RISK, RADICALISATION & REPATRIATION: GENDERED AND AGE-SPECIFIC NARRATIVES SURROUNDING THE DETENTION OF BRITISH CHILDREN FORMERLY ASSOCIATED WITH ISIS

By

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Abstract

An estimated 40,000 children, some of which are British citizens, are currently detained in camps in North-East Syria due to their alleged association with ISIS. Although this detention violates the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the British government has been hesitant to repatriate British child citizens citing security concerns. This research seeks to understand how these British children are framed within UK newspapers, with particular attention given to how discourses of age and gender interact to construct notions of risk. This thesis demonstrates that whilst age and gender both interact to frame British ISIS-associated children, age - and specifically childhood - acts as the dominant identity marker. What this research ultimately highlights is the importance of addressing age and children within Security Studies, and the need to expand intersectional approaches to security to account for age.

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Introduction

According to Save the Children (2021a) an estimated 40,000 children are currently detained in camps in Syria due to their alleged association with ISIS. Of these, approximately 27,500 are believed to be foreign nationals (Human Rights Watch 2021). Despite such detention violating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), action to release children from camps such as Al-Hol and Roj remains limited (Save the Children 2021a). Lack of action by the international community is often attributed to the complex nature of this issue, with the release and repatriation of these children to their home countries viewed first and foremost through a state security lens, rather than a children's rights lens (Human Rights Watch 2023).

Many NGOs and civil society actors have argued that with a rising counter-terrorism agenda has come an erosion in children's rights. Children in instances of conflict are increasingly treated with suspicion given their potential exposure to and participation in radical violent extremism. The supposed need for exceptional circumstances results in children's rights being undermined; the terrorist risk that these minors may present is used as justification. In response, organisations such as Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (2020) and Save the Children (2021b, 32-33) have begun to highlight the need for children's security to be protected, stressing the importance of not allowing counter-terrorism priorities to usurp child protection commitments.

In understanding the conflicting approaches to viewing and governing these children, what appears to be central is the notion of risk. As noted by Elbe (2008, 179-180), risk acts as an enabling function for security processes. Drawing on the notions of risk, actions are taken in the name of security and justified on the premise of potential future danger. The risk that these children pose is therefore of interest in understanding what security measures are being taken by states and why.

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In the case of ISIS-associated children, the potential security challenge that these children pose to the state finds itself at odds with the detrimental effects that detention poses to these children's rights and own security. Whilst research has been conducted by Gray and Franck (2019) regarding the securitization of refugees within British newspapers and the media framing of these individuals as both "as/at risk" (276), similar studies using ISIS-associated children as an empirical case have yet to be undertaken. This dichotomy between 'at risk', whereby children are presented as in need of protection, and 'a risk', whereby it is the state that requires protecting from potentially radicalised minors, is therefore of research value.

Given the ongoing debates surrounding the detention and repatriation of ISIS-associated minors, research into how these children are framed is of great salience. Whilst this is an academic piece of research, seeking to contribute to the field of Critical and Feminist Security Studies, it is hoped that findings may also aid the work of NGOs and practitioners working in the children and armed conflict (CAAC) field.

This thesis seeks to explore how the UK media frames British minors formerly associated with ISIS who are currently detained in Syria. Whilst the term 'ISIS-associated children' is used to refer to these children, it should be stressed that this term does not intend to imply that these children are or were members of ISIS, merely that they have been associated with the group due to geographical and familial proximity. The UK has been selected as it is an outlier with regards to repatriation; whilst most other Western nations have repatriated or are repatriating their minors, the UK has largely avoided doing so (MacDiarmid 2023). Consequently, studying the narratives regarding these children's detention and their potential repatriation to the UK is of salience.

Of particular interest when understanding these narratives is how age and gender interact to produce such framings. Whilst various identity markers likely come into play, age is the focus of this thesis due to this being the overwhelming marker associated with children and childhood.

Gender has also been selected since several tropes surrounding childhood are gendered - for example, notions of innocence, vulnerability, and passivity (Carpenter 2006 2-3). By focusing on these identities, it is possible to examine whether depictions of these children conform to gendered and age-specific norms, or whether norms are subverted.

The following overarching research question has therefore been formulated: *How do discourses on age and gender frame British ISIS-associated children who are detained in Syria within UK newspapers?*

In exploring this question, it is assumed that intersections between gender and age produce discourses which frame children both as 'a risk' and 'at risk'. Whilst the conditions that children are detained in and their deprivation of rights are likely to place children's insecurity in focus, notions of potential radicalization and repatriation are instead anticipated to frame these children as a security risk to the British state.

To begin, a review of relevant literature is provided, addressing existing scholarship on children within Security Studies, the media's role in representing risk, and discourse on ISIS-associated children within academia. Following this, the theoretical framework in which this research is situated is outlined. The methodological framework of this thesis is then provided, highlighting the methods chosen, how they were operationalised, and associated ethical implications. The following chapter then presents an analysis and discussion of media discourse on ISIS-associated British children. Key frames surrounding age and gender are outlined and discussed. To conclude, an overview and reflection of this research is provided, with consideration given to what this study contributes, and how it could be further expanded upon.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

This literature review addresses three areas of scholarship which are integral to my research. To begin, the presence of children within Security Studies - or lack thereof - is examined. This literature provides a rationale for the research this thesis intends to conduct, and an overview of existing constructions of children in relation to security. Following this, focus is placed on the centrality of the media within constructions of risk. Attention is paid to how gendered discourses have been used within these media representations, and the implications of this. Finally, existing scholarship on ISIS-associated children is reviewed. This literature covers both the limited media analyses which exist, as well as wider discourses pertaining to these children. These three strands of literature all inform the research being conducted; by putting them in dialogue it is possible to identify where research gaps exist and how existing scholarship can be built upon.

1.2 Children & Security Studies

Deviating from traditional understandings of 'security', the emergence of the field of Critical Security Studies in the 1990s offered a new, human-centred conceptualisation of (in)security (C.A.S.E Collective 2006, 444). Suggesting that security should not be confined to state-centric or militaristic interpretations, Critical Security Studies claims that at its core should be human emancipation (C.A.S.E Collective 2006, 448). Security is therefore conceptualised as something that is understood, experienced, and constructed differently depending on the individual and context (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2020, 36-40). However, despite acknowledging this, examining (in)security through a child-focused lens is largely missing.

Children are arguably important actors within International Relations, and in particular, Security Studies, and yet limited research attention has been given to children within both disciplines (Jacob 2015, 14; Beier 2015, 1-2). This has led some scholars to question: "where are

the children?" (Jacob 2015, 15; Brocklehurst 2015, 39). Whilst other social sciences have accepted children as legitimate research subjects, Jacob (2015, 14) and Lee-Koo (2015, 65) argue that International Relations has been slow to bring children into the discipline. The limited inclusion of children within International Relations and Security Studies appears to have occurred over the past 30 years, with Jacob (2015, 17) claiming that this is due to increased interest in human security and the introduction of the Responsibility to Protect agenda, and Macmillan (2015, 62) suggesting that the adoption of the UNCRC in 1989 also played a role.

Although largely overlooked, children are arguably central to understandings of conflict and security. With children making up substantial parts of global and country populations, ignoring children risks failing to successfully achieve security (Brocklehurst 2015, 38-39; Wagnsson et al. 2010, 4). Children are implicated in conflict in numerous ways; as combatants, peace makers, products of war-time rape, victims, and civilians (Jacob 2015, 14; Wagnsson et al. 2010, 3). Given their situatedness within conflict, Jacob (2015, 15) argues that children are ultimately important sources of knowledge. In ignoring children as actors and knowledge sites, decision-makers fail to acknowledge the way in which children are implicated by security structures, and therefore risk failing to secure children's security (Jacob 2015, 15; Wagnsson et al. 2010, 3-4). This notion is further supported by Hopkins et al. (2019, 438) who call for children to be recognised as important security actors, so that "our approach to 'security' acknowledges its multidimensionality, complexity and multiplicity".

Given the lack of attention to children within Security Studies, it is important to reflect on why this is the case. Wagnsson et al. (2010, 2) and Lee-Koo (2015, 71-72) claim that this absence of children is a consequence of political realism. As non-traditional actors, children risk being overlooked and deemed unimportant in comparison to the state and other traditional actors (Wagnsson et al. 2010, 5-6). However, given that conflict no longer operates under traditional

norms, and that non-traditional actors - such as children - are arguably legitimate research subjects, Wagnsson et al. (2010) suggests that such an approach to security is outdated.

Within realist understandings of security, Lee-Koo (2015, 71) argues that children are resigned to the domestic sphere within the state. This portrays children as apolitical subjects who exist separately from the international sphere, and whose security is ultimately protected by the family. This argument is supported by Watson (2007, 31), who claims that the international political community "can care less for children, because their mothers care more", framing children as passive subjects who are the responsibility of their family and the private sphere rather than the state and public sphere.

To counter this approach to security, Lee-Koo (2015, 82-88) calls for critical understanding. In employing a critical approach, Lee-Koo stresses not only the centrality of children to Security Studies, but also the notion that childhood is constructed, and the importance of interrogating the impact of these representations. Understood as a social construct, childhood functions as an identity marker similar to gender, race, or sexuality (Wagnsson et al. 2010, 9; Brocklehurst 2015, 32). Despite this, scholars argue that 'childhood' identity is overlooked or understood solely in tandem to gender. However, subsuming childhood into the category of "womenandchildren" (Jacob 2015, 20) fails to ensure that children are treated as unique actors, requiring their own individual analysis (Jacob 2015, 20-21). Lacking a fixed definition, children and 'childhood' can be constructed in various ways, all of which require critical attention (Beier 2015, 4-7; Brocklehurst 2015, 32-33). Legal, biological, and cultural understandings of 'childhood' all highlight the fact that "it is not simply natural" but rather a construct produced by different discourses and representations (Brocklehurst 2015, 33).

Scholarship has highlighted a range of constructions of children and childhood, particularly in association to conflict. As noted by Wagnsson et al. (2010, 9), children may be presented as suffering victims, active combatants, or potential peacebuilders. Within their research, Wagnsson

et al. (2010, 9-11) go further to conceptualise four political roles that children play as security actors. It is argued that children play the role of the "referent object" (9) - with Wagnsson et al. claiming that this is the most common security role that children play. Additionally, children are also presented as "problem solvers" (10), "threats" (10), or potential "resource[s] for public communications" (11).

To play the role of the referent object or a resource for public communications, Jacob (2015, 16-18) and Beier (2015, 7-8) argue that children are constructed as innocent vulnerable civilians. The innocence and vulnerability of children which exists within popular imagination is drawn upon to present them as the prototype civilian in need of humanitarian intervention. This notion is supported by Macmillan (2015), who suggests that processes of securitization enable children to be presented as civilians in need of rescue. However, whilst Jacob (2015, 16-18) and Beier (2015, 7-10) suggest that it is the concept of childhood that facilitates constructions of civilianhood, Kinsella (2005, 260-261) argues that gender is what enables this categorisation to occur, with gendered traits of innocence and passivity allowing for children to be securitized and constructed as civilians.

Despite some existing scholarship emphasising the importance of children within Security Studies, research remains limited, particularly beyond understanding children merely as referent objects. This research intends to contribute to this gap, situating British ISIS-associated children within Security Studies and uncovering how children may be not only framed as innocent civilians 'at risk', but also as dangerous threats who pose 'a risk'.

1.3 The Media and Representations of Risk

To fill this gap on children within Security Studies, I intend to conduct a media analysis by examining how British ISIS-associated children and their riskiness are constructed by

newspapers. When reflecting upon constructions of risk, the media arguably acts as an important site where representations and meanings are created. As Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017) suggest, the news media not only acts to inform the public of the (in)security of individuals, but also to form "moral communities" (614) whereby the public is compelled to "think, feel and act towards them" (617). Understanding media representations is therefore of importance not solely to understand what information is created and disseminated, but also the political implications of this. Whilst there has been scholarship examining media constructions of refugees and migrants (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017; Gray and Franck 2019; Wallace 2018) and some on terrorists (Martini 2018; Jiwani 2021), there has been limited attention to ISIS-associated children (Sivenbring 2021; Fadil et al. 2022). This thesis seeks to rectify this, offering insight into how ISIS-associated children have been constructed by the media, and the potential implications.

Focus on the media and how it constructs (in)security is of importance, given that it is a site of power, capable of producing and reproducing discourse (Martini 2018, 462). As noted by Sivenbring (2021, 537), the media functions as a connection between the public situated in their local contexts and distant political events, such as the conflict in Syria. Particularly with regards to human rights discourses, Powers (2016, 315-316) argues that the media is a key producer of discourse that chooses which issues the wider public should be informed about. In attempting to inform audiences of world events, the media uses framing; certain aspects of news are made more salient, creating dominant narratives through which information can be understood (Martini 2018, 462; Greenwood and Thomson 2020, 143). However, the deployed frames are not solely the choice of journalists or media outlets, but also dependent on pre-existing discourses (Martini 2018, 462). As such, the way in which the public understands and processes international politics is inherently linked to the discourses prominent within society. Therefore, whilst the news is understood by many as "reality", it is in fact constructed in relation to existing structures

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and narratives (Greenwood and Thomson 2020, 143). It is thus valuable to critically analyse the representations being produced and the potential effects of this.

To construct representations of risk, a series of tools and frameworks are used. As noted by Stern (2006a), the importance of creating 'the Other' is vital to securitizing a collective. Stern argues that it is essential to identify who 'we' are not, and thus construct a collective 'we'. To do this, discourses of threat and danger are deployed to construct an 'Other' that is distant from 'ourselves'. Various identity markers appear to be drawn upon to construct risk in the form of difference. Exploring UK media representations of refugees, Gray and Franck (2019) argue that masculinities and racialised tropes are drawn upon by the media to justify notions of risk and threat. However, whilst refugee men are constructed as 'a risk', Gray and Franck's research suggests that women and children are represented as 'at risk' due to feminine constructions of vulnerability, passivity, and helplessness.

The notion of gendered constructions of risk and threat is also echoed by Martini (2018), whose research analyses UK media discourse on foreign female jihadists. Rather than affirming gendered tropes however, notions of a foreign female jihadi challenge existing norms surrounding gender, race, and threat. Martini notes that terrorism is often associated with masculinity, whilst women are typically understood as passive victims needing protection. However, the existence of female jihadi acts to subvert these tropes. Martini also highlights that the Western identity of these foreign female jihadi challenges the idea that risk and insecurity is linked to race and 'otherness'. Although these women are deemed dangerous, racialised orientalist tropes are not necessarily capable of being deployed, given their Western identity. However, Jiwani (2021), whose work examines the construction of 'ISIS brides' within the Canadian media, suggests that despite possessing a Western identity, such individuals can still be 'othered' to generate suspicion and fear. Jiwani argues that emphasis is placed upon these women's affiliation with ISIS, so that their Canadian identity is subsumed by their identity as an ISIS member. In this

way, Jiwani suggests that the media can create distance between the Canadian public and Canadian women who have joined ISIS, successfully 'othering' them and enabling these Canadian 'ISIS brides' to be deemed a threat.

These media representations can have real-world political implications and consequences. As Esser notes (2014, 155), politicians are largely reliant on the media to both shape and understand public opinion and legitimise policy decisions. Given this intrinsic link between politics and the media, it is important to better understand how the media frames British children associated with ISIS, considering what power structures are embedded within these constructions, and how these constructions may be used to legitimise certain policies or actions.

Whilst this scholarship highlights how identity markers such as gender, race, and 'otherness' can be used to construct and frame notions of risk, what the literature lacks is an examination of how age can also be utilised to construct these notions. This thesis seeks to fill this gap, paying specific attention to how the intersections of age and gender function in relation to risk within media discourses.

1.4 Constructing ISIS-associated Children

Scholarship on media constructions of ISIS-associated children is largely limited, with much of the literature instead focusing upon adults (Jiwani 2021; Martini 2018; Mathieu 2022). However, with contributions from Sivenbring (2021) and Fadil et al. (2022) a small body of research is growing.

Exploring media narratives around Swedish children in Syria, Sivenbring (2021) offers a media analysis of 3 Swedish newspapers and how ISIS-associated Swedish children are constructed within these articles. Through this analysis, Sivenbring contends that Swedish children are both presented as "in danger and dangerous" (536). Through the frames of "the

suffering child" (544), "original sin" (545), and "the future terrorist" (545), Sivenbring highlights the multiplicity with which such children are constructed. Although the concept of 'childhood' is deployed to present these children as innocent and passive, notions of uncertainty are also deployed to present these children as actual or potential security risks. Like Sivenbring, Fadil et al.'s research (2022) on how ISIS-associated children are presented within the Belgian media also highlights this multiplicity and liminality. Suggesting that these children live in a state of "virtual innocence" (855), Fadil et al. argue that a state of exception is created in which these children's rights are questioned. These children exist in-between notions of "at risk or representing a danger…belonging or not-belonging" (858).

With research focussing on Swedish and Belgian children, it is of interest to see how constructions of British children may differ from or reinforce existing narratives. Although media analyses are limited, broader scholarship on foreign children associated with ISIS does exist. Research focuses on topics such as legal discourse on these children's repatriation and criminal liability, discourses on their health and trauma, and the conditions in which they live.

Within legal scholarship, much of the research conducted examines the obligations which states have to repatriate child citizens from Syria. According to Sandelowsky-Bosman and Liefaard (2020), the UNCRC designates various rights to these children regardless of their ISIS association. In the case of the Netherlands, the authors claim that the Dutch government has a legal duty to protect Dutch children and repatriate them. This notion of duty is also reported by El-Matrah and Dabboussy (2021), whose article claims that in not repatriating Australian children, the Australian government has failed to provide the protection that these individuals are entitled to. However, as El-Matrah and Dabboussy allude to, repatriation of ISIS-associated children is not necessarily an easy decision for governments to make. Concerns exist regarding the safety implications of repatriation, with fears that returning children could threaten the security of the state which they return to.

Despite security fears, research on the conditions in which detained children are living in, and the health implications of this suggest a legitimate need for assistance. As noted by Cook and Vale (2019, 33-34), conditions within Al-Hol and Roj camps are poor, with children subjected to overcrowding, malnutrition, lack of sanitation, and exposure to disease and violence. According to Cavalcanti et al. (2022, 1-2), in 2021 an estimated two children died every week in Al-Hol camp because of the poor conditions. Living in Al-Hol is argued to have both physical and mental health impacts, with children vulnerable to harassment, sexual abuse, violence, and trafficking. These health implications are also argued to be gendered, with girls particularly at risk of sexual abuse within Al-Hol. Beyond the conditions of the camp, Brooks et al. (2022) highlights the mental health impacts of living under the caliphate. As Brooks et al. notes, many children may have been used by ISIS within their operations, and even if not directly involved, would likely have been exposed to extreme violence. Trauma caused by these experiences is claimed to also increase the risk of children developing anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders.

Whilst this existing scholarship provides an overview of some of the insecurity faced by these children in terms of public health and legal rights and protections, it should be stressed that there is currently limited literature situating these experiences within the field of Security Studies. Although some media analyses have been conducted, these remain limited, and thus far there has been no examination of the British case. This thesis therefore intends to contribute to the small pool of existing research on ISIS-associated children by not only exploring these children through a Critical Security Studies approach, but also by focusing specifically on British children.

1.5 Summary

The existing literature highlights both the importance of the media in constructing risk, as well as the lack of attention to children within Security Studies and International Relations more

broadly. This thesis therefore adds to both areas of scholarship, by analysing how children are constructed in relation to risk within the UK media. There currently appears to be no literature focusing solely on the detention and repatriation of British minors formerly associated with ISIS, and media analyses of how ISIS-associated children have been framed remain sparse. As such, by focusing upon British ISIS-associated children, this research is well placed to provide new empirical contributions to the field. By interrogating how these children are constructed in relation to risk within the media, a better understanding of how they are viewed by the public and how such framings justify or legitimise policy interventions may also be uncovered.

In addition to these empirical contributions, this thesis seeks to contribute theoretically to the topic and wider field. As evident within the reviewed literature, all too often other identity markers are the focus when considering how individuals become deemed 'a risk' and 'at risk', with age largely ignored. However, this research aims to highlight that age is an important category which should be considered when understanding how individuals and identities are constructed, and how the power structures which foreground identity come into play to construct, reify, and subvert notions of risk. By exploring the interplay between age and gender - with some consideration also given to other identity markers such as race - this paper intends to highlight the important role that age, and specifically childhood, has in the framing of individuals and subsequent perceptions of risk.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This section develops the theoretical framework in which this thesis is situated. To begin, an overview of Critical Security Studies and how it conceptualises risk and threat are provided. Noting a lack of consideration given to the role of identity within Critical Security Studies, Feminist Security Studies and feminist postcolonial approaches to security are then discussed. Consideration is given to how these gendered and racialised understandings of security, risk, and threat are of salience to this research. To conclude, definitions of age and childhood are provided, followed by an explanation of how this thesis conceptualises risk as gendered and age-specific.

2.2 Critical Security Studies

Given that this thesis focuses upon the security of detained children, and how these are constructed within the UK news media, this research finds itself situated within the framework of Critical Security Studies. Emerging as a new school of thought within Security Studies following the end of the Cold War, Wyn Jones (1999, 166) argues that Critical Security Studies offers a conceptualisation of security which is "broader", "deeper", "extended", and "focused". Unlike traditional approaches, Critical Security Studies distances itself from state-centric understandings of security, instead centring the individual and human emancipation (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2020, 31). By broadening conceptualisations of the referent object beyond the state and acknowledging that military threats do not represent the sole source of insecurity or threat (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2020, 34-37), Critical Security Studies offers a useful framework for this research.

The relevance of Critical Security Studies to this research is also strengthened by Critical Security Studies' understanding of security as a "derivative concept" (Peoples and Vaughan-

Williams 2020, 36). Through this conceptualisation, Critical Security Studies recognises that different individuals have unique understandings of what (in)security is, what sources of insecurity may be, and who requires protection. Central to this understanding of security is the fact that as individuals our identity greatly shapes who we are, how we view the world, and what we experience – particularly in relation to (in)security. As noted by Wyn Jones (1999, 116) "the human condition is one of overlapping identities…all of which come into play at different times and in different situations". The fluidity of these identities is important to note and should be reflected upon when understanding what identities are at play when constructing (in)security. Identity is also of salience given that to practice security, a collective identity or community must be constructed in opposition to a risky or threatening 'Other' (Booth 2007, 278). In creating a community to be secured and constructing an 'Other' to be secured from, the notion of insecurity must therefore be deployed.

To enable the construction of this insecurity, various tools and devices may be used. Within this thesis, focus is placed primarily on the concept of risk. Given their age, it is the potential for danger that ISIS-associated children pose, as opposed to the immediate danger, that is most of interest. By focusing on risk this potentiality for danger can be examined. Understood by Strachan-Morris (2012, 180) as "a function of probability…and harm", risk acts to justify security measures based on the potential for insecurity (Elbe 2008, 179-180). Although historically ignored and undertheorized within Security Studies (Aradau 2004, 264), there is an emerging pool of literature within Critical Security Studies examining the role of risk in relation to security (Aradau and Van Munster 2007; De Goede 2008; Corry 2012).

One example is the work of Aradau and Van Munster (2007, 91), with their conceptualisation of risk as "precautionary" and "a dispositif for governing social problems" being adopted within this thesis. Risk – or more specifically, the probability of harm or danger - is understood by Aradau and Van Munster (2007) as constructed and designed to rationalise methods of control.

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Using this conceptualisation of risk allows this thesis to interrogate how media framing identifies and constructs risk regarding British ISIS-associated children, which may then be used to rationalise certain forms of governance or intervention with regards to these minors. Examples may include the likelihood that these children commit future terrorist attacks or the probability that they have already been radicalised.

Alongside 'risk', the concept of a 'threat' is also central to security discourses. Therefore, although not the primary focus of this thesis, attention will be paid to how media discourses construct notions of threat in relation to ISIS-associated children. Whilst risk is understood by Strachan-Morris (2012, 180) as the measure of likeliness that harm may occur, threat is instead defined "a function of capability and intent" (174). Although traditionally understood within Security Studies as military in nature, Critical Security Studies instead broadens understandings of threat to include those that are "environmental, economic, political, and societal" in nature (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2020, 37). Within the context of this research, possible illustrations of threat may be children who have received training in how to commit violent or terrorist acts, or children who have been radicalised and align themselves with ISIS.

2.3 Feminist (Postcolonial) Security Studies

Despite acknowledging the centrality of identity to constructions of (in)security, Critical Security Studies does not systematically account for the various identity markers and power structures at play. One such example is gender, understood by the prominent feminist scholar Judith Butler (1990) as socially constructed, and produced and enacted through different discursive practices. Given the lack of attention to gender within Critical Security Studies, the field of Feminist Security Studies attempts to fill this gap (Sjoberg 2018, 51, Wibben 2011, 4-8). Arguing that gender is present within international security, whether explicitly or implicitly, Feminist Security Studies contends that security processes cannot be properly understood unless

gender is accounted for (Sjoberg 2018, 50). Feminist Security Studies therefore seeks to understand how gender gives meaning to security, influences experiences of (in)security, and shapes actions taken to promote or protect security (Sjoberg 2018, 46-48). Rather than focusing solely on the male-female dichotomy, attention is also given to where gendered traits – attributes which are associated with either men or women – are operationalised within the security realm (Sjoberg 2018, 45). Examples of scholarly engagement therefore include how masculinities and femininities are performed and constructed in times of conflict, and what unique forms of insecurity are experienced by women (Sjoberg 2018, 48-49),

Although Feminist Security Studies accounts for the role of gender within constructions and experiences of security, gender is just one of many identity constructs. Rather than existing as a singular category, gender always functions as an intersection – for example with other identity markers such as race, class, and sexuality (Søndergaard 2005, 190). Feminist postcolonial scholars therefore seek to adopt an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1989) by not only conceptualising security as impacted by gendered understandings, but also racialised ones. Noting that gender is also shaped by colonial logic, postcolonial feminists focus on how gender, race, and colonialism intersect to construct and shape experiences of (in)security (Nwangwu et al. 2021, 282-284; Sjoberg 2009, 188).

Feminist postcolonial scholars such as Gray and Franck (2019, 278-279) conceptualise security as both racialised and gendered, with "ideas of racialized masculine threat and racialized feminine vulnerability" (279) central to security discourses. Building upon colonial modernity - the concept that modernity is rooted in and a product of colonialism (Mignolo 2011, 2-3) - Gray and Franck (2019, 279) contend that gender plays an integral role in the production and promotion of colonial narratives of the 'Other'. Gender is used as a tool of othering, by constructing the female 'Other' as subjugated and in need of saving, whilst the male 'Other' is

suggested to be violent and dangerous. In this way, gender and race are seen to interact to construct notions of (in)security.

Within feminist postcolonial approaches to security the concept of risk continues to be present, although remains largely underdeveloped. Whilst within Critical Security Studies limited attention is paid to how risk exists in relation to gender and race, feminist postcolonial research instead presents risk as inherently gendered and racialised. As explored through Stachowitsch and Sachseder's (2019) work on risk analysis, gender and race are greatly implicated in this construction of risk and security. Risk analysis functions as "a (neo)colonial tool of governance that attempts at ordering and governing the non-European 'Other' – often in violent ways" (111), with the reproduction of racialized and gendered stereotypes used to justify such governance. Tropes such as the feminized vulnerable victim or the threatening masculine 'Other' are utilised with the purpose of categorising individuals as 'a risk' versus 'at risk'. Accounting for the role of gender and race in constructions of risk is therefore required within this research.

When reflecting on constructions of risk and security discourses, it is necessary to account for critiques which argue that racism and colonialism are integral to the production of (in)security, since these processes are "animated by racialized threat imaginaries" (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2020, 6). To avoid reifying racist and colonial assumptions present within security discourses, the work of Gray and Franck (2019) will be echoed, with attention being paid not only to how media framings produce security discourses, but also how gendered and racialized logics enable such constructions to occur.

In addition to the concept of risk, feminist postcolonial scholarship also interacts with the concept of threat. However, like risk, this scholarship extends conceptualisations present within Critical Security Studies to understand threat as something which is again constructed in relation to gender and race (Gray and Franck 2019; Martini 2018). As noted by Gray and Franck (2019) threat is understood as something inherently masculinised and racialised. This is further

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reinforced by the work of Martini (2018), whose research on jihadi brides suggests that these women subvert masculine understandings of terrorism, as well as gendered narratives that frame Muslim women as weak and passive.

By employing a feminist postcolonial approach, I intend to draw upon these existing conceptualisations of security, risk, and threat as inherently gendered and racialised. Such understandings provide an important lens through which to investigate how British ISIS-associated children are constructed. However, within this scholarship there remains a lack of attention to other important identity markers – such as age - and how they shape constructions of risk. As such, whilst drawing on the importance of gender, and also accounting for the role of race to a limited degree, I intend to extend existing feminist postcolonial understandings of security by arguing that age also functions as an important factor when constructing risk.

2.4 Age and Childhood

Before examining how age and childhood, intersecting with gender, construct British ISIS-associated children in relation to security, risk, and threat, it is first necessary to define how these terms are understood and applied to this research.

As Birren (1968, 16) explains, age functions as a biological, psychological, and social process. Different ages are linked to different roles played within society. One such example is the role of the child and the concept of childhood. Childhood is a socially constructed and deeply contested concept (Beier 2015, 4-9). Although there is no universally agreed definition, according to the UNCRC (1989) all individuals under the age of 18 years are to be considered children. However, this fixed understanding of childhood is arguably at odds with biological and social constructions of the category. Biological changes associated with the development from child to adult do not follow precise delineated timelines (Brocklehurst 2015, 30), and different contexts - be they

cultural, economic, or political - may result in the duration and understandings of childhood being constructed and interpreted in varying ways (James 2010, 490).

Beyond childhood functioning merely as a time period, the concept is also associated with various tropes and assumptions. As noted by Beier (2015, 6), a dominant trope is lack of agency. Children are seen to be lacking in power and autonomy, not treated as full political subjects in the same way as adults. In this sense clear power differentials between adults and children appear to emerge. With the absence of agency and status, children also find themselves constructed as pre-political beings, without a place in the political realm (Beier 2015, 6-8). Alongside a lack of agency and power, children and childhood are also commonly associated with innocence and deservingness. Presented as inherently good and pure, children are understood to be the ideal civilian – worthy of care and protection (Beier 2015, 7-8).

For the sake of this research, a child will be understood as anyone under the age of 18 years. This thesis also conceptualises children and childhood as rooted in pre-existing tropes and assumptions of children as innocent, vulnerable beings, who lack power and agency in comparison to adults. Throughout this research, consideration will therefore be given to whether ISIS-associated children reify or subvert these tropes.

2.5 Conceptualising Risk as Gendered and Age-Specific

Drawing on understandings of gender, age, children, and childhood defined in the preceding sections, this thesis seeks to extend existing postcolonial feminist theories and conceptualise risk as something which is produced and constructed as a result of the intersecting identities of gender *and* age. Gendered and age-specific tropes of innocence and vulnerability are understood to interact to produce notions of being 'at risk'. The fluid nature of age, however, represents a potential for transgression. Thus, although gendered and age-specific tropes such as innocence and passivity may reduce notions of risk, the fact that these tropes are not permanent but

temporal means that future potential for danger, and thus potential for risk to be constructed, is possible. This thesis will therefore interrogate how gender and age function in relation to risk, and the extent to which traditional gendered and child-specific narratives are utilised and subverted when constructing risk.

Whilst Feminist Security Studies and feminist postcolonial scholarship acknowledge the role that gender and race play in constructing risk, the importance of age has yet to receive extensive scholarly attention. This research will therefore not only contribute to the lack of postcolonial feminist literature within the field of Critical Security Studies, but also offer a new conceptualisation of risk which accounts for age, and specifically childhood. In doing so, it is hoped that greater attention is paid to the important role that children play within Security Studies.

3. Methodological Framework

3.1 Discourse Analysis

This thesis employs critical discourse analysis to investigate and understand how age and gender intersect to frame ISIS-associated children within British newspapers. Discourse is constructed by the social world, but also something that constructs the social world. In this way, discourse can be understood as power, constructing and maintaining social realities. However, this power is arguably unevenly distributed - those with power are capable of constructing the identities and social realities of those without (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 61-63). Although the subaltern can speak, they are not heard; instead, they are ignored, and spoken for (Spivak 1988; Devadas and Brett 2002, 84). In this research, it is ISIS-associated children who are spoken for. Who these children are, and their positioning within our social imaginings is not created by them but for them. It is those with power, such as the news media, who create and construct these children (Martini 2018, 462). Critical discourse analysis therefore functions as a useful methodological tool, allowing for an uncovering of how discourse is used as power to create and constitute different social realities (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 63). In doing so, this power can be challenged - questioning how the texts are positioned, who this positioning benefits, who this positioning harms, and why this positioning has taken place (Van Dijk 1993, 252-253).

Interrogating the uneven power dynamics present within discourse is particularly important in this research, given that these children are 'othered' and marginalised because of their age. Children are typically assigned minimal agency and voice within society (Beier 2015, 6); it is therefore vital to challenge these uneven power dynamics and how this influences the discourses created regarding these children. Within my research I attempt to not speak for these children; although they are the focus of this research, I instead try to speak solely for the media representations of these children and highlight the problematic nature of such constructions, in which children are silenced and imagined by others for political gain.

For this critical discourse analysis, 3 British newspapers were selected as the sites of my analysis. The Times (right leaning), The Guardian (left leaning) and The Independent (centre leaning) were chosen to reflect the broad spectrum of news coverage within the UK (Smith 2017). Although designed to account for a range of potential political discourses regarding these children, the analysis did not highlight any clear framing differences between newspapers. The analysis focuses on an archive of news articles published between July 1st 2020 and February 28th 2023, as this covers the period following the UK Court of Appeal's ruling that Shamima Begum could return to the UK to fight the government's decision to revoke her British citizenship (Grierson 2020). Whilst not directly related to the detention and repatriation of children, this event led to increased media discussions regarding the conditions in Al-Hol and the right to return of British nationals associated with ISIS. Increased coverage of British children detained in former ISIS territory would therefore be expected.

To collate an archive of relevant articles the Nexis search tool was used, with articles filtered by the search term "child* AND IS* AND camp AND Syria AND Brit*". 106 relevant articles were identified.

When conducting my analysis of these news articles, the following questions were used to guide my reading.

1. How are the children depicted as a/at risk?
2. What aspects of the children are highlighted (with particular consideration to their age and gender)? And what meanings are attached to these depictions?

By using these questions as a guiding framework, attention was paid to the way that discourse constructs British ISIS-associated children in relation to age, gender, and risk. This allowed for an understanding of how notions of risk are produced as a result of the intersecting identities of age and gender.

3.2 Reflections

Whilst this research aims to achieve an intersectional analysis, by focusing primarily on age and gender other important identity markers may have been overlooked. Although age and how it interacts with gender is the focus of this research, other identity markers – particularly race – also function to frame British ISIS-associated children. While race plays an important role in constructions of risk, and is present within the news articles analysed, it is not as explicit as gender and age; instead, it appears that race only becomes more salient upon reaching adulthood, with racialised logic framing the children far more implicit. This may be because, due to their age, there is still time and potential for these children to conform and thus belong to understandings of white British identity. Therefore, when studying how these children are constructed, race is mentioned where relevant, however it is not subject to in-depth analysis.

3.3 Positionality and Ethical Implications

It is important to acknowledge that what we know is shaped by our own identity. As such, there is a need to consider our positionality and how this may impact upon our research (Van Wingerden 2022, 4). As the researcher it was important to recognise my own position and privilege as a white, middle-class, western woman and how this may have influenced how I interpreted the news articles and assigned meaning to them – thus attempting to avoid reifying and reproducing racialized and problematic framings and constructions within my analysis. Throughout this research I questioned the work I conducted, how it may have been impacted by my positionality, and when necessary, sought to rectify this. In acknowledging my western perspective and applying a feminist postcolonial framework to my research, I have attempted to limit any aspects of othering within this research.

Previous professional experience working within the children and armed conflict sphere may also have affected my positionality and how I engaged with this research. Prior exposure to this

field guided me in the research design and likely shaped the way in which I analysed and interpreted the news articles.

Another ethical consideration within this research was the distressing nature of several of the news articles being analysed. Efforts were therefore made to ensure that I took care of my mental health. Having previous professional experience working on the topic of children and armed conflict, I felt well equipped to manage the potential emotional impacts of conducting this research.

4. Empirical Analysis

The following section provides an analysis of the news articles covering British ISIS-associated children detained in Syria. Discussed are some of the key aspects of age and gender which appear most pertinent in the construction of these children. The themes are not exhaustive and do not necessarily reflect those with the largest quantity of coverage, but rather have been selected based on their research relevance and the unique contribution they provide to further understanding of how age and gender interact to construct notions of risk.

4.1 Where are the children?

Echoing prominent Feminist IR scholar Cynthia Enloe's question "where are the women?" (Enloe 2014, 29), this analysis asks *'where are the children?'*. Noting the importance of women as political actors and their value as research subjects, feminist analysis establishes a grounding for this research being conducted. Whilst Enloe (2014) stresses the lack of attention given to the role of women within international politics, children also appear to be missing within mainstream scholarship. This thesis therefore extends Enloe's work to examine the presence of children within International Relations, and in particular, Security Studies.

With only 106 relevant articles identified within a 36-month period, a lack of media attention is given to these children. Devoid of coverage, these children arguably fail to be considered news-worthy subjects, with their humanitarian need unable to enter into the circulation of public information. In the articles that do exist, similar to Sivenbring (2021, 544), children's voices are rarely heard. News coverage is dominated by rhetoric produced by politicians, NGOs, legal figures, and security experts; where lived experience is present, it is largely the mothers' voices. This lack of children's voices reinforces the notion that children are passive subjects (Wagnsson et al. 2010, 9-10); deemed unable to 'speak' for themselves. Representations are made *for* children as opposed to *by* children.

In addition to a lack of children's voices within news coverage, another silencing of children occurs in the frequent deployment of the phrase "womenandchildren" (Enloe 2014, 25). As argued by Jacob (2015, 20-22), the use of this term fails to acknowledge the unique experiences of children. Whilst women and children are in many ways "allied" (Jacob 2015, 21), the consistent use of 'children' only in relation to 'women' risks having a subsuming effect whereby children only exist in relation to women and not in their own right (Jacob 2015, 20-22). This conflation of children with women also makes it hard within this research to extricate these children from the gendered and femininized notions commonly associated with women. Within many of the articles children appear merely as add-ons, referred to and yet never the focus of the coverage. This may act to reify longstanding tropes of children as passive actors, not yet existing in their own right.

4.2 The Outsourcing of Care and Responsibility

Throughout the articles analysed, UK government policy is often quoted to clarify the government's position on the protection and repatriation of British children in Syria. These policy soundbites constitute stock answers, given any time the government is asked to provide comment on the content or featured case within news articles. Repeated frequently within the collated news articles is the following statement by the British Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, outlining the UK government's policy on repatriating British children:

> *"There may be British children in internally displaced persons camps in Syria who are innocent victims of the conflict. Where we become aware of unaccompanied or orphaned British children in Syria, we will work to facilitate their return, subject to national security considerations."* (Begum, 2022)

Whilst acknowledging the potential presence of British minors in Syria, the government only offers repatriation routes for *"unaccompanied or orphaned…children"* (Begum 2022). Consequently, children who remain with family members find themselves excluded from the possibility of repatriation to the UK. This policy has arguably been formulated for many reasons, particularly

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based on fear experienced by several European countries that repatriating children will function as a gateway through which their parents, who are deemed a threat and potentially requiring prosecution, can also return (Fadil et al. 2022, 865).

What this policy also alludes to is that children are the responsibility of their mothers and caregivers first and foremost. It is only when their caregiver is absent that the state is willing to assume responsibility for these children. This can be seen to represent a gendered outsourcing of responsibility by the UK state to these children's mothers, with expectations that they fulfil their supposed motherly duties in caring for these children, thus allowing the state to absolve itself of any duty of care. Gendered expectations and delegations of caregiving and responsibility therefore ensure that these children are constructed not as the responsibility of the state, but of their mothers.

Watson (2007, 31) reinforces this notion that responsibility for children is primarily delegated to mothers as opposed to the state, noting that the international order "can care less for children, because their mothers care more". The outsourcing of care from the state to the mother therefore appears in line with understandings of the political status of children and their presence - or lack thereof - in the state system (Lee-Koo 2015, 71). Despite being British citizens, due to their age these children are not treated as political subjects but merely "apprentice citizens", not worthy of full rights and protections (Lee-Koo 2015, 72). Constructed outside of political life, children appear as apolitical subjects; they are shown to belong to the family, kept out of the public realm of responsibility (Lee-Koo 2015, 71). It is therefore only when the family sphere is compromised that the state intervenes and takes responsibility for the child citizen. That being said, the government's policy also stipulates that their assistance towards these orphaned or unaccompanied children is *"subject to national security concerns"* (Begum 2022). Questions are therefore raised as to whose responsibility these children become if deemed a security risk, especially if without family and denounced by the UK government.

This notion that children are primarily the responsibility of their mothers appears to be reinforced by statements made by the mothers of these children. Of the mothers featured within news coverage, there is an overwhelming acceptance that they bear responsibility for the wellbeing of their children, and that they will do whatever it takes to achieve this. One example is Shamima Begum, who reached out to the British press when heavily pregnant in the hopes that the UK would repatriate her and her unborn son. For Begum, it is suggested that her child was a source of hope and resilience, noting:

> *"The only thing keeping me alive was the baby I was pregnant with. I felt like I had to do him right by getting out and giving him a normal life."* (Loyd 2021)

Drawing on Butler's work on performativity (1990, 24-25), Jeremiah (2006, 24-25) argues that motherhood and maternality are performed and enacted. Through this lens, Begum's statements can be viewed as attempts to perform the traditional role of the caring and protective mother, conforming to gendered norms and expectations of motherhood. Two previous children of Begum had both died in infancy, with Begum stating *"I felt like it was my fault for not getting them out sooner"* (Osborne 2021). Rather than attributing blame or responsibility to the state or other actors, Begum appears to claim sole responsibility over her children. This reinforces the gendered notion that these ISIS-associated children are primarily the responsibility of their mothers and not the British government. However, despite this, it appears that only with state assistance can this motherly duty be fulfilled.

Although these children are placed firmly under the responsibility of their mothers, Fadil et al. (2022, 12-13) highlights that the state has a role to play in intervening in the parent-child relationship if adequate care is not provided. Questions are therefore raised as to the extent to which these children belong to alleged 'failed mothers' (Martini 2018, 468), thus requiring state intervention. For many of these children, their detention and association with ISIS is due to their parents' actions. How then can these same parents be trusted to adequately protect them? And

why should these children be refused repatriation by the British state due to the continued presence of these supposed 'failed' parents?

One case that featured multiple times within newspaper coverage was that of Nicole Jack and her three daughters. Although British citizens, they have been refused repatriation to the UK. Jack brought her four children to Syria in 2015 and became pregnant with three more whilst living in ISIS territory. One of her sons, who was taken from the UK to Syria aged 8, was killed in an airstrike. The three children Jack conceived whilst in Syria all died. Coverage suggests Jack's failure as mother - leading her children into a warzone only to watch them die. Whilst Jack is not painted as an innocent victim, her children are. Even Jack's mother notes that whilst her grandchildren are innocent and deserving of assistance, Jack herself should *"face the consequences"* (Batchelor 2021). This denotes a difference in deservingness; as Jack is an adult, she must deal with the repercussions of her actions, whereas her children are depicted as innocent victims deserving of rescue. Jack's mother calls upon the government to intervene, questioning *"Don't we owe these children a duty of care?"* (Burgess 2020).

It is through this question that it is suggested that these children's mother has failed to fulfil her motherly duties to protect and care for her children, and that responsibility should therefore transfer from their mother to the collective 'we'. Historically the British state has played the role of paternalistic protector, staging interventions on behalf of both its own citizens and the international community (Nicolaou 2018). Yet despite these calls for shared responsibility, the government appears not to acknowledge this, refusing to play the traditional role of the paternalistic saviour and intervene on behalf of the wellbeing of British children stranded in Syria.

What this discourse makes evident is that, due to their age, British ISIS-associated children are constructed as in need of care and protection. Although the traditional gendered notion of children being the responsibility of their mothers is deployed, questions are raised as to

whether these mothers can be trusted to protect their children from risk or whether they in fact expose them to risk.

4.3 Innocence Corrupted

News coverage frequently notes the poor conditions which these children experience in the camps. The camps are presented as places of violence, lawlessness, and chaos, where disease and suffering are rife, and where children find themselves at risk. As one article in The Independent claimed, in 2021 Al-Hol camp was *"bloodier…in terms of murder per capita than Caracas in Venezuela, the world's deadliest capital"* (Trew 2021a). This violent imagery contrasts the healthy environment children should grow up in, highlighting that these camps are not a safe place for children. Alongside descriptions of the camps, news articles also feature descriptions of the children themselves, with the icon of the starving, suffering child used to invoke concern. Articles from The Times refer to *"emaciated gangs of children…[running] feral among the tents"* (Loyd 2020a) and *"thin, Dickensian figures with unkempt hair, gaunt frames and luminous eyes, their skin parchmentdry due to malnourishment"* (Loyd 2020b). The trope of the starving child acts to establish a sense of pity for these children, with the reader consequently invited to intervene and save them (Mannevuo 2014, 134-138).

Ultimately these camps are presented as liminal spaces which are *"ungoverned"* (Hamilton 2023) and represent *"a gap in the world's consciousness and conscience"* (Spencer 2021). The children who reside in these places are suspended between life and death, suffering and saving. Despite knowledge of these conditions, the UK government does not repatriate their child citizens, instead leaving them in this risky space. This lack of state intervention however does not represent an absence of state power. Instead, the lack of intervention by the UK government can instead be read as a decision to reduce these British children to bare life. Excluded from the political community and suspended within a state of exception, these children appear to no

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longer constitute political beings but only biological ones (Agamben 1998). As noted by Arendt (1979 290-295), rights are guaranteed by the state; the political and physical distancing of these children by the UK government therefore acts to deny them of the "right to have rights" (Arendt, 1979, 296). News coverage displays children living in Al-Hol and Roj camps as deprived of their basic rights, including access to water, shelter, healthcare, and education – echoing Agamben's notion of the camp, in which the state of exception is "given a permanent spatial agreement" (Agamben 1998, 169). Yet rather than intervening to ensure these rights, the UK government is instead portrayed as complicit in their deprivation.

The deprivation of these children contrasts their presentation within news coverage, which overwhelmingly frames them as innocent victims. These children are depicted as *"being punished by association"* (Trew 2021b), having been brought to Syria by their parents and now unfairly treated due to their parents' potential crimes. Whilst there is some questioning within news coverage over the possibility that these children may themselves have received military training or committed crimes, this is limited. It is instead suggested that their age should automatically render these children innocent, with the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba, declaring that all minors *"should be considered and treated primarily as victims"* (Trew 2022). Although associated with childhood, these tropes of innocence and victimhood are also inherently gendered. Carpenter (2006, 2-3) notes that the concepts of vulnerability and innocence are rooted in gendered logic. As such, it is primarily sex and age which function as determinants of perceived innocence and civilianhood, as opposed to actual innocence or non-combatant status.

Despite being constructed as presently innocent, many articles suggest that these children are at high risk of radicalisation. Referring to the camps as *"the cradle of the new caliphate"* (Loyd 2020b), news coverage makes an explicit link between the environment these children are living in and their risk of radicalisation. A lack of access to education within the camps is suggested to

leave children vulnerable, with jihadist indoctrination threatening to fill the gap. However, lack of education is not suggested to be the sole risk factor. It is acknowledged that the abandonment of these children by the UK government also has the potential to function as a propaganda tool. The UK government's decision to leave British children in limbo, stuck in a dangerous and unsafe place, is claimed to risk increasing the hopelessness and disillusion endured by these children, making them vulnerable to extremist ideologies. Within coverage on their potential for radicalisation, these children are largely presented as naive and impressionable due to their age, thus at heightened risk of indoctrination.

Therefore, although British children are presented as innocent victims in this current moment, their potentiality for violence and extremism is highlighted. Repeated often within news coverage is the notion that the longer these children spend in the camps, the greater the risk that they will become radicalised and present a future threat to the UK. However, if transgression is intrinsically linked to temporality, the question arises as to why these children are not being rescued before their childhood innocence is corrupted by radicalisation. Given this, several articles attribute blame to the UK government, whose failure to repatriate these children only increases the risk that these children become radicalised and represent a future security threat.

According to statements made by the UK government and quoted within news coverage, for some British children it is already too late for them to be rescued and rehabilitated. Instead of possessing the potentiality for violence and therefore representing a risk to UK security, the UK government argues that some instead already represent a threat – possessing the immediate intent and capability to harm the UK. A security services assessment referenced within news articles claimed:

> *"Individuals who stayed with ISIS for a significant period were likely to have an ideological commitment to the group, be desensitised to violence, and received some level of military training even if they were women or children."* (Dearden 2021a)

Age and gender are therefore suggested not to negate the threat level posed, with *"even"* women or children possessing the capability and intent to harm the UK. This arguably disrupts traditional gendered understandings of who can pose a threat.

Within government discourse featured in news coverage, a duality appears to emerge; these children are both victims and threats. Just as the UK government highlights the danger or potential for danger that some children possess, they also acknowledge their victimhood. However, in recognising that these children are victims of trafficking, manipulation, and abuse, the government argues that this does not negate the risk or threat that the children pose. This rhetoric is reproduced frequently within news coverage, with legal representatives for the government and security service officials emphasising that *"victims can very much be a threat"* (Dearden 2023) and that *"you could well have been radicalised and manipulated at an age when you are vulnerable...but nevertheless, however unfortunate it might be, you are now a risk"* (Woode 2022). Through this discourse, it is suggested that the feminine tropes of vulnerability, innocence, and lack of agency typically associated with childhood do not protect or prevent these children from being securitized.

The security of the state is ultimately deemed more important than the security of these children. Despite being victims, whose own security has been violated, the risk that these children are claimed to represent to the UK is deemed of greater salience. It is under this logic that the UK government justifies their attempts to relinquish responsibility. Rather than fulfilling the traditional role of paternalistic protector of vulnerable children, discourse within the articles analysed instead paints the UK as cowardly and weak; the state presents these children as an existential threat to the security of the UK to justify a failure to protect British minors.

Within narratives on the innocence of these children, age is clearly shown to a large extent to protect children from being presented as a risk, although in the case of the UK government this is seen to be challenged. Gendered understandings of childhood allow children

to be read as innocent, vulnerable, and passive victims - thus supporting the narrative that these children are 'at risk' as opposed to 'a risk'. However, the temporal nature of childhood suggests that such readings of these children are not permanent, and that a potentiality for risk may emerge, and in some cases has already emerged.

4.4 From Child to Adult: The Case of Shamima Begum

As noted by Valentine (2003, 37-39) childhood is not fixed, but rather a fluid identity which is constructed and changes over time. As children grow older, the way in which they are constructed in relation to childhood has the potential to shift. Given this, questions are raised as to what may happen to these children as they transition into adults? Does a change in age impact the way in which they are constructed? Do interactions between age and gender, as well as other identity markers such as race, change over time?

Although difficult to predict, the case of Shamima Begum has the potential to offer insight into how changes in age may result in shifting constructions of these children. In 2015, Shamima Begum – a 15-year-old schoolgirl from London – travelled to Syria with two school friends to join ISIS (BBC News 2021). After being found in a detention camp in Northeast Syria in 2019, the now 23-year-old has been at the centre of a divisive court case after the government removed her British citizenship and refused to let her return to the UK. News coverage exists from the time she left the UK as a child in 2015, to her attempts to return to the UK now as an adult, thus offering an interesting overview of how age may alter the way in which ISIS-associated individuals are constructed. It should be noted that this case is not the main focus of this research, and so it is not possible to give a complete or detailed account of Begum's story. However, what this case does provide is a lens through which to understand how age impacts perceptions of responsibility, agency, risk, and threat.

When she left the UK to join ISIS, Begum was 15 years old – legally a child. At the time, there was widespread outrage that the British authorities had failed to protect three schoolgirls from being radicalised and traveling undetected to a warzone (Dearden 2020). The Metropolitan Police had identified Begum as a *"vulnerable teenager"* after a school friend had joined ISIS; yet despite concerns for Begum's safety, a lack of action was taken to prevent Begum's radicalisation and departure to Syria (Loyd 2021). When Begum's departure was first reported, the dominant narrative was that she was a victim who had been manipulated and taken advantage of by extremists. The schoolgirls were portrayed as naive to the reality of their actions, with great concern being expressed by their families, the wider community, and the government. Coverage emphasised gendered narratives of Begum and her friends as victims, lacking in agency (Jackson 2021). It should be noted however that the construction of Begum was not only rooted in gendered logic; racialised tropes also appear evident, with Spivak's narrative of brown women requiring white men to save them from brown men echoed amongst news articles (Spivak 1988, 296). With emphasis placed on Begum's vulnerability and victimhood, it was suggested that Begum had a chance for return and redemption.

Following her discovery in a detention camp in 2019, the now adult Begum re-entered public discourse. However, with Begum having transitioned from child to adult, the discourse has shifted. Begum now represents a polemic figure within the UK, with debates circling around if she is a victim, or a remorseless perpetrator who poses a threat to the UK. The analysed articles reflect this discussion, with the featured government discourse promoting the narrative that Begum made an informed choice as a teenager and must now live with the consequences. According to the government, Begum is a risk to the UK – and this risk is not mitigated by her gender or the age at which she joined ISIS.

However, this narrative is firmly dismissed by several critics of the government's current policy towards British ISIS returnees. Human rights actors have claimed that Begum was, and is,

a victim, with Begum's lawyer arguing that she had been *"recruited, transported, transferred, harboured and received in Syria for the purposes of 'sexual exploitation' and 'marriage' to an adult male"* as a 15-year-old (Glass 2022). Using her status as a minor at the time of joining ISIS, Begum is suggested to have been unable to consent to travelling to Syria and joining ISIS. This is reinforced by quotes from Begum herself featured within news coverage, in which she states that she was *"young and naive"* (Osborne 2021). Using her youth and associated naivety, Begum attempts to distance herself from responsibility, instead portraying herself as child who was manipulated.

In contrast, the notion that a 15-year-old Begum, and children more generally, lack agency and should be automatically accepted as victims is refuted within some articles - especially by government and security officials. Quoted within one of the analysed articles, an MI5 officer claimed that:

> *"It is not conceivable that an intelligent and articulate 15-year-old could not know what ISIS was doing, so in some respects yes, I do believe she would have known what she was doing and had agency in doing so."* (Dearden 2023)

Whilst childhood is frequently associated with a lack of intelligence and agency, it is suggested that at 15 years old, an intelligent and articulate person has transgressed past this point of childhood. Questions are therefore raised as to whether Begum did act with agency, and if so whether she deserves to be held accountable for knowingly supporting terrorism.

According to the legal representation for the UK government, the decision to strip Shamima Begum of her British citizenship was motivated not by her choice to join ISIS as a child, but by her decision to remain in Syria as an adult:

> *"It was at that stage, not when she was a child, that the deprivation decision was taken."* (Dearden 2021b)

Over time, Begum has transgressed from a naive girl to a dangerous woman in the eyes of the UK government. By claiming to only reprimand Begum for her actions as an adult, the state suggests that whilst children can be deemed innocent and free from accountability, adults cannot. Whilst age may function to protect individuals from being viewed as a threat or held accountable, gender does not. Begum's womanhood does not prevent her from being framed or understood as a violent terrorist threat, however her age – at least to a certain extent – does.

This case raises problematic questions for the British children who remain stranded in Syria. Without repatriation, what will happen to these children once they become adults? Will they be stripped of their citizenship on their 18th birthday? How might their treatment by the UK government change as they are deemed to transgress from innocent child to guilty adult? What Shamima Begum's case shows is that age is not static – and neither are the gendered notions of innocence and vulnerability that serve to protect individuals within the period of childhood.

4.5 Discussing the Role of Gender and Age in the Conceptualisation of Risk

What is evident in the analysis conducted is that age and gender are operationalised and interact in different ways, enabling these children to be constructed in relation to risk through a range of frames. Given their age, children are overwhelmingly depicted as unable to care for themselves; instead, these children are assigned to the care of someone else. Who is viewed as responsible for caring for these children is to a great extent gendered. Throughout news coverage it is the children's mothers who are constructed as responsible for their care and wellbeing, with this gendered notion appearing to justify the UK government's hands-off approach towards these children. However, questions are raised as to who should care for these children if their mothers 'fail' to fulfil their motherly duties and these children are placed at risk; should the state intervene in this caretaking role, therefore assuming the figure of paternal protector?

Such protection is arguably required, given that for the most part these children are framed as innocent and vulnerable victims who have been abandoned in a place of extreme danger, leaving them at risk of violence. Depictions of Al-Hol suggest that the camp is no place for a child, as it does not conform to the norms or expectations of a child-friendly environment. Situated within childhood, these children are constructed through the gendered and child-specific tropes of innocence and purity. However, news coverage notes that with time these children will become adults and suggests that in changing age categories the potential for corruption, radicalisation, and violence emerges. In this way, childhood innocence is shown to be temporal as opposed to fixed. These individuals will not be framed as innocent children forever and therefore represent a potential risk once they move from child to adult. What this makes evident is that whilst the gendered and child-specific tropes of innocence and vulnerability construct notions of being at risk, these tropes do not function indefinitely but rather are constrained to the specific period of childhood.

The temporal nature of age in relation to risk is further reflected in the case of Shamima Begum. As a child, Begum was framed as a naive victim; gendered narratives of helplessness and lack of agency helped further this framing. However, upon reaching adulthood this construction of Begum has changed. Now viewed as a violent terrorist threat, Begum is constructed – at least by some – as someone who is accountable for her actions, undeserving of forgiveness, and requiring punishment. With her transition from childhood to adulthood, Begum has shifted from being understood as 'at risk' to 'a risk'. Given this, questions are raised as to how the framing of British ISIS-associated children in relation to risk may change in the years to come. The protective function of gendered and childhood-related tropes arguably appears limited in duration, thus posing potential implications for these children as they grow older and approach adulthood. Although gendered and age-specific tropes of innocence and passivity construct children as 'at risk' and deserving of repatriation, such tropes may no longer function in

protecting these individuals once they become adults, thus rendering them in danger of being constructed as 'a risk' after the age of 18.

Through this empirical analysis, risk is shown to be constructed in relation to both gender and age, with these identities functioning as meaning-making powers. Gendered and child-specific tropes of innocence, vulnerability, and civilianhood are clearly seen to frame these children as 'at risk' – stressing their need for protection and constructing them in opposition to the violent crimes of ISIS. However, given that childhood is not fixed, neither are the ways in which these children are constructed in relation to risk. Acknowledging that these children will at some point become adults, a potentiality for danger emerges, thus enabling the children to be read as 'a risk'. The riskiness of these children therefore emerges not necessarily through the danger they pose now, but by their potential to become dangerous in the years to come. Risk should therefore be understood as impacted by the fluidity of the identities used to construct it.

Conclusion

Whilst previous scholarship has highlighted the role that gender plays in constructing and interpreting risk, this research demonstrates that age, and in particular the concept of childhood, is also of importance. Through adopting an intersectional approach, the above analysis demonstrates that the construction of British children associated with ISIS relies on interactions between both gender and age. Representations of these children are rooted in gendered and age-specific grids of intelligibility, with the deployment of certain characteristics and identities drawing upon long-standing meanings and tropes of childhood and gender which exist within these grids.

Within the analysis it becomes clear that age and gender are operationalised in different ways by different actors, thus allowing British ISIS-associated children to be framed along a spectrum of risk. From helpless innocent children in need of saving, to dangerous terrorists who pose a risk to British national security, understandings of gender and age are both deployed and subverted depending on the desired messaging different actors wish to convey. A duality therefore emerges in the framing of these children: within news coverage they are shown both as 'a risk' and 'at risk', threatened and threatening, guilty and innocent.

What this research ultimately demonstrates is that although often overlooked, children and childhood have an important role to play within Security Studies. Despite other identity markers, such as gender, receiving far greater attention, this thesis highlights that age is also important when constructing risk. Examining the discourse on these children therefore allows for a deeper understanding of how age can be operationalised to construct the notion of risk. Whilst child-specific tropes of innocence and vulnerability may help to frame children as 'at risk', this framing is reliant on the concept of childhood. Therefore, as age is temporal, notions of risk have the potential to change as children progress from childhood to adulthood.

What is additionally apparent is that age does not function in isolation but in relation to and interaction with other identities. By exploring the interplay between age and gender, this thesis demonstrates the need for an intersectional approach to security (Stern 2006b; Gray and Franck 2019), and highlights that such an intersectional approach should also foreground age. Gender acts to strengthen constructions of these children, helping audiences to understand these framings within gendered grids of intelligibility. However, whilst these two identity markers interact to frame British ISIS-associated children, they do not necessarily play equal roles. Within this analysis age appears as the dominant identity marker, with gender largely playing a supporting role in the framing of British ISIS-associated children. Whether age is as important when framing adults as opposed to children remains to be further investigated.

Although this research provides important insight into how and why these children are constructed, these findings are also of broader significance. The framings uncovered in this thesis undoubtedly have material implications for these children. The way in which they are depicted by the UK media has the potential to shape public opinion on these children. Whilst narratives of innocent and vulnerable children may be utilised by NGOs and civil society actors to push for repatriation and intervention, discourses portraying these children as potentially violent radicals risks justifying the government's restrictive policies towards British children detained in Syria. Alongside policy implications, these findings also highlight wider questions on whose security matters. Whilst these children are suggested to be 'at risk' the fact that they may also pose 'a risk' to state security raises questions as to whose security ultimately matters and the hierarchies between human security versus state security.

This research provides a much-needed contribution to the current lack of literature on children within Security Studies, however further investigation is required. Whilst this thesis focused solely on British children, a wider analysis to investigate whether framings vary between countries and nationalities would be of interest. Furthermore, expanding the analysis to look

beyond newspapers towards NGO reports, legal and policy discourse, and government speeches and debates may also act to enrich this current enquiry into the framing of British ISIS-associated children.

By focusing on age and gender, it should be stressed that other important identity markers are excluded from this analysis. Future research examining how age interacts with other markers such as race, class, or nationality to produce risk would therefore be of interest. Does age remain the dominant identity marker when constructing these children? What unique framings may be produced by this intersection of identities? These questions are of salience and have the potential to further deepen our understanding of the role of age within security discourses.

Ultimately, what would be of greatest interest is how these ISIS-associated children construct themselves. A lack of children's voices is evident in the newspapers analysed, and unfortunately, due to numerous constraints and ethical challenges, within this research project. How these children identify themselves, and how they feel about how others have constructed them would be extremely insightful. With this in mind, further research engaging with these children using interviews or photovoice would also be a beneficial contribution.

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