Women's participation in terrorism, conflict and violent extremism: Gender equality or pure pragmatism?

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Abstract

Modern warfare disproportionally affects the lives of women and girls. Females experience armed conflict differently to men due to the gendered division of roles and responsibilities. Historically, direct combat involved participation exclusively by men, with civilians, comprising mainly of women and children, suffering due to displacement and direct targeting. As a result, women are frequently victims of gender-based violence, as well as torture, forced disappearance and murder. In modern conflicts however, women are not only victims but also perpetrators of violence; they take up arms and commit violent acts, either voluntarily or under duress. Women actively participate in organised rebellion and warfare in several societies with a history of violent extremism and domestic terrorism, transgressing traditional gender roles and altering gender relations.

This paper will examine the motivation behind women's participation in warfare, violent extremism and acts of terrorism, and whether it differs to their male counterparts. Furthermore, it explores whether women's participation in armed conflict breaks down patriarchal systems and increases gender equality, are for pragmatic reasons, or a combination of both. Female combatants in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of Sri Lanka will be used to highlight the significant role of women in armed conflict.

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'A woman is often perceived as a victim of violence or of society, as widows or mothers, or as passive supporters – part of a support network. She symbolises the guardian of tradition, a symbol of motherhood and life. How can she then, seemingly contradictory to this, give her life to violence and death?' (The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2005)

Violence, Culture, and Gender

In order to fully understand why and how women participate in violent extremism, terrorism and armed conflict, a brief exploration of culture and norms in societies that have experienced conflict. Research has revealed that state instability is the most reliable predictor of state-level terrorism (Piazza, 2007), and that worldwide terrorist attacks occurred mostly in failed or weak states concentrated in countries in South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa (LaFree et al. 2010). In research conducted by Gelfand et al. (2011), the authors differentiated between cultures that are "tight" (strong social norms and low tolerance of deviant behaviour) and "loose" (weak social norms and high tolerance of deviant behaviour). Their research provided an empirical test to show how ecological, historical and institutional factors, along with everyday situations and psychological processes, form cultural systems. Tight countries were more likely to have autocratic governments and more police per capita, compared with loose countries that have more openness in the media and higher crime rates (Gelfand et al., 2011). Drawing upon cultural psychology theories, their study of 33 nations revealed that countries with historically high levels of threat are tighter than countries with historically low levels of threat. Autocratic rule suppressing dissent, more law and regulations, less access/use of new communication technologies, fewer civil and political liberties with criminal justice systems more able to maintain social control, are all features of a tight nation (Gelfand et al., 2011).

Gelfand, et al. (2013) also examined how cross cultural values and norms connect with terrorist activity worldwide. Tight societies have more vulnerability to terrorism than loose nations (Gelfand et al. 2013: 11). Sri Lanka was not one of countries included in their study however, for the purpose of this analysis, it is fair to assume

that Sri Lankan society is tight, similar to neighbouring India and Pakistan. Gender egalitarianism was one dimension examined within tight and loose cultures. It was defined as 'the degree to which a collective minimizes gender inequality (House et al., 2004: 359), Sri Lankan culture falls on the lower end of the scale. Societies with low gender egalitarianism proscribe different roles for men and women, with an emphasis on masculine values such as toughness, assertiveness, success and competition, compared with feminine values of nurturance, cooperation and solidarity (Hofstede, 1980). The United Nations Development Program Human Development Index ranked Sri Lankan seventy-fourth in the world in terms of gender inequality in 2012, which comprised a composite measure reflecting inequality in achievements between men and women in three dimensions; reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market (UNDP, 2012). Within Sri Lankan society females are subordinate to males and symbolically represent the nurturer of the nation (De Mel, 2003 in Jordan and Denov, 2007: 47).

The Tamil Tigers: A prime example women's liberation in an otherwise patriarchal society?

The LTTE, also known as the Tamil Tigers, were an armed group formed in opposition to the Sri Lankan government, and have been labelled a terrorist organisation by numerous states. The separatist group have been fighting for a national homeland for ethnic Tamils in the country's northern and eastern regions. The Tamils claim actual and perceived persecution by the Sinhalese majority. In 2009 the Sri Lankan government declared an end to the civil conflict, with the capture and killing of LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran. The group were well known for pioneering the suicide bomb vest and their use of women combatants, and have been attributed to a dozen high-level assassinations, and over two hundred terrorist attacks (Bhattacharji, 2009). Women were recruited into the LTTE from the mid-1980s and performed various roles, including propaganda work, the provision of medical care, fundraising, recruitment and as combatants (Alison, 2003: 38). Their naval force, known as the Sea Tigers, comprises primarily of females, and the elite Black Tigers, suicide squad has numerous women. Estimates report that the number of combatants within all factions of the LTTE were between 15 and 50 per cent, however the actual number is unknown (Alison, 2003: 39).

Whilst there is no universal legal definition of 'terrorism', the widely agreed upon academic definition, adopted by the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, emphasises elements such as a 'special form or tactic of fear-generating, coercive political violence' and 'a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints' (Schmid, 2012). This definition includes specification that terrorist violence is predominantly political in its motivation and social repercussions and that the motivations to engage in terrorist acts cover a broad range, such as redress for alleged grievances, revolution, national liberation and the promotion of diverse political, national or ideological causes and objectives (Schmid, 2012. For the purpose of this analysis, the violence committed by LTTE combatants are considered terrorist acts, given the large numbers of suicide attacks perpetrated.

Motivations for violent acts: does gender matter?

Most researchers agree that people committing acts of terror fall within the normal range of socio-emotional functioning and do not have different personality profiles to others (Gelfand et al. 2013: 4). Women's participation in violent conflict, terrorism and extremism, whilst not new, is increasing worldwide. Fragile and conflict-affected societies often loosen their constraints on women to facilitate the convergence of individual and terrorist organisational interests (Cunningham, 2003: 187). Over the last decade women have participated in over 38 non-international armed conflicts (Jordan and Denov, 2007: 42), as well as violent international disputes. The role women and girls play in armed conflict, terrorism and violent extremism include direct combat as perpetrators, commanders, suicide bombers and human shields, as well as in support roles such as domestic servants and sex slaves (Fox, 2004).

The reasons for why women participate in acts of violence and terrorism in armed conflicts are not widely researched. Both women and men are vulnerable to coercion to participate in conflict for a variety of reasons unrelated to gender (Chowdhury Fink, Barakat and Shetret, 2013: 3). Sutten (2009: 17) explains that the increasing role of females in terrorist groups may be caused by a shortage of men within the organisation, due to personnel being captured, killed or unwilling to participate. Cunningham (2003: 181) identified several themes from the South Asian context that provides insight into female terrorists. Personal motives influenced women to join the

LTTE and become suicide bombers; freedom and liberation were key themes at both collective and individual levels; the idea of sacrifice as a general cultural norm, and; exploitation of female combatant roles by LTTE leaders. Furthermore, research by Alison (2003) revealed that Tamil nationalism was not a gender-specific sentiment; similar to men, LTTE women also identified with self-determination, autonomy and land rights as a reason for joining the struggle. Other contributing factors motivating women included fear and anger over sexual violence, emancipation and increasing life opportunities (Alison, 2003: 43).

Research by Jacques and Taylor (2013) examined the backgrounds and social experiences of female terrorisms compared with their male counterparts, citing a few differences. Their study revealed that the majority of female terrorists were equivalent in age and in the role they played, and they were more likely to have higher levels of education, less likely to be unemployed or have prior activist connections. Furthermore, their results found that women terrorists were more likely to be widowed or divorced compared to males, indicating that females motivation to commit violent acts relate more heavily to individual rather than collective engagement in terrorism (Jacques and Taylor, 2013: 42). Other studies suggest that most of the same factors prompt men and women to become terrorists, such as socio-political conditions, death of a family member, fanatical commitment to ideological beliefs or a desire to effect social change (Chowdhury Fink, Barakat and Shetret, 2013: 3).

Is the female terrorist an unlikely perpetrator?

In tight societies, with low gender egalitarianism it is easy to understand how women have been effective perpetrators of violence in armed conflict. When women are seen as mothers, wives, nurturers and peacemakers, they are not considered credible or likely agents of terrorism, and thus can carry out attacks more easily (Cunningham, 2003: 171). Female terrorists often do not receive the same scrutiny by opposition forces, or at security checkpoints and can conceal suicide vests or bombs underneath traditional clothing, clearly giving them a tactical advantage to their male counterparts (Sutten, 2007: 18). Women have the ability to use their gender stereotypes to avoid detection as their 'non-threatening nature may prevent in-depth scrutiny'; they are not perceived as able to be guilty of terrorist acts (Cunningham, 2003: 172). Furthermore,

recruiting both males and females from a young age enables them to be trained, manipulated and indoctrinated to support the cause (Sutten, 2009: 17). Using women as active agents clearly plays upon established prejudices and assumptions about the role of women in patriarchal societies. In particular, female suicide bombers can send out a powerful message, as the attention drawn in the aftermath is not the carnage created, but on the female victim whose grievances need to be addressed (The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2005: 7).

Some examples of how females have used their gender specifically to commit a terrorist act include a suicide bomber appearing to be pregnant in order to gain entrance to a hospital, successfully killing and injuring numerous people including the commander of the Sri Lankan Army (BBC News, 2006). Similarly, a young woman assassinated the Indian prime minister in 1991 after offering him a garland of flowers (BBC News, 1991). Some reports say that she concealed a bomb underneath her dress or buried it in her basket of flowers. The bomber was allegedly chosen to implement the attack to avenge her rape by Indian Peacekeeping forces. As De Mel (2002:18) points out, such 'acts of victimhood transformed into agentive moment, mark their protagonists as those who have broken rank, dispensed with or reinvented tradition and re-drawn their roles in society'. Conversely, Jordan and Denov (2007) assert that the LTTE movement simultaneously uphold and reinforce prevalent gender constructions though the reproduction of conventional cultural standards, preventing women from meaningful empowerment.

Gender equality within the LTTE: Rhetoric or propaganda?

Within the LTTE was the specialised 'Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers', founded in 1983. The five main aims of the Women's Front, also known as the 'Birds of Freedom'; were to secure the right to self-determination of the Tamil people and establish an independent democratic state of Tamil Eelam; abolish the oppressive caste discrimination and semi-feudal customs; eliminate all discrimination against Tamil women to secure social, political and economic equality; ensure control over their own lives, and finally; to secure legal protection for women against sexual violence (Schalk, 1994: 169). It is evident that in this list of aims, particular female grievances were elucidated; however there was no indication by the LTTE that women were recruited specifically to contribute to the civil conflict in a gender-

specific way (Schalk, 1994: 172). The LTTE's discourse in promoting the liberation of women from conventional roles and their inclusion as combatants and suicide bombers contradicts accepted cultural conceptions of gender ideals (Jordan and Denov, 2007: 47).

Respected leader of the LTTE and of Tamil nationalism, Velupillai Prabhakaran, spoke out about women's involvement in the armed struggle. International Women's Day was also celebrated as Tamil Eelam Women's Day, and on three separate occasions (1992, 1993 and 1996) Prabhakaran gave speeches elucidating his ideas on the role of women (Mehta, 2010). In 1992 he spoke about the oppression of women as a social injustice occurring in all cultures worldwide. Tamil women specifically, were 'subject to intolerable suffering as a consequence of male chauvinistic oppression, violence and form the social evils of casteism and dowry' and that their 'awakening is crucial' in order for them to 'rebel and re-orient their wretched conditions of existence' in order for their true emancipation. Words such as these are seemingly a call to arms for women who want to be liberated from the oppression of men in society (Prabhakaran, V (1992), in Mehta, 2010: 199). However, to then join an armed struggle that subjugates women and uses their gender as a tactical weapon against opposition targets begs the question of whether women's participation is really equality or just pure pragmatism.

In the following years, the LTTE leader emphasised that women were equal to men, and that their transformation into fighters progressed the liberation of Tamil land and women. Prabhakaran's comments such as 'society has differentiated between men and women and created unequal relationships' and that gender differences and traditional values based on them have 'moulded the outlook and approaches of feminism' (Prabhakaran, V (1993), in Mehta, 2010: 200) indicate his understanding of feminism and gender as a social construct. Whether or not he was using such rhetoric as propaganda to manipulate young girls and women is debated. Noticeably, dialogue about the peaceful, non-violent resolution of the conflict and the potential role women (and men) could play, was not included in Prabhakaran's speeches about women.

Women's emancipation: cause or effect?

The increased participation and visibility of women combatants and suicide bombers within the LTTE has resulted in debate by feminists about the role of women in

organised violence. The major question raised was whether LTTE women are liberated or subjugated (De Alwis, 2002: 682); were they viewed as equal to men or recruited for pragmatic reasons? Perhaps it is a combination of both. Generalising the motivations and actions of all women combatants denies them individual agency. Alison (2003: 39) asserts that initially, the main motivator for the recruitment of females by the LTTE was a practical response to the need for more fighters, rather than an ideological commitment to gender equality and women's rights.

There are intersecting reasons for why females chose to participate in the Sri Lankan armed conflict, some of which are gender specific and others are not. Pro-Tamil supporter and Women's Wing trainer Adele Balasingham suggested that the decision by women to join the LTTE's armed struggle therefore represents a 'vast departure of behaviour for Tamil women' as they are escaping from patriarchal control and gaining independence from their fathers, uncles and brothers (Adele, 1993 in Jordan and Denov, 2007: 47). De Mel (2004: 78) explains that it is only the representation of female suicide bombers in literature, media and public discourse that informs our understanding of their stories and motivations, given the lack of personal narratives from the women themselves. It is clear that for the LTTE, female combatants were symbolic of women's liberation and feminist ideals were used to attract women to the organisation (Alison, 2003: 44). Coomaraswamy, former UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women called LTTW women 'cogs in the wheel', asserting that they were not initiators of ideas or, but rather implement policies of others (Parashar, 2009: 241). Research conducted by Parashar (2009) with former female LTTE combatants, indicated that forced conscription requiring one child from each Tamil family to serve in the LTTE resulted in many girls unwillingly taking up arms.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Sri Lankan government perception of recruitment of women into the LTTE was a form of indoctrination, where many young girls (many under the age of 18) claim to be forcibly recruited or 'volunteered' (Participant 1, Sri Lanka, Goodman-Delahunty and Sivasubramaniam, 2012). Furthermore, this empirical research revealed that a group of over three hundred women participating in a terrorist rehabilitation program had reported that from their teenage years had not had the opportunity of understanding and defining themselves as women, as their 'whole femininity has been really crushed by reality because they have been made to

think like killing machines and (be) totally emotionless…you're meant to work and think and behave like a man' (Participant 5, Sri Lanka, (Goodman-Delahunty and Sivasubramaniam, 2012). Certain Sri Lankan feminist scholars have described how LTTE women are expected to be internally pure, chaste and virginal, whilst simultaneously appearing masculine by having her hair cut short, dressing in army fatigues and by not wearing make-up or jewellery, other than the iconic cyanide capsule around her neck (De Alwis, 2002: 683). Whether this internal and external gendered performance was a choice or enforced within the armed group is unknown.

Were women combatants active agents, empowered by the process of armed conflict, or victims, coerced or manipulated into joining against their will? The reality lies somewhere between 'agency and victimhood', neither liberated not subjugated (Alison, 2003: 52, Parashar, 2009: 243). Parashar (2009:244) suggests that the broader socio-cultural frameworks within in which these women fought and lost their lives should be considered more in depth in order to fully understand the cause and effect of female LTTE combatants. At present, four years after the end of the civil conflict, perhaps now the time is ripe to explore the variety of reasons for Tamil participation in terrorism, violent extremism and armed conflict in the Sri Lankan context, by asking surviving women themselves, and allowing them to use their multiple voices to reveal their narratives publically.

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