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This Briefing Paper considers the roles ascribed to women participating in revolutionary and political violence, including terrorism. The author outlines her doctoral research project, which will test assumptions that women are primarily victims, or forced to participate in, acts of violence. Through a mixed method approach, the project aims are to validate (or invalidate) current typologies of women's roles in conflict, and contribute to knowledge of gender perspectives in revolutionary and political violence, and peace-building processes.

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Women in political and revolutionary violence

Lauren Vogel

Introduction

Women have been involved in violent conflict throughout history and across multiple contexts; however, their role has traditionally been presented as that of victim or of peacemaker. This doctoral research project tests such assumptions by examining the role of women as active participants in political and revolutionary violence. This briefing paper outlines the objectives, methods and implications of the research programme.

Mapping the domain of violence: Problems of definition

Contemporary discourses of violent conflict are dominated, both in popular imagination and academia, by ideas of terrorism. The terrorism discourse rests on several assumptions regarding violent actions that constitute terrorist acts. Although there is no universally accepted definition of terrorism, there are common elements, including: actual violence or threat of violence; a political, religious or ideological objective or message; specific targeting of civilians and property in addition to the military; lack of an internationally accepted legal justification for the violence, and; communication of fear to a wider audience beyond the immediate victim/s, commonly referred to as incitement of terror (Cunningham 2003; Kovarovic 2011). The cliché 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter', although over-used, aptly illustrates the ambiguous and subjective nature of terrorism; what is considered terrorism changes across time and space and depends upon context and one's perspective.

These issues of definition may not be resolved in the near future, although there have been promising developments (e.g. Bottomley & Bronitt 2012; Kovarovic 2011). However, some of the assumptions underlying popular ideas of terrorism will be explored throughout this research, in terms of who is served by the employment or application of the label 'terrorism,' and the actors or actions included in and excluded from the discourse. However, in light of the on-going definitional debate, the label 'terrorism' will be used sparingly - primarily when it is utilised by other researchers and occasionally epistemologically to acknowledge the multiple ways in which violent conflict is understood and experienced (Hasso 2005). The term 'political and revolutionary violence' or 'violent conflict' will be employed in most instances, with these terms intended to encompass violence in defiance of the state or violence perpetrated by non-state actors, regardless of ethical or moral justifications (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007; Utas 2005). In general, this violence will have a political, religious

or revolutionary objective, however, it is not the focus of this research. The definition employed is intentionally and deliberately broad so that a more holistic picture of women's involvement in various forms of conflict is captured and explored.

Where are the women in political and revolutionary violence?

Women have been involved in violent conflict throughout history, from the Amazons of ancient Greece to female suicide bombers of the Russia/Chechnya war. Indeed it was a woman, Vera Zasulich, whose attempted assassination of the St Petersburg Chief of Police in 1878 heralded the modern age of political violence (Knight 1979). However, the mainstream study of political and revolutionary violence has typically focused on men and male imposed threats. Scholarly work on terrorism (e.g. Enders & Sandler 2006) excludes women almost entirely, both exemplifying and perpetuating the perception that terrorism and violent conflict are masculine phenomena (Graham 2008; Sjoberg 2009). This discourse is reflective of the broader arena of international relations and politics where masculine constructs dominate, and the way in which women function within this space is widely ignored (Enloe 2000; Graham 2008).This observation prompted Cynthia Enloe (2000) to pose the question, 'Where are the women?' in relation to the research on international relations and politics. This question can be applied equally well to the domain of political and revolutionary violence (Graham 2008; Nordstrom 2005).

Women enter the discourse of violent conflict primarily as victims, and occasionally as unofficial peacemakers. Primarily women are portrayed as widows, internally displaced persons, refugees and/or victims of sexual violence (Utas 2005). Whilst it is true that women are disproportionately and negatively impacted by violent conflict, focusing solely on their victimisation diminishes their personal and political agency (Anderlini 2005) and tends to portray a one dimensional version of the reality of women's experiences as victims. While it is true that women are victims in conflict, they are also survivors who negotiate a precarious existence in dangerous conflict zones – continuing to collect food, care for and support their families, find ways to earn an income, rebuild their communities, and deal with individual and collective trauma (Anderlini 2005; Nordstrom 2005).

Furthermore, the 'women as victim' stereotype fails to take into account the nuanced and complex realities of violent conflict. Women are both victims and offenders, often simultaneously. Consider the story of Isata, summarised from an article written by Myriam Denov and Richard Maclure (2007):

> Isata was born in Sierra Leone. In the 1990s when Isata was nine years old she was abducted by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). She was gang-raped soon after she was abducted; the beginning of repeated sexual violence. Eventually a male commander took her as his 'wife' and although he continued to rape her, he protected her against the sexual violence of the other rebels. In the rebel camp Isata was responsible for cooking and washing and couriering weapons and ammunition. After a year she was given tactical and weaponry training and became a combatant for the RUF. In this role she engaged in routine killing and mutilation of others, as well as alcohol and drug use and celebrations of battles and violence.
>
> *"Once you were part of the fighting force, you should be seen killing someone even without reason. This showed that you were committed and ready to work with them…Cocaine, brown-brown [crack] and alcohol were always there…[After the violence] we sang, shouted and danced for the violent acts we did"* (Denov & Maclure 2007, p. 250).

Who, then, is the victim in this story? Clearly Isata is a victim of child abduction and repeated sexual violence. However, the people she murdered and mutilated are unnamed victims of Isata's violence. Thus Isata is both a victim and an offender, at times simultaneously (as when she is forced to ingest drugs and alcohol before a battle in which she kills and maims others under the influence of these substances). Indeed, the male commander who was Isata's 'husband' or the rebels who raped her may also have been victims as well as offenders. Denov and Maclure (2007) recount the story of a young male combatant, Mohamed, who was abducted by the RUF and experienced extreme physical and psychological brutality (including beatings, threats of violence, forced drug use and promises of

camaraderie and rewards) in order that he accept the ideology of, and fight for, the RUF. Mohamed came to accept sexual violence as the norm, "During that time I could choose any girl that I wanted…If she wasn't willing to have sex with me, I would force her" (Denov & Maclure 2007, p. 253).

Determining who is a victim and who is a perpetrator in violent conflict is far from simple and thus gender stereotypes are commonly invoked in order to ascribe roles. Men are perceived as more aggressive, thus they are perpetrators of violence. Women are perceived as more passive, thus they are victims. However, these stereotypes serve to obscure the complexities of violent conflict. This is not to say that all women who are victims are necessarily offenders. However, the one dimensional focus on women as victims of conflict (as well as men as perpetrators of violence) obscures the many and varied ways in which women are involved in political and revolutionary violence – as survivors of violence and conflict, as perpetrators of violence, and/or as advocates of peace and resolution.

A more nuanced approach is required, to look beyond the victim stereotype and examine the range of roles that women play in political and revolutionary violence, particularly the roles that they take as perpetrators or supporters of violence, is necessary (Graham 2008; Sjoberg & Gentry 2007). Most research that purports to examine violent conflict, as well as much that claims to examine women involved in this conflict, dismiss female combatants as filling support roles. In much the same way that women's role in conflict is more than that of victim, their active participation is much more complex than simply that of supporting militant activities. Even if filling these support duties were the only act that women engaged in, these roles are crucial in sustaining a militant group, facilitating logistics and attacks, and engendering community support (Cragin & Daly 2009; Von Knop 2008). Thus, a focus on how women participate in political and revolutionary violence is necessary in order to not only gain an understanding of the myriad of ways in which women are involved, or involve themselves, in conflict, but also the way in which militant groups function and how they are sustained.

Women as perpetrators of violent conflict

Whilst the role of women in political and revolutionary violence is not well understood or explored in the literature (Bloom 2011; Cragin & Daly 2009; Von Knop 2008) some researchers (Cragin & Daly 2009; Mahan & Griset 2008) have constructed typologies of the roles that women play. Sue Mahan and Pamela Griset (2008) propose, based on the literature on terrorist groups, that women occupy four roles. 1) *Sympathiser*: traditional and stereotypical feminine duties centred on nurturing and caring, such as performing household-like chores (cooking, cleaning) and nursing as well as providing shelter and resources. This role can also entail availability for sex with male members of the organisation. 2) *Spy*: providing financial and/or strategic support to an organisation, including acting as a decoy, messenger, or intelligence gatherer. 3) *Warrior*: involvement in active combat. 4) *Dominant force*: providing ideology, leadership, motivation and/or strategy for the organisation.

Kim Cragin and Sara Daly (2009) developed a more comprehensive typology of womens' roles in terrorist organisations, derived from available literature and secondary sources:

1) *Logistician*: includes acting as a *courier* (transports resources), *protector* (provides shelter and protection from the opposing side) and/or a *decoy* (distracts or lures security officials);

2) *Recruiter*: includes acting as a *facilitator* (recruits new members via person-to-person contact), *propagandist* (runs websites or public events to encourage support/ recruitment) and/or *historical conscience* (retells the story of the conflict thus maintaining grassroots support);

3) *Suicide bomber*;

4) *Guerrilla fighter*;

5) *Operational leader*; and

6) *Political vanguard*: includes acting as a *strategic visionary* (provides ideology and strategy), *central committee member* (provides strategic guidance and allocates resources) and/ or *political official* (representative in political/public context).

The validity and reliability of these proposed typologies have not been quantitatively tested and there remain important questions. First, do women fill all these roles in all organisations across all types of conflict? It seems unlikely that women play the same roles in South American guerrilla groups as they do in rebel groups in Chechnya or in globalised Islamic extremism. Katherine von Knop (2008) argues, for example, that women are utilised uniquely within extremist Islamic organisations as organisational supporters and operational facilitators due to fundamentalist interpretations of gender roles in Islam. Second, do the roles of women in violent conflict change across time? It seems likely that, as violent conflict evolves across time and space, the role of women within conflict changes accordingly. Third, is the description of the role of women in political and revolutionary violence usefully constructed and understood with reference to a single typology, or several typologies? As demonstrated by the story of Isata recounted earlier, the role that women (or indeed men) play in political and revolutionary violence is much more complex than a simple label implies. It may be that a typology in this instance is too reductionist to be useful.

The doctoral research project will explore these questions by way of a combined quantitative and qualitative approach. Data are currently being collected from various sources, including academic studies, government and non-governmental reports, autobiographies and biographies, and media reports. These data are coded according to the roles proposed by Mahan and Griset (2008) and Cragin and Daly (2009) as well as any additional roles that arise from the data. Several case studies will be reviewed, incorporating quantitative data analysis, to explore the questions posed above. This approach will examine the utility of current typologies, as well as giving voice to women involved in violent conflict and the complexities of their participation, This will allow an exploration of the multifaceted and dynamic nature of the roles that women play in political and revolutionary violence, and how their participation may be usefully represented and understood.

Why are these questions important?

It is important to examine the role of women as perpetrators of conflict in order to gain a well-rounded picture of their involvement in conflicts, as well as the way in which militant groups function. However there are additional far-reaching implications to the question of women in violent conflict.

Several scholars (e.g. Graham 2008; Sjoberg & Gentry 2007) have criticised the contemporary approach to women in violent conflict which categories them primarily as victims. Even when women are clearly acting as perpetrators, they are portrayed as victims who perpetrate violence due to a lack of choice, flowing from the fact that they are divorced, infertile, influenced by male family members or associates, raped, grief-stricken, traumatised, drugged, brainwashed, and/or mentally unstable. Various narratives (similar in many ways to stereotypes) have been explored in relation to women in violent conflict, for example the beautiful soul narrative (Elshtain 1987) and the mother, monster, and whore narratives (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007). These narratives have, at their core, the denial of women's ability to act with agency, particularly in political and revolutionary violence, and stem from the idea that women are essentially victims, not perpetrators, of conflict.

These observations are consistent with psychological research on stereotypes, which has found that women are perceived as inferior to men in instrumental agentic qualities, and observers display prejudice against women when they are filling masculine roles as they are perceived to be unqualified (Eagly & Mladinic 1994; Prentice & Carranza 2002). Thus, women who display agentic behaviour violate gender-role expectations, in what has been termed the gender congruence hypothesis (Eagly & Mladinic 1994). The domain of conflict and violence is perceived as a masculine one, and acting as a combatant within it requires agency, a trait typically assigned to men. A woman acting within this domain is therefore widely perceived as a victim of circumstance and of the men around her.

The representation of women who commit political violence as incapacitated by grief, emotionally desperate, or under the influence of men undermines their capacity as violent actors and instead attributes responsibility to their insanity, the men controlling them, or the circumstance in which they find themselves. In this sense, women are denied responsibility for their actions. Interestingly, an essential element of common definitions of terrorism is the political, ideological or religious motive and the intent to incite fear. If a woman commits a typical terrorist offence such as a suicide bombing, but is portrayed as committing this offence in order to regain her honour after being raped (as is often claimed, for example, in regard to the Chechen 'Black Widows'), is she really a terrorist? Questions such as this, in relation to the assumptions underlying the contemporary discourse of terrorism, will be explored throughout this doctoral research.

Furthermore, there are practical consequences of these gender stereotypes in the arena of violent conflict. Women are routinely excluded from post-conflict processes, such as disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programs, due to stereotypical conceptions about who is a combatant in conflict. In Sierra Leone, for example, a prerequisite for entry into DDR programs was the possession of a weapon; however many women reported that they were ordered by their commanders to relinquish their weapons to male rebels or, alternatively, that they used weapons from a communal source during conflict rather than possessing a gun themselves (Mazurana & Carlson 2004). Thus they were unable to present themselves as combatants at DDR reception centres.

Furthermore, a Sierra Leonean woman was not eligible to participate in DDR programs or claim benefits based on her status as a rebel's 'wife,' unless she presented with a man who identified her as a combatant – a situation that presented a number of problems to a woman who was forced into 'marriage' in the first place (Mazurana & Carlson 2004). Similarly, women are often excluded from conflict resolution and peace negotiations because they are not perceived as active participants in conflict whilst male militants are included because they have 'fought' for their place at the negotiating table (Parashar 2011). These issues demonstrate the lack of contemporary understandings regarding the many and varied ways in which women participate in, and are affected by, violent conflict. Research in this area is critical to ensure effective interventions for conflict resolution and reconstruction initiatives.

Current conclusions and future directions

Women are portrayed primarily as victims

and occasionally as unofficial peacemakers within violent conflict. Although they are undoubtedly involved in conflict in these ways, they are also perpetrators and combatants, roles that have received substantially less attention. The stereotypes that are invoked when women are observed in conflict suggests a one dimensional portrayal of their involvement, a diminishing of their responsibility for violent acts, and exclusion from processes aimed at resolving conflict and re-building communities in the aftermath.

The doctoral research outlined in this briefing paper explores these issues by focusing on the range of ways in which women participate in political and revolutionary violence. The anticipated outcome is a quantitatively and qualitatively validated typology of the multifaceted roles undertaken by women as active perpetrators and/or supporters of conflict.

Implications include a better understanding of not only female participation in conflict, but also the way in which political and revolutionary violence is perpetuated, and how militant groups function and are sustained. Further implications include quantitatively validated evidence that could be used to argue for the inclusion of women in conflict resolution processes and post-conflict re-building in a systematic manner, in order to ensure effective resolutions to violent conflict, and to prevent dissatisfied female combatants from participating in or initiating renewed violence.

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Lauren Vogel graduated from Griffith University in 2009 with a Bachelor of Psychology (Hons). She started her Doctor of Philosophy through the School of Psychology and CEPS in late 2010. Her Doctoral research is looking at the role of women in political and revolutionary violence. She is also involved in a number of research projects at CEPS focusing on intelligence methods and risky people. Lauren has extensive experience as a Project Officer and Research Assistant at several institutions working on large-scale evaluations of new therapeutic approaches and organisational restructuring. Her primary research interests include peace psychology, human rights, feminist international relations, political and revolutionary violence, and terrorism/extremism.

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