

the limited number of female terrorists and female self-immolators and the difficulty of acquiring reliable data. However, one scholar has begun asking these essential gender-centered *how* questions.

Nacos has asked how gender stereotypes play into the media's portrayal of legitimate female politicians and illegitimate female terrorists. To do this, she turns to media frames. Dietram Scheufele, a scholar interested in the media and its effects on society, argues that the media uses frames to process, comprehend and present the news.⁶⁶ Furthermore, media frames are "a central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events."⁶⁷ Scheufele suggests that media frames organize our everyday life and reality and these frames are a vital part of any news report.⁶⁸ In order to construct frames, Philip Davis suggests that journalists rely on five major framing devices when reporting the news. These devices are 1) metaphors 2) exemplars of historical events 3) catchphrases 4) depictions and 5) visual images.⁶⁹

These five devices can be seen in the media's portrayal of female violence. According to Nacos, the framing of violence is particularly important because it has a "strong effect on the perceptions and reaction" of the audience.⁷⁰ Nacos highlights that this is above all true when reporting on female terrorism. By dwelling "on the fact that women perpetuate a horrific act of

⁶⁶ Dietram A Scheufele, "Framing as a Theory of Media Effect," *International Communication Association*, (1999), 106.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 106. Original in Gamson, W.A and A. Modigliani, *The changing culture of affirmative action*.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 106. Original in Tuchman, G., *Making News: A Study in the construction of reality*.

⁶⁹ Philip M. Davis, "How the Media Frames 'Open Access'," *The Journal of Electronic Publishing*, February 2009, accessed May 26, 2011,

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/textidx?c=jep;view=text;rgn=main;idno=3336451.0012.101>.

⁷⁰ Nacos, 436.

terrorism, the media frames such news inevitability in episodic terms and affect news consumers attribution of responsibility.”⁷¹

In her article, Nacos argues that there are gender stereotype frames in the news regarding female politicians and female terrorists:

Society cannot understand women in roles that cultural norms and prejudices perceive as inherently male (i.e. women as political leaders, women as violent political actors), there is a tendency to resort to stereotypical explanations (i.e. her good looks opened doors; her family affected her path; she is tough like a man, not a real women.⁷²

She justifies her argument by performing a content analysis on U.S. and non-American English language print and broadcast news. She generates six frames which she identifies as gender stereotypes used by the media to pigeonhole and comprehend women acting in inherently masculine roles. These frames are: The Physical Appearance, The Family Connection, Terrorist for the Sake of Love, The Women’s Lib/Equality, The Tough-as-Male/Tougher-than-Men, and the Bored, Naïve, Out-of-Touch-with-reality.

Nacos’ purpose for asking this *how* question is important because her research gives valuable insight to the world of anti- and counterterrorism. She claims, “Terrorist organizations know how to exploit cultural stereotypes and gender clichés that are reinforced by the media.”⁷³ Her concluding argument is that anti- and counterterrorism units should not be swayed by media reporting because the representation of female terrorists is inaccurate and does not reflect reality.⁷⁴

Nacos’ article is the stepping stone for the research presented here. Using the same inductive reasoning, I noted gender stereotype similarities between Black Widows and female Afghan self-immolators. Thanks to the foundation Nacos established in her article, I was able

⁷¹ Nacos, 437.

⁷² Ibid, 436.

⁷³ Ibid, 435.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 435.

to narrow her argument and further ask whether the media uses gender stereotypes to portray two female illegitimate actors and if the framing is similar over a variety of Western media sources. By doing so, I am able to support Nacos' claim that the media's framing of females in inherently masculine roles undermines and underplays the female terrorist's actual threat. My specific contribution stems from Nacos' argument. I have redirected her empirical focus to two illegitimate actors: Chechen Black Widows and female Afghan self-immolators. This shift provides a new insight into the media's gender stereotyping of women in masculine roles and helps to show the gender stereotypes the media uses to report about violent women. Furthermore, I have narrowed the sources to only North America and the United Kingdom for a more focused analysis of Western media's portrayal and framing. These elements alone have added a new contribution since these violent women, especially self-immolators, are sparsely mentioned in scholarly literature. However, by shifting the empirical cases to two groups of illegitimate women, I am able to expose a different angle than Nacos. Her broad scope may have never brought her to the assumption that these women are seeking agency and thus, my specific empirical examples provide the framework to show their violence is a cry for political agency.

The content analysis of this article has come from forty-nine news stories about Black Widows and thirty-six news stories about female Afghan self-immolators. All of the media sources are, as mentioned, from North America and the United Kingdom. After initial observations, I found similar stereotyping between the two groups and I was able to develop specific frames. One frame has been inspired by Nacos' frame titled Physical Appearance, but it has been renamed to include feminized language and photography as well. This new frame is

called the Feminized Imagery frame. Nacos' other frames could not be used because of the change from the legitimate female politicians to the illegitimate female self-immolator.

I have identified four additional frames to fit the new illegitimate actor. Unlike Nacos, who compared actors from differing backgrounds, Chechen Black Widows and female Afghan self-immolators not only share gender, but also religion, culture, tradition, and their willingness to die. Therefore, the frames were influenced by these factors. Those used here are: Feminized Imagery, Violence Breeds Violence, Islamic Honor, Manipulation and Male Control, and Irrational Women. It is important to note that this research is not conducive to precise placement of media examples into one frame over the other. This is because all of the frames have an element of overlap. I will develop this idea further in chapter three, but first an introduction to the case studies and the gender paradox of suicide.

CHAPTER 2 – CHECHENS AND AFGHANS: CASE STUDIES

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the case studies by using scholarly literature of Chechen and Afghan history, tradition, and culture. Assumptions drawn from this scholarly literature suggest that Black Widows and female Afghan self-immolators are seeking political agency because they are voiceless in their societies—arguably their violence is a form of protest against those that suppress their voice. This chapter will further expand this idea and it will develop a foundation for comparison between the scholarly reasoning of female violence and the media’s representation of female violence.

This chapter is broken into three sections. First, there is a background of the modern history used to establish the political and social climate of each country. Then, there is an analysis of Muslim culture and the treatment of women in that culture. Finally, a brief analysis of Western society’s ingrained gender stereotypes connected to suicide and the gender paradox that accompanies it.

2.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE WARS IN CHECHNYA

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Chechen president Dzhokhar Dudayev, a former Soviet Air Force officer, declared independence from Russia. As one could predict, the President of Russia at the time, Boris Yeltsin, was not enthusiastic about this declaration and sent troops to Chechnya to smother the uprising. However, this turned out to be a moment of national embarrassment for Russia when “Chechen freedom fighters intercepted Russian troops

at the airport and sent them back.”⁷⁵ This became the first of many conflicts between Russia and Chechnya that would take place over the next few years.

There were two major wars fought between Russia and Chechnya in the 1990s and 2000s. The First Chechen War began in 1994 when Russian troops were sent to Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, hoping to suppress an uprising.⁷⁶ Chechens managed to resist until December “when there was massive aerial and artillery bombardment... resulting in a heavy loss of civilian lives and hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons.”⁷⁷ The war lasted for two years before a peace agreement was made but not without major structural damage to Grozny, massive casualties to both combatants and civilians, and Russia suffering from a bruised ego.⁷⁸

Just three years later, the beginning of the Second Chechen War began when Russia sent troops to “subdue bandits hiding in Chechnya’s mountains” but their mission quickly developed into a full attack.⁷⁹ The war went through a transition circa 2004 when Chechen militant groups reorganized, replacing assassinated leaders (killed by Russian troops) with new and more radical and religious leadership.⁸⁰ It is clear that “what started as a number of nationalist groups seeking independence from Russia [has] become infiltrated by Islamists, who [have turned] what was a more narrowly focused nationalist terrorist campaign into a front in

⁷⁵ “Regions and Territories,” *BBC News*, January 19, 2011, accessed March 1, 2011, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/2565049.stm

⁷⁶ “First Chechen War 1994-1996,” *Global Security Organization*, April 27, 2005, accessed March 1, 2011, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/chechnya1.htm>.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ “Second Chechen War 1999-2006,” *Global Security Organization*, October 4, 2010, accessed March 1, 2011, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/chechnya2.htm>.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

the broader-based conflict between Islamists and the West.”⁸¹ The Chechen society shifted from Sufism, the dominant form of Islam for almost two centuries, to a more radicalized form of Islam known as Wahhabism.⁸² Since September 11th, Russia has become even more aggressive and “[it] has since portrayed Chechen rebel forces as part of the global terror network and uses this to vindicate its methods.”⁸³ The second generation of terrorism scholars have remained consistent regarding Chechen insurgents and have labeled them as religious terrorists regardless of their separatist goals.

By the end of 2005, Taus Dzhabrailov, the head of Chechnya's Parliament, reported that there were up to 160,000 Chechen combatant and civilian casualties between the two wars.⁸⁴ However, many human rights organizations believe that the numbers are much higher and argue that, “Russian officials are not known for giving accurate accounts of civilian or military losses in Chechnya.”⁸⁵

The war waned by late 2006, but the conflict did not cease until the situation was “normalized” in 2009 when the Russia troops ended military operations in Chechnya.⁸⁶ Despite a valid diplomatic endeavor and current efforts to rebuild Grozny, a rift seems to remain between Russians and Chechens—with the majority of bitterness coming from Chechens. These ill feelings are understandable for three reasons. First, Chechens were not successful in obtaining their independence. As of now, Chechnya remains one of Russia’s twenty-one ethnic non-Russian republics with its own small government, parliament, and constitution that

⁸¹ Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat* (New York: Random House, 2006), 83.

⁸² Tom Parfitt, “The battle for the soul of Chechnya,” *The Guardian*, November 22, 2007, accessed May 8, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/nov/22/chechnya.tomparfitt>.

⁸³ “Regions and Territories,” *BBC News*.

⁸⁴ “Chechen official puts death toll for 2 wars at up to 160,000,” *The New York Times*, August 16, 2005, accessed March 1, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/15/world/europe/15iht-chech.html>

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ “Regions and Territories,” *BBC News*.

remains subordinate to Russia and has very little power.⁸⁷ Secondly, the Chechen people—both combatants and citizens—suffered great and unnecessary losses from the two wars. During these wars Russia committed heinous human rights violations against Chechen people and nothing has been done to remedy it. The Human Rights Watch reported that, “in almost all of the 115 rulings, the court concluded that Russia was responsible for extrajudicial executions, torture, and enforced disappearances, and that it had failed to investigate these crimes.”⁸⁸ Moreover, of the 33 cases researched, “Russia has still not brought a single perpetrator to justice, even in cases in which those who participated in or commanded the operations that led to violations are named in the European Court judgments.”⁸⁹ Thirdly, Chechens remain under Russian law, which is uninterested in obliging Chechen religion or culture. These three reasons have unarguably fueled Chechen’s frustrations with Russia causing some Chechens to believe the war is not over. There are Chechens that are still actively engaged in the fight for independence through the use of terrorism, many being women.

2.1.1 THE BIRTH OF THE BLACK WIDOWS

Karla Cunningham, a second generation terrorism scholar, argues that the literature on the Black Widows is incredibly limited and that which does exist is “journalistic and often sensationalist.”⁹⁰ Meaning a scholarly and clear understanding of Chechnya’s Black Widows is still being formulated. Yet with the work of the second generation scholars, there have been developments regarding these women over the last few years. For instance, it has been

⁸⁷ Professor Peter Balazs, “EU-Russia relations and the ‘Near Abroad’,” *Central European University*, November 17, 2010: class lecture.

⁸⁸ “Who Will Tell Me What Happened to My Son? Russia’s Implementation of European Human Rights Court Judgment in Chechnya,” *Human Rights Watch*, September 27, 2009, accessed March 1, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2009/09/28/who-will-tell-me-what-happened-my-son>.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Karla J. Cunningham, “Countering Female Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 30 (2007): 118.

established that up until the last decade Chechen women held only supportive background positions within the terrorist groups.⁹¹

Initially, Chechen female insurgents were not involved in frontline activity. Their roles primarily consisted of backline duties like medical care, food distribution, maintaining the men's morale during war and, most importantly, bearing children and raising them to be good fighters.⁹² However, as mentioned, things rapidly changed in Chechnya "because of military losses and the ideological influence of Islamic volunteers from abroad."⁹³ The influx of volunteers and the religious shift has suddenly espoused the use of female martyrdom.⁹⁴ This shift suggests that the volunteers were not only useful manpower in the battle against Russia but also highly influential in the advancement in Chechen's form of terrorism.

In June 2000, Khava Barayeva became the first Chechen woman used as a suicide bomber. She drove a truck full of explosives to a Russian military headquarters and detonated her bomb, killing herself and two others.⁹⁵ Chechen insurgents revere Barayeva as a hero because of her actions of martyrdom. Her success generated more interest in using female bombers, and it is apparent with the recently growing number of attacks that female suicide bombings have become Chechen insurgents' preferred method of terror.⁹⁶ Speckhard claims, "Chechen women are the most dangerous for national security because they have carried out the most risky operations... If the trend continues [they] will continue to be a grave threat."⁹⁷

⁹¹ Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York, Colombia University Press, 2007): 154.

⁹² Ibid, 154.

⁹³ Ibid, 154.

⁹⁴ Bloom, 155.

⁹⁵ Ruslan Isayev, "The Chechen woman and her role in the new society," *Prague Watchdog*, June 21, 2004, accessed May 8, 2011, <http://www.watchdog.cz/?show=000000-000015-000006-000008&lang=1>.

⁹⁶ Bloom, 155.

⁹⁷ Quotation taken from an interview with Anne Speckhard published in *The Star*. The source:

2.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: FROM THE TALIBAN TO TODAY

Once the Soviets pulled out of Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, they left behind a country riddled with anarchy and the leadership of corrupt warlords.⁹⁸ This unstable environment provided the necessary setting for the Taliban to rise to power. In 1994, “the Taliban developed enough strength to capture the city of Kandahar from a local warlord and proceeded to expand its control throughout Afghanistan, occupying Kabul in September 1996.”⁹⁹ Just two years later, the Taliban was able to control 90 percent of Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰

Once the Taliban had gained control, it began implementing extreme Islamic rule. In doing this, they committed many human rights violations, particularly against minority groups and women.¹⁰¹ The Taliban denied women the right to work or attend school and they could no longer leave the house unveiled or without a male escort.¹⁰² During the Taliban’s battle for control, the United Nations (UN) reporter Kamal Hossain detailed large-scale kidnapping of women and girls.¹⁰³ He cited the Taliban militia as responsible for the abductions.¹⁰⁴ He reported that many women were suspected of being forced into prostitution and that they were maimed or killed if they attempted to escape.¹⁰⁵ When the Taliban leadership was confronted by the UN about these human rights violations, in a report done by Hossain, the Taliban denied all charges. The Afghanistan Foreign Minister Mulla Wakil Ahmad Mutawwakil said:

Olivia Ward, “Why Chechnya’s Black Widow’s are Driven to Kill,” *The Star*, April 2, 2010, accessed May 8, 2011, <http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/article/789522--why-chechnya-s-black-widows-are-driven-to-kill>.

⁹⁸ “Background Note: Afghanistan,” *The US State Department Website*, accessed May 17, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5380.htm>.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² “UN reports flay violations against women in Afghanistan,” *RAWA News: The Reality of Life in Afghanistan*, March 9, 2000, accessed May 17, 2011, <http://www.rawa.org/un-reprt.htm>

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ “UN reports flay violations against...”

[Hossain is] an ignorant and incompetent man who is working solely for money... [he] lacks experience to tackle human rights issues and has fallen prey to propaganda against the Taliban by their opponents. Where is the proof that [the] Taliban have abducted women or forced them into prostitution. It is an irresponsible statement and the UN has lost all credibility by publicizing such baseless reports.¹⁰⁶

The situation did not improve for women in Afghanistan and the harsh Taliban laws remained implemented within the society.

Simultaneous as these events were unfolding in Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden, a Saudi national, and his terrorist group Al Qaeda were charged with the bombing of the U.S. Embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam that killed twelve Americans and thirty-two Foreign Service employees.¹⁰⁷ Bin Laden had been active in the mujahedeen resistance against the Soviets during the Soviet-Afghan War where he “financially and politically” supported the Taliban.¹⁰⁸ In August 1998, ‘Operation Infinite Reach’ commenced with the U.S. launching a missile into Afghanistan, striking Al Qaeda training camps.¹⁰⁹ This attack was permissible because of recent U.S. intelligence identifying Afghanistan as the new home of Al Qaeda, the Taliban’s unwillingness to expel Al Qaeda, and the Al Qaeda bombings at the U.S. embassy just months before.¹¹⁰ The uneasy tension between the Taliban and the U.S. grew after Al Qaeda’s claim to the September 11th attack in America. The months following September 11th proved to be crucial in the fight against terrorism and because of the “Taliban's repeated refusal

¹⁰⁶ Rahimullah Yusufzai, “Taliban reject UN report on violation of women’s rights,” *Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan*, March 13, 2000, accessed May 17, 2011, <http://www.rawa.org/un-reprt.htm>.

¹⁰⁷ Allison Bukowski, “The 1998 Bombings of the United States Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania: The Failure to Prevent and Effectively Respond to an Act of Terrorism,” *Project on National Security Reform*, accessed May 22, 2011, <http://www.pnsr.org/web/page/921/sectionid/579/pagelevel/3/interior.asp>.

¹⁰⁸ “Background Note: Afghanistan.”

¹⁰⁹ Allison, Bukowski, “The 1998...”

¹¹⁰ Background Notes: Afghanistan.”

to expel bin Laden and his group and end its support for international terrorism.”¹¹¹ The U.S. and its allies began a military campaign that targeted both Al Qaeda camps and Taliban military posts. This military pressure caused the Taliban to disperse at the end of 2001, allowing for the establishment of a democracy in Afghanistan.¹¹²

2.2.1 A NEW ERA FOR AFGHANISTAN?

In 2004, Afghanistan, newly named Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, drafted its constitution which gave “women full citizenship, with legal rights and duties to those of men.”¹¹³ The state based its legal foundation on both civil and Sharia law, as the country is 80% Sunni Muslims, 19% Shia Muslims, and 1% other.¹¹⁴ Shortly after the drafting of the constitution, the first democratic elections were held and Hamid Karzai was announced the winner—eight million Afghans voted, 41% of them women.¹¹⁵ This was a historic change in Afghanistan as two million women returned to school and even more to work, some in very prestigious positions.¹¹⁶ For instance, Dr. Massouda Jala was the first woman to run for the presidency. She lost to President Karzai, but she came in ahead of many male candidates.¹¹⁷ She was appointed Minister of Women’s Affairs. Then there is Malalai Joya, another active Afghan woman, who was the youngest parliamentarian in the National Assembly of Afghanistan. Her presence in the National Assembly created hope for many women in the country as Joya was a physical representation of the changing policies.

¹¹¹ Background Notes: Afghanistan.”

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Anita Raj, Charlemagne Gomez, and Jay G. Silverman, “Driven to a Fiery Death—The Tragedy of Self-Immolation in Afghanistan,” *The New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 358, (2008): 2201.

¹¹⁴ “The World Factbook: Afghanistan,” *The Central Intelligence Agency*, accessed May 18, 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>.

¹¹⁵ “Background Notes: Afghanistan.”

¹¹⁶ “Women’s Rights in Afghanistan,” *CBS News*, October 14, 2009, accessed May 17, 2011, <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=5384993n>.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Since the fall of the Taliban, there have been three major steps towards women's equality in Afghanistan. First in 2005, Afghanistan signed the Protocol for the Elimination of Forced and Child Marriage.¹¹⁸ This protocol makes a conscious effort towards the elimination of forced and child marriages, which are historically very common in Afghanistan. According to the United Nations Development Fund for Women, "70%-80% of female Afghans are forced into marriages and 57 percent are married before 16 years of age."¹¹⁹ Secondly, one year later in 2006 Afghanistan set up the National Development Strategy. This strategy "includes as goals the elimination of discrimination against women and the promotion of women in leadership."¹²⁰ Thirdly, in 2009, the Afghan government tried passing a law that would forbid Shia women from refusing sexual intercourse with their husbands for more than four days.¹²¹ This law would essentially legalize marital rape. Roughly "300 to 500 women protested the law while 600 to 700 demonstrators marched in support of it... The marchers who opposed the law included several female members of Afghanistan's parliament."¹²² However, during the protest, women were greeted by an angry mob that threw rocks and rubbish at them. This was a small step towards equality because there were brave enough to take a stance against the patriarchal government but, in the end, it was international pressure that caused the law to be revamped.¹²³

Regardless of this small victory and movement towards equality, Afghan women still hold a subordinate social position to men. Since the fall of the Taliban and the democratization

¹¹⁸ Raj, Gomez, and Silverman, 2201.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 2201.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 2201.

¹²¹ "Afghanistan to change controversial 'rape' law," *CNN News*, April 16, 2009, accessed May 18, 2011, http://articles.cnn.com/2009-04-16/world/afghanistan.law.karzai_1_afghan-parliament-president-hamid-karzai-law?_s=PM:WORLD.

¹²² "Afghanistan to change controversial 'rape' law."

¹²³ "Afghanistan 'rape' law puts women's rights front and center," *CNN News*, April 6, 2009, accessed May 31, 2011, http://articles.cnn.com/2009-04-06/world/afghanistan.law_1_karzai-government-president-hamid-karzai-taliban-regime?_s=PM:WORLD.

of the country, there have been provisions implemented into the constitution that protect women's rights but these provisions are not translating into society.¹²⁴ On the surface one could argue change is happening but—Is it really? For instance, Jala was dismissed from her position as Minister of Women's Affairs because she “pushed too aggressively for women's rights.”¹²⁵ Then Joya “publicly denounced the presence of warlords and war criminals in the Assembly,” and accused her peers of being corrupt.¹²⁶ Because of her behavior and acute accusations, she was dismissed from her position as well and forced into hiding.¹²⁷ Women like Jala and Joya represent a double-edged sword of an Islamic state's effort to transition into democracy—the liberal democratic component of equality seems to conflict with that of this traditional Islamic society.

2.3 MUSLIM CULTURE AND THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world.¹²⁸ It is often associated with the Middle East, but only 25 percent of the world's Muslim population lives in the Middle East.¹²⁹ The majority of Muslims are spread throughout Asia, Africa, and in the former Soviet Union countries of Central Asia.

Modern Islam is not known for its equal treatment of women, but it was not always so restrictive of women. Although restrictions on women are still present at the time, Muhammad was considered “sympathetic to women and was concerned about their equal treatment,

¹²⁴ “Women's Rights in Afghanistan.”

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ “Malalai Joya, dismissed Afghani Parliamentarian, spoke at Arch Street (Pa.) Meeting,” *Friends Journal*, accessed May 17, 2011, <http://www.friendsjournal.org/malalai-joya-former-female-parliamentarian-na>.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Campbell and Guiao, 784.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 785.

including full religious responsibility.”¹³⁰ He attracted very independent and strong women. His first wife, Khadija, was a wealthy widowed tradeswoman who, ten years his senior, proposed to him.¹³¹ During their marriage, Muhammad took no other wives but after Khadija’s death, he acquired eleven more wives and concubines—one was a judge, another was a warrior, and a third was a political activist.¹³² However, Muhammad began receiving messages from Allah about women. It is believed that these messages arrived from Allah because enemies of Islam were harassing his wives and Allah told him “he was to seclude his wives for their protection.”¹³³ It is important to note that women play another important role in Islam. They are seen as incredibly sexualized figures who are more aggressive and keen on sexual intercourse than men.¹³⁴ This leads men to view women as temptresses and as distractions from Allah. Women’s sexualized nature, coupled with harassment from other men, caused women to be hidden away. It is documented that after Muhammad established Islam, he accused women of being filled with sin by saying, “he had been shown hellfire and the majority of its inhabitants were women.”¹³⁵

Scholars Elizabeth Campbell and Isabelita Guiao have analyzed Islam and they have identified four commonalities that appear across most Muslim communities.¹³⁶ These commonalities are particularly true in Chechen and Afghan societies. The first commonality is family unity. The elders in the family generally arrange all marriages. Further, extended families usually live together under one roof—the new wife goes to live with her husband’s

¹³⁰ Jeri Altneu Sechzer, “‘Islam and Woman: Where Tradition Meets Modernity’: History and Interpretations of Islamic Women’s Status,” *Sex Roles*, vol. 51, no. 5-6 (2004): 263.

¹³¹ Campbell and Guiao, 785.

¹³² Ibid, 785.

¹³³ Ibid, 785.

¹³⁴ Daniel Pipes, “Why Muslim Countries Treat Women Differently,” *George Mason University’s History News Network*, July 4, 2004, accessed May 19, 2011, <http://hnn.us/articles/5341.html>.

¹³⁵ Campbell and Guiao, 785.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 786.

family. The second commonality is child marriages or forced marriages. Campbell and Guiao argue, “Some families offer their daughters, some as young as nine years old, to men who offer the highest dowries... once married, Muslim women are expected to stay at home, raise children, and hide themselves under layers of cloth to avoid male attention.”¹³⁷ The third commonality is polygamy. According to Sharia law, a man cannot marry more than four women and he must treat them all equally.¹³⁸ However, if a woman does not get equal treatment, she has no choice than to accept her fate as it is very difficult for women to get legal backing to seek recourse for breaking this law. The fourth similarity is male punishment. Men are responsible for training their wives and if a wife acts shamefully, the man has a right to hit her. Campbell and Guiao argue that as long as the beatings are not excessive or disfiguring, they are acceptable.¹³⁹

Women in Chechnya and Afghanistan face these four commonalities daily. Yet in addition to these four elements, Chechen and Afghan cultures place a very strong emphasis on honor and shame. Within these communities, any act of shaming the family (i.e. adultery, rape, or barrenness) can lead to potential violence or ostracism from their families and community.¹⁴⁰ Shame can be easily and unintentionally imposed. For example, in cases of rape or barrenness, a woman does not choose these acts—she is a victim—yet she still brings shame to her family because of it.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Campbell and Guiao, 786.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 786.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 786.

¹⁴⁰ O’Rourke, 711.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 712.

2.3.1 CHECHNYA: BLACK WIDOWS

Drawing on scholarly literature, it is arguable that Chechen women turn to terrorism as a way to acquire political agency. They are rendered voiceless by two different factors for two different reasons. First, Russia marginalizes Chechen women by taking advantage of their vulnerability. During the wars, for instance, Russian troops demanded money from fathers otherwise the troops would rape their daughters.¹⁴² It is shameful for Islamic women to be victims of rape and Russian troops were aware of this cultural stigma. Thus, they have exploited Chechen culture and Chechen women to make money. Secondly, Chechen men marginalized Chechen women. This can be seen through forced marriages, child marriages, and domestic abuse, which are all part of Chechen daily life.

Chechnya experienced a great amount of casualties during the wars with Russia. Many civilians, particularly women and children, were killed and nearly a whole generation of men eliminated. Thus, Chechen women are still living in the emotional and physical aftermath of the wars. This acts as a constant reminder of their frustration. Anne Nivat, another second generation terrorism scholar, claims that the Chechen youth is the group that has been most affected by the last decade of war and religious extremism. She argues:

Religion as a new element in the nation-building process of the region has had a strong impact on the young: to them, being a “Wahhabi,” despite the fact that they do not really understand what it means, is above all a way to exist, and to exist differently among the vast majority on non-Muslim people within the Russian federation.¹⁴³

Nivat has interviewed the female friends and family of Aminat, one of the nineteen female suicide bombers present at the Dubrovka Theater hostage attack in Moscow. It is clear from

¹⁴² Bloom, 157.

¹⁴³ Anne Nivat, “The Black Widows: Chechen Women Join the Fight for Independent—and Allah,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 28 (2005): 417.

these interviews that the women believe their violent acts are validated.¹⁴⁴ Aminat's 19-year old sister, Maaka, believes that surviving a war "does not make it easier to live 'normally.'"¹⁴⁵ Maaka defends her sister's actions and suggests she will do the same if the situation does not improve in Chechnya. She said, "If they don't let us live as we want, I would gladly join her in paradise."¹⁴⁶

Nivat argues that Chechnya is in a state of psychological chaos and these young Chechen women are unstoppable because they have no fear of death.¹⁴⁷ Thus, for many Chechen women, the option of suicide bombing provides them a way to express their frustrations and acquire a voice in their country and throughout the world.

2.3.2 AFGHANISTAN: SELF-IMMOLATION

Violence and Afghanistan have gone hand-in-hand over the last decade—ranging from the current war to large amounts of domestic violence. Aziz argues, "It is an unfortunate truth that violence is entrenched in the Afghan society."¹⁴⁸ Thus, it is no wonder that women have had a difficult time acquiring the equality that the Afghan government, culture, tradition, and religion seem to be denying them.

Women are having a difficult time gaining equality in Afghanistan for two additional intertwined reasons: literacy and healthcare. Literacy rates among Afghan women are approximately 12 percent.¹⁴⁹ Without education and the ability to read, women find themselves greatly limited. Global reports show that women who commit self-immolation are generally

¹⁴⁴ Nivat, 416.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 416.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 416.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 417

¹⁴⁸ Aziz, 49.

¹⁴⁹ "CIA World Factbook: Afghanistan."

young and uneducated.¹⁵⁰ In KH. O. Khushkadamnova's research on female self-immolation, she discovered that women do not know their rights, likely because they cannot read, nor do they know anything about the legal systems. One of Khushkadamnova's interviewees when asked about self-immolation said:

Women are not well prepared for life, they have a low level of education. An intelligent woman would never do such a thing. The reason for this is inadequate knowledge and a low level of culture. It is essential to teach women their basic rights. I myself am a woman of the East, and I want to know the laws.¹⁵¹

It is clear that education could change the lives of Afghan women and give them the means necessary to move from second-class citizens to first class citizens. Secondly, healthcare is a major concern for women in Afghanistan. The average fertility rate is 7.5 children per mother, each birth bringing the mother close to death because Afghanistan has the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world.¹⁵² Women simply cannot get the services they need and are dying at shocking rates.

Scholars seem to agree that women in Afghanistan are committing self-immolation as a form of protest against their society and the way they are treated. They are very limited in the ways they can make change. A majority cannot read, many risk death to give life, and most are engulfed in the fears of shaming their families—thus their actions appear justified. Their violent acts of self-immolation gives them the voice they desire. Khushkadamnova argues, “Choosing this way to end their lives is their method of protest against unresolved social problems.”¹⁵³ Additionally, Anita Raj, Charlemagne Gomez, and Jay Silverman, who are self-immolation researchers, claim, “Women and girls appear to see [self-immolation] as a means of

¹⁵⁰ Campbell and Guiao, 787.

¹⁵¹ KH.O. Khushkadamova, “Women's Self-Immolation as a Social Phenomenon,” *Sociological Research*, vol. 49 (2010): 89.

¹⁵² Raj, Gomez, and Silverman, 2201.

¹⁵³ Khushkadamova, 76.

both escaping from intolerable conditions and speaking out against abuse, since their actual voices do not bring about changes that would allow them to lead safe and secure lives.”¹⁵⁴

2.4 THE GENDER PARADOX OF SUICIDE AND VIOLENCE

It is important to note the method that both female suicide bombers and female self-immolators choose to express their desire for political agency. Unlike other actors who might only be interested in expressing angst through the violent killing of others, these women kill themselves. Thus, one cannot overlook suicide in both these cases.

Suicidologists have found an interesting tie between gender and suicide in Western societies. It is clear that women attempt suicide more than men, but men have much higher rates of success.¹⁵⁵ Though there have been awareness campaigns over the last few decades, suicide still remains a large killer in the West. There is a suicide ratio of four males to one female in the U.S.¹⁵⁶ and a ratio of three to one in the U.K.¹⁵⁷ Due to greater rates of male success, suicide is viewed as a male/masculine activity in Western society. Furthermore, men have traditionally used more active, visibly violent, and more lethal methods to facilitate their suicide such as firearms, jumping, and hanging.¹⁵⁸

When women commit suicide they tend to use more ‘feminized’ and passive methods such as poisoning or pill ingestion.¹⁵⁹ This passive attempt at suicide again confirms Western

¹⁵⁴ Raj, Gomez, and Silverman, 2201.

¹⁵⁵ “Statistics,” *American Association of Suicidology*, accessed March 24, 2011, <http://www.suicidology.org/web/guest/home>.

¹⁵⁶ “Suicide Facts (US),” *SAVE: Suicide Awareness Voices of Education*, accessed March 23, 2011, http://www.save.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewpage&page_id=705d5df4-055b-f1ec-3f66462866fcb4e6.

¹⁵⁷ “Statistics—facts.” *NHS Website*, February 2, 2009, accessed March 24, 2011, <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Suicide/Pages/Facts.aspx>.

¹⁵⁸ Katrina Jaworski, “THE MALE PRESERVE OF MARTYDOM: Representations of Palestinian female suicide bombers in Australian newsprint media,” *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 10 (2010): 121.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 121.

society's view of suicide as far more masculine than feminine, a more male than female activity.

Katrina Jaworski argues that the interpretation of reason, when it comes to suicide, plays an important role in the gender dynamics and how Western society views it. She argues:

Women's suicides are interpreted specifically through the lens of relationship breakdown as a result of emotional weakness and internal turmoil... men's suicides are read as signals of courage, pride, and resistance against external circumstances such as loss of employment or severe physical illness.¹⁶⁰

In other words, successful suicidal males are seen as “strong heroes who have attempted to restore ‘their lost power and dignity’”¹⁶¹ while women who commit suicide are viewed as highly emotional and unable to cope with distress, severely depressed, and looking for a ‘way out.’

The way Western society views suicide is an indicator of the way these women are represented in the media. Female suicide bombers and female self-immolators challenge Western society's collective understanding of suicide because they are not simply taking their own lives but violently taking their own lives.

Emotional behavior is often associated with female violence. In the early 1990s, the then director of Germany's intelligence-gathering network, Herr Christian Lochte, was asked about advice allegedly given to recruits in West Germany's armed anti-terrorists squad. The advice was to shoot the women first.¹⁶² Though no one could remember hearing those exact instructions, “they considered it to be a damn good piece of advice.”¹⁶³ Director Lochte said:

¹⁶⁰ Jaworsk, 122.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 122.

¹⁶² MacDonald, 4.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 4.

For anyone who loves his life, it is a very clever idea to shoot the women first. From my experience, women terrorists have much stronger characters, more power, more energy. There are some examples where men waited a moment before they fired, and women shot at once.¹⁶⁴

Director Lochte suggests that women are emotional and uncalculated—women do not think prior to shooting and they are dangerous because of their irrationality. While in contrast, men and male violence is rational, emotionless, and highly calculated. Meaning women react irrationally in violent situations and men rationally. This belief could arguably be one of the reasons women do not hold front line combat positions in any Western military.

In the next chapter I will discuss the media's gender stereotype framing and representation of Black Widows and Afghan female self-immolators, two actors who commit suicide. There will be five frames: Feminized Imagery, Violence Breeds Violence, Islamic Honor, Manipulation and Male Control, and Irrational Women.

¹⁶⁴ MacDonald, 4.

CHAPTER 3 – GENDER STEREOTYPE FRAMES

As shown in the last chapter, Chechen Black Widows and female Afghan self-immolators are acting violently to gain political agency and obtain a voice. However, Western media is misreporting and misrepresenting these women because Western society does not know how to comprehend female violence. Female violence, especially violence resulting in suicide, bends gender roles and challenges society's perspective of gender. Thus, in order for the media to comprehend and report on these women, the media resorts to gender stereotype framing to help explain the phenomenon.

As established in Chapter 1, the media uses frames to process, comprehend, and report the news. It is apparent that media framing has become crucial to the public's understanding of female violence, giving the media the ability to directly influence the way particular situations are perceived and understood. Nacos, referring specifically to the U.S. media argues, "Newsrooms are not hermetically sealed against the prejudices that play perniciously just beneath the surface of American life...the result is that the media continues to use different framing patterns in the news about women and men." This argument can easily be applied to other English speaking Western countries. Nacos argues that gender stereotypes are visible through the framing of female behavior—legitimate and illegitimate females actors acting in inherently male roles. Here I build on that by posing that gender stereotype framing is also prevalent in the media's representation of two illegitimate violent actors.¹⁶⁵

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze five gender stereotype frames that I have identified in Western media's reporting of Black Widows and female Afghan self-immolators. These frames are Feminized Imagery, Violence Breeds Violence, Islamic Honor, Manipulation

¹⁶⁵ All media sources have been assigned an identification number for easy categorization. See: Annex 1 and Annex 2.

and Male Control, and Irrational Women. As previously mentioned, these frames are inspired by Nacos' article where she identifies gender framing in Western media's representation of female politicians and female terrorists. Nacos' empirical examples nicely fit into each frame she identifies because of her large range of empirical evidence. With such a large scope she is able to be more selective and pick examples that allow her to create well-defined and very clear frames. In contrast, I have specific empirical examples that are far more narrow than Nacos'. This narrowed scope has allowed for more in-depth research but less defined frames. Thus, the five frames I have observed in Western reporting of Black Widows and female Afghan self-immolators have an element of overlap, meaning many gender stereotypes found in Western media can fit in more than one frame. As an example, the *Los Angeles Times* writes:

Chechen culture tends to link women's identities to their fathers, husbands, and sons. And so it is no surprise that, in a place where so many men have met violent ends, there is an ample supply of women who feel that they have lost motivation to live, and it's all the better if they can give their lives to the cause.¹⁶⁶

This passage could fall under the Violence Breed Violence or the Islamic Honor frame. Because of this obstacle, I have had to use discretion in placing the empirical examples in the frames they best represent.

3.1 FEMINIZED IMAGERY

This section focuses on how the news is perceived upon first glance. This frame is important for two reasons. First, the general populous reads headlines and views pictures before reading the article. The information in the headline and the chosen photos are what determines whether the reader will actually read the report. However, whether the reader continues or not, they have already been exposed to the media's gender stereotyping of violent women.

¹⁶⁶ BW-LA1.

Secondly, the Feminized Imagery frame is likely the most important frame that the media uses to represent female suicide bombers and female self-immolators as ‘others.’ This ‘othering’ allows the Western audience to detach from the situation and see the violent women as ‘not one of ours.’

The first method that the media uses to perpetuate gender stereotypes in the Feminized Imagery frame is headlines. Headlines such as, “Chechnya’s female bombers”¹⁶⁷ and “Afghan women seek death by fire,” lump together gender and nationality.¹⁶⁸ As Jaworski claims, there is a problem stemming from the language used. She makes a specific argument about suicide bombers, but this argument can be applied to self-immolators as well. She argues, “The interpretation of differences is not a self-evident matter of identifying someone as a female and as a woman but, rather, interpreting something as different because suicide bombing is largely presumed to be a universally masculine activity...inscribed through male bodies.”¹⁶⁹ Male suicide bombers or male self-immolators are never gendered, nor labeled male in the media. It is apparent that through language, that “being male is self-evident and thus does not require direct naming.”¹⁷⁰ This becomes another example of gender stereotyping and the media’s inability to explain these violent women.

¹⁶⁷ BW-BBC1.

¹⁶⁸ SI-T1.

¹⁶⁹ Jaworski, 125.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 125.

Image A

Chechen suicide bomber.¹⁷¹



Image B

Afghan self-immolator (survivor).¹⁷²



As Davis argues, visual images are one of the five most important elements of frame development. Visual imagery is a powerful technique commonly used to present terrorists and self-immolators to the public. In the photos above, the first is of Dzhennet Abdurakhmanova, a 17-year old Black Widow responsible for the Moscow metro bombing in March 2010.¹⁷³ She is pictured here prior to her suicide bombing mission, fully veiled holding a gun. The second image is of Hayato, a 36-year old Afghan. The burnt skin on her hands is displayed as if they are a symbol of a horrible past and an unsure future. This photo was taken after her second attempt of suicide by self-immolation, which she blames on her husband's abuse.¹⁷⁴ The women's hands are important in these photos—one with a gun, the other with burns—displayed like symbols of their desired emancipation. Furthermore, the women's eyes play a significant role. Both intensely gaze into the camera as if to suggest that they are not ashamed of their actions.

When showing photos of Black Widows and female Afghan self-immolators, the most common photos published show women wearing traditional Islamic dress—often covering their

¹⁷¹ BW-DM2.

¹⁷² SI-PY1.

¹⁷³ BW-DM2.

¹⁷⁴ SI-PY1.

hair, faces, or both. When such images are seen, it allows the readers to rely on their own opinions and prejudices, often feeling uneasy at the inability to see the woman's entire face. Western culture relies heavily on sight and visibility in connection to trust, which makes it understandable for the reader to glance at these photos and feel unnerved. It is noteworthy to mention that though male suicide bombers and male self-immolators are susceptible to 'othering' in headlines, they are not represented by gender stereotypes. Moreover, the images of them do not involve hiding their faces for two likely reasons. First, men do not wear veils in Islamic culture. Secondly, and more importantly as argued in the last chapter, male suicide is an act of pride and courage, thus they have nothing to hide—exposure makes their suicide valid.

The final method that the media uses to portray violent women in the Feminized Imagery frame is a descriptive (often feminized or gruesome) vernacular meant to muster emotions in the reader. For instance, in a story published by the *Los Angeles Times*, the journalist describes Abdurakhmanova and her accomplice after the Moscow metro attack as such, "Their heads were severed, blown off their bodies by the forces of the suicide bombs they detonated...their eyes are closed as if in prayer."¹⁷⁵ This is clearly meant to evoke emotions in the reader. At the same time, *The Daily Mail* described Abdurakhmanova as "baby-faced" and "only" 17-years old.¹⁷⁶ Female Afghan self-immolators are equally gendered in the media. They are reported as having "eyes full of grief,"¹⁷⁷ others have "charred cheeks, blackened finger tips...racked with unimaginable pain."¹⁷⁸ The author of a *BBC* human-interest story reports, "This is not hard to write, it's cathartic. Shooting the story though was anything but raw emotions accumulated—anger, sorrow, revulsion, and anger again." Arguably the

¹⁷⁵ BW-LA1.

¹⁷⁶ BW-DM2.

¹⁷⁷ SI-G4.

¹⁷⁸ SI-G5.

Feminized Imagery frame is the most prevalent in the media's representation of these violent women. It uses their own gender against them, downplays their voice, and forces the Western audience to become overly emotional while exposed to the framing.

3.2 VIOLENCE BREEDS VIOLENCE

Violence Breeds Violence is the second frame that the media uses to rationalize female violence. Through this frame, the media suggests that a woman's violent behavior is excusable because of her environment (e.g. she lives in a war zone or she is trapped in an abusive marriage, etc). The *New York Times* writes that after "decades of war and destruction, including atrocities by Russian forces, women have [been] driven to desperate acts...the war has created the favorable soil for such extremists."¹⁷⁹ Additionally, *The Star* reports that Afghan self-immolators are "choosing suicide to escape the violence of their daily lives."¹⁸⁰ The media disregards the notion that women can and often do act violently regardless of environmental stimuli. Furthermore, Western media reports women as having "strong personal rather than political motives"¹⁸¹ while completely excluding any notion that female suicide bombers and female self-immolators are voiceless members of their society.

In the case of Chechen female suicide bombers, the media clings to the notion that Chechnya has a war torn history and suffered great male casualties. Thus, every article has two similarities. First, each article refers to Chechen women as vengeful retribution-seekers driven to violence by the death of their beloved male relatives. A British newspaper defines Chechen female bombers as a "suicide squad made up of women who have lost male relatives, usually

¹⁷⁹ BW-NYT5.

¹⁸⁰ SI-S1.

¹⁸¹ Nacos, 440.

husbands or brothers, to the conflict.”¹⁸² Others refer to them as a “phenomenon”¹⁸³ and report that they “turn themselves into human bombs and [are] sent off to kill civilians in Russian cities [because] often their husbands were killed by security forces.”¹⁸⁴ As explained in Chapter 1, the lack of statistical data about female suicide bombers’ motives suggest that the media unjustly and unrightfully chooses “revenge” as the sole motivator.¹⁸⁵ The second similarity between all the articles is the use of the title ‘Black Widow.’ It was the Russian media that originally used this title and it quickly spread across the globe as a common way to refer to these women.¹⁸⁶ Western media harps on the fact that these women are dressed in full black burqas—black being a symbol of mourning—to invoke images of a grief stricken widow who turns to terrorism as a way to avenge her husband’s death.

Afghanistan is currently at the center of an armed conflict and this coupled with the country’s traditional patriarchal society has caused women to suffer human rights violations and inequality issues. However, the media uses this fact as the basis for its Violence Breeds Violence framing by emphasizing the physical violence present in Afghan households and using this violence as a justified motivator for female self-immolation. *The New York Times* reports, “Violence in the lives of Afghanistan’s women comes from everywhere: from her father or brother, from her husband, from her father-in-law, from her mother-in-law and sister-in-law.”¹⁸⁷ Another writes, “More Afghan women are choosing suicide to escape the violence and brutality of their daily lives.”¹⁸⁸ With statements like these, the media leads the audience to

¹⁸² BW-G1.

¹⁸³ BW-ST1.

¹⁸⁴ BW-NYT3.

¹⁸⁵ See: Chapter 1.

¹⁸⁶ BW-AW1.

¹⁸⁷ SI-NY2.

¹⁸⁸ SI-S1.

believe Afghan women are in a state of despair—everything and everyone is against them—and suicide is the only way out.

The media reports that domestic violence and mistreatment is the driving motivation for self-immolation. One American newspaper tells the story of Fawazi, a 16-year old girl forced to marry her cousin and endure constant abuse from her in-laws. The newspaper writes, “Fawazi withstood such treatment for three excruciating years. Not until Fawzai’s brother-in-law struck the head of his wife with a handgun did she threaten to do what she thought was a sure way to suicide: self-immolation.”¹⁸⁹ The *Daily Mail*, a British newspaper reports, “One woman committed suicide by setting herself ablaze after her father-in-law tried to rape her. Another set herself on fire because her brothers would not let her marry...yet another told her mother before she died that her husband beat her daily.”¹⁹⁰ Then there is the story told by *Marie Claire* about Marzia, a girl no older than 15 years old. The report reads:

[She had] plugged in the television that her husband recently brought home and it short-circuited. Because it was the first television she had ever owned, Marzia believed that it was beyond repair. “My husband had worked for months to buy that TV, and I felt awful,” she said. Terrified at the prospect of her husband’s wrath, she set herself on fire.¹⁹¹

It is clear that Marzia lived in an unstable and abusive environment—the media claiming her fear for her husband was the motivation for her immolation, yet the story does not disclose any other possible reasons. Thus, the frames force the audience to accept that her abusive environment led to her attempted suicide.

The media justifies the behavior of Black Widows and female Afghan self-immolators by claiming their violent environment sparks their violent behavior. The media does not look

¹⁸⁹ SI-WS1.

¹⁹⁰ SI-DM1.

¹⁹¹ SI-MC1.

beyond the surface and ask why women are pursuing such violence or why they are so willing to kill themselves. The reports are designed to pull on the heartstrings of the audience because the reports tell emotionally charged individual cases. These cases show Western media's need to justify female violence by framing it as violence breeds violence.

3.3 ISLAMIC HONOR

The third frame used by the media is Islamic Honor. This frame encompasses all elements of religion, tradition, and family honor. This, like the other frames, is presented by the media as a form of justification for female violence in Chechnya and Afghanistan. Religion and the traditions of Islam are commonly brought up and used as a justification for the women's violence—with an especially strong emphasis on the concepts of honor and shame. It is important to note that not one media report fails to mention the women's religion or religious customs.

As established in Chapter 2, the concepts of honor and shame are the binding elements of Islamic society. Shame can easily be imposed on a family for reasons such as barrenness, divorce, adultery and most commonly, rape. The media focuses heavily on the notion of rape as a motivating factor for Black Widows. A Canadian newspaper reports, "Chechen women who join their people's struggle often do so because they have been previously raped by Russian soldiers and have subsequently been persuaded that violence is the only way to 'redeem' themselves."¹⁹² By redeeming themselves, they believe that they can restore family honor. However, the BBC reports, "Most of the Chechens react with shock and almost a sense of shame at the fact that women are taking an increasing role in the fight."¹⁹³ Consequently, the

¹⁹² BW-S2.

¹⁹³ BW-BBC2.

media is suggesting that women turn to terrorism because of shame, but the act of terrorism brings more shame. Further, according to National Geographic:

A number of pregnant Chechen women have [blown themselves up]. It's terribly disturbing... There were even allegations that some of these women were having extramarital affairs, which are not acceptable in that society... They saw their lives on Earth as too difficult to handle, and when they reached that stage, in their minds, taking out the enemy was an opportunity to become a hero: Why not redeem [her]self and [her] family.¹⁹⁴

It is clear from these examples that the media is portraying Islamic Honor as an important element in Chechen society. Additionally, one would think that Black Widows are driven solely by religion and religious customs because nearly every article refers to them as extreme “militant Islamists.”¹⁹⁵ If readers were not informed of their initial intentions of secession from Russia, one would never learn of it from the media. The media plays so heavily on religion it nearly forgets Chechnya's separatist goals.

Like Chechnya, Afghan society circulates around religion, customs, shame, and family. As established, the elements of honor and shame are driving forces in Muslim communities. To shame one's family is the worst kind of embarrassment, not to mention dangerous, as it could lead to ostracism. Yet the media has taken this scholarly supported argument and extended it as a justification for self-immolation. As a *New York Times* report claims, “Their family is their fate.”¹⁹⁶

MSNBC, a major U.S. media provider, reported of a 16-year old girl named Gulsum, who was betrothed to a man 24-years her senior. The report says, “The marriage proposal came with a simple cultural gesture her father could not refuse: The groom's sister-in-law lay her newborn son at the father's feet—an act signifying purity and innocence—and asked for the

¹⁹⁴ BW-NG1.

¹⁹⁵ BW-ST1

¹⁹⁶ SI-NY2.

girl's hand.”¹⁹⁷ According to *MSNBC*, the father was bound by tradition. He is reported saying, “The baby is like a holy book, so I [couldn't] say ‘no.’”¹⁹⁸ Yet six months later, his daughter lit herself on fire after enduring daily beatings from her new husband. When she did it, “the family did not help...the neighbors wrapped her in a blanket to put out the fire.”¹⁹⁹ The family she was forced to rely on, turned their backs when she did something shameful—such as trying to commit suicide.

The media reports that families often lie to cover up the truth about the women's burns. This is done to avoid additional shame because suicide is a sin in Islam. Therefore, the family claims it as an accident. *The Guardian* reports of a relative who claims, “It was all a terrible mistake, an unfortunate cooking accident.”²⁰⁰ Yet the nurse on duty told the reporter, “No, it wasn't...they always try to keep it a secret.”²⁰¹ A major U.S. newspaper tells of a young girl who set herself on fire and 58 percent of her body suffered severe burns. While the family was driving her to the hospital, the girl's husband whispered to her, “If anyone asks you, don't tell them my name; don't say I had anything to do with it.”²⁰² This focus on denial, fear, and shame develops the Islamic Honor frame further because it shows that female violence must be justified and the media is using religion, traditions, and their families to explain the events.

3.4 MANIPULATION AND MALE CONTROL

Manipulation and Male Control is the fourth frame used by the media. This frame focuses on the gender stereotype that these women are pawns in a man's world. The media

¹⁹⁷ SI-MSNBC2.

¹⁹⁸ SI-MSNBC2.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ SI-G5.

²⁰¹ SI-G5.

²⁰² SI-NY2.

suggests that they are easily controlled by male manipulation, coercion, and restrictions. Moreover, this frame simply implies men force women into violence.

The media claims Black Widows are coerced and drugged into compliance and violence. According to *The Star*, “Coercion of one sort or another seems to be a central factor when women allow bomb vests to be strapped around their midriffs and agree to carry out acts of political violence.”²⁰³ *The New York Times* claims, “Women have been coerced, brainwashed and even drugged by Chechen terrorists in order to carry out the attacks.” The report goes on to mention Zarema Muzhikhoyeva, the first Black Widow ever to be caught, claiming, “She had been recruited to terrorism out of shame and debt. Her handlers gave her orange juice that made her dizzy and dispatched her [on her mission].”²⁰⁴ Like Muzhikhoyeva, other women have been reported being “drugged.” For instance, *The Seattle Times* interviewed a witness to the March 2010 metro bombers in Moscow. The witness saw the Black Widow bomber before the attack and described her as having “glassy eyes, as if she were on drugs.”²⁰⁵ He continued by explaining, “He thought she was mentally ill.”²⁰⁶ The *Los Angeles Times* reports Black Widows as being “drugged and hypnotized into compliance.”²⁰⁷

When it comes to female Afghan self-immolators, the media blames coercion and the restrictions men place on women in the society. An example of the media’s justification for female violence can be seen in a report done by *BBC*. This report features Zeinab, an 18-year old mother of two, who for two years endured her husband’s relentless beatings and one day decided to pour lamp oil all over herself in front of her husband. The story reports that the husband egged her on by telling her that he spent good money on the oil, now she must use it or

²⁰³ BW-S2.

²⁰⁴ BW-NYT5.

²⁰⁵ BW-ST6.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ BW-LA1.

it is a waste.²⁰⁸ Zeinab dropped the match and set herself on fire because of her husband's taunts. The media makes it appear that coercion was the obvious reason for her self-immolation—framed perfectly to appear that her husband's cruelty was the sole reason for the striking of the match. An example of restrictions imposed on women in Afghanistan and the representation in the media can be seen in many reports. One NGO writes, "Women are not allowed to go on their own in taxi cars, they are sort of socially policed if they are talking to other men, they have to be in the burqa, they have restrictions on freedom to work."²⁰⁹ The media repeatedly mentions the oppressive patriarchal society that Afghan women live in. The same NGO reports, "The problem is that women are so restricted that for them to even get out of the house, to be able to seek support is also sometimes very difficult."²¹⁰ There is the case of Fazela, a 15-year old self-immolator. She told *Radio Free Europe*, "I really wanted to leave the house...but he took my burqa and did not let me go outside of the house."²¹¹

It is clear that manipulation, coercion, restrictions, and male control are all ways that the media tries to justify female violence. By blaming female violence on external uncontrollable circumstances, the women remain "innocent" and "feminine" in the eyes of the Western audience. By representing these women as pawns in a man's world, it explains their violent suicide and their position within what is seen as an inherently masculine role.

3.5 IRRATIONAL WOMEN

The final gender stereotype the media uses is the Irrational Women frame. As explored in earlier chapters, female violence is seen as highly emotional and irrational. Director Lochte

²⁰⁸ SI-BBC2.

²⁰⁹ SI-RAWA1.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ SI-RFE2.

confirmed that women are more likely in situations of war and violence to pull the trigger before a man, hence the advice of shoot the women first. Female violent irrationality is transferred into the media. This frame of Irrational Women encompasses three major elements of irrationality to which the media pays close attention: depression, desperation, and threat making.

Repeatedly throughout the media, reports can be seen about Chechen women driven to terrorism because of irrational emotions. For example, *BBC* got a rare interview with a young Chechen woman named Kowa whose husband was killed in the war against Russia and who decided to join the Black Widows as a suicide bomber. Kowa said, “I have only one dream now, only one mission—to blow myself up somewhere in Russia, ideally in Moscow, to take as many Russian lives as possible—this is the only way to stop the Russians from killing my people.”²¹² Kowa is convinced her violence will stop other violence. She is irrational, emotionally charged, and making threats. When asked about her daughter she said, “I have a daughter who is 18 months old, but it’s not worth living for my child, not now that my husband is dead.”²¹³ This is particularly powerful framing because it directly defies the Western notion of women as caregivers to children. Kowa challenges gender roles. The media uses her story to justify her behavior because she is not a “normal” woman.

The reports of female self-immolators are no different. The women are portrayed as equally irrational as Chechen Black Widows. For instance, *ABC News* reports of a young Afghan woman who went to a judge and asked for a divorce from her abusive husband but the judge told her “she should not ask for [a] divorce.”²¹⁴ The woman “suddenly jumped [up] and

²¹² BW-BBC2.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ SI-ABC1.

set herself alight” at the courthouse.²¹⁵ She used “petrol smuggled into the court under her burqa.”²¹⁶ The media portrays this woman as quick to react and irrational. However, it ignores that her act was highly calculated since she had planned ahead, thinking to bring the petrol with her. This omission is interesting because it reinforces the fact that the media uses gender stereotyping to process and report the news. If they had brought attention to the fact that she had calculated her suicide by bring the petrol with her, it would suggest the action was rational and emotionless. Such would be incomprehensible to the Western audience as this kind of female violence is not justifiable to them.

Irrational Women is an important frame because it suggests that women are emotional and uncontrolled in violent circumstances or unstable environments. This gender stereotype framing unjustly accuses violent women of being abnormal, gender bending, or being hyper emotional. The media gives no credit to those women who may be violent for the sake of acquiring a voice or political agency.

The next chapter will summarize the arguments set forth in this paper. It will also analyze the media’s representation of female violence and suggest the ramifications these gender stereotype frames could pose to Western society.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ SI-ABC1.

CONCLUSION

North America and the United Kingdom are dependent on the media to report global issues. This dependence gives the media influence over how society perceives, comprehends, and accepts news events. The media—in order to report the news—uses frames to convey consistent, quick, and comprehensible events to the public. However, framing can cause a number of problems because some topics remain, in the era of equality, incomprehensible within society—a topic such as female violence.

Female violence challenges all of Western society's deeply rooted assumptions of traditional gender roles. Violent women bend these gender roles and go against what society views as “acceptable” female behavior. Society finds it difficult to accept women performing violent acts, let alone performing *extremely* violent acts such as suicide bombing and self-immolation, two activities traditionally reserved for men.

Nacos' research on gender stereotypes in the media has been the inspiration for this article. In this article, I expanded Nacos' argument that the media resorts to gender stereotyping frames in order to understand why women acting in inherently masculine roles. She claims that legitimate female politicians and illegitimate female terrorists are framed in similar gender stereotypes and she identifies six gender frames that can be seen throughout her large scope of empirical research.²¹⁷ From this foundation, I narrowed her scope and focused specifically on the media's representation of two illegitimate actors: Chechen Black Widows and female Afghan self-immolators.

Chechen Black Widows and female Afghan self-immolators on the surface have nothing in common other than their violence and their gender. However, upon closer

²¹⁷ Nacos, 440.

examination, it is apparent these women share much more (e.g. culture, tradition, and religion). In this article, I argued that these women are committing violence because they are voiceless members of their societies, and they are participating in gender-bending activities in order to obtain political agency. I explicitly claimed that Western society lacks the ability to comprehend female violence and in order for the media to produce quality comprehensible news, it resorts to gender stereotype framing as a way to rationalize female violence to the public. Though the reason and true motivating factors for these women remain relatively unknown due to the lack of data, the media would have one believe that the answers are cut and dry. The media reinforces and clings to traditional gender roles as a way to explain female violence and rationalize their behavior as desperate, irrational, and frustrated. This is undeniable. Some women are desperate, others irrational, and most frustrated with their situations, but this is not a reason to disregard the fact that they are voiceless actors. By resorting to gender stereotypes, the media is overlooking a major motivating factor for female violence—lack of political agency. To lay this claim, I first had to establish the research explored by other scholars.

In Chapter 1, I examined the sparse scholarly literature regarding female suicide bombers and female self-immolators. It was here that the holes in the preexisting literature were exposed. Both these fields of research have failed to explore *how* questions. However, Nacos has begun to look at this area by asking how the media frames women in inherently masculine roles. Chapter 2 focused primarily on the historical, cultural, and traditional backgrounds of Chechen and Afghan societies in order to develop an understanding and basis of my argument. It was there that I exposed the scholarly information known about these women and their roles in society. It is true that women in Chechnya and Afghanistan are

second-class citizens in their patriarchal societies. They suffer from inequality, lack of education, and simple human rights. Yet, the media is using this knowledge to generate frames in order to report the situation to the West. Finally, Chapter 3 supports my claim through empirical evidence. I identified five gender stereotype frames used by the media to rationalize and justify female violence, particularly Chechen suicide bombers and female self-immolators. These frames are Feminized Imagery, Violence Breeds Violence, Islamic Honor, Manipulation and Male Control, and Irrational Women. Within each frame, the media resorts to hyper-exaggerated stereotypes. This form of framing helps the Western audience to comprehend female violence. Western society easily accepts this explanation because traditional women are not violent. Violence has been a male-dominated activity since the beginning of time—men as hunters, women as gathers; men as knights, women as damsels; men are soldiers, women are nurses.

Many International Relations scholars overlook gender as a vital area of research and because of this there are numerous holes in literature regarding females and female violence. Nacos has begun to fill these gaps by asking gender-centered *how* questions. By taking Nacos' original argument and redirecting it, I was able to make a step towards filling these holes. Further, I intentionally analyzed the media representation of two lesser-researched groups of women in order to add depth and contribution to scholarly work. Expanding Nacos' argument allowed me to delve further into, and focus more specifically on why illegitimate women are acting in inherently masculine roles—something her trailblazing research was unable to answer.

This research proves to be pertinent to the field of International Relations because one of the major underlying questions presented here is—What kind of ramifications can media

framing have on society and security? The gender stereotyping of the female violence could lead society to underplay, or worse, ignore threats posed by women. In a world where terrorism is growing, it is ill advised to continue to justify female violence using gender stereotypes. Thus, Western society should strive to denounce its traditional roles and accept female violence as a new reality. I argue that this distorted framing is detrimental to Western society because it underplays the threat of female violence—specifically female terrorism. Terrorist organizations acknowledge the entrenched gender roles in Western society and use them to their advantage through the use of the media. Terrorist organizations use women suicide bombers to heighten the shock-value and increase terror. Without the help of the media, terrorist organizations would only be able to inflict terror in isolated places. However, with the help of the media, terror is easily spread—the media is terrorism’s most valued friend. Simply put, Western media should change its framing and begin reporting female more equally to that of violence committed by males.

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