

Female Combatants: Same goals, different motivations?

Written by Gül Pembe Akbal

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GÜL PEMBE AKBAL, JUN 2 2017

Introduction

'The mere fact that it is necessary to specify "female combatants" indicates their historical rarity and symbolic position as unconventional figures' (Alison 2004, 447).

Women's participation in combat is considered as deviant and inappropriate (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). Despite their historical rarity, there has been a steady rise in female participation in violence during the last thirty years (Ness 2007).

In relation to female combatants, it has been argued that they have distinct incentives for joining an armed combat. This essay is going to illustrate that this argument fails to draw an accurate picture of female participation in violence and thus reinforces gendered identities. Even though gender-specific determinants for women can be identified, this essay suggests that greater importance should be given to social conditions as well as the sociology and ethics of the insurgent groups involved rather than distinct motivations for men and women. This is also because the insurgent groups' ideology and the framing of the conflicts affect the reasons to join an armed combat. This argument will be illustrated by using the cases of Kurdish female combatants, being part of a liberation movement with the aim of an emancipated society and the case of the 'Black Widows' of Chechnya, a group of female suicide bombers willing to sacrifice themselves in the name of a 'holy war'. As can be derived from the case studies, this essay puts an emphasis on women within anti-state liberation movements since they are assumed to have a greater potential in involving female combatants (Alison 2009).

This essay is structured as follows: it will first define the main concepts, proceed by outlining how women have been theorized during conflict situations, explain the theoretical framework and present the argument. It will then continue by applying this to the chosen case studies. This essay will use a constructivist approach in understanding women's agency. It concludes with thoughts for future research and recommendations for understanding women's agency with a less gendered account.

Definition of main concepts

With *female combatants*, I refer in line with Alison (2009) to women using non-conventional guerrilla forms of warfare, including bomb-making, planning assassinations, suicide bombs, but also conventional forms of battle. This is particularly the case in ethnonational conflicts (Alison 2009, 3).

Further, the difference between sex and gender should be clarified. *Sex* is the biological difference between men and women. *Gender*, however, can be understood as the socially constructed differences between these sexes. This is generally divisible into *masculinities* and *femininities*, with a set of stereotypes, norms and roles assigned to men and women (Sjoberg 2007, 83-84). Accordingly, gender is not given by nature. Notions of gender are negotiable and subject to change over time.

Women's role during armed conflict

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Starting from this angle, there have been different approaches to gender in general, such as essentialist, constructivist or poststructuralist ones. The *essentialist account* argues that there are gendered social behaviours that issue directly from biological sex, such as *women are inherently more peaceful than men*. The *constructivist account* argues that gendered behaviours are largely a product of socialisation (Shepherd 2010, 278). The *poststructuralist account* argues that there is a discursive nature of all identities (Randall 2010, 116) and a far-reaching intersectionality of race, class and ethnicity. It thus emphasizes the difference among women in relation to non-white, non-middle class and non-Western women (Alison 2009, 108).

Particularly the constructivist approach has been significant in understanding women's agency and gender hierarchy. Constructivists argue that 'the world is socially constituted through inter-subjective interaction, that agents and structures are mutually constituted, and that ideational factors such as norms and identity are central to the constitution and dynamics of world politics' (McDonald 2013, 64-64). Constructivist theories of gender affirm that gender is not a biological characteristic, but rather a social practice that involves social structures and 'packages of expectations' (Enloe 1989, 3). Hence, women and men are defined according to such social and cultural norms. Accordingly, the role of ideas and the dynamic relationship between structure and agency become crucial in order to understand women's agency. Constructivist approaches do not approach gender as 'simply being there', but rather as contextual and consequently as dynamic and changeable (Demmers 2002, 26). I consider this approach as being best suited in relation to female combatants since different insurgent groups have distinct ideologies that might encourage or hamper women's involvement in combat. It cannot per se be said that women's involvement in insurgent movements empowers or liberates the women in question. The constructivist approach takes different types of socialisation into account and is thus most appropriate in understanding women's agency in armed conflict.

Various studies have approached and understood women during conflict situations. The different lines of research can be distinguished in either *women as victims of armed conflict* (York 1998; Kirby 2012) which is the more traditional approach or *women as agents of political violence* (Alison 2009), a phenomenon which has widely been neglected. One of the most prevalent discourses has been the victimization and the peacemaker theory, thus resting on an essentialist account, arguing that women are generally more peaceful and less aggressive or warlike than men (Alison 2009, 1). The argument is that women suffer war disproportionately, and thus have a particular interest in peace (York 1998, 22-24). The literature on women during conflict largely neglects the ways in which women might be affected by war other than in terms of sexual violence and ignores women's agency.

Portraying women solely as victims or peacemakers during conflict situations does not only deny women's agency but also ignores the fact that men can also be victims of sexual violence. Collective images equating femininity with victims and masculinity with perpetrators is incomplete and biased. Moreover, such an understanding violates the principles of achieving true emancipation of women by precisely putting them into places where our gendered mindset expects them to be. I criticise such gendered theorizing about 'men-the perpetrator' and 'women-the victim' (Coulter 2008) or 'women's peace' and 'men's war' (York 1998, 19) by arguing that women can indeed be agents of political violence. Their reasons for joining an armed conflict might differ, at least rhetorically, from the ones of male combatants. Nevertheless, more importance should be given to social conditions and the insurgent groups' sociology and ethics while assessing determinants of joining an armed combat. The theoretical expectations of this argument will be discussed in the subsequent part.

Why do women fight?

Women in numerous ethno-separatist struggles make up approximately thirty to forty percent of combatants (Ness 2007, 85). Hence, one clear distinction to make concerning female combatants is the differentiation between institutionalized state militaries and anti-state liberation movements. Alison (2004, 2009) argued that the latter may have more potential for challenging gendered identities (Alison 2009, 117) and that they provide more space for female combatants than institutionalized state militaries do (Alison 2004, 2009; Enloe 1983). This yields from the dependence as well as the structural and ideological need of women's enlistment (Sajjad 2004; Coulter 2008; Alison 2004, 2009), the rhetorical commitment to gender equality and the imagination of a 'new society' (Alison 2009, 222-223). The simple fact that anti-state liberation movements challenge the state explains their different motivation for taking up arms for both sexes. The differentiation is a useful and a necessary one since it implies different

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outcomes. The Kurdish as well as the Chechen case are anti-state nationalist movements and might thus attract more women than the institutionalized state militaries in the respective states would.

The gender of a female combatant impacts the meaning of her actions more than that of a man. Where male combatants are more or less framed in terms of their political motivations, the political motivation of female combatants is nullified in some cases and attention is only given to her as a representative of her biological sex (Rajan 2011, 61). This has various reasons: Women are traditionally associated with the private space, which is not seen as politically relevant whereas men are associated with the public space (Yuval-Davis 1998, 24). Women are thus traditionally considered as representatives of their nation, motherhood, nurturing and peace (Yuval-Davis 1998, 29), as 'Beautiful Souls' (Elshtain 1995) or even as the 'better half of humanity' (Ness 2007, 85). In this sense, the image of a female combatant is not appropriate in societies where patriarchy – a system based on hierarchy that differentiates human beings on the basis of sex, class, race and sexual orientation (Rajan 2011, 18) – resides.

Do women being enrolled in combat roles then challenge these gendered identities while breaking traditional norms and have thus distinct motivations for taking up arms? Alison (2004, 2009) – specifically examining female combatants in Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka – has argued that motivations for joining armed combat largely equals that of male counterparts, such as revenge for state violence and nationalism (Alison 2009, 224). However, she argued, that gender-specific determinants also play a role, such as communal and personal experiences, the movements' commitment to gender equality and the concern for their families and communities, which can also be framed as the wider nation (ibid.). More importantly, she identifies that the combat represented a catalyst for developing a feminist perspective. The determinants for joining the armed movement were thus not feminist in the first place; they rather evolved gradually (Alison 2009, 222-226). Alison successfully differentiates between motivational factors and those being evolved during the course of the conflict and transformed the gender roles within the movements itself. Equally, Wood (2008) argues that civil war transforms traditional gender roles where patriarchal networks are often radically reshaped due to the involvement of female combatants (Wood 2008, 552-553). I consider the main strength of their arguments in the fact that motivational factors might differ from the one that have been produced within the conflict and strengthened the will of engagement. The movements have presented a way of thinking more emancipatory about gender, even if the reason to join the combat has not been of feminist nature. Nonetheless, both argue that women are being re-marginalized in the post-conflict period (Alison 2009, 225; Wood 2008, 553) and that the new process of nation-building does not necessarily create a permanent space for women (Sajjad 2004). Still, many female ex-combatants affirm that it is their experience in the movements that has allowed them to critique the shortcomings of their movements in regard to gender (Chinchilla 1997, 209).

Related to this, it should be kept in mind that women's agency is socio-culturally determined and their experiences vary across space and time. The decision for a woman to join armed combat is heavily dependent on the social conditions and structures she is embedded in. The political ideologies of the insurgent groups consequently play a significant role. As do different expectations produce different gender constructions, the latter in turn produce different outcomes in relation to female combatants.

Kurdish Female Combatants

The rise of the 'Islamic State' (IS) in the Middle East has particularly made the Kurds –dispersed over the countries of origin Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria – visible. The involvement of female combatants in the fight against IS has gained remarkable media attention with media outlets describing Kurdish female combatants as 'incredibly brave' and 'inspirational' who do not only fight for their own women's rights but also for the rights of women from other ethnic groups (Daily Mail 2014). Accordingly, this section will focus on female combatants within the Syrian civil war and their fight against IS. Prior to that, the ideological roots of the armed female wings will be briefly discussed.

The history of female involvement in the Kurdish armed struggle dates back to the foundation of the Kurdistan's Worker Party (PKK) being founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 1978. The PKK has begun its armed struggle in 1984 with the aim of forming a separate Kurdish state. Over the years, the organisation modified its agenda and is now aiming to gain regional autonomy (Baser 2013). The PKK's ideological propaganda, the gender construction of their political discourse as well as extraordinary oppressions especially in the last 1990s have been effective in prompting women

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to join the movement as active armed combatants (Çağlayan 2012, 11). On the one hand, women's involvement has been encouraged as a symbol of liberation and revolution and on the other hand, as symbols of Kurdish culture (Dryaz 2011, 2). PKK militants argued that 'they are facing a gender regime in which the state is a reproduction of masculinity, so to achieve an equal system, it seems entirely normal to orientate the direction of the fight to the "Men-State" sovereignty' (ibid.). Clearly, the fight against the state is not only a fight for regional autonomy, but also a fight against the patriarchal society they are part of. As it has been framed by women joining the conflict: 'The liberation of Kurdistan will be achieved by the emancipation of women' (Arte 2016).

Particularly since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the Syrian Kurds began to gain importance. The 'People's Protection Units' (YPG), the Syrian Kurds military organization, have a strong ideological affiliation to the PKK. Consequently, the movement's framing of female involvement is similar to that of the 'mother organization'. Kurdish female combatants, organizing themselves within the 'Women's Protections Units' (YPJ) have gained particular admiration after they have gained control together with their male counterparts over the Northern parts of Syria, Rojava, where they aim to build a system of so-called 'Democratic Confederalism' (New York Times 2015). The success of this system has been framed with the following words: 'The autonomous region of Rojava, as it exists today, is one of few bright spots — albeit a very bright one — to emerge from the tragedy of the Syrian revolution' (New York Times 2015). Rojava's constitution enshrines gender equality and freedom of religion as inviolable rights for all residents (ibid.). Female combatants' motivations go hand in hand and sometimes beyond the proclaimed goals of the Kurdish resistance as a whole. The desire for liberation, the end of oppression and the establishment of a Kurdish homeland including the self-determination of Rojava are the primary motivational factors for the Syrian Kurdish combatants in general. YPJ fighters being interviewed additionally claimed the following: 'This is a women's revolution' or 'We are not just fighting for the Kurds. We are fighting for a democratic Syria, too. That's our idea of freedom – our objective isn't to stay in the trenches forever' (Arte 2016). These quotes indicate that women within the YPJ might have additional reasons to fight such as emancipation and gender equality, challenging gendered identities and self-empowerment.

After Kurdish fighters including the female brigade rescued trapped Yazidis from Mount Sinjar in 2014, they gained further international recognition. As one rescued survivor of the mountain puts it:

'Women fighters — they saved us. My society, Yazidi society, is more, let's say, traditional. I'd never thought of women as leaders, as heroes, before' (New York Times 2015). This quote reflects the ways in which the participation of females in combat roles can challenge the predominant notions of women as victims. Particularly after these experiences, Yazidi women, calling themselves 'Force of the Sun Ladies', claim to have taken up arms in the quest for revenge, for preserving the future of their race as well as to stop being victims (Alalam 2016).

These self-claimed motivations indicate a close proximity to what Elisabeth Jean Wood has argued to be the 'pleasure in agency' – the 'positive affect associated with self-determination, autonomy, self-esteem, efficacy, and pride that come from the successful assertion of intention' (Wood 2003, 235). Women being highly motivated by ideational factors might envision their actions to be history-changing in a more just way and in pursuit of an equal society. In this regard, the psychological dimensions of joining an armed combat and the accompanied feelings of self-empowerment and liberation should be stressed at least as much as strategic reasons. In the reality of the Syrian civil war, people have been forced to become either refugees or warriors (New York Times 2015), or to ally with one of the warring parties. Those who chose to become combatants had to make the decision between the Islamic State, Assad's regime, the Free Syrian Army or the Kurdish revolution. It is obvious that not only for Kurdish women, but also for Kurdish men the most appropriate group in achieving their goals has been the revolution of Rojava.

Chechen Black Widows

Quite distinct is the portrayal of Chechen female combatants in accounting their use of violence as being due to either the longing for a husband and children, or 'maternal and domestic disappointments' (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 31-32). This depiction reinforces the essentialist account of women as mothers and peacemakers whilst denying their agency in political violence driven by ideology or the belief in a cause. Rather, Chechen women's violence is seen as a perversion of the private sphere (ibid.). But why do Chechen women really fight?

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'Black Widows', a term used by the Russian government to convey a racialized, monstrous, mad and suicidal image of Chechen women (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 88), is a group of female suicide bombers in Chechnya, labelling themselves as 'Shadhidki' – meaning holy warriors who sacrifice their lives (Myers 2003, 1). This quite opposite self-understanding of these women and their portrayal by the Russian government is worth differentiating since it attaches different motivational factors dependent on the term used. The Russian government has used this dehumanizing rhetoric to justify violence against the Chechen nation (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 93-94). More importantly, this gendered narrative fails to hold Russia accountable for the large-scale human rights violations against the Chechen society.

The origins of the Chechen struggle date back to the collapse of the Soviet Union, when Chechnya declared independence in 1991. Soon after, two large-scale civil wars have been fought over Chechen self-determination, the first one during 1994-1996 and the second one during 1999-2000 (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 89-90). Note that the Chechen society with their culture and lifestyle – being a mixture of tribal, Muslim and Soviet traditions – differs essentially from the Russian one. In fact, they are organized in tribal structures (teipy system) where 'women were perceived as objects of political and economic gain, their bodies constantly engaged in intertribal exchanges in the *teipy* system or for maintaining high birth-rates during the Soviet Union' (Kemoklizde 2009, 184). Accordingly, it becomes even more astonishing that women descending from highly patriarchal societies become suicide bombers whilst abandoning one of their ultimate life goals, namely giving birth and nurturing the following generation. Why Chechen women fight and even turn to more extreme forms of violence than suicide bombing cannot be easily explained just by personal loss of husbands, fathers, sons and brothers. Their reasons for joining the combat are much more complex.

Rajan (2011) has argued that this portrayal of personal loss is too simplistic and denies the political consciousness of Chechen suicide bombers as political actors (Rajan 2011, 73). I agree with this conclusion based on the evidence that many determinants for joining an armed combat 'are common to both female and male counterparts' (Alison 2003, 39) – in this case the primary goal of combat is Chechnya's independence. Certainly, gender-specific determinants can be identified as it had been argued above and the loss of loved ones and desperation might also be a decisive motivational factor for women suicide bombers. However, numerous Chechen women who have lost loved ones have not joined the movement and there has been certainly men fighting due to the same reasons. Attributing revenge and mental incapacity as motivational factors have mythologized their violence (Sjoberg and Gentry 2008, 191). Even though motivational factors might include revenge for Russian war crimes, they also include psychological factors such as trauma (Speckhard and Akhmedova 2006, 66-71). More importantly, religious ideology that is bound to Wahhabist Jihadist ideology has been amongst the decisive motivational factors for female suicide bombers to emerge (ibid., 73-74).

It should be kept in mind, however, that the majority of the Chechen women (and society as a whole) does not support suicide terrorism despite gross human rights violations and devastations by wars (ibid.). The depiction of female suicide bombers as having no agency and if so of irrational nature is a construct that neglects political motivations and reinforces the victimized notions of women that a subordinate to male domination. The voices of Chechen women themselves seem to be largely absent – in contrast to Kurdish women in Rojava – which might yield from the fact that the conflicts are framed differently.

Fighting for the same goal?

Having outlined the main motivational factors for women to join the armed combat in Kurdistan and Chechnya, the question in how these movements, and particularly the women within, equal or to differentiate themselves arises.

The Kurdish case shows a clear adherence to principles of democracy and gender equality whereas the Chechen women's motivations are not clear enough to make a precise judgement. Do they fight for global jihad, for Chechen secession or even for gender equality? The ambitious motivational factors in the Chechen case arise anxieties about the future of suicide bombers whereas the Kurdish case in Syria has been repeatedly framed as a model for democracy and Western admiration for the guiding principles of the movement. Nevertheless, the Kurdish case reveals how gender emancipation is framed from 'above', the top-down approach of the organization requires the

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people, men as well as women, who join to comply with the principles of gender emancipation even though it might not be in their interest. The shortcoming of a top-down ideological approach is that the society in question might not embrace the principles they shall be governed with. How does the Kurdish society, which is traditionally organized in tribal structures similar to the Chechen one, approach the supposed 'feminization' of the movement? In fact, the gender relations within the movements might still underlie traditional or patriarchal structures as women are asked to de-sexualize when they enter the movement. Women are only supposed to show love for their 'nation'. Additionally, does hyper-visibility and distinct female brigades truly signify a step towards gender emancipation? Does the idealization of Abdullah Öcalan pose threats or opportunities for the Kurdish resistance? These are questions that should be kept in mind whilst theorizing women within the Kurdish struggle.

The Russian state deploys powerful discourses about 'Black Widows' to frame Chechen women's participation in specific ways. Despite this framing, the Chechen case also indicates how devastation and gross human rights violations can take the form of backlashes of excessive political violence in terms of suicide bombings. The uncertainty in the political ends of female suicide bombers leaves the Russian government as well as international arena with questions on how to cope with the growing rise in female violence. The confusion about the motivations makes the gendered agencies even more fearful (Rajan 2011, 74). Intentionally or not, by taking up arms women are challenging the symbolic gender boundaries that might transform the deeply entrenched divide between the public and private sphere within the Chechen society.

The mere fact that most of Chechen women (though not all) in combat roles are veiled as a representation of their religious or cultural faith, Western narratives about their agency are commonly linked to cultural anxieties about Islam (Rajan 2011, 67). It has even been argued that the discourse about Chechen women and the conflict follows a neo-Orientalist discourse, a 'means of articulating a subordinating discourse regarding populations and societies associated with Islam' (Gentry and Withworth 2011, 145). The portrayal of Chechen women within this discourse ignores the motivations and meanings of their actions by solely putting an emphasis on their appearance and their identity as Muslim women. The Kurdish women, however, have frequently been labelled as the 'heroines of the West' (International Business Times 2014). This quite distinct understanding and framing of women in combat situations, renders women's agency from different ethnic and religious background as either 'good' or 'bad', thus reinforcing post-structuralist accounts where differences between class, race and ethnicity are emphasized.

Conclusion

This essay has aimed to offer an alternative explanation for the emergence of female combatants. It has been argued that a strict differentiation between motivational factors for men and women is not entirely useful even though gender-specific determinants for joining an armed combat for women could be identified. In order to understand the reasons for women's engagement in armed combat, it is crucial to understand the complexities of war, the society it is taking place in, the women's place within the respective society and the insurgent groups' sociology and ethics as well as its gender narrative.

Two very distinct cases of female involvement in armed conflict – the Kurdish as well as the Chechen case – have been outlined in order to illustrate this argument. The Kurdish case has shown how the organization's gender narrative has prompted women to fight alongside their male counterparts whereas the Chechen case has illustrated how women decide to fight despite the lack of a gender narrative and a top-down framing within the movement. The ambiguous motivational factors in the Chechen case require a more gender-neutral approach in order to understand women's agency. It becomes additionally pressing to analyse psychological factors in terms of traumata and individual agencies in the decision of whether or not to become a suicide bomber. This can be an interesting area for further studies.

In the Kurdish case, it remains open whether or not the organization's framing of women's emancipation will have a lasting place in the respective society even though institutional efforts are already made in order to include women in areas of decision-making.

For further studies, a more gender-neutral approach is needed in order to understand women's reason to join an

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armed combat. Additionally, further research should focus on the actual dynamics of the movements: who and how they recruit as well as how women are trained and deployed. Thereby, questions in how far international and particularly western narratives about these movements actually fit the experiences of these women themselves should be tackled. Do these narratives tell us more about Western perceptions than they do about Kurdish and Chechen women?

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