

## SUICIDAL SERVITUDE: HOW FEMALE TERRORISTS ARE DEPRIVED OF LIBERATION

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Over the past few decades, both academics and policy makers have linked the stability of states to the empowerment of women (Caiazza 2001, 1). However, most of the policies enacted through the Hillary Doctrine, which pioneered the inclusion of women's rights in United States' foreign policy, focused on women as victims, not perpetrators, of wartime violence (Leidl and Hudson 2015, 5). Reports published by the United States Institute of Peace make an effort to debunk the assumption that men are the only abusers of human rights in areas such as sexual violence (Cohen, Green, and Wood 2013, 4). Further studies claim that throughout history women have participated as militants in over 38 civil conflicts, and this trend is on the rise specifically in terror groups (Caiazza 2001, 1; Jordan and Denov 2007, 42).

The role of women in terrorist organizations, most notably in societies where women are customarily subjugated, has transformed from supportive roles that are an extension of their traditional duties to active military positions such as suicide bombers (O'Rourke 2009, 684). This promotion to active roles is even more surprising in terrorist organizations that have nationalist and religious ideologies because it seems to defy the standard practices of nationalist military groups. Typically, patriarchal nationalism as practiced by these organizations promotes a traditional view of women who remain in the home and support the male members of their family (Leidl and Hudson 2015, 97). While the advancement of women to militant positions previously reserved for men may seem to be the result of greater gender equality within terrorist organizations, terror groups actually use female suicide terrorists (FST) and other female militants because of their strategic viability, not out of an appreciation for the women themselves (O'Rourke 2009, 684; Jordan and Denov 2007, 42). In the analysis of this scholarly debate, this paper will first discuss and then refute the main arguments for the conclusion that terrorist groups have adopted gender equality.

Some scholars argue that the global movement by terrorist organizations to use FST is due to a realization that women have value outside traditional gender norms (Raghavan and Balasubramaniyan 2014, 206). The argument stems from four main points. First, they argue that women join terrorist organizations in an effort to seek liberation and thus change the organization from the inside (Caiazza 2001, 3). Second, that the groups themselves adopt gender equality as a political goal in order to recruit women (Wang 2011, 104; Jordan and Denov 2007, 43). Third, that groups gain greater publicity from Western media by utilizing their female members (Raghavan and Balasubramaniyan 2014, 202). Fourth, that female members "enjoy better standing

over the male members in terror groups” when looking at groups within societies that lack gender equality (Raghavan and Balasubramaniyan 2014, 206). These four points seem to validate the assumption that women have gained equality within terrorist groups. However, as further analysis of each point will show, this theory is not realistic.

While a small minority of women do join terrorist organizations as a path to emancipation, they are unable to combat the masculinity of the group and do not gain true gender equality. Through interviews with former female members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Jordan and Denov 2007 were able to demonstrate that some women had joined this nationalist terrorist organization in an effort to escape the traditional gender roles of Sri Lankan society (Jordan and Denov 2007, 53). However, they were quick to qualify that this was a secondary objective to the women’s main goal: the protection of their communities from marauding government forces. Additionally, further study of this group shows that the LTTE forced the women recruits to masculinize by cutting their hair, forgoing adornment, and adopting male fatigues (Wang 2011, 102). In this case, the group is able to avoid the threat of shifting gender dynamics by forcing the women to abandon their femininity to gain equality (Leidl and Hudson 2015, 98). Other religious or nationalistic terrorist organizations either follow the standard presented by the LTTE, or do not attract women who wish to gain liberation. In fact, most women who join terrorist groups, especially those with nationalistic aims, join out of a sense of duty to protect their community, not seeking gender equality. Aside from these women, some women do join terrorist groups seeking liberation. Growing evidence suggests that many female members from strict patriarchal societies are seeking a way to repent for sexual misconduct (like infidelity or premarital sexual relations) or regain the respect of the community after becoming victims of rape (O’Rourke 2009, 703). Therefore, while a small cadre of women may join terror groups seeking liberation, it is not in the quest of gender equality, but instead in hopes of being reintegrated into their community in their traditional feminine roles.

Furthermore, while certain terrorist organizations adopt female empowerment as a recruitment method, this is not due to a sincere appreciation of women, but rather a tactic borne out of necessity to attract more members, and upon joining, female members are not emancipated. The LTTE were one of the first nationalistic terror groups to adopt the platform of gender equality in the 1980s. They started to recruit women to increase their membership because many male operatives had fled or been arrested by Indian counter-terrorist efforts (Martin 2011, 9). LTTE leaders repeatedly called for female empowerment throughout the 80s and 90s, however this political agenda was mere rhetoric. LTTE reproduced traditional Sri Lankan gender roles by placing an emphasis on female discipline, outlawing pre-marital sex, encouraging female militants to marry male members, and requiring women to gain permission in order to leave the organization (Jordan and Denov 2007, 58). Therefore, both their motivation to increase membership and the reality of conditions within the organization prove that gender equality was never a sincere goal of the LTTE.

While the LTTE was the first and arguably only nationalistic terrorist orga-

nization to recruit women by promising emancipation, other groups in the Middle East and Chechnya actively recruit FST in order to exploit the strategic advantages of female operatives (O'Rourke 2009, 683). The increasing focus of the international community on counter-terrorism efforts has made it more difficult for terror groups to conduct attacks (Gage 2011, 90). Therefore, terrorist groups have had to find innovative ways to conduct violence in the face of successful counter-terrorism campaigns. The societies in which these organizations operate adopt strict gender roles that stress the virtue and modesty of women. In these societies, women are not highly scrutinized by security forces and are able to smuggle larger amounts of explosives under their traditional garments (burqas or saris) (O'Rourke 2009, 685; Jordan and Denov 2007, 58). The ability of women to evade counter-terrorism efforts makes FST much more effective; on average FST result in 8.4 casualties per individual attack while male suicide terrorists (MST) only result in 5.3 casualties (O'Rourke 2009, 687).

Once secular terrorist organizations (which have less loyalty to traditional gender roles) proved the success of FST, religious groups that had originally condemned the use of women in nontraditional roles started to recruit FST. Sheik Yassin, the leader of Hamas, initially spoke out against FST in 2002 when Al-Aqas Martyrs Brigade used a female suicide bomber,

A women martyr is problematic for Muslim society. A man who recruits a woman is breaking Islamic law. He is taking the girl or woman without the permission of her father, brother, or husband, and therefore the family of the girl confronts an even greater problem since the man has the biggest power over her, choosing the day that she will give her life back to Allah (Victor 2003, 197).

However, Yassin reversed his position just two years later once their effectiveness became evident (O'Rourke 2009, 697). It is highly unlikely that his core beliefs on this matter altered during this time period, but the success of FST was ultimately too irresistible to ignore. Muslim cleric Sheik Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah sheds light onto the dilemma,

It is true that Islam has not asked women to carry out jihad [holy war], but it permits them to take part if the necessities dictate that women should carry out regular military operations or suicide operations (Fadlallah 2002).

The use of FST instead of relegating women to supportive roles does not constitute a change in how these terrorist groups view women. Instead, the exploitation of women as strategically advantageous operatives instead of the inclusion of women in planning positions shows that these terrorist organizations are not committed to gender equality.

While female suicide terrorists gain greater media attention and thus bring more legitimacy to terror groups, the way groups idolize FST as “brides” reinforces their traditional roles instead of championing the women themselves (O’Rourke 2009, 709). Even though female terrorists are increasing in number, they are still considered a rarity because women make up anywhere from less than 5% of an organization ( Hamas ) to over 30% (LTTE) (Raghavan and Balasubramaniyan 2014, 200). As such, the media usually focuses on the women and the organization they represent rather than the carnage they produce (Martin 2011, 7). The attention gives the terrorist organization a greater platform which they can use to spread their message. Therefore, FST help achieve a central goal of most terror groups: the use of violence “as a means to draw attention to themselves and their respective causes” (Hoffman 1998, 26). However, the propaganda pushed by the terrorist groups typically strip FST of their identity by referring to them as their position within the patriarchal order. Hamas does not publish the names of their FST— not as a security matter but to strip them of their humanity— instead they are given titles like the “Bride of Haifa” or the “Bride of the South” which focuses solely on their traditional position within conservative societies (O’Rourke 2009, 709). Similarly, the FST within the Chechen separatist movement are called “Black Widows,” which refers to their widowed status, for their husbands also gave their life to the cause (O’Rourke 2009, 710). While the spotlight does show the community that female operatives can handle the responsibility of frontline positions, assigning FST the title “bride” dehumanizes them and reestablishes traditional gender roles.

Although many terrorist organizations have started to allow women to hold more responsibility by becoming FST, there is little evidence that these women “enjoy better standing over the male members in terror groups” especially in societies where women are typically subjugated (Raghavan and Balasubramaniyan 2014, 206). Excluding leftist terrorist organizations, there are rare cases, specifically within the LTTE, where a woman is permitted to assume a planning or strategy role. However, these instances are an exception to the general standard and do not represent most women in terrorist groups (Raghavan and Balasubramaniyan 2014, 200). In fact, O’Rourke points out that the families of FST in Hamas receive only a \$200 stipend a month instead of the \$400 stipend the families of male suicide terrorists receive (O’Rourke 2009, 697). Additionally, FST are often required to be accompanied by male members if their mission requires them to travel for more than a day away from the compound (O’Rourke 2009, 698). Furthermore, Yassin’s main argument that women do “enjoy better standing over the male members in terror groups” centers around the fact that the “man” (the male handler within the terrorist group) would

supersede the natural order of power over the FST (Raghavan and Balasubramaniyan 2014, 206) (Victor 2003, 197). In an environment where women were not originally utilized because of the question of power within the patriarchal system, it is highly unlikely that women would gain prominence over the male members of the group.

Over the past forty years, the role of women in nationalistic and religious terrorist organizations has changed from tactical or supportive positions to active military roles, most notably suicide terrorism. While the adoption of FST seems to defy the standard patriarchal masculinity perpetuated by nationalistic groups, the transition is not due to the groups espousing gender equality or pursuing female empowerment. Instead, it is a strategic modification assumed because conventional methods used by male terrorists are either no longer viable due to a decrease in the number of male members, or because successful counter-terrorism campaigns have made it harder for traditional tactics to succeed. Therefore, terrorist groups view women as strategic assets who can further their cause through increased publicity, deadlier attacks, and legitimacy gained through the inclusion of women. While terrorist organizations capitalize on this new development, counter-terrorism campaigns lag behind because they are often unwilling to scrutinize women the way they do men. The only way counter-terrorism campaigns can limit the success of FST is if they pursue a gender-neutral screening policy (O'Rourke 2009, 717). Such a policy may be hard to implement because the societies in which FST operate have strict views of women and would be reluctant to violate a woman's modesty through heightened screening. However, if the states that are impacted by FST do not adapt their counter-terrorism strategies, terrorist groups will continue to capitalize on this reluctance and successfully use FST to the detriment of the entire nation.

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