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Outskirts — feminisms along the edge

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Unnatural Beings: Gender and Terrorism

> The woman who brandishes an automatic weapon incarnates the definitive and irrevocable power of her mysterious myth, of her life and death rites, just as the Gorgon turns men into stone when she shows her nocturnal face. (Neuburger & Valentini, 1996:viii)

Unremarkably, in most of the major works on the study of terrorism there is no mention of gender despite the fact that in the last decade there has been a noticeable increase in the study of 'female terrorism'. This 'form' of terrorism is named and gendered, seemingly different and apart from terrorism. Behind every act of terrorism lies a protagonist or perpetrator who is unmistakably male. Women's association with violence, especially as the perpetrators of violence, is believed to require a different kind of analysis. One in which there is always a referent positive or negative link between women's reproductive role and violence. Those who embrace political violence, as a means to an end, are invariably constructed as the 'bad' women, abnormal and unnatural.

In the literature which focuses on an analysis of women and violent direct action there is often a failure to consider the question of political agency and, as such, gender becomes the exclusively salient feature of such an analysis (Sjoberg,

2009:69). Gentry refers to such explanations as 'twisted maternalism' and this is most especially the case when we refer to political violence whereby maternalism is always a factor, politics is not (2009:246). Those working in the field of counter intelligence and counter insurgency refer to such women as 'unnatural' (See Macdonald, 1991; Galvin, 1983; Third, 2010) and there have been many attempts to support this hypothesis 'scientifically'. This paper calls for a different kind of analysis, one which prioritises an understanding of women first and foremost as individuals, citizens and political actors.

For the most part, politics and political engagement is a minority activity. Less than ten percent of any population, even at the peak of political mobilisations such as movements for democratization or independence, are categorised as active participants at any point in time (Russett, Starr & Kinsella, 2009). Moreover, there tends to be a bifurcation of the political arena between institutional and non-institutional politics wherein the latter offers the latitude for different forms of organisation, direct action and leadership and is a more attractive arena for women's political participation (Corcoran-Nantes, 2008). It is in the non-institutional arena that radical organisations committed to the use of political violence as a strategy proliferate. This is most noticeable where the political cause is anti-colonialist or fighting for a homeland, situations in which the promise and expectation of social change – most especially that of greater equality – are on the political agenda (Cunningham, 2003:175-176).

There is a tendency to use the word terrorism to describe all acts of political violence after 9/11 (Nagar, 2010:533-534; Post, 2003:616;). Without doubt 'terrorism' is a word that has significant connotations, is politically loaded and often far more revealing of the political positioning of the commentator/analyst and as such highly subjective. It is a difficult word to define and so the United Nations has failed to offer an agreed working

definition because it is an expanding definition. Here the term terrorism is referred to, in its broadest context, as a political tactic which involves the use or threat of violence in order to achieve a defined political or social agenda. As Hoffman argues, the people who are labeled 'terrorist' often do not consider themselves as such and see the use of proscribed violence as the only means available to them (2006: 21–24). Without an agreed definition, the analysis of terrorism in all its genres is invariably emotive and descriptive.

When we speak of women and terrorism it is often anomalous, unthinkable in the light of women's socio-biological socialisation and the pernicious sustaining of a culturally specific female 'ideal type' (OCSE, 2005: 3). Here the 'good woman' is consistently defined through a maternal/carer lens, wherein political reasoning identifies them as mothers of the nation rather than active participants in the nation. Thus, women who engage in violent political action are all subject to the same scrutiny – mothers, potential mothers and never-to-be mothers alike.

The aim of this article is to analyse and contest some of the images and 'understandings' presented in the literature on women who engage in political violence, from those presented as being the hapless victims of male seduction in Morgan's (2001) analysis of gender and terrorism to the biological determinism that creeps into some of the more laudable revelatory analyses of Macdonald (1986) and Neuberger and Valentini (1996). Using examples of women's engagement in social revolutionary movements and nationalist separatist movements, and their escalating profile as female suicide bombers in the latter, the article will investigate the complex social and political realities which frame the participation of women in 'terrorist' activity.

Perceptions of Gender and Terrorism

Counter insurgency and counter terrorist agencies over the years

have consistently ignored or under-analysed the question of gender and terrorism., not withstanding that in the contemporary period women have been engaged in armed political action since the early 1960s when women constituted between one fifth and one third of the activists in violent political organisations (See Cunningham 2003; MacDonald, 1986; Gonzalez-Perez, 2006). Now, with the advent of suicide terrorism, security experts who continue to work with a terrorist stereotype of the 18-35 year old male are perplexed when women are present in ever growing numbers on the front line of armed resistance and contemporary terrorism. Consistently, studies of terrorism depict violent women as different biologically, psychologically, and sexually, not only from 'terrorist' men, but also 'non-terrorist' women (OCSE, 2005:2-4; Zedalis, 2004:7; Gentry, 2009:244). In the use of violence women confront the existing societal gender stereotype '(and) in the process destroying our perceived safe, innocent and traditional view of women' (OCSE, 2005:4). Reflections past and present return to a similar theme: the search for the motivations behind women's violence (Bloom, 2007:16-17; Galvin, 1983:20; MacDonald, 1991:1-3).

Are women really the unwitting collaborators, housekeeping for their radical boyfriends, lovers and partners, and people who 'mothered' terrorists? (Gentry, 2009:241). These questions reflect the propensity of political experts and psychiatrists to conduct what Bloom terms a 'psychological autopsy' in which their view of women oscillates between unnatural beings and the unwitting pawns of radical and violent men (Bloom, 2007:16). The former constructs women as being dangerous, formidable and unpredictable, (McDonald, 1991:4; OSCE, 2005:7), whereas others, extrapolating on the latter, argue that because women constitute a minority in terrorist organisations they might actually incite men to violence as men 'compete' for them and wish to 'impress the women' (Zawodny, 1978:280-1).

Gender specific research on women and political

violence/terrorism has offered some of the better insights into the phenomenon. The influential seminal works of Eileen Macdonald, Robin Morgan, and Luisella de Cataldo Neuberger and Tiziana Valentini seek to understand the machinations of organisations deemed to be terrorist and analyse the experience, motivations and reflections of the women who participate in them. From different personal and academic standpoints – their work is revelatory, woven through extensive one to one interviews with women who were or remained on the frontline of violent radical political organisations and liberation movements. In accordance with work on the social psychology of terrorism, one striking feature of their research is that their interviewees appear to be 'disturbingly normal' – the woman next door, the work colleague or the neighbour (Post, 2005:617).

Robin Morgan offers a feminist analysis of terrorism seen through the lens of her own experience in radical social movements, political clandestinity and finally personal enlightenment. For Morgan, terrorism is an inevitable product of a patriarchal world in which the dynamic of gender inequality is played out within the sexual politics of terrorism. Militant men become the recruiters of women – lovers, partners and husbands draw them in and they become the 'demon lover's woman' (2001:179). Morgan contends that women are token terrorists, not with respect to their numbers, but because they are followers rather than leaders irrespective of their position or status within an organisation. Male politics, status and power is preserved and prioritised despite rhetoric or a political agenda which commits to gender equality. In the end, Morgan argues: 'to dance with the Demon Lover is only to dance oneself toward the false liberation of death. To rebel on his terms is only to rebel against the challenge of living on your own terms' (2001:214). The quantum leap for Morgan was to abandon the conflictual balancing act, between radical left wing politics and feminist activism opting for the latter, life and political agency.

The work of Eileen MacDonald, an investigative journalist, is much more empathetic wishing to understand women's participation in violent political action of many different genres. She explores the personal, motivational, and emotional side of women's experience. She argues that what is known through the media is tainted by explaining why or how these women might be different, describing them as monsters, non-heterosexual, androgynous or deranged feminists (1991:1-11).

From this standpoint, MacDonald was able to draw on the motivations of women especially those facing conditions of civil war and occupation. For these women, it was better to stand and fight than become the unarmed and unprotected victims of occupiers of the state. This would seem to be equally true in the 21st century whereby the numbers of women entering nationalist separatist organisations as combatants, most especially suicide bombers, has escalated and this directly coincides with a decrease in security for women against all the perpetrators of gender specific violence and intimidation in conflict situations (See Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008; Ozcan, 2007; Alison, 2003). In MacDonald's view, the women she interviewed had agency; they chose to enter the struggle and defined the nature of their participation within it. All but two of the women interviewed were avowed feminists and all of them spoke of the double edged sword of both political and 'male' repression and that female status and equality needed to be established in the same way as national liberation or independence (1991:231-4). MacDonald states that the issue of maternity and motherhood ran through all of her interviews. For those who had children their desire was to protect them, for those who did not, the decision was to not bring children into the world in which they lived and fought. As revolutionaries and freedom fighters, women clearly needed to make the more difficult choices which emerged from complex backgrounds, experiences, and political beginnings (Macdonald, 1991:235-8).

Neuberger and Valentini (1996) approached the question of understanding women's terrorism through judicial psychology and hence their research concentrated on crime and criminal law. They studied Italian terrorist organisations primarily the Red Brigades and Prima Linea. The conundrum, initially for them was why so few women when arrested became pentito (collaborators), as opposed to men. Using both questionnaires and unstructured interviews they met with men and women both separately and together. The women were clear about why they engaged in political violence and for the most part justified doing so. For them the struggle was a political one, a means to an end, the only pathway to a better future for themselves and their children. Yet, Neuberger and Valentini argue that once women entered such organisations there was a loss of individual identity, a reduction of gender differences, and a prioritisation of the collective. Instead, they state that women's experience is based on a 'maternal-sacrificial affective code', that is, nurturing and sacrifice:

> When this specific code of living … was transferred to the context of armed subversion, it was incarnated in the idea itself of a Communist society or of a just and happy society for all and was pursued primarily by the group as a whole and, secondarily, by the members of the group (Neuburger & Valentini, 1996:81).

Thus, for Neuburger and Valentini the cause becomes the family/child to nurture and protect; violence was not something to be undertaken lightly but as an expiation of wrongs committed against themselves or significant others. In conclusion, they argued that women were more likely to become obdurates than penitents.

Sjoberg in a recent article wrote in favour of feminist analyses

working from a grass roots perspective, and 'one that focuses on individual narratives rather than a globalised and hyper-securitized discourse of good and evil' (2009:70). It can be argued that Morgan, Macdonald, and Neuberger and Valentini work from the individual narratives of the female and male political actors and the words and actions of the researched women, are 'interpreted' by the researcher, hence certain value judgements are made with respect to maternalism and female subservience. For example, for Morgan (2001), women lacked agency and were subservient to men in movements that are 'male led for male purposes'. Macdonald (1991) revealed the sense of agency and commitment of women but consistently related women's ideas and action to maternalism. Neuberger and Valentini (1996) explicitly worked from a maternalist premise making the maternal role of women integral to their motivation and endurance in violent political movements. As Gentry argues, there is something quite perverse about continuing to pursue the idea of maternalism and applying it to particularly violent contexts such as assassinations or suicide bombings. Thus, the juxtapositon of analyses conflating maternalism with peace/non-violence on the one hand and with war/violence on the other is, in some cases, rather like having 'a bet each way'.

From reviewing the literature, questions are raised; can we postulate that gender difference in politics is in some way biological? Do women express agency in their choices to enter into and engage in a political arena that focuses on the use of political violence? Or is there a propensity for political analysts to cherry-pick explanations of cause and effect from the multi-faceted and complex factors that influence membership and activism within violent political organisations only to reinforce culturally specific gender stereotypes?

Female 'Terrorists' in Perspective

One of the principal reasons for the difficulties encountered in

understanding women as the perpetrators of violence is that most of the images we hold of women and conflict, in all its genres, are the objectification of women as the victims of violence. Whatever the cause or arena of conflict, women and children are considered to be the ones most affected by violence - the collateral damage of war, terrorism and counter terrorism. Yet, since the beginning of time, women have never simply been bystanders in conflict situations or in struggles for radical social change; women have chosen not only where they stand politically but with whom they stand and what for. As Bernice Carroll once speculated, but we can demonstrate, 'women's direct action has played a major role in every significant movement for social change and liberation in the 20th century' (1989: 20-21). In the 21st century this continues to be the case.

In the 1960s and 1970s some of the more famous social revolutionary movements and national separatist movements were actively pursuing change in armed liberation movements and via urban guerrilla warfare; the former, in separatist or independence movements in parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, and the latter, principally occurring in the USA, Europe and Latin America in the form of movements for radical social change against perceived or actual state oppression. This was the period of the 'guerrilla icon', as Astrid Proll, ex-member of the Baader Meinhoff gang, once said, when young people did not want to be rock stars but revolutionaries (MacDonald, 1991:212). Women, in the wake of sweeping social changes after the Second World War, were asserting their place in the workforce, higher education and grass roots politics. Through all of this gender equality was on the agenda implicitly or explicitly as an adjunct to socialist and liberationist ideals. Then, as now, organisations that gave no or little priority to gender issues failed to attract any substantive participation from women (Cunningham, 2003:175-6).

In Latin America, several centuries of history of women's participation in violent conflict against colonialism and for independence formed a background for the participation of women in the radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s. This was in spite of the cultural gender stereotypes of machismo and marianismo, the latter signifying the Catholic reification of the mother in Latin American society and the primacy of maternal roles for women (Stevens, 1973; Bunster, 1989). In Latin America, authoritarian politics and military coup d'état changed the face of politics and the possibilities for political engagement. In situations where all avenues for opposition politics were prohibited or criminalised, both women and men joined forces to challenge and confront the regime. Many entered rural and urban guerrilla organisations, which engaged in various targeted forms of political violence such as assassinations, bank robbery and kidnapping. By the 1970s women constituted between one third to over half of the members of these organisations (See Gonzalez-Perez, 2009, Kampwirth, 2002 & Reif, 1986). Most of the participants, as was the case in Europe, were young, educated and middle class.

In Europe socialist revolutionary groups were anti capitalist and anti imperialist fighting for a new social order based on equality and justice for all (See, Becker, 1979; Pelz, 2007; Jamieson, 2000). The modus operandi of these groups differed little from those in Latin America and constituted armed violence against identifiable 'political targets'. The members of these guerrilla groups came out of a variety of left wing movements such as the student movement, radical workers movements and, ironically, anti-war movements. Post (2005) argued that these movements across the continent were essentially a political backlash by the 'baby boomers' against the failure of the established political order but most especially against their parents' complicity in maintaining the status quo (2005:618-9). In both Germany and Italy, even in the 'progressive' 1970s, gender stereotypes confined and oppressed women as they had done in the past. In

Germany, under the Third Reich, the ideology of the three Ks, kinder, kirche and kuche (children, kitchen and church) were the societal maxims prioritised for the good wife and mother but were used to discriminate against women in public life both in education and employment (See Becker, 1979; Macdonald, 1991). Whereas in Italy, a specific culture of machismo, similar to that in Latin America, found that women's oppression in both public and private life was sanctioned by law whereby women still effectively were treated as 'male property' (See Neuberger & Valentini, 1996; Macdonald, 1991). Left wing groups attracted large numbers of women with their political agendas advocating equality and justice. Even Counter insurgency sources in Europe calculated that the number of women in 'subversive' movements, in the 1970s and 1980s, ranged from twenty to fifty percent (Cunningham, 2003:176, Macdonald, 1991: 200).

The analysis of women's participation in socialist revolutionary movements has tended to be conservative and ambiguous. Most studies focussing on Latin America with respect to political action, usually termed guerrilla or subversive politics, have tended to focus far more on the nature of women's participation rather than their motivations (See Reif, 1986; Schweitzer, 2006; Gonzalez-Perez, 2009). Those investigating groups which engaged in violence in pursuit of an ideological politics in Europe and elsewhere invariably and universally describe these as terrorist organisations rather than revolutionary organisations. Yet the pursuit of a universal explanation for women engaging in armed struggle is defeated by the premise on which it is made – that the reasons for doing so are personal rather than political.

First, is the assertion that women's entry into politically violent organisations is almost exclusively made through their personal relationships with men (Bloom, 2007:17; Morgan, 2001:203-5). Morgan attempts to prove her point by citing the Weinberg & Eubank (1987) study of Italian women terrorists which claimed that over two thirds were married to terrorist men and the rest

were introduced into the group by male siblings (Morgan, 2001: 203). For the most part existing evidence demonstrates that this was the exception rather than the rule (Hudson, 1999:29-32). Mara Aldrovandi in a meeting with Neuberger and Valentini made it very clear that entering the armed struggle was a rational decision, bearing in mind her participation in other radical political groups:

> I did not fall in love with a man and follow him into the armed struggle: the man I loved before, when I was still in AO (Avanguardia Operaria), stopped short of embracing the armed struggle; my sister, whom I love, also desisted. I had "effective" examples of [those] who made different decisions (Neuberger & Valentini, 1996: 107).

Whether the personal relationships between women and men pre-dated or post dated their entry into armed subversive organisations most of the evidence indicates that what brought them together were their similar backgrounds, experiences and most especially political views and beliefs (Bloom, 2007: 17). It would be reasonable, therefore, to speculate that this would put them on a par with emotional and affective relationships occurring between men and women who are not politically active. Thus, Morgan's depictions of women's entry into violent political organisations whereby militant men use their charms to recruit women, as demon lovers pimping themselves for the cause, has no basis in fact (2001:179). With respect to the Italian Red Brigades and Prima Linea in Italy most female members had some engagement with politics before they became members of the group, as a student, worker or feminist (MacDonald, 1991; Neuberger & Valentini,1996). In the case of Latin American guerrilla movements and the Baader Meinhoff Group/Red Army Faction in Germany it was a virtual condition of entry (Kampwirth, 2002; MacDonald, 1991; Wickham-Crowley, 1993).

In clandestine organisations there is a need for trust and secrecy. No one without skills important to the group could expect to be 'invited' to join and often this was based on a person's proven political commitment and experience (See Wickham- Crowley, 1993; Gonzalez-Perez, 2006).

The second explanation for women's involvement in political violence is that women terrorists/subversives are deviant/unnatural women (OCSE, 2005: 4; MacDonald, 1991:3; Neuberger & Valentini, 1996:54-5). The main intellectual currency used to support this argument is motherhood – women as mothers, mothers-to-be or never-to-be mothers. In Latin America, it was not unusual for those women who went underground and had children to place them in the care of family or trusted friends. It was an act of protection, because the state had no qualms about torturing or killing children in front of parents to make them talk (Bunster, 1989). In Europe similar choices were being made, Ulrike Meinhoff of the Baader Meinhoff group and Adriana Faranda founding member of the Red Brigades were faced with the difficult decision of going underground as armed subversives and leaving their children with designated family and friends as the primary carers. The term 'abandonment' is used often even by the most empathetic of female writers which inflects something callous, selfish and unnatural about the act itself (Macdonald, 1991, Jamieson, 2000). Yet when reading the interviews with women from movements as diverse as ETA (Basque Separatist Movement), Red Brigades and the IRA they frequently express guilt about 'neglecting' their children, or they describe the emotional impact of being separated from their children. Those who did not have children, described the anxiety of making decisions about deferring motherhood either temporarily or permanently (Macdonald, 1991).

The third common assertion is that those who engage in violence are in some way bad or insane. Probably the most perverse

action taken in the name of science to prove this theory was the infamous illegal removal of Ulrike Meinhoff's brain, posthumously, by the state authority to see if there were neuropathological reasons for Meinhoff, who had once been a celebrity left wing journalist , becoming a 'violent terrorist' (Boyes, 2002). Soon after this revelation in 2002 a professor from the University of Tuebingen confirmed that the brains of other members of the Baader Meinhoff group, Andreas Baader, Gudron Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe were also illegally removed for examination and research (Brumby, 2002). This morbid fascination was to be stimulated further as studies of 'terrorist' women began to push preconceptions to their limits when used to explain more radical forms of armed subversion in which women were willing to give up their lives for the good of the cause most notably as suicide bombers.

Obsession with the Female Suicide Bomber: Perceptual Worlds Collide

In 1969, a young female commando of the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) led the hijacking of a TWA jet bound for Tel Aviv in which the passengers were evacuated in Damascus and the plane was blown up. That woman was Leila Khaled accredited as the first female 'terrorist' who is said to have become the 'idol' of female political activists everywhere. The 'iconic' image of Leila, head covered in the keffiyeh, wearing uniform, a dress ring made out of a bullet casing and holding an AK47 cultivated both political romanticism and intrigue (MacDonald, 1986:108; Cunningham, 2003:182). At no time in history had a single 'terrorist' act had such an international impact, in this case to reveal the plight of Palestinians in the Israeli occupied territories.

Khaled is probably the most interviewed female 'terrorist' in the world. Her commitment to the Palestinian struggle is unwavering

and she went to extraordinary lengths to remain on the front line of PFLP action. Before her capture in a second hijacking in 1970 she underwent extensive plastic surgery to change her features which enabled her to lead the unsuccessful action that was to be her last in the public eye (Baum, 2000; MacDonald 1986:130-131 & 235). While for a time working underground as a guerrilla fighter, until the birth of her first child in 1982, she has survived assassination attempts by Mossad, and fiercely protected the identity of her husband and children for many years in order to shield them (MacDonald, 1986:235). Now living in Amman she continues to work with women of the Intifada in the popular women's committees of the refugee camps and is an elected member of the Political Bureau of the PFLP (Baum, 2000).

Khaled remains a role model for female combatants in the Middle East and beyond. Although she was prepared to sacrifice her own life undertaking dangerous assignments there is no indication that, given the right circumstances, she would have undertaken an explicit suicide mission. As with the search to identify the motivations behind women's violence in social revolutionary movements, explanations for the emergence of female suicide bombing as an international phenomenon fell into a similar gendered stereotype of the mad, bad, or sad woman.

Explanations for female suicide terrorism are rarely based on firsthand knowledge from the female perpetrators themselves. Assumptions are often made from investigations into the woman's personal life, medical/psychiatric history or moral profile based on newspaper reports, interviews with the families and friends of female suicide bombers and/or representatives of the relevant political organisation. The use of these testimonies with respect to motivation and intent, in the absence of the perpetrator gives us a multifaceted presentation of events and circumstances which are often interpreted via the standpoint of the researcher or 'expert' (See, Schweitzer, 2006; OCSE, 2005; Gunawardena, 2006). Thus, for many, the motivation driving the

female suicide bomber is seen to be personal rather than political.

With respect to the Palestinian Liberation 'Movements' such as Fatah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, until the 1st Intifada, women were not actively encouraged to be involved in the armed resistance due to the question of honour and the concern over the treatment of captured women by the Israeli's (Schweitzer, 2006:28). From 1991, the opportunities for an expanded activism by women was fuelled by the crisis in which women's individual and collective experience of insecurity and violence under Israeli occupation and in the refugee camps led not only to increasing numbers of women entering the various organisations but demanding active military training to undertake a central rather than a peripheral role in the resistance. Cunningham argues that the engagement of women as suicide bombers within the Palestinian Liberation Movements should be seen in terms of an incremental political progression:

> In particular, there was an apparent trend in women's growing roles within the Palestinian resistance that was initiated with examples of male/female collaboration [e.g. suggesting female training by more experienced males], followed by individual women planting explosive devices but not detonating them, to the culmination wherein women were tasked with actually detonating bombs on their own persons. Thus, in hindsight suicide bombing by women appeared to be a logical progression in women's operations within various organizations, and suggests that women may be tasked with tandem suicide bombing and other operations in the future (Cunningham, 2003:182).

The first accredited female suicide bomber in the Israeli-Palestine

conflict was Wafa Idris in 2002, who detonated a bomb in a shopping precinct in Jerusalem, resulting in two deaths and over 100 casualties. The Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, a secular militia affiliated with the Fatah movement, identified her as one of their own martyred in the operation (Biedermann, 2002). The many explanations of her becoming a suicide bomber diverged between the personal and the political. In some accounts, the preference was to depict her as a divorcee, on account of her failure to conceive, and as someone who was eminently depressed because of her 'outcast' status within her own society (Zedalis, 2004:7; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008:120). Yet her family rejected accounts of her as a depressed or an isolated individual. To the contrary, she had been an active member of Fatah for many years, worked as a volunteer for the Red Cross as a paramedic literally 'picking up the pieces' of the Intifada on a daily basis and had personally suffered at the hands of the Israelis (Biedermann, 2002, Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2008:1009). Despite evidence such as this to the contrary, analyses of female suicide bombers invariably opt for a socio-psychological profile rather than any meaningful political analysis.

Immediately following the death of Idris, there was a surge in the number of Palestinian female suicide bombers whereby over 67 women stepped forward as volunteers, with eight successfully undertaking their missions (Schweitzer, 2006; Gonzalez-Perez, 2009). Many others were captured by the Israelis who gave open access to the prisoners for the Israeli media and researchers for 'study and analysis' of their motivations. The work of Yoram Schweitzer is indicative of the kind of analyses undertaken. Based on interviews with male and female Palestinian suicide bombers, Schweitzer concluded that the reasons given to him by women for their actions were far more personal than political but he also acknowledged that the narratives changed depending on who was interviewing the prisoner and for what purpose (Schweitzer, 2006).

In the use of suicide bombing, as the political weapon of choice, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil EElam (LTTE) of Sri Lanka undertook over 220 suicide attacks between 1980 and 2009 (Gonzalez-Perez, 2009:5). Over one third of the combatants in the regular force were women and in the Black Tigers elite force women constituted one third to one half of the members and they carried out between 30-40% of the suicide bombings (Zedalis, 2004:2). The LTTE frequently justified this by claiming that the women volunteering for suicide missions had been the subject of abuse or rape in the Sri Lankan conflict and the act was one of retribution in the face of dishonour (Cunningham, 2003:180-1). Gunawardena contends that the same justification was given for the assassination of Rajiv Ghandi in 1991 by a female suicide bomber and as such the act became 'her personal vendetta rather than a politically motivated assassination' (2006:86).

The ability of the LTTE to recruit women combatants and most especially to the Black Tigers special unit has confounded many observers. As members of a highly militarised organisation concerns were raised when women frequently spearheaded military action. In view of the numbers of women used in suicide missions the LTTE was repeatedly accused of using women as 'cannon fodder' (Cunningham, 2003:181).

The work of Alison (2003) is insightful in that it is based on interviews with women members of the LTTE. She argues that by the period of the upsurge in female recruitment by the LTTE there was a generation of young women who were alienated from the Sri Lankan state and committed to the principal of self determination. However, Alison states there were certainly factors both personal and political influencing women's commitment to the LTTE such as, the affect of the war on their education, family members, and their community, the abuse of women and the need to defend themselves (2003, 40-44). While the LTTE was never, by any measure, a 'left wing' organisation it

had a political agenda for national liberation which included a commitment to resolve gender specific issues such as sexual discrimination, abolition of the dowry, legal protection against all forms of violence against women and a defence of women's' independent citizenship rights.

Claims (which have also been aimed at other nationalist separatist movement) that women were excluded from leadership and decision making positions are refuted by Alison's interviewees. They stated that by 2002, of the twelve member Central Committee of the LTTE five were women, plus they established a separate 'women only' committee for women's development both within the LTTE and in the local Tamil Community. Moreover, Alison argues the women demonstrated a sense of personal independence and empowerment. An important aspect of Alison's work is the exploration of the consistently recurring ambivalence between nationalism and feminism or pro-female politics. Women in the LTTE may have, like men, prioritised the nationalist aims of the movement over a commitment to gender equality but as Alison observes:

> Women involved in nationalist struggles all over the world have shown that in their position … (a) commitment to the perceived needs of one's perceived nation or ethnic group is viewed as just as important, or more so, than one's needs 'as a woman'. (2003:52)

In the 21st century the spectre of the female suicide bomber continues to shock. Women continue to enter the frontline of national separatist movements such as the Black Widows of the Chechnya Separatist Movement, women of Al Qaeda in Iraq and the female armed militants of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) in which suicide bombing is also considered a legitimate strategic action (See Ozcan, 2007; Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2006; Von

Knop, 2007). The more radical the political context, the more bizarre the explanation that is given for women's involvement; as in the case of the omnipresent Black Widows in the mass hostage taking at the Moscow theatre in 2002. The spectre of women dressed in black from head to foot, only their eyes showing and with explosives strapped to their bodies were the images that were transmitted all over the world. The reaction was one of shock and lurid speculation of their motives including that they were trafficked women, drugged, brainwashed, or trained and paid for by 'external forces' (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007:97-99, Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2006:70). The view of the surviving hostages, eye witness accounts, and video footage was quite different: there was no sign that they were either drugged or coerced: 'the Chechen women strapped on their own suicide belts, were in control of their own detonators, and carried revolvers and grenades just as the men did' (Gonzalez-Perez, 2009:11).

An analysis of female suicide bombers is complicated by the mere fact that most of what we know is supposition or subjective interpretations of the motives of women suicide bombers through family, friends, and 'compatriots'. Successful suicide bombers cannot be interviewed posthumously and unsuccessful ones have many different reasons for reflecting on their actions in different ways assuming a position of penitent, disassociation or obdurate (Neuberger & Valentini,1996). The work of Beyler (2002) presents a bifurcated explanation of the motivations and role of women as suicide bombers and in doing so illustrates the conundrum with which we are faced. On the one hand she states that:

> women consider combat as a way to escape the predestined life that is expected of them. When women become human bombs, their intent is to make a statement not only in the name of a country, a religion, a leader, but also in the name of their

gender (2002:3).

Yet on the other she concludes:

> Female suicide bombers appear to be one of the most extreme forms of exploitation of women, who become objectified, even if they think that their choice is subjective. It is by accepting their mission or volunteering for suicide bombings that they acquire the status of an object. When they agree to go on the missions, they become weapons in the hands of the men of the terrorist organizations (2002:15)

Thus within the same article women are depicted both as individuals who exercise agency and as victims exploited by 'male' terrorist organisations. The phenomenon of suicide bombing, of all forms of political violence, still renders the largest number of casualties and deaths and is usually referred to by counter terrorist analysts as 'mass casualty terrorism'. Yet for all the fear generated about suicide terrorism the number of suicide attacks worldwide is very small and the number of women engaged in these assaults even smaller. Thus:

> Out of the approximately 17 groups that have used the tactic of suicide bombing, women have been operatives in more than half. Between 1985 and 2006, there were more than 220 women suicide bombers, representing about 15 percent of the total number of such attacks (Bloom, 2007:16)

One might ask why more research focus is placed on female suicide terrorism when men constitute the overwhelming majority of the protagonists/perpetrators in this form of political violence? Perhaps, as the OSCE report maintains 'there is

something not quite natural about a female suicide bomber', a chilling remark which suggests that there may be something 'natural' about suicide bombing undertaken by men.

On the Horizon of New Perspectives

The numbers of women entering violent political organisations has increased substantially over the last decade and most of this increase has taken place in national liberation or nationalist separatist organisations. This coincides with a period in which the intensification of state oppression and international conflict has led to greater numbers of women choosing to enter the armed resistance as combatants or to move within the organisations from non-combatant to 'frontline' active service, a phenomenon referred to by Cunningham (2003) as incremental political progression. This tends to occur in movements in which the goals are defined within the ambit of a circumscribed geographical territory or a proposed or actual nation state to be recognised legally and constitutionally as such. These nationalist movements typically include some commitment to gender equality. Placing value on women as individuals, as equals, is paramount in any political organisation that wishes to encourage and support the participation of women. As we have seen, past and present organisations have made a point of making such commitments clear.

The exception to that rule has been organisations that are non-secular and international in scope that typically operate on a much broader, patriarchal political agenda; sectors of the Palestinian Liberation Movements would fit into this category such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. For example, both of these organisations had explicitly ruled out the use of women in violent political action on religious grounds and continued to do so up to and soon after the Wafa Idris suicide bombing. In the aftermath, amid the surge of women volunteers to be suicide bombers for the Palestinian cause, both

organisations changed their positions (Cunningham, 2003:183-4, Tzoreff, 2006:22). The status of women, however, for these organisations would not be changed in the process.

Men and women have often undertaken different strategic roles within combat/conflict situations. Within all societies gender relations are culturally circumscribed and the life experiences of men and women are gained in different social and political spheres. In the societies mentioned here, female 'invisibility' could be used to challenge and attack the prevailing political order. Utilising the cloak of gendered cultural mores women are able to use expected behaviour/dress/daily activities to access target areas for the perpetration of acts of violence.

To accede that women's presence in radical movements for social change both historically or in the contemporary period is anything other than a conscious decision and one in which women execute political agency is to put aside everything we know already about women's political involvement. Throughout the literature, be it policy reports, academic research, or media analysis an emphasis on socio-biological and emotional explanations, to the exclusion of any political motives, once again places women on the 'outer'. Even in the best of the analyses there is still a tendency to see women as political protectionists rather than political protagonists.

Perhaps, gendered explanations for the motivations, of female 'terrorists' offer a better insight into the positioning of the observer/commentator than to any understanding of violent strategic political action itself. Socio-biological explanations of women's political action predominate. Yet in every interview with these activist women, it is very clear that their political belief and/or personal commitment is ever present in their activism and, for the most part, fuels it. Nevertheless, honour and self sacrificing maternalism seem to offer a more comfortable logic, a safe option: to think otherwise would be much more challenging.

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