

# Popular Representations of Female Terrorists

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## Popular Representations of Female Terrorists

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When people think of terrorists they often think of fanatical men, women rarely come into their minds. However, women make up 20% of terrorist organisations and more than half of all suicide bombers around the world have been women.[1] With women playing a large role in terrorism it can be assumed that more articles in the media and academic research will concern women. However, coverage of female political violence describes female terrorists as a new phenomenon. They fail to recognise that it was a woman who committed the first ever suicide bombing in 1985 and that presently there are at least two female terrorist groups: the Palestinian 'Army of Roses' and Chechnya's 'Black Widows'.[2] When women are written about they are often stereotypically represented in a feminine manner for instance, as mothers and care givers. Significantly, this depiction of women has been crafted by the western media and in academic research when they study female terrorists. It can be argued that a woman as a terrorist goes against the tradition social norms and views of femininity and as a result, narratives are created in order to understand acts of violence. In particular, female terrorists are represented using four main narratives. Firstly, female terrorist are represented as victims that are naive and defenceless. Secondly, they are seen as failures as wives and mothers. Thirdly, they are viewed to be sexually deviant and fourthly, female terrorists are seen to be perpetrators of violence who are ruthless and aggressive. It is possible to see that women play an important role in terrorism and these narratives have a profound effect on the portrayal of women. Therefore, it is necessary to explore how female terrorists are represented in the western media and academic research in more detail.

The victim narrative is important to the way that females are represented in western media and academic research. Female terrorists are often described to be deceived into committing terrorist acts and are viewed to be naïve and childlike. This narrative promotes the idea that female terrorists lack the political motivations of male terrorists but are instead motivated by love and they do not fully comprehend the terrorist ideology. In most narratives that are employed to represent female terrorists less emphasis is placed on political motivations. This is shown in a study by Bronwyn Naylor who found that female violence is often described in the media as 'emotional' or 'irrational' whereas male violence is described as 'normal' and 'rational'.[3] This is integral to the way that narratives of female terrorists are created. Motivations behind female terrorists are depicted as being emotionally charged rather than logical. For example, a study by Deborah Galvin follows the victim narrative and explains that women join terrorist organisations due to being mobilised by men. According to Galvin, 'Some women are recruited into terrorist organisations by boyfriends. A significant feature that may characterise the involvement of the female terrorist is the male or female lover/female accomplice scenario'.[4] This illustrates the narrative that women commit terrorist acts for the sake of love and are deceived into terrorism; their motives are emotional rather than ideological. As a result, the image that is created diminishes the women's role in the terrorist organisation and portrays terrorism that it carried out by women to be less horrific than a man committing terrorist acts. The consequence of this narrative is that it downplays the significance of actions. The narrative argues that women are brainwashed victims whereas men are naturally violent and deceptive. This narrative is problematic because it promotes negative images of both men and women.

Importantly, this narrative highlights the point that when female terrorists are represented their violence is explored in relation to male violence and is described as different from male violence. An outcome of this is that it reinforces the idea that women are secondary to men, women do not own their violence but instead their violence is created by men. In addition, the victim narrative is asserted by Robin Morgan who argues that women in terrorist organisations are involved in a 'rebellion for love's sake- that is classic feminine not feminist behaviour.' Morgan goes on to state that female terrorists are 'almost always lured into it by a father, a brother or most commonly by a lover'.[5] Women

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are described as being forced into terrorism due to patriarchal control and are exploited by men in order to achieve their political goals. However, in reality when terrorists are recruited both males and females are enlisted by family and friends.[6] The belief that women are victims reinforces gender hierarchies and the idea that women are passive and subservient. Rhiannon Talbot argues that the construction of a terrorist is highly masculine whereas femininity is perceived to be un-violent. Therefore, when a female terrorist is represented she is very rarely described as empowered and seen to be using traditional masculine means to achieve her goal. According to Talbot, 'She is seldom the highly reasoned, non-emotive, political animal that is the picture of her male counterpart; in short, she rarely escapes her sex'[7] The argument that sex is the frame in which women are perceived is pivotal to how narratives represent female terrorists. A narrative is created in order to reconcile female terrorism with traditional notions of femininity as a way of making sense of terrorist acts. The notion that femininity needs to be linked with terrorism is a key theme in all the representations of female terrorists.

Another important way in which female terrorists are represented is as failures as mothers and wives. This narrative encourages the idea that there must be something wrong with a woman to make her become a terrorist. This is shown in an article by Newsweek where the author explains that women engage in terrorist activities due to their failure to carry out what is expected of them. The article describes a suicide bomber as having 'explosives strapped around her womb'; this implies that the women killed herself due to her inability to have children and because of her shortcomings as a woman.[8] By using the term 'womb' the article emphasises the woman's role as a mother and questions her ability to carry out this role because of the action she is taking. Using the term womb highlights the difference between violence and femininity and creates juxtaposition between giving life and taking life. This narrative explains female terrorism as a response to a problem with a woman's femininity. Also, by concentrating on the roles that women play, the narrative emphasises gendered assumptions about what expected female behaviour is.[9] Moreover, the roles that they play for example a mother are seen to define them. The role they play as mothers/wives is used to frame terrorist activity. In this narrative women are shown to be supportive for instance, as a loyal wife/ nurturing mother. This paints the picture that the female terrorist is driven by her intrinsic drive to be caring and maternal. By focussing on female terrorists as wives and mothers, reports ignore any other motivations and this separates a women's participation in terrorism from a man's. By contrast a man's ideological reasons behind terrorism are rarely questioned whereas the media makes a concerted effort to find alternative explanations for female terrorism. Also, the mother/wife narrative de-emphasises the violence involved in terrorism and instead it describes women as 'domesticated terrorists'. [10] They are terrorists but are unthreatening because they are motivated by their nurturing and caring instincts as women. Female terrorists are explained using traditional gendered norms. Consequently, this limits the role of female terrorists to the private sphere. The mother/wife narrative is destructive because it conforms to western notions of femininity rather than challenging it. Violence and terrorism is regarded as being un-feminine and could perhaps be used to challenge gender stereotypes but narratives employed by the media instead redefine actions to reinforce traditional gendered norms.

Another dominant representation is the belief that female terrorists are sexually deviant. By contrast to the mother/wife narrative, this narrative argues that female terrorists have to be sexually deviant in order to do something that is so un-womanly. Neuburger argues that next to the aggressive and ruthless narrative, sexual deviance is the most potent explanation of female terrorism. This narrative is used to describe any type of non-conforming behaviour. Consequently, this narrative is used to describe female terrorists because they commit acts that do not follow the traditional roles given to women.[11] Again, it is possible to see that sex is used as a frame in which women's actions are explored. In the mother/wife narrative sex is used to explain a woman's ability to have children and become a mother as well a good wife. Terrorism is explained in relation to sex rather than as a separate issue. In addition, female terrorists are often reduced to sexual objects and are described by their capacity to have sex with men. The sexual deviance narrative explains that terrorism conducted by women is due to their sexuality. In this narrative a female terrorist is portrayed as sex-crazed. For example, news reports of the suicide bomber Reem al-Reyashi describe her as an adulteress who was forced to sacrifice her self in order to clear her name and the honour of her family. Reports of al-Reyashi concentrate on her personal life and her illicit affair with a Hamas operative.[12] This example also shows an element of the sexual deviance narrative which suggests that women do not own their bodies but are instead controlled and owned by men. This is shown by the assertion than al-Reyashi was forced to kill her self by her husband and was encouraged by members of Hamas. In this narrative men have power over women's bodies and sexuality. Women are seen as pawns in political violence and are forced to carry out terrorist activities.

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They do not own their violence and have no choice. Due to al-Reyashi's sexual deviance she is less than a woman and is made to become a suicide bomber. Moreover, the emphasis on the emotional act of regaining honour for her family parallels the role of women in the private sphere who are tasked with looking after their families.

Connected to sexual deviancy the media and academic research also emphasise the physical appearance of female terrorists. Often articles on female terrorists concentrate on how they are dressed and their body language. This is shown in an article in the New York Times about the suicide bomber Wafa Idris which describes her as being 'confident and composed, her chestnut hair curling past her shoulders'.<sup>[13]</sup> Another report begins with describing Idris as an 'attractive, auburn haired graduate who had a loving family and likes to wear sleeveless dresses and make-up'.<sup>[14]</sup> The emphasis on the physical appearance of female terrorist is a sharp contrast to the brutal act of terrorism. In the media female terrorists are almost always described as being attractive and it is very rare to find a description of a female terrorist who is not pretty. Importance placed on the physical appearance of female terrorists can desensitise the public to terrorist acts. It is interesting to note that physical appearance is also stressed by the media when looking at female politicians. Brigitte Nacos found that by concentrating on the physical appearance of female politicians the media highlights the fact that these women do not fit the typical profile of politicians who are usually 'tall, trim, men'.<sup>[15]</sup> Similarly, by concentrating on the physical appearance of female terrorists the media highlights the fact that these women do not follow the typical mould of a terrorist. It can be argued, that because they are not the 'typical' terrorist, the media believes that it is not necessary to look at the political motivations behind female terrorists just as the media gives less coverage on the political policies of female politicians. This portrayal of women is problematic because it generalises all women and reduces them to their gender.

An additional narrative that is employed by the media and academic research is the notion that female terrorists are ruthless and aggressive. This narrative represents female terrorists as more fanatical, cruel, and deadly than male terrorists. Matias Antolin argues that female members of ETA 'tend to be more cold-blooded and more lethal than the men because they have to prove their worth'.<sup>[16]</sup> This narrative explains that in order for women to become terrorists they have to tap in to something that makes them monstrous and less of a woman. A female terrorist is regarded as being less human because a real woman would not carry out violent acts. This is similar to the sexual deviancy narrative which explains that a woman has to have extreme sexual urges (which make her less of a woman) in order to become a terrorist. This narrative implies that due to the severity of their actions women are more of a threat than men. Again, a women's violence is characterised as being different from a man's. A consequence of this narrative is that it demonises women because they do not follow the traditional images of women and it explains their violence as a biological flaw.<sup>[17]</sup> Due to this biological flaw, violent women and female terrorists are either 'mad' or 'bad'.<sup>[18]</sup> This narrative promotes gendered stereotypes of women who are nurturers and maternal as the ideal women. When women do not follow this model they are categorised as deviant and inhumane. This narrative is similar to the mother/wife narrative because it describes gendered stereotypes as the expected role that women should play. Biology plays a key role in this narrative as it does in the mother/wife narrative. A women's ability to have children defines her and if she does not follow this framework the woman must have masculine characteristics. Terrorism is seen as a masculine act and therefore female terrorists must be somehow masculine in order to be ruthless and aggressive. However, not only does a female terrorist possess masculine qualities, because she is a woman she is worse than a male terrorist and is more cunning and deceitful. Being a female terrorist makes a woman insane whereas the motivations and acts of a male terrorist are described as rational and sane.

Connected to the representation of women as aggressive and inhumane is another aspect of the sexually deviant narrative. Ruthless female terrorists are often portrayed as sexually dysfunctional. Adding to the masculine characteristics that terrorist women possess this narrative argues that they are sexually less than 'normal' women. These women are sexually deviant because they are either infertile, lesbians or sexually failing their men. Due to the fact that these women are sexually dysfunctional and different from regular women they are ruthless and aggressive. These aspects work together to make a woman commit terrorist acts. This image can be seen in reports about the Chechen terrorists the Black Widows. An article from the Montreal Gazette describes the Black Widows as 'childless young women who had lost their husbands and are damned to wear mourning dress for the rest of their lives'. They are described as being 'scarier than men' giving orders and brandishing guns 'alongside their male comrades'.<sup>[19]</sup> It is possible to see that the article employs the narrative of failed mothers by describing the women as childless. In addition, due to their failures as wives and mothers they are described as dangerous and ruthless. By portraying the

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Black Widows as monstrous they are dehumanised. This narrative has been used by the Russian government as a device to target the Black Widows with extreme force.[20] Interestingly, an article in Time magazine portrays the Black Widows using the victim narrative and states that, 'the women who take part in terrorism do it not out of their own desire or willingness but because they are manipulated. They are given no other choice'. In addition, the article states that, 'women tend to be recruited because they are in search of psychological first aid'.[21] This links to the idea that due to a biological flaw, women carry out terrorist acts. Again, this narrative highlights the point that for a woman to become a terrorist she must be controlled by other factors such as members of her family or carry out acts due to flaws in her biology. A key theme in these narratives is the focus that women do not own their violence. They attribute women's motivations for terrorism as problems in their biological makeup from infertility to psychological issues. Narratives rarely explore the political motivations and choices but instead refute the idea that a woman would freely choose to become a terrorist. This is problematic because by doing so the narrative questions a woman's intellectual ability. Narratives highlight the idea that for women terrorism is not a rational choice.

In all the narratives explored femininity places a key role. Femininity is used as a contrast to violence and is seen as almost an opposing concept. Some narratives build the idea that femininity and violence can not work together. In many media reports female terrorists are described as weak and submissive. They are not successful due to their female qualities. For example a news source claimed that Hezbollah 'reverted to using men because the attacks by women and children were less effective'. In addition, the article claims that Wafa Idris was not as successful compared to male suicide bombers because she killed less people.[22] Furthermore, another common representation of female terrorists is the image that they are used by men in order to serve their political motives. Women are used as terrorists because they are unlikely to be suspected. A consequence of these notions is that it promotes gender inequality. Female terrorists carry out the same acts as men and therefore should be equal but these narratives instead sensationalise stories and promote gender subordination when women are acting outside gender stereotypes. By concentrating on the femininity of these women their political agency is belittled and sometimes even ignored. In addition, the use of gendered metaphors and words also trivialise female terrorists. For example, the description of female Chechen terrorists as 'Black Widows' and the description of female Palestinian terrorists as the 'Army of Roses' rely on images of flowers and insects which underestimate the harshness of terrorists acts and female terrorists. Female terrorists are also often referred to as girls and this again belittles their actions. This is shown in an article in the Guardian which states that, 'when there is a bombing, Russians are no longer surprised to discover a girl is responsible'.[23] Moreover, as stated before imagery that refers to women in their capacity to have children is also frequent.

To conclude it is possible to see that there are three main themes in the representation of female terrorists in the western media and academic research. Firstly, narratives use traditional notions of femininity to describe female terrorists. All the narratives explored argue that 'real' women are only those that follow gender stereotypes. 'Real' women are peaceful, caring and conservative. By contrast, female terrorists are not 'real' women because they are violent and ignore stereotypes of womanhood. This is connected to the second way female terrorists are represented. A common belief in all the narratives is the idea that women do not choose to be violent. Thirdly, is the theme that female terrorists are rarely politically motivated and their reasons behind terrorism are often depicted to be due to their biology. Importantly, what these themes have in common is that they all show that female terrorists are represented and analysed using their gender. Terrorist acts are explored through the framework of gender instead of being examined objectively. Instead of seeing women as agents that make logical choices, the media and academic research all produce gender marginalising narratives. A consequence of this is that all narratives strip female terrorists of their political agency and maintain subordinating stereotypes of women. This can be seen in the mother/wife narrative where women's political action is due to their intrinsic drives to be caring and nurturing. Women are described as failures if they do not fulfil this role. Additionally, the sexual deviancy narrative vilifies women who are not feminine as monsters. Perceptions of the political motivation of terrorists promote the idea that women have to be emotional and irrational in order to become terrorists. Actions are rarely portrayed as intelligent and rational decisions. Instead motivations behind terrorism are often attributed to being coerced by men and women are given smaller roles within terrorism. It is possible to see that the psychological make up of women plays a key role in how political motivations are described. Furthermore, women do not own their violence but instead their political agency is controlled by men. A problem created by reducing a woman's role in terrorism is that it de-emphasises the horrific act of terrorism and is offensive to the victims of terrorism. Stereotypical views of women are used by narratives to create

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a contrast between violence and femininity. Terrorism is seen as a masculine act whereas women are regarded through their femininity. For this reason female terrorists are marginalised in political discourse despite the important role they play in terrorist organisations. The reduction of a woman's violence is problematic because it emphasises the fact that their motivations behind terrorism is different from a man's. By employing narratives that are based on gender stereotypes an incomplete picture of terrorism is created. Female terrorists are viewed using one frame and so terrorist acts are not analysed honestly. Despite the fact that these narratives are supportive of patriarchy and gender subordination, perhaps the most important issue with the way female terrorists are represented is that it presents an unfinished picture of terrorism and international politics.

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