

From 'Followers' to Leaders: Re-examining the Roles of Women in Armed Rebellion

Written by Alexis Henshaw

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ALEXIS HENSHAW, AUG 16 2013

With the proliferation of civil conflict in the Post Cold War era, domestic insurgencies have received increased attention in literature on international relations.[1] While research on the topic has added to our understanding of why individuals and groups decide to take up arms against their government, theoretical and empirical work in this area still tends to ignore the importance of women's contributions to armed rebellion. The popular conception of rebel women centers around their roles as "camp followers" or "combat wives"—roles that define women as secondary, i.e., in relation to others, to those who are in combat, to actors who are presumed to be male. As evidence of this trend, we need look no further than research in the field where scholars have generalized "child soldier" to mean "boy soldier," or where they have utilized causal variables like male secondary schooling to explain incentives to rebel, discounting the possible motivations of women (Gates 2002; Humphreys and Weinstein 2008).

Do these conceptions about women's roles in war stand up to reality? Based on an examination of women's roles in rebel groups active since the end of the Cold War, I argue that a more gender-conscious analysis of rebel groups is needed. The participation of women cuts across regional and ideological lines, with women active as combatants, supporters, and leaders. Challenging the notion of women as marginal actors in conflict, I contend that the contributions of these women are often strategically important to insurgencies. This article develops by, first, discussing women's involvement in selected movements during the Cold War. Next, I move on to a discussion of post-Cold War insurgencies, highlighting areas where women have made distinct contributions. Finally, I address the implications of these findings for scholars, arguing for a more gender-inclusive approach to the study of civil conflict.

A Brief History of Women in Armed Rebellion

Various authors have discussed the contribution of women as "camp followers." [2] Enloe describes these individuals as "women who follow... male soldiers," but she emphasizes that "[t]o 'follow' is not to be a part of, but to be dependent on, to tag along" (Enloe 1999, 37). These women, present in military campaigns throughout history, would carry out tasks including laundry, tailoring, nursing, cooking, and the allocation of provisions. The level of recognition and respect these women received from the groups they work for has varied from one group to another.

During the Salvadoran civil war, thousands of women supported the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) as *tenedores*, individuals who cooked for and fed rebels, ran safe houses, and acted as couriers. An estimated 40% of *tenedores* were women, yet these women did not regard themselves as FMLN "members," nor did the FMLN itself consider them a part of the organization (Conaway and Martinez 2004; Cohen and Wali 1991; Vargas 2003).

Indeed, where women's contributions to armed insurgencies have been recognized by rebel groups, international observers, and scholars, it tends to be because women have transcended the role of camp follower by becoming combatants or leaders in a rebel organization. In the FMLN, 29% of combatants participating in official disarmament programs were women (Luciak 2001; Conaway and Martinez 2004). Women also comprised about 30% of armed combatants in Nicaragua's Sandinista National Liberation Front or FSLN (Randall 1995; Luciak 2001). The participation of women in the FSLN was such a defining feature that the image of the female combatant (often

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depicted with a gun and a child in her arms) became a symbol for the movement, appearing in posters, murals, and recruitment materials. One scholar who analyzed Sandinista recruitment materials states that women appeared in images in the materials just as often as men did (Kampwirth 2004). While the role of women in these two groups—and a handful of other cases—have received significant scholarly attention, these rebellions have often been studied more or less in isolation. Much of the extant research on women in insurgencies is single-case or small-N focused, which serves to perpetuate the notion that women contributing to rebel groups is the exception, not the norm. A cross-national analysis of contemporary rebel groups provides a more complete picture of the extent to which women are active.

Women Rebels in the Post-Cold War World

In keeping with the historical understanding of women's participation in conflict as camp followers and supporters, an analysis of over 70 rebel groups active in the post-Cold War era shows that women play a noncombat role in over half of all insurgent groups (Henshaw 2013). Cooking, smuggling, and relaying information are commonly reported functions, but women's contributions outside of combat also include several visible and strategically important functions. While the label "camp followers" implies that women are in positions that entail little danger or risk, women in many rebel groups perform high-risk tasks such as smuggling, espionage, recruitment, and propaganda distribution. In the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), a separatist group active both during and immediately after the Cold War, women were active in the organization in roles including the distribution of pamphlets, recruitment, the smuggling of arms, and the research of targets for armed attacks (Wilson 1991). While women were denied official membership status early in the organization's history, by the 1970s women had leveraged their contributions and advanced into positions as combatants and leaders in the organization (Wilson 1991; Connell 2001). By the time Eritrean independence was achieved in 1990, women had come to play such an important role in the movement that their participation was noted in the preamble of the country's never-implemented 1997 constitution (Rosen 1999).

Other rebel organizations show similar patterns. Women and girls have been implicated in the transportation of small arms and smuggled goods in the Allied Democratic Forces (Uganda), the Palipehutu/National Liberation Forces (Burundi), The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (Angola), and the United National Liberation Front/People's Liberation Army (India) (Mugisa and Kisakye 2007; Amnesty International 2004; Human Rights Watch 1994; SATP 2001). In Myanmar's Kachin state, where ethnic violence has flared since 2011, displacing tens of thousands, women have acquired a more visible presence in the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). Though the KIA has been in existence for decades, a female wing was officially established only in 2007. One estimate states that as many as 1500 women have been brought into the ranks, and while KIA leadership has stated that it does not send women into combat, reports during the recent conflict document women serving in propaganda units, distributing supplies, acting as medics, and running checkpoints (Roughneen 2013; Jackson 2012). In the Middle East as well, women have performed strategically important noncombat roles, such as the women of the Al-Mahdi Army in Iraq. Despite reports early in the Iraqi war that indicated women were excluded from the organization's recruitment efforts, later reports showed women acting as escorts for foreign journalists and as armed guards at rebel-held sites (Halpern 2003; Daragahi 2004; Jones 2004). In Syria, while the extent of women's participation has been a subject of debate, reports suggest women are active in both combat and noncombat capacities in opposition groups (Abouzeid 2013; Christia 2013).

These glimpses into the inner workings of organized rebel groups show that women are much more than "followers"; in fact, many of their contributions are of great strategic importance. The ability of women and girls to escape suspicion and, sometimes, to gain entrance to spheres where men's mobility is limited has made the recruitment of women desirable for many organizations. This extends to participation in armed attacks as well. The deployment of female suicide bombers by groups like the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Fatah, and the Tamil Tigers is well-documented (Eager 2008; Bloom 2007; Cragin and Daly 2009). Women's presence in leadership and combat roles was widespread in Nepal's Maoist insurgency (Xaykaothao 2006; Gautam, Banskota, and Manchanda 2001). In Iran, the Kurdish Party for a Free Life (PJAK) counts thousands of women officers and fighters in its ranks (Briggs 2012; Timmerman 2010). In the KIA as well, women have been trained as officers—raising the question of whether the organization may open combat positions to women as well if violence in the region recurs (Jackson 2012).

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Rethinking Literature on Armed Rebellion

How might these examples prompt a change in thinking about armed rebellion? The fact that women play a part in all of these rebellions challenges the notion that revolutionary women are a curiosity or an anomaly. The groups discussed here are historically, geographically, and ideologically diverse, suggesting a picture of women's contribution to modern conflict that is far more widespread than most accounts credit. While policymakers have started to express an awareness of gendered conflict with the passage of Security Council Resolutions 1325, 1820, 1888, 1889, and 1960 and the U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, scholars of International Relations should also re-examine their assumptions. This is because scholarship that understates or ignores the presence of women as actors and stakeholders in civil conflict risks creating an incomplete understanding about how conflicts are conducted and settled, who fights, and why.

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[1] For a discussion of trends in civil conflict since the Cold War, see World Bank 2011.

[2] See, e.g., Enloe 1999; Goldstein 2001; Griset and Mahan 2002; Gonzalez-Perez 2006.

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