

Dominant Gender Discourses and the Framing of Female Rebels in Syria

Written by Stina Wassén

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STINA WASSÉN, FEB 8 2015

How do Dominant Discourses of Gender Influence the Media's Framing of Female Rebels in Syria?

As of summer 2013 an increasing number of stories about female rebels fighting in Syria have been reported. Whilst women warriors are not a new phenomenon (Goldstein, 2001), they are often portrayed as something strange and abnormal. Thus, having been inspired by Cynthia Enloe's (2004) curiosity about gender and gender relations, this essay seeks to examine why, and to what extent female rebels in Syria are portrayed differently than their male counterparts.

This essay will begin by providing a brief overview of the meaning of sex and gender. In order to shed light on why female rebels in Syria are depicted differently to male rebels, the essay will examine how women have traditionally been constructed as non-violent and peaceful. Subsequently, the essay will engage with Laura Sjoberg's and Caron Gentry's work on how women who engage in proscribed violence (i.e. violence "condemned or prohibited by the laws of states or the laws between states") (2007:11) are depicted as either mothers, monsters or whores. In so doing, this essay will demonstrate how women who engage in proscribed violence transgress dominant gender roles, and are therefore portrayed in dominant discourses as either being motivated by their Womanhood, or as not being "proper women."

By engaging with the news media as a framing actor, the essay will establish how the media is neither a unitary actor, nor works in isolation from dominant discourses on women combatants. Finally, news media frames of female rebels fighting in Syria will be examined. In so doing, the essay will show that, because female rebels surpass what is traditionally rendered proper female behaviour, a major part of the media portrayals, depict female rebels as either *mothers* or *whores*, in order to sustain dominant gender discourses.

Gender and the Gendering of Women in International Politics

As Cynthia Enloe argues, "gender makes the world go round" (1989:1). In order to understand why women fighting in Syria are portrayed differently than male rebels, we must first engage with the concept of *gender*. As pointed out by Gill Steans (2006), feminist theory usually distinguishes between sex and gender. Whilst 'sex' usually refers to "the coding of bodies as either 'male' or 'female' on the basis of biological attributes" (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2010:34), 'gender identities' do not originate naturally from either a 'female' or a 'male' body. Instead they are socially constructed. Attached to this claim is the argument that the understanding of gender rests on inter-subjective discourses that are historically situated and consequently subject to change (Steans, 2006). This feminist argument has the result of challenging biological essentialism, which argues that the social world mirrors natural variances between people with different sexes (ibid: 8).

Something to keep in mind when thinking about sex and gender is that the argument that gender is produced through discourse does not inevitably imply an understanding of the sexed body as 'natural' or 'fixed'. Indeed, Judith Butler and other post-structural feminists have long pointed to the way in which biological sex is performed through discourse (1999). However, it is also important to remember that the argument that gender is socially constructed,

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does not deny the material impacts gender norms might have on people. On the contrary, all societies have specific social rules and institutions that rest on notions of gender, which decide how people should act and who is entitled to what kind of treatment (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). Moreover, whilst the *gendering*, i.e. the social classification and treatment of people based on perceived gender, varies through space and time, gender subordination of things regarded as feminine, to that which is labelled masculine, remains constant (ibid: 6). Ergo, in order to understand the news media's framing of female rebels in Syria, we must first understand how women and men have traditionally been constructed as counterparts of each other.

As pointed out by Gentry (2003), the perception of women as inferior to men in the social science tradition is found as early as in the writings of Aristotle, who argued that the family was a unit ruled by the biological superiority of man. According to him, the woman is the subject of the man's rule due to her innate inferiority (ibid: 57). By arguing that this analogy had to be applied to society in general, Aristotle successfully established patriarchy in political thought (ibid). Indeed, the distinction between the private and the public is still very present in social science in general and in IR in particular. According to the private/public dichotomy, the woman occupies the domestic domain, taking care of the children and household whilst the man belongs to the public domain of "business and commerce, politics, violence and war" (ibid:57). In addition to the public/private dichotomy, the rational actor, which in IR has a special place as the ideal identity of the modern actor to which states in the realist tradition are compared, establishes yet another dichotomy between the genders. Indeed, the rational actor, "the knowing subject, economic man, and political [agent] – is not gender neutral but masculine" (Sjoberg, 2013: 118). As with the public/private dichotomy, this ideal type of actor is put in opposition to its female counterpart, the 'irrational woman' (ibid). Important to note is that whilst this dichotomy is socially constructed, it has been used to disregard and exclude that which has been rendered feminine from international politics (ibid). Undoubtedly, this gender dichotomy is also seen when we look specifically at war.

As put forth by Jean Bethke Elshtain (1995), the Western tradition has, and continues to, construct women as non-violent, peace loving and nurturing 'Beautiful Souls', and men as violent 'Just Warriors' (ibid: 4). Whilst these representations do not explain what women and men *actually* do during war, they support the constructed notion of women as non-combatants and men as soldiers (Gonzales Valliant et.al, 2012). Due to the construction of women as *naturally* nurturing, the one that offers "succor and compassion" (Elshtain, 1995: 4), women secure men in their role as fighters. As pointed out by Eric Blanchard (2003), whilst women have often been excluded from war stories, the notion of women as peace loving, in-need-of-protection-figures has nevertheless been essential for war making. Indeed, this gendering of women, whilst constructing them as non-violent, still establishes them as the 'thing' in need of security, which in effect promotes both men, as violent guardians, and war itself (ibid:1301).

Having briefly looked at how women and men are constructed as opposites in international politics and in war, this essay will now move on to examine how women who take up arms transcend dominant gender roles and subsequently how these women are rendered abnormal in dominant discourse.

Violent Women

When a woman uses proscribed violence, her action is always analysed through her sex. It is through the 'fact' that she is a woman that her violence is understood and explained (Myers and Wight, 1996: xxii). Also, the depiction of women who use proscribed violence in popular culture, in mass media and by state institutions, further show how these women cause social unease by transcending the boundaries of hegemonic gender roles (ibid). Indeed, the dichotomy between the perceived biological categories of 'men' and 'women,' are seen as both constitutive and supportive of social order (Butler, 1999). Thus, when women step outside of dominant gender discourses about how they should behave, their actions are excused so as to make them less threatening to hegemonic gender norms (Myers and Wright, 1996).

As the theoretical framework produced by Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) shows, dominant gender discourses on women who use proscribed violence, clearly portray them as the exception to the rule. Due to the general understanding of women as non-violent and peace loving (Elshtain, 1995), the women who 'violently' compromise these understandings are systematically rendered abnormal. In this way, the dominant understanding of how women and

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men behave can persist. The way in which this has been done, is by depicting women who commit proscribed violence according to three types of narratives: *the mother*, *the monster* or *the whore* (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:30). Indeed, these gendered narratives are neither culturally specific, nor new phenomena but are found across cultures, religions, time and space (ibid). Due to the limited scope of this essay, and due to the essay's own findings regarding the news media's framing of female rebels in Syria, only the narratives of *the mother* and *the whore* will be examined here.

The mother narrative explains women's violence by emphasising their longing for, or existing link to motherhood (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). This narrative can be found as early as in the story of Medea in Greek mythology, who due to her love for Jason and her longing for marriage and children, kills her own brother (in order for her lover to escape) (ibid:30). Likewise, present media depictions of revolutionary women often explain their use of violence as being due to either the longing for a husband and children, or "maternal and domestic disappointments" such as loss of husband or children (ibid:31). An example of this is how dominant discourses have described Chechen women terrorists as 'Black Widows', motivated primarily by the killings of their husbands (Stack, 2011). Consequently, the violence carried out by these women, is not seen as motivated by political or religious convictions, but rather as a result of a longing for, or denying of, their "biological rights" as mothers (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:32).

The whore narrative can be divided into three sub-narratives. Due to the findings in the media narratives of female rebels in Syria, only the third version of the whore narrative will be explained. This narrative focuses on how women who engage in proscribed violence are physically and/or mentally controlled by men. In this narrative, the women do not choose to get involved themselves, but are forced to engage in violent actions or with violent organisations by men (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). Thus, these women are seen as prostitutes in the literal sense of the word, as they allow their bodies/minds to be used by men (ibid). Before engaging with the different depictions of female rebels in Syria, the essay will briefly examine the media as a *framing* actor. In so doing, the essay will later be able to explain why competing depictions of female rebels in Syria exist and why hegemonic gender norms are seen to influence a majority of the media's portrayals.

The Media – Framing Realities

The theory of *framing* has long been used in order to explain how communicative actors, such as news media and state elites, are able to convey a specific narrative to an audience (Scheufelel & Tweksbury, 2007:12). As Gentry has pointed out "rhetoric has often been used to perpetuate certain social truths and norms" (2011:177); indeed, the world is too full of information to allow everything to be included in just one story or narrative (Lippmann, 1991: 16). Thus, *frames* are constantly used in order to select and highlight "some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution" (Entman, 2003:417). The usefulness of framing theory is first of all that it points to the fact that telling a story and arranging a narrative, always involves *choosing* between what information should be included, and what should be left out (ibid). Secondly, depending on what choices are made, the subsequent understanding of a particular story will differ (Edy & Meirick, 2007). Thus, whilst news media might be regarded as a way for people to get information about what is happening 'out there', the media always *frames* a reality in order to successfully convey a message. Indeed, as the quote by Nicholas Onuf tells us, "we [continuously] construct worlds we know in a world we do not" (Onuf, 2013:38). Subsequently, whilst not all media frames coincide with pre-existing frames or dominant discourses of a certain issue, they do not operate in isolation. Dominant discourses construct how people and events are understood, and they influence what frames news media apply (Steuter and Wills 2009). Indeed, this process is co-constitutive. Media frames help to establish dominant discourses just as they help create, and overlap with other frames. In conclusion, media frames are both influenced by, and help to influence hegemonic understandings of issues and actors. Ergo, when looking at how the media has framed female rebels in Syria, it becomes evident that they both coincide, and differ from pre-existing discourses on women who engage in proscribed violence.

Female Paramilitaries in Syria – Mothers and Whores

The argument posed in this essay is based on a sample of 21 articles from American, British and German on-line newspapers. Both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers have been included. Further, a majority of the articles

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sampled (14 out of 21), use variations of the *mother* and/or the *whore* narrative as examined above.

Beginning with the mother narrative, a substantial proportion of the articles that use this kind of framing of female rebels, focus on how they have joined the fighting because of the loss of their husbands, children and/or other family members (5 out of 21). For example, an article by the German *Vice Magazine* explains how “all the women [in the rebel group] share the same story: their husbands were killed in battles against the Assad-regime” (*VICE*, my translation). Likewise, an article by the UK magazine *Mail Online* tells the story of the female rebel nicknamed ‘Guevara’ who, whilst according to the *Mail Online*, “is the last person you’d expect to find looking down the sight of a sniper rifle in the middle of a bloody civil war”, was “motivated by the death of her children” (*Mail Online*, 06-02-2013). The German political newspaper *Spiegel Online* has further elaborated on the story of ‘Guevara’ who, as a result of her children’s death “swore revenge”, left her husband (who tried to stop her from joining a rebel group), and remarried a rebel leader (*Spiegel Online*, my translation). The second version of the mother narrative found in media portrayals of female rebels in Syria, argues that women join in the fighting in order to find a husband (2 out of 21). For example, an article by the German news media, *Die Welt*, argues that there is a growing trend for German Muslim women and girls to travel to Syria in order to marry ‘Jihadists’ (*Die Welt*, my translation).

The whore narrative found in media framings of Syrian female rebels seems to be a mixture of the mother and the whore narrative. This frame is found in the articles covering the phenomenon of “Sexual Jihad.” Even if the story of hundreds of Tunisian women travelling to Syria in order to have sex with male rebels is highly questionable (*BBC*), ‘Sexual Jihad’ nevertheless got coverage in both US, British and German media *Bild.de.*, *Mail Online*, 04-04-2013., *The Telegraph*). According to this narrative, hundreds of Tunisian women have travelled to Syria to ‘aid’ rebel fighters by having sex with them (*Mail Online*, 04-04-2013., *Bild.de*); allegedly because they want to get pregnant (*Fox News*). Thus, this frame depicts the female rebels as motivated by their longing for children, at the same time as they are depicted as prostitutes for male rebels.

As mentioned above, the media is neither a unitary, nor an isolated actor. Also, in the case of the media depiction of female rebels in Syria, a diverse amount of frames simultaneously represent them. Therefore, whilst a majority of the articles sampled apply a highly gendered narrative (14 out of 21), less gendered accounts of Syrian women fighting in the war also exist. For example, a *New York Times* article successfully conveys a multifaceted portrayal of why Ahin, a Kurdish woman in the north of Syria, decided to join the fighting (*New York Times*). Indeed, the media representations of Kurdish women tend to stress how their decisions to go to war are influenced by several interconnected political and personal factors. For example, the German media outlet *Deutsche Welle* argues that many of the Kurdish women fighting see it as a way to influence both their own personal futures and the future of the Syrian state (*Deutsche Welle*). Furthermore, while the sample of articles analysed for this essay show that well-regarded media texts (for example *Spiegel Online*) also use a gendered narrative of female rebels in Syria, the so-called whore narrative was circulated in tabloid media such as the *Mail Online*.

Motives Behind the Gendered Framings of Female Rebels

As discussed earlier, women who engage in proscribed violence are primarily viewed in relation to their sex. For example, the mere fact that this essay has had to use the term ‘*female rebels*’, points to the way in which women’s violence is seen as abnormal and in need of explanation. Further, it is clear from the discussion above that because women who enrol in revolutionary organisations unsettle the hegemonic understanding of what a woman is, these women tend to be rendered unwomanly. Indeed, when gender practices are disrupted, efforts to “[re-stabilise] heteronormative understandings of what it is to be masculine or feminine” are made (Kaufman-Osborn, 2005:599). Thus, the depictions of female rebels as mothers and whores, whilst not necessary deliberately political, always have political implications. The mother and the whore narratives effectively de-legitimise female rebels perpetuate gender stereotypes, deny female rebels their agency and subordinate them in relation to their male counterparts (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). Therefore, as pointed out by Gentry (2009) the most important thing to keep in mind is that the framing of women’s motivations for engaging in proscribed violence, as directly linked to their ‘womanhood’, tells the reader more about the framing actor, and less about women’s actual agency when taking part in political violence. As the less gendered account of Kurdish female rebels shows (*New York Times*), there is an array of complex reasons and motivations that compel women to join rebel groups.

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Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that women and men are socially constructed through discourses of gender. Further, women and men have been constructed as counterparts of each other both in international politics and in relation to war. In war, women are traditionally seen as peace loving, 'Beautiful Souls' in need of protection, whereas men have been constructed as violent warriors. Because of this, women who engage in proscribed violence transgress hegemonic gendered norms and are therefore rendered either as being entirely motivated by their sex, or as not being "proper women".

As the examination of articles depicting female rebels in Syria shows, while not all media frames depict women's motivations to join rebel groups as being particular to their sex, the framing of female rebels as either mothers or whores is widespread. As a result of this essay, more research should be carried out to further understand the framing of female rebels in Syria and the political implications for women on the ground. Based on the research of this essay, it can be argued that female rebels are treated differently than their male counterparts; this is problematic as it de-legitimises their political claims and perpetuates gender stereotypes which serve to inhibit us from understanding people's complex reasons for joining a violent and political struggle.

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Written by: Stina Wassén
Written at: The University of St Andrews
Written for: Professor Anthony Lang
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