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'IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER':

Recognizing the Breadth of Women's Participation in Violent Political Organizations and Beyond

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Introduction

The potential for political violence in women is still something that most contemporary societies are wary of openly acknowledging. It is, after all, easier to apprehend the relation between women and violence as a unidirectional one, that is to say, as something that is done *to* them. Even when a woman is at the origins of the violence, her actions are often presented and explained in a gendered way. It seems counterintuitive that this should still be the case when there are now numerous studies demonstrating that women have long been involved in political violence, and by many means. Women's involvement is probably even greater than can be proven with official data, as historical records have been known not to reveal the full extent of women's participation in violent organizations. Either way, it is now undeniable that gender has never fully prevented women from fighting — literally or figuratively — for what they wanted. Yet women's involvement is still too often largely denied or at least depreciated, especially outside feminist literature. There are several reasons for this, but two in particular have significant repercussions.

The lack of reliable data, for one, is problematic. First-hand material is difficult to come by, and second-hand material is always questionable (as it should be). It is a difficulty faced by any researcher on “illegitimate” violence. However, the gender dimension complicates matters further, mainly because it sometimes hinders our acknowledgment of these actions as violent actions or as contributing to violence. Media framing of women's actions, for instance, often diverges from how men's actions are treated. The attention is focused on women's physical appearance, their familial or romantic ties, or their emotional states of mind, with the aim of sensationalizing the actions committed. Because violence is still primarily seen as a man's affair,



women's experiences of violence tend to be essentialized. And when it becomes too difficult to relegate women to the usual category of victim, their actions are rendered exceptional so as to not question too deeply why they have chosen violence. Even today, women's violence is largely rendered invisible, whether by erasing the tracks of women's involvement or by taking control of the narrative. Without trustworthy data about occurrences of violence committed by women, it is complicated to assess the full spectrum of their participation. But data notwithstanding, how participation is defined is also problematic when it comes to gender. That is the second reason why the full breadth of women's involvement is difficult to assess.

Even if it's not always acknowledged, participation in violence is a gendered concept (Enloe 2014 [1990]; Kadera and Shair-Rosenfield 2018). What it means to participate, to engage, is often reduced to its most straightforward meaning. This is why men are seen as participants, while women are more often than not seen as followers. But as Cynthia Enloe writes: "To 'follow' is not to be part of, but to be dependent on, to tag along" (2000, 37). Because women are not perceived as taking the lead, as being active members of the group, they are often excluded from the advantages, as well as the pitfalls, of what is implied in being part of an organization. The fact that they might have little input into the types of roles they occupy within the organization is seldom taken into account. But beyond that, participation is only considered in its most formal conception. As in conventional politics, within "unconventional" politics it should be recognized that there are different types of participation. What it means to be engaged, to be involved, takes on a different significance depending on the context in which it is employed, and its inclusiveness. You don't have to be a member to be a participant, and women are uniquely positioned as proof of that.



Through this working paper, I aim to contribute to the budding literature on the subject of women's violence by highlighting the full array of their involvement and participation. In order to achieve that, not only it is necessary to look out for women's presence in violent political contexts,¹ but also to see how it is made sense of. Moreover, it's essential to see what women's presence brings to the organizations they are involved in, as much as what it means to participate for women in particular. Thus, I will begin by exploring the now-classic question, "Where are the [violent] women?",² and its corollary, how are their actions explained? Meanwhile, despite characterizations of violent women as "unnatural," the fact remains that women have been involved (and still are) in all kinds of political violence, as I will show. The decision to openly accept and recognize women's involvement is one with far-reaching consequences for a violent organization's leadership, as it has many advantages, but also many drawbacks. It is not a decision to be taken lightly, as I will show in the third section of this paper. Finally, I conclude the paper by deepening the question of what it means to participate when it comes to violent contexts through a gender perspective, something that has yet to be done in current works on illegitimate violence. As I will show, participation is too often solely conceptualized in a restrictive way. In order to grasp the complex reality of violent women, a

¹ Because of difficulties in distinguishing between types of political violence in some cases (due to non-consensual definitions) and differences in perceived legitimacy between these types (which may affect the labelling), I chose the term "violent political contexts" to encompass violence between non-state actors (for example, ethnic conflict), violence by a non-state actor (for example, terrorism) or violence between a state and a non-state actor (for example, civil wars and guerrilla movements).

² Cynthia Enloe asked herself this question almost thirty years ago in her seminal book, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (2014 [1990]).



more flexible and ad hoc stance needs to be adopted. Through a review of the latest works on the subject, and building on these findings by adding my own empirical data,³ I aim to show that the relation between gender and violence is not unidirectional and that women's participation is a multifaceted phenomenon that has yet to be fully grasped.

“Where are the women?”: The Gendered Representation of Women’s Political Violence

When Cynthia Enloe first formulated the seemingly straightforward question — “Where are the women?” — in 1990, it was to highlight the lack of visibility and representation of women in international politics and, in a broader sense, their de-subjectification. They were not there, and openly asking the question was a way to stress this absence in the public sphere, or more precisely this absence from the academic understanding of the public sphere. Nearly thirty years later, Enloe’s question is still relevant, as women have become more visible, but how they are represented is still problematic. Violence, especially, has a polarizing effect on women’s representation and they are either rendered invisible or made “hypervisible,”⁴ depending on how politically acceptable their actions can be framed. Either way, women’s violence is treated very differently than men’s, due to a dichotomic characterization of each gender’s “nature.”

The association between women (“the gentler sex”) and peace, for instance, is only centuries

³ As part of my doctoral thesis on women’s activism during political conflicts, with a particular focus on the Northern Irish and Israeli–Palestinian conflicts, I conducted personal interviews during my fieldwork. Initial findings have been used in this paper.

⁴ Mostly by way of media overexposure, which is a roundabout way to render them invisible, as I will demonstrate. See Sjoberg (2018).



old. Moreover, it is neither as natural nor as universal as one might think. Rather, it is an association that has been slowly implemented over time. Prior to the decades preceding World War I (Berkman 1990, 142), examples of the intrinsic duality of “women’s nature” (as both warrior and mother) could be found in the legends and folklore of many cultures around the globe (Sautman 1986). This duality came to be mostly replaced by a binary, gendered representation of the social order. Images of women as “life-giving” as well as “life-taking” gradually gave way to representations of women as uniquely life-giving, whereas the life-taking dimension came to be associated with masculinist connotations.⁵

Women’s biological ability to reproduce — or the potential to do so — was deemed reason enough to characterize them socially as “in need” of men’s protection, and thus dependent on men. As women were to protect “life,” men were to protect women. It was also seen as an explanation for women’s natural affinity for pacifism. Meanwhile, this is the reason why they were deemed unsuitable for the public sphere. Like children, women were perceived to be “political innocents,” an idea still widely — unconsciously or not — taken for granted today.⁶ Women’s subjugation is thus enabled and promoted behind a rhetoric of protection. In

⁵ At the origins of this new conceptualization of social order is the popularization of “biological determinism” at the end of the nineteenth century. As explained by Herbert Spencer, women were stuck in a “somewhat earlier-arrest of individual evolution...necessitated by the reservation of vital power to meet the cost of reproduction” (1873, 373). The idea of “biological[ly]-determined sexual temperaments” (Conway 1970) found huge success at this time, most notably through the works of Geddes and Thompson (1901).

⁶ It led Cynthia Enloe to coin the term “womenandchildren” as a way to highlight how women are assimilated with children, especially by aid workers (2014 [1990], 1). The problem is that “the depiction of ‘women and children’ as



a reality where agency is defined by the actor's ability to make its voice heard in the public sphere, restraining one's access to that sphere on the grounds that it might go against their "delicate sensibilities" is just another way to silence them. By framing women as intrinsically "too good for this world yet absolutely necessary to it" (Elshtain 1995 [1987], 140), the domination of men was justified because of its underlying purpose: protecting the ones "nature" had made weaker than them, using a rhetoric of "beautiful souls" versus "brave soldiers" (Elshtain 1985).

As a result, women are seen — more so than men — as a homogeneous category in which the ones who do not conform with the essentialist image of their gender are excluded from "womanhood." They are not women, but some kind of deviant variant of their given gender. This is the "dark side to the linkage of women and peace — it can be used to keep women in their place" (Charlesworth 2008, 348). By essentializing women as peacemakers, society tends to turn a blind eye to "the complex set of roles women as individuals and as members of broader communities play in enabling and encouraging violence" (Ní Aoláin, Haynes and Cahn 2011, 6), a truth that is much more complex. Apprehending women as a homogeneous category might be heuristically helpful on some occasions, but ascribing to them essential qualities can only lead to dangerous oversimplifications (Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998, 45). By excluding the ones who do not fit this representation of what women are supposed to be, the voices and experiences of many women are silenced and concealed. However, this process can take different forms, which have evolved over time.

a coherent category of war victims is overly simplistic and ignores the variety of roles women and girls possess during war as well as their agency during this period" (MacKenzie 2012, 2).



As “beautiful souls,” there was only one way for women to be accepted in the public sphere for a long time: as victims. This is why when a woman committed violent actions in the past, those actions were often dismissed as accidental and thus not worthy of being recorded. The erasure or omission of women from official archives is very problematic.⁷ The fact that men were, for a long time, the ones doing the recording has not been without consequences. Women’s voices and experiences were rarely transmitted in the first person. They are still relatively few and far between today. Only with the growth of women’s literacy did women begin to be more than a simple footnote to history. But still women’s transcriptions of events are too often considered to be second-rate, as they are not being considered politically relevant. Theirs is the counter-narrative, not the main one, even when they directly took part in the historiographical event (or events) being related.⁸

Even now, in the age of social media transforming how information is diffused, the phenomenon of women’s violence is still rendered invisible, but in a more indirect and insidious

⁷ As Kathleen Blee explains, “It is difficult to assess the precise role of women in such forms of violence because the historical record is mute about how often a woman tied the noose around a lynched person’s neck or struck the match to burn an African-American corpse, or a living person. Yet, it is clear that women were integrally and fully involved in these events” (2005, 424). On the erasure of women in historical records, see Macdonald, Holden and Ardener (1987); Cardi and Pruvost (2011); Perrot (2012).

⁸ Moreover, history can be easily manipulated. Just looking at some examples of “commemoration” is evidence of this. As Niall Gilmartin explains, it’s as much a “process of forgetting as it is remembering” (2015, 144). By omitting the contribution of some who fought in the name of the “unity” of the group or the “dignity” of the fighters, history is rewritten to satisfy the (male) majority that things can now go back to what they were before. As Seema Shekhawat writes, “While women were visible, even though on a limited scale, during the militancy, they became virtually invisible once violence receded and the peace process gained momentum” (2015, 108).



way. It's not that there's no reporting of violent events in which the perpetrator is a woman. On the contrary, there are now, more than ever, covers of magazines and newspapers dedicated to the subject. After all, as Kathleen Newland wrote almost forty years ago: "Women are at their most newsworthy when they are doing something 'unladylike'" (1979, 73). However, how the topic is framed is frequently problematic, as it denies or at least discounts women's agency as perpetrators. The actions of female perpetrators are then no longer ignored but sensationalized (MacKenzie 2009; McEvoy 2009), which is a way to exceptionalize and singularize the actions committed. Thus, violent women might be "hypervisible" (Sjoberg 2018). Still, it doesn't mean that they "are no longer invisible," as Sjoberg argued (2018, 297), because even hypervisible women are not seen as fully fledged agents when committing violent actions. It is unambiguous when looking at news articles, but also perceptible when analyzing certain scientific accountings of the phenomenon.⁹

Unlike men's, women's engagement or involvement in violent organizations¹⁰ is often framed in an individualized and non-political way. When looking at women's motivations for participating in violent organizations, most authors stress emotional and individualistic explanations. If these motivations are conceptualized and categorized differently depending on

⁹ It should be noted that the bias has tended to be more questioned and rectified in recent years; see Berrington and Honkatukia (2002); del Zotto (2010); Nacos (2005).

¹⁰ Because this paper is aiming to address a broad spectrum of political violence, the term "violent organization" is purposely versatile so as to capture different types of structures, from loosely organized networks to hierarchical organizations. As well, the term "violent women" is used here to refer to women linked to such organizations, whether closely, on a permanent basis, or more flexibly, in a sporadic fashion.



the authors,¹¹ most have in common that they are personal and individual reasons (Schweitzer 2006). The emphasis on the personal at the expense of the political is a recurrent problem when it comes to analyzing women's violence and its consequences. Whereas men's motivations are often presented in a balanced way — as having political incentives as well as individual ones — most accounts of women's violence tend to be somewhat biased and/or call on a more emotional lexicon. Maybe as a result, women perpetrators are often considered to more “unhinged” — and thus more dangerous — than their male counterparts. They are seen as deadlier by their opponents, and even crueler sometimes.¹² Women's violent actions are perceived to be an emotional and personal response, and thus not as measured as men's. There is the assumption, as Mia Bloom has highlighted, that women “must be even *more* depressed, *crazier*, *more* suicidal, or *more* psychopathic than their male counterparts” (2011b, 4). Once again, the “terrorist half” overshadows the “feminine half.” But by making the “violent woman” more than a man, it ultimately makes her less than a (normal/real) woman, as she no longer matches the essential representation of femininity.¹³

However, there are degrees of “taintedness” and deviancy. Depending on the frames adopted and the narrative chosen, women's actions are either perceived as: (1) the results of a sick and fragile mind; (2) the consequences of a faulty biology; (3) the effects of extenuating

¹¹ Examples include love (Morgan 2001), revenge (Speckhard and Akhmedova 2008), redemption or relationship (Bloom 2011a).

¹² See notably Bloom (2010, 93); Georges-Abeyies (1983, 77); MacDonald (1992); Talbot (2000, 179); Utas (2005).

¹³ As Lorraine Dowler points out, “Ironically, when women abandon their political innocence, they often have to forfeit an ecumenical sense of innocence or purity. These women are often seen as tainted” (1998, 168).



circumstances; or (4) simply the repercussions of not knowing better. Evidently, no frame is exclusive, but each draws on a different stereotype matching the narrative conventions that are culturally resonant at a specific time and place (Ettema 2016). Without being able to access the same level of political agency that a (man) perpetrator can, the actions of a woman perpetrator can either be seen as completely depoliticized or somewhat politically contextualized, depending on the narrative chosen by the narrator. Within this paper, I will pay a special attention to four such narratives: the innocent, the whore, the monster, and finally the mother.

The narrative of the innocent (or “innocent child” [Berkowitz and Ling 2006]) is often used as a way to depoliticize women’s actions; the women are framed as simply confused, led by manipulative men and/or organizations to commit “evil” deeds. Thus, being victims, they are not responsible for their actions. After all, “as we *all know*, the connection between women and peace is ancient” (Forcey 1994, 355). In an implicit translation of the essentialist representations of femininity and womanhood, the narrative of the innocent woman relies on a dichotomous division of social functions, according to which women belong to the private sphere and have little interest in public affairs. As such, their actions — like themselves — are not political. On the contrary, the narratives of the whore, the monster and the mother (Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007) tend to politically contextualize women’s violent actions. By focusing either on the sexuality (whether excessive or inadequate),¹⁴ the rationality

¹⁴ The woman is either characterized by her perceived promiscuity (in which case the woman perpetrator is a nymphomaniac) or the perceived lack of (hetero)sexual activities (in which case the woman perpetrator is a lesbian or a prude). Either way, violence within this narrative is seen as a derivative of a “sex gone awry” logic.



(excessive or inadequate),¹⁵ or the reproductive capacities¹⁶ of the actor, her agency as a perpetrator of violence is framed so as to make sense of her actions according to specific and individual circumstances. Thus, the personal dimension tends to be seen as outweighing the political one. The potential ideological dimension of her presence in violent organizations is blurred in light of either her unbalanced sexual appetites, her irrational or over-rational behaviour, or again her biological abilities.

Except for the innocent narrative, violent women characterized through these narratives are not considered to be “real” women, falling too far away from essentialist representations of femininity.¹⁷ As Rhiannon Talbot explains: “The identity of a woman terrorist is cut into two mutually exclusive halves, either the ‘woman’ or the ‘terrorist’ is emphasized, but never together” (2000, 165). It’s a similar case for any type of political violence. Our longstanding inability to accept the intersection of the two images — of both woman and terrorist — has led us to exceptionalize occurrences where acts of violence were committed by women, and thus treat them as abnormal. More often than not, the “woman half” is obscured by the “terrorist half,” blinding us to the full spectrum of women’s relation to violence.

¹⁵ Rationality may be seen as lacking, sometimes related to the “over-emotionality” of women, who are deemed incapable of controlling their drives and bodies, or there may be a perceived excess of rationality, when women’s control over their emotions is so tight that they are seen heartless and thus “unnatural” in their masculine ways.

¹⁶ Either translated within the frame of the “nurturing mother” or of the “revengeful mother” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 33).

¹⁷ As Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry point out, “The narratives of monster, mother and whore have fully othered violent women. Their behaviour, their wilful participation in political violence, has transgressed the norms of typical female behavior....Violent women are not women at all, but singular mistakes and freak accidents” (2007, 13).



Everywhere at Once: The Pervasiveness of Women's Involvement and the Spectrum of their Roles

Because most occurrences of violence committed by women have been framed until now as peculiar and exceptional happenings, the complexity and depth of women's relation to violence have just begun to be highlighted. It shows that much has yet to be discovered about the subject. Moreover, it impels us to question a lot of preconceptions and prejudices about violence and gender. The almost automatic assumption is that where violence is concerned, women must be relegated to the category of victim. This "lens of victimhood" has tended to overshadow the pervasiveness of women's involvement in violent organizations, and has distracted academics from the whole spectrum of roles that women take up in those organizations.

Women's perceived relation to violence is a complex one. Whether it's the tendency to essentialize women's experiences during conflicts, and thus reducing women to the role of the peacemaker that led to the relegation of women to the victim category,¹⁸ the two roles (peacemaker and victim) are intrinsically connected and fuel each other. Both indicate that the only way to make sense of the presence of women in a conflict is to ascribe to them a function that strengthens the prevalence of men's experiences. After all, men — as "perpetrators" — have agential capabilities that women — as victims — are not deemed to possess.¹⁹ The

¹⁸ Or, on the contrary, if assigning women to the victim category led to an essentialization of women as peacemakers.

¹⁹ Not only during times of conflict, but also during peacetime.



problem is that each category — perpetrator and victim — is often seen as an identity-defining state-of-being by outside eyes, from aid agencies to media outlets. You are either a perpetrator or a victim, but you cannot be both at the same time. But automatically assigning women — because of their gender — to the category of victim is not only an oversimplification, it is simply erroneous. Even during conflicts, when various forms of oppression are at play and women are actively involved, even central, women (like their male counterparts) are never simply passive. Their actions are sometimes in reaction to something done to them or happening to them. However, this doesn't disqualify them as actors. The relation between women and violence should thus not be seen as unidirectional, as something done to women, to which they are powerless to respond. Sometimes it's the other way around. And more often than not, they give back as much as they receive when they see a possibility for it.

Thanks to a growing literature on women involved in political violence, the “widespread myth that wars are fought — mostly by men — to protect ‘vulnerable’ people” (Tickner 2001, 49) is little by little being challenged. Women may not have been as numerous as men during conflicts. They may have been less present on the frontlines than on the supply lines. However, they've always been part of the effort, something that is now recognized (Goldstein 2003; Steans 1998, 89; Talbot 2000). Moreover, thanks to a growing interest during the late 1990s on the interconnections between gender and conflict, new studies began to appear, highlighting a past involvement ignored by many.²⁰ If the focus started on legitimate forms of participation

²⁰ See notably de Pauw (1998).



(women in the military), it then spread to women's other forms of political activism, unfolding, at the same time, promising new research programs.

Still, it's a long journey, as the obstacles along the way are significant. The difficulty of descriptive statistics is a recurrent problem in scientific fields such as these — especially terrorist studies — because of the lack of reliable first-hand data. But the bias regarding historical recordings when it comes to women doesn't help either in this case. Hopefully, these obstacles will not stop some authors from working on the subject. As Jakana Thomas and Reed Wood point out, "Recent cross-national studies further highlight the frequency of female participation: more than half of all groups include female participants and more than a third employ some number of female combatants" (2017, 216). However, there are differences between organizational structures, and it is sometimes difficult to clearly identify what causes the variance.

The type of group has often been said to explain the variation in women's participation. For instance, most authors seem to agree that women are more involved in leftist or nationalist groups than in right-wing organizations (Cunningham 2003; Talbot 2000, 167). Cindy D. Ness estimates that women make up 30 to 40 percent of militants in ethno-nationalist groups, sometimes even holding leadership positions. This is true even though the glass ceiling is still a reality in these groups, and despite the groups' frequent arguing for a more gender-equal society (2005, 16). As to how many women are in right-wing or religious groups, it is difficult to say. It was hypothesized that "the reasons for the non-appearance of women among al-Qaeda attackers is simply the social conservatism that prevails in Muslim society" (Cook 2005, 383). This statement was quickly challenged, however (Von Knop 2007), and the last decade seems to



have proven Katharina Von Knop right, with more women publicly involved in jihadi groups than ever before.

However, it is also possible to look at the variation from another angle. The presence of a glass ceiling in various violent organizations defending a leftist ideology challenges the assumption that the ideological platform will naturally lead to women's greater participation.

As Margaret Gonzalez-Perez explains:

"...terrorist groups such as Cuba's revolutionary Communists, Vietnam's Front for National Liberation, Japan's Red Army, Italy's Red Brigade, Germany's Red Army Faction, Northern Ireland's Irish Republican Army and the Weather Underground of the US were all undoubtedly leftist, yet they were unable to recruit a female membership of more than 25 percent. Furthermore, those women rarely rose to the levels of combat, command or policymaking." (2008, 1-2)

For Gonzalez-Perez, the difference in women's inclusion cannot be explained only by political ideology, but must also take into account their political orientation: women are more involved and more active in domestic organizations than in international organizations, as such groups offer more potential for change in women's social status. In international movements, meanwhile, "women will be relegated to the status quo, regardless of the success or failure" (2008, i). Thus, Gonzalez-Perez is addressing not only the levels of participation of women in her study, but also the roles they occupy in violent organizations. Then again, both influence how women's involvement is apprehended. Depending on the type of functions occupied within an organization, women's presence is more (or less) visible and detected.

As with any organization, violent organizations rely on a structured apparatus to encompass a whole range of different functions. For militant organizations, it means "not only foot soldiers but also the development and upkeep of politically, financially, and logistically



focused subdivisions. Without a logistical and support apparatus, organized armed rebellion reduces to violent protest" (Parkinson 2013, 418). The tendency to automatically connect violence with what happens on the frontlines blinds us to the complex array of roles and people behind the lines that make this violence possible. In the case of women it's particularly problematic, since behind the lines is where — by choice or not — they tend to be. There are obviously famous examples of women who have headed violent organizations through time and around the world: Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin in the Rote Armee Fraktion,²¹ Susanna Ronconi in Prima Linea,²² Fusako Shigenobu in the Japanese Red Army,²³ and so on. But they are exceptions to the rule. Women are more frequently found in indirect roles, as logistical and support workers. And those roles are not without consequences for the way their involvement is recognized.

The disproportionate presence of women in behind-the-lines functions had several interrelated ramifications for the appreciation of the phenomenon. As Louise Ryan has remarked, the perceived passivity of these roles contributes greatly to the invisibility of women members within organizations (a problem already mentioned in the first part of this paper). If it's indeed already difficult to obtain reliable data on what happens on the frontlines, it's even

²¹ The Rote Armee Fraktion (or Red Army Faction) was a German far-left violent organization created in 1970, also sometimes known as the Baader-Meinhof Group. Meinhof and Ensslin were key members of the "first generation."

²² The Prima Linea was an Italian far-left violent organization created in 1976, and the second deadliest, behind the Red Brigades (Brigate Rosse). Ronconi was a member of the Red Brigade before founding the Prima Linea (Eager 2008, 29).

²³ The Japanese Red Army was a far-left organization created in 1971 in Lebanon. It was also known as the Anti-Imperialist International Brigade. Shigenobu was the leader and founder of it.



more challenging to see and account for what unfolds in the shadows. But more than that, it also raises the question of the understanding of participation itself — which is undeniably gendered (Enloe 2000; Griset and Mahan 2003) — and thus the accountability of these women behind-the-lines.

The perceived passivity of women involved in logistical and support functions has led some observers to assume it was a sign of women's lesser ideological engagement than that of their male counterparts. Women's allegiance to the organization was thought to be auxiliary at best and, as such, their identity as participants could be dismissed or at least downplayed. They weren't properly "part" of the organization, just "camp-followers" (Enloe 2000; Goldstein 2003; Gonzalez-Perez 2016; Griset and Mahan 2003). This reading of events was, after all, a way to make sense of women's participation without challenging too deeply any shared assumptions about "women's nature." As studies in post-conflict management have shown, assuming that women were merely followers had disastrous long-term consequences for the women in question (Naraghi-Anderlini and Pampell Conaway 2004; Shekhawat 2015). It resulted in the exclusion of women perpetrators from some of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs, and thus from the help they were entitled to as participants.²⁴ Moreover, the whole reasoning is based on a questionable premise: that women choose the function they occupy. As Shekhawat reminds us: "Do women have the freedom to decide how intensely they will be involved in a violent movement? It is the male-dominated leadership of a movement that decides what women will do and what not" (2015, 15). Few choose freely the

²⁴ It also led the World Bank to expand its definition of "combatant" in order to include support activities that are often performed by women (MDRP 2005).



functions they occupy when they enter a (violent) organization, even less so from the very beginning. The group, and the cause behind it, overshadows the individual: you do what is asked of you. Sometimes commitment is demonstrated by prioritizing your aspirations.²⁵

If women's participation in political violence is less important than men's, and they are more often than not found in the supply lines of the organizations rather than the frontlines, it does not mean that the extent of their skills stops there. The versatility of women in violent organizations has been substantiated on several occasions. One of the first attempts to categorize the breadth of women's functions was done by Pamala Griset and Sue Mahan (2003). They differentiated between four types of roles, from simple sympathizers to spies, then warriors, and finally what they called "dominant forces."²⁶ In another classification done by Karen Jacques and Paul Taylor six years later (2009), the same functions were once again identified, but two others were added: warriors leaders²⁷ and suicide bombers, thus refining Griset and Mahan's typology. Meanwhile, Kim Cragin and Sara Daly (2009) put forward their own classification, identifying five categories: logisticians, recruiters, suicide bombers,

²⁵ For instance, Mairéad Farrell, a well-known Irish republican killed in 1980, is said to have declared: "I am oppressed as a woman, and I'm also oppressed as an Irish person. We can only end our oppression as women if we end the oppression of our nation as a whole. I hope I am still alive when the British are driven out. Then, the struggle begins anew" (cited in Bloom 2011a, 84).

²⁶ According to Griset and Mahan, "At the other end of the spectrum are women who are dominant forces within terrorist groups. They are not only actively recruited but also actively involved. Women provide ideology, leadership, motivation, and strategy for their groups" (2003, 159).

²⁷ The relevance of this new category is questionable, as it intersects with the already existing category of "dominant forces."



operational leaders and fighters, and political vanguards. One of the latest attempts to describe the full range of women's roles was done by Lauren Vogel, Louise Porter and Mark Kebbell (2013). In reviewing the literature on the subject, they identify more than forty "activities" in which women were involved in "political and revolutionary conflict," divided into four "themes": the ideological theme, active theme, support theme and caring theme.

The evolution of role classifications highlights a growing appreciation of the complexity of the roles women occupy in such organizations. Piece by piece, a clearer picture of the phenomenon is being drawn, in spite of a lack of reliable first-hand data. Even if there's still a lot that is not known, one thing is certain: women are not newcomers to the world of violent militancy. There are several reasons for that.



“A woman’s touch”: Organizational Advantages and Disadvantages of Women’s Presence

Despite their involvement often being unacknowledged, women have always taken part — in various ways and through different kinds of violent organizations — in political violence. The lack of formal recognition of their presence is not, however, solely the result of a longstanding academic oversight. Neither is it solely due to the inability to match essentialist representations of femininity with the reality (and complexity) of womanhood. Or at least, not in themselves. And that’s why it is important to look at the organizational dimension, since the difficulty of appraising women’s involvement in violence is also the by-product of an absence of official acknowledgement by the organizations themselves of women’s presence. Undeniably, this is not always the case, and there are in fact several examples of organizations openly welcoming members of the “gentler sex” to their ranks. But for women to be accepted in a violent organization doesn’t automatically equal being accepted as a man would be. As I will show, there are various pitfalls for a group in accepting women members. But there are also numerous advantages to welcoming them, as many organizations are aware of. Thus, it’s a fine line for groups to walk.

In order to apprehend the full range of benefits that women’s presence delivers, it’s necessary to differentiate among them, depending on whether their influence is direct or indirect. Some of the advantages rely on the impact of female membership in the organization itself, whereas others derive from the representation of women and how it can be used to further the aims of the organization. For instance, women members are often considered to be more loyal to the group than their male counterparts, as they seem to show a greater commitment to the cause. According to Nancy C. Laur and Eileen MacDonald, “Women seem to



believe their commitment to terrorism is stronger than males' because of deeper 'soul-searching' and emotive determination to achieve the goal of the movement" (cited in Talbot [2000, 179]). However much one agrees with the explanation, it seems true that women tend to not — publicly at least — disavow their allegiance, even past allegiance. This aspect was notably highlighted in Luisella Neuberger and Tiziana Valentini's work on women members of the former Italian Red Brigade. The peculiarity of women's response to penitentism, defined as the situation in which "a terrorist who dissociates himself or herself from armed struggle and collaborates with the justice authorities" (Neuberger and Valentini 1996, 9), was what pushed Neuberger and Valentini to explore the intricacies of gender and terrorism in the context of the Italian *anni di piombo*. What they found is that there were almost half fewer women than men in the "penitents" ranks²⁸ (1996, 6). Kathleen M. Blee, drawing from her research on the KKK, concludes that women also seem to be less inclined to become informants for the opposing side (2005, 426).

More generally, women members are deemed to have a cohesive effect on the sustainability of violent organizations. As Ní Aoláin and her co-authors point out: "Even where women are not engaged as combatants, they often create the social and economic networks that support and enable violence to continue" (2011, 6). These networks are foundational — as they often are key to the organization's resilience — and women are at the nexus of them. Even today, the institution of marriage is a sure way to secure intra- or inter-organizational ties. By their ability to transform the organization in a familial manner — strengthening organizational

²⁸ According to Neuberger and Valentini, "the women penitents (13 out of 100) numbered approximately half of the number of men penitents (24 out of 100)" (1996, 6).



ties by establishing bonds of kinship (Bakker 2006, 46; Ismail 2006) — women are the ones who can reshape a contentious group into an intergenerational movement (Blee 2005, 426). That's why, for Shekhawat, "militancy could not have sustained without the participation of women" (2015, 100). It is also why women members — when accepted into the ranks — are often found in support and logistical roles, where their skills and expertise are recognized (Dalton and Asal 2011, 805). As Thomas and Wood point out: "women's roles within rebel groups are likely to reflect the embedded gender norms of the communities from which they arise" (2017, 217). By positioning women in roles and functions that are similar to the ones they occupy in peacetime, violent organizations seem to want to re-create the kinship unit as a way to inject a dose of "normalcy" during times of conflict; the presence of women is thus used as a stabilizing effect on the organizations. One of the latest examples of this was provided by the Islamic State, in which women — even while on some occasions instructed in firearms and explosives training — were mostly expected to remain indoors. Only on very rare occasions were they officially allowed to leave the house.²⁹ But this didn't prevent them from engaging in various and essential ways, notably online (Huey 2015; Huey and Peladeau 2016).

Online or in real life, women are known to be a motivating influence on different levels for violent organizations (Berko and Erez 2007; Goldstein 2003). However, the incentivizing effect of women members is often linked to the instrumental use of essentialist

²⁹ In his translation of the Al-Khansaa Brigade manifesto, Charlie Winter identifies three circumstances when women could leave their homes: in order to study theology; if the woman is already a doctor or teacher; and finally, "if it has been ruled by fatwa that she must fight, engage in jihad because the situation of the ummah has become desperate, 'as the women of Iraq and Chechnya did, with great sadness'" (2015, 8).



representations of women. As such, the organizational advantage of women's presence can be described as indirect. Shekhawat, for instance, highlighted the "boosting" power of women on the "morale of the militants" — through slogans and propaganda tools — to encourage men combatants (2015, 103). This power is an undeniable benefit that no organization can turn a blind eye to when a conflict threatens to drag on. However, this boosting ability greatly relies on representations of women as needing protection (from men). By appealing to men's sense of honour and masculinity, the female figure — whether the image the mother or the virgin (that is, a mother-to-be) — is a galvanizing image. It's also an image that can mobilize men by drawing on their feelings of presumed shame if they do not take action. The mobilizing effect can be used to attract potential recruits to the violent organization, as well as to attract (international) media attention (Zedalis 2004), and, by extension, to elicit feelings of sympathy (Brunner 2010).

The instrumental use of women's representations by violent organizations is by no means a new phenomenon, even if it has proven to be, across time, geography and situation, as much a constraint as an asset. Different imagery can be at play — sometimes at the same time — depending on the locus and objectives of the group in a specific situation. The visual representation of the mother sacrificing herself for her children, for instance, is used regularly for recruitment purposes. After all, it's a powerful image because of "the important symbolic value embedded in motherhood and martyrdom or maternal sacrifice" (Dalton and Asal 2011, 805). The essentialist representation of women as the givers of life is seen as the biological reason why they shouldn't be placed in a position in which they could become the takers of life. If the representation is this compelling, it's also because the motherhood dimension draws on a



generational logic as well as a gendered one. The reference is double: from mother to son, and from woman to man. Moreover, the image is flexible enough that it can switch easily from a logic of honour to one of disgrace. Depending on the desired effect, it is easy to move from the affirming message that one should “be a good son” (a good son will fight so that his mother doesn’t have to) to the shame-filled “bad son” message. Playing on masculinist feelings of shame for motivational purposes is a well-tried strategy. It relies once again on the social perception of women’s intrinsic pacifism, and how a man should be ashamed of “letting” a woman do a “man’s job” that is “unnatural” for her. But the image of women can also be used by a violent organization in domains beyond the recruiting field.

Even today — when literature is becoming more and more aware of women’s involvement in political violence — the presence of women is still greeted with a level of surprise and interest. The participation of women always elicits a certain degree of media attention, the phenomenon still being treated either as exceptional or exotic, not “normal.” But for a violent organization, such attention and visibility can be useful in more than one way (Shekhawat 2015, 102). At a tactical level, for instance, women’s involvement can be critical, as they might arouse fewer suspicions than their male counterparts (Schweitzer 2006, 9). This can facilitate women’s access to the organization’s target (Zedalis 2004, 1), at least until the novelty wears off. If it was considered straightforward, for instance, for republican women to cross the English checkpoints with rifles in their prams at the beginning of the Troubles, the situation changed quickly when the military realized what was happening (O’Keefe 2013, 66).³⁰ Likewise,

³⁰ As it was for loyalist women; see Farr, Myrttinen and Schnabel (2009, 226).



at the beginning of the 2000s, the use of women kamikazes was unheard of in the Intifada context; this changed quickly between 2002 and 2003. Thus, even if short-lived, the tactical advantage of the “innocence of the female sex” (Talbot 2000, 181) is not to be downplayed as an organizational asset.

Moreover, the use of women can be a way for an organization to evoke sympathy — even at the international level — for the cause. It can also be a strategy to distinguish itself on the “organizational” market. Despite their particularities, violent groups — like other organizations — compete between and among each other for the privilege of representing “their people” within a particular community. Accepting women through the ranks of the organization can give a competitive edge to an organization. On some occasions, women have been known to change group membership in order to be able to reach their goal. It’s what happened to Dareen Abu Aisheh, for example, who joined the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades in order to blow herself up, in spite of being a long-time Hamas member³¹ (Brunner 2010, 32; Zedalis 2004, 3).

Finally, women’s presence may be used to increase the respectability of the violent organization (Blee 2005, 425) and legitimize the organization’s cause (Talbot 2000, 169). By projecting the image of an inclusive organization, the group aims to position itself as a significant player with a long-term political project that encompasses the whole community. However, inclusiveness can be a double-edge sword. Depending on the audience and the cultural context, it can be detrimental for a violent organization to appear too inclusive or too

³¹ Dareen Abu Aisheh died on a suicide mission on February 27, 2002. At the time, Hamas leadership had declared itself against female martyrdom. Its official opinion would change later that year (Zedalis 2004).



innovative regarding women, especially when it comes to specific tactics such as suicide bombing. In fact, all of the advantages listed here can become harmful to the group if not carefully handled according to what is culturally acceptable in terms of gender roles and functions in a given context. It has been said this is the reason that Hamas, for instance, refused to sponsor female kamikazes until 2002, even though other groups didn't have such opposition (Zedalis 2004). Moreover, at the structural level, the group has to be able to take on the "organizational shift" of accepting women's involvement (Dalton and Asal 2011, 807). It means having favourable and strong-enough grassroots support to withstand the transformation. For Angela Dalton and Victor Asal, it is the reason why "the longer an organization has been in existence, the more likely it is going to use women in violent attacks" (2011, 813). The corollary is that groups that don't reach this organizational stage will tend to maintain women in passive roles, even if it sometimes means dismissing women's engagement at the ideological and/or group level. As such, it is a way not to alienate the old guard while still somewhat appealing to "new blood." However, it lessens to a certain degree some of the advantages of women's involvement (especially the ones related to their visibility).

From an organizational point of view, there is a fine line between women's formal participation being an asset or a liability. But because "[m]aintaining a rebel organization requires many different types of militants, who not only mobilize along different trajectories and accept varying levels of risk but also serve in diverse roles" (Parkinson 2013, 419), it is important to consider the full spectrum of women's involvement and what it brings to the organization.



“More than meets the eye”: Membership and Informal Participation

There's more than just formal participation, even when it comes to illegitimate forms of political action. Participation, even of the violent kind, does not begin or end solely with an organization. However, it's something that has yet to be fully appreciated in current works about gender and political violence, and even more generally in the whole field of contentious politics. The abundant literature existing about the various forms of participation within conventional politics — especially women's — has yet to be matched by an equal interest within the field of unconventional politics. It is counterintuitive, because if informal means of participation have been known to be privileged by women over formal ones when it comes to legitimate participation,³² why would it be different within illegitimate politics? In order to grasp the full breadth of women's involvement in political violence, academics need to go beyond organizational definitions of participation and analyze it through a gendered lens.

As mentioned briefly in the introduction, participation is a gendered concept. What it means to participate — how it is translated, what are its consequences — differs between men and women. The reason is that gender influences how these actions are conceived and changes how they are made sense of. For instance, participation is often associated with a dynamic action, with observable elements.³³ Participation in a conflict, in particular, is often associated with being on the frontlines, with one finger on the trigger, in the name of a specific group.

³² See Coffe and Bolzendahl (2010).

³³ In their seminal work, for example, Sidney Verba and Norman Nie define political participation as “those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the direction they take” (1972, 2).



Thus, when one thinks of a participant in a political conflict, not only does one think of a member of a specific organization, but most of the time one thinks of a combatant. Even if, as in any political organization, no violent group could endure without an organizational division of labour encompassing a full range of functions — from recruiting to intelligence gathering to logistics of all kinds — the tendency to essentialize the representation of the participant is undeniable. Those behind the lines are seldom considered, even though they are often the ones ensuring the survival and viability of the actors on the frontlines. Most forgotten of all are the people without organizational affiliation. Just as the figure of the participant is elided with that of member and combatant, so member and combatant are elided with the male gender. Thus, the participant is not represented as a sexless figure but as a man.

Meanwhile, the influence of context is too often forgotten when it comes to seeing and understanding women's participation during times of political conflict. As Rosemary Ridd and Helen Callaway pointed out more than thirty years ago: "when a community is involved in open conflict and all resources are directed toward countering an external threat...there is likely to be some fluidity in the social ordering unless steps are taken to prevent this" (1987, 3). And, indeed, there is fluidity. The private and the public spheres tend to overlap during oppressive times, as the private becomes political. This is why it is easier for violent organizations to open their ranks to women members (even if not always done forthrightly, as some organizations do not want to upset their more conservative members) under the name of necessity. But, more generally, it is also why it is easier for women to get involved in the public sphere during times of crisis — in the name of the community — without too openly transgressing gender roles.



Because (political) participation is often considered a dynamic activity, it is sometimes difficult to recognize it when it appears in less straightforward forms — for instance, as a non-institutionalized action or a non-action. It is as true in the realms of conventional politics as it is within contentious politics. But the relevance and significance of such actions shouldn't be dismissed because of their “un-institutionalized” character. There are as many reasons for an individual to engage in a political organization as there are for him or her not to engage, whether the organization in question is violent or not. In some cases, engagement is not *per se* the result of an autonomous choice. One might approve of the aims of an organization without approving of all the tactics employed or liking certain of its members, even if the organization is said to represent the interest of the whole community.³⁴ Moreover, it is sometimes difficult to nurture a long-time institutionalized political engagement, even during a period of conflict. One might choose to disengage from a group (or not engage with one) for reasons other than ideology. Personal reasons, often practical ones, may explain the lack of political involvement, especially in women. After all, if everything is a question of priority, societal pressures and expectations often influence how this ordering of priority is made.

Maternity, for instance, or the inclination to become a mother and have a family, was often cited by the women interviewed during fieldwork in Northern Ireland as the reason why they did not (officially) join the struggle. The real or perceived incompatibility of political activism and motherhood is a theme that frequently came up. It was, for many interviewees, an important dilemma, whether it was openly acknowledged or not. For the few who got involved

³⁴ For instance, not all republicans were in favour of the IRA's or Sinn Fein's behaviour during the Troubles, despite both branches claiming to represent republicanism's interests.



young and publicly in political activism, their involvement often translated into a decision to delay starting a family. But motherhood being something that was (and still is) sometimes difficult to prevent — especially within a practising Catholic context — it is often easier said than done. Moreover, it should be noted that even though (political) prisoners were granted early release from prison according to the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, their criminal records weren't expunged. Neither were the records of those who were imprisoned before that, during the thirty-years struggle. These records resulted in travel restrictions, difficulties in employment and — for many families — an impossibility to ever adopt children. It is something that came up in a number of interviews I conducted, even in those where it wasn't a problem they personally encountered.

The fact that motherhood in itself is often framed as a patriotic act in nationalist discourses does not change that these women sometimes do not consider themselves "participants." Women might be the ones (re)producing the nation and thus ensuring its survival (Yuval-Davis 1997), but pregnancy was never represented as or seen as a form of political activism during the interviews conducted as part of our doctoral theses data collection. It was something that was sometimes wanted, other times something that had simply happened, but — whichever the case might be — it was something that, for a time at least, had consequences for participation. But then again, being a "participant" was solely associated with organizational and institutionalized participation by the women in question. This is mostly why they did not think of themselves as "part" of the struggle, even if, for instance, some of them admitted helping to make Molotov cocktails in their living room in order to help those fighting the British troops or the loyalist militias. Because it was something that "everyone was doing"



and they were not members of a political organization, they did not perceive their actions as an expression of their political participation, but rather a way of helping the community as a whole.

In the case of Northern Ireland, there were many ways outside the institutionalized frame for them to help their community. What began as individual actions of solidarity between neighbours quickly developed into webs of grassroots community organizations with women on the frontlines. But what may be seen as simple occurrences of social activism during peacetime are inevitably transformed into political activism during times of conflict. The act of holding a community together — and the familial cell within it — during a conflict is undeniably an act of political resistance when the community perceives itself to be “attacked” on all sides. Making sure the household is fed, even during imposed curfews; watching and overseeing what happens in the neighbourhood in order to check what the (para)military does (and sometimes doesn't do); maintaining communication with the ones imprisoned, even if they are not members of the community, just so they do not feel too lonely —all these kinds of actions, which are not political in themselves, are given political meaning by the oppressive context in which they take place.

Moreover, as mentioned previously, a lack of organizational affiliation does not presume an absence of ideological convictions, especially during an open conflict. Why is that important? Because peculiar events can drive individuals to get involved in specific (occasionally violent) actions. Focusing only on organizational participation blinds us to these occurrences of sporadic involvement in which those who normally identify as simple supporters can suddenly become full-fledged participants for a short time. The powerful impetus of singular events that



emotionally resonate with individuals shouldn't be dismissed, for men as well as women. They might be short-lived windows of contention, but they sometimes have non-negligible consequences, as they happen without any type of supervision. Riots, for instance, are instances of sporadic and violent involvement in which the participants are not always politically affiliated with organizations. The same goes for public demonstrations, without the violent dimension (even if there is a violent aspect in some instances): they might be coordinated by political organizations, but their success relies on popular participation. There are various activities within contentious politics' repertoires that do not rely on institutional ties or formal organizations. Upholding a restrictive definition of what it means to participate is not only near-sighted when it comes to apprehending political violence as a phenomenon, it is reckless, especially regarding women. By ruling out more flexible and/or sporadic forms of political participation, we risk silencing women's voices.

Evidently, there are difficulties in expanding the definition of participation within the arena of contentious politics, in particular on the illegitimate side, from an empirical point of view. The lack of reliable data is once again a problem (as it always is in the field). However, the disproportionate interest in the question of the political participation gender gap — and its meaning, explanations, etc. — regarding the realm of conventional politics compared to unconventional politics is illustrative in many ways. Undeniably, there is much that is not known about what explains the gender gap in political participation. Within the field of conventional politics, findings about the gender gap in participation are contradictory. Within the field of unconventional politics, an additional problem lies in representations of gender and violence,



which influence how some important concepts are made sense of, thus contributing to the persistence of blind spots in this field of research.

Conclusion

There are still many untested assumptions when it comes to women participating in political violence, especially about what leads women to get involved. A few very interesting studies have been published in the last decade or so on the subject, some of them even attempting to produce systematic analyses of the phenomenon.³⁵ But in spite of these significant contributions, research and researchers still need to go further. This means questioning the adequacy of the concepts used; it means cross-examining the data collected; it means challenging our representations about violence, about womanhood, and about gender. It is easy to fall back into monolithic conceptualizations about what women are, especially violent ones. More importantly, it is necessary to stop opposing what women are and what they do against what they ought to be (or aspire to be) and do, *as women*. Thus, it is time to start treating them as agents and not simply as symbols.

Women's political violence is not a new phenomenon, but it is still a field from which there is a lot to learn. The aim of this working paper was to review what is known of women's participation, while highlighting where research should go from here. In order to do that, analyzing how womanhood was (and still largely is) conceptualized regarding peace and violence was a necessary prerequisite. Whether one likes it or not, essentialist representations of women continue to fuel biased thinking about the phenomenon. Women's participation may

³⁵ See notably Dalton and Asal (2011); Wood and Thomas (2017).



consist of different forms and kinds, but one thing is sure: women have never been strangers to political violence. Dichotomous thinking — men versus women, violence versus peace, and perpetrators versus victims — is no longer helpful when trying to apprehend violence as a whole, if it ever was. Violence, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. It is sometimes difficult to see it for what it is, but it doesn't mean it is not there. It is important to look at what lies in the shadows and to question on what basis it is decided that one thing is violence, while another is not.



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