

# WHEN THEY LOOK AT HER...

How can the mobilisation of women in political violence be understood, with reference to terrorism?

## Contextual Information

Political violence and terrorism have been equated with the male identity, whereby men were considered the drivers of political violence due to their ‘masculine’ abilities. However, while, “violence has been critical for the constructions of masculinity, [they] have not been essential in affirming or reproducing female identity” (Hasso, 2005:29). Particularly, the rhetoric is seemingly justified because women’s “physique [and femininity] does not allow her to execute tasks that requires force” (Germain N’Guessan, 2011:185). More explicitly, because women are the only gender capable of giving life, it renders them unable to ‘naturally’ take life, “as killing is the most ‘unnatural’ feminine behaviour”, and therefore women can only willingly take part in non-combatant roles (Ahall, 2012:10). For this reason, women’s activism within political violence is only accepted when it reflects normalised discursive ideologies of femininity.

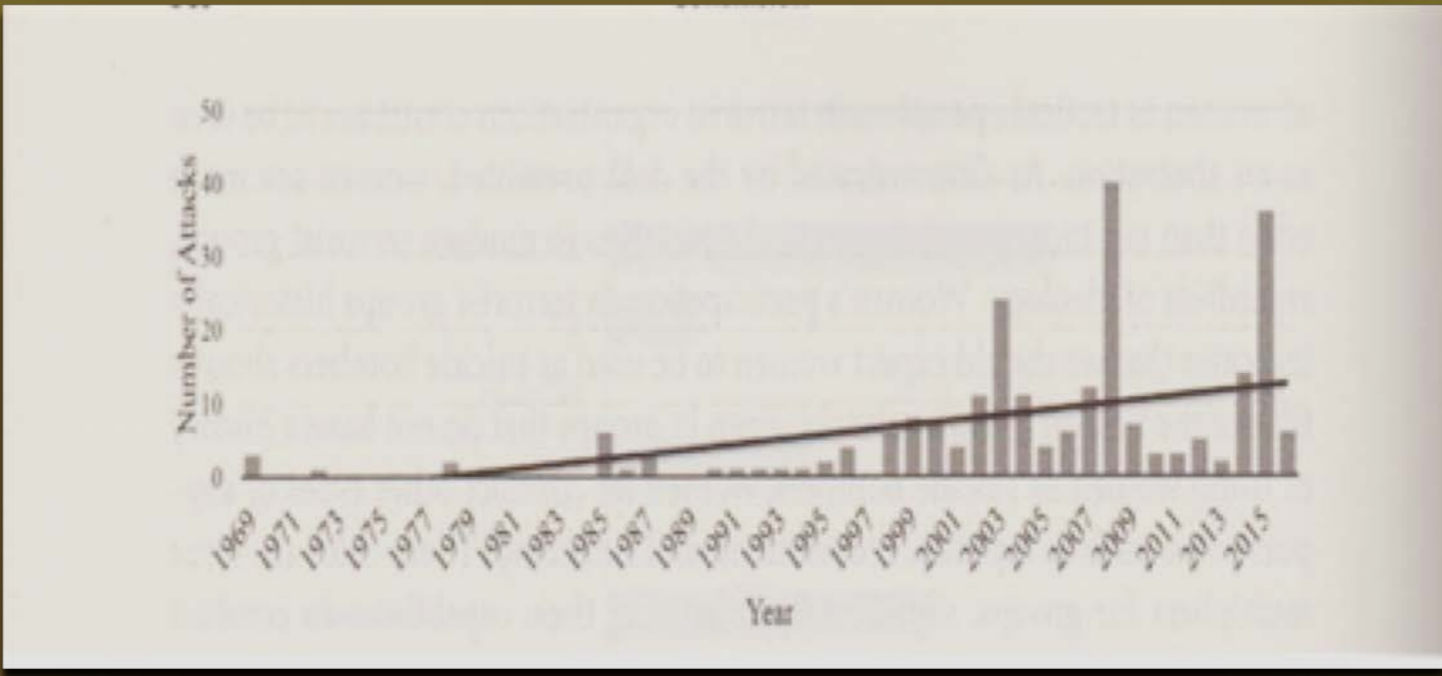


Figure 1 – Rise in female suicide bombers (Davis, 2017:146)

## Aims/Objectives

Problematised and scrutinized essentialist and normalised ideologies of femininity by mapping out existing literature’s willing or unwilling inability to address the complex intersections between gender, political violence and agency.

Elucidate the nuanced reality where women have constantly re-iterated, challenged and negotiated gender constructs through the examination of terrorist organisations that has both enabled and justified women’s mobilisation in the group’s political violence.

Expose how women’s engagement in political violence is complex and multifaceted.

## Do female perpetrators in Al-Qaeda in Iraq and in the Liberation of Tamil Tigers challenge and/or re-iterate femininity?

The Beautiful Soul:  
Women are inherently peaceful and innocent beings, and so “there is no room for women fighting” (Sjoberg, 2010:56).



Mother, Monster and Whore:  
A woman’s sex is the primary lens through which any of her actions are digested” and so the narrative assumes that women’s participation in political violence outside of feminine domains as both a disruption and an excess of femininity (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007:36).

Thenmuli Rajaratnam, an LTTE female suicide bomber conducted an attack on the former Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, by detonating her bomb that was hidden underneath her sari.



“The woman in the family is a mother, wife, sister, and daughter. In society she is an educator, propagator and preacher of Islam, and a female Jihad warrior” (Al-Khanssa Brigade).

## Women’s roles and motivations within political violence



## References

- Ahall, L. (2012). 'Motherhood, Myth and Gendered Agency in Political Violence', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 14(1), pp.103-120.
- Al-Khansaa Brigade, (no date). *Al-Qa'ida Women's Magazine: Women Must Participate in Jihad*, MEMRI. Available at: <https://www.memri.org/reports/al-qaida-womens-magazine-women-must-participate-jihad> (Accessed: 9 January 2019).
- Ben Saga, A. (2018). 'Belgium to Extradite Most Dangerous Woman to Morocco', *Morocco World News*, Available at: <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2018/11/23/5679/belgium-extradite-dangerous-woman-morocco/>. Accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019.
- Figure 1- Davis, J. (2017). *Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad and the Islamic State*, London: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Germain N'Guessan, K. (2011). 'Gender Hierarchy and the Social Construction of Femininity: The Imposed Mask', *Acta Iassyensia Comparationis*, Vol.9, pp.185-199.
- Hasso, F.H. (2005). 'Discursive and political deployments by/of the 2002 Palestinian women suicide bombers/martyrs', *Feminist Review*, Vol. 81, pp. 23–51.
- Nelson, E. (2017). 'Easter through the eyes of a woman', *Communities Digital News*, Available at: <https://www.communitiessnews.com/letter/through-the-eyes-of-a-woman-2-67027/>. Accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019.
- Reuters (no date). 'Thousands of Tamil Tigers have died since the guerrillas took up their armed struggle for an autonomous Tamil homeland in the 1970s', in *The Telegraph* (2009), Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/sri-lanka/5263433/Life-as-a-female-Tamil-Tiger-guerrilla-reliant-by-one-of-first-female-soldiers.html>. Accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019.
- Ruff, A. (2016). 'Tamil Nadu poll 2016: Parties getting ready for the battle for Chennai fort', *Asian Tribune*, Available at: <http://www.asiantribune.com/story/55803>. Accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019.
- Sjoberg, L. (2010). 'Women fighters and the beautiful soul narrative', *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 92(877), pp. 53-68.
- Sjoberg, L. and Gentry, C. (2007). *Mothers, Monsters and Whores: Violence in Global Politics*, London and New York: Zed Books Ltd.
- Spada, A. (2015). 'The female Kurdish fighters winning the war against Islamic State', *Islam Media Analysis*, Available at: <http://www.islammedianews.info/the-female-kurdish-fighters-winning-the-war-against-islamic-state/>. Accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019.
- Turley, J. (2008). 'Shattering the Terrorist Glass Ceiling: Al Qaeda Leader rejects roles of women as terrorists and suicide bombers', Available at: <https://jonahanturley.org/2008/04/shattering-the-terrorist-glass-ceiling-al-qaeda-leader-rejects-role-of-women-as-terrorists-and-suicide-bombers/>. Accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2019.