

# Female suicide bombing

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This chapter was originally supposed to be titled ‘female suicide terrorism.’ But should we feminise a complex tactic of political violence, just because women have become visible in it, and generalise it as illegitimate in the first place? I suggest we speak of women suicide bombers and female suicide bombing instead and carefully distinguish terms and concepts in what is an ideologically charged debate. Similar to ‘suicide terrorism’, which has turned into a dynamic object of knowledge and privileged signifier within terrorism studies and beyond, the notion of female suicide bombing suggests that there is a specific phenomenon which we can grasp by this term, independently of the specific circumstances of their appearance. Moreover, the terms attack/bombing/operation on the one hand, and terrorism on the other, are frequently conflated both in politics and in research. The very space in between these notions, however, remains oddly open to a most delicate key question of International Relations (IR): which political violence is legitimate and which is not? When it comes to speaking and writing about women who intentionally cause their own and others’ death in the context of a violent political conflict, it seems that to some extent the political confrontations including suicide attacks correspond with the discursive contentions in the media and in scholarship. To put it in another way: the issue is a perfect example of how deeply political and epistemic violence are entangled. It is against this backdrop that I would like to discuss female suicide bombing and the recurring question of what is so special about it.

### FACTS AND FIGURES

Since the 1980s, at least seventeen groups have integrated women suicide bombers across Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Turkey, Russia, Iraq, Somalia, Uzbekistan, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. But facts and figures vary remarkably along the criteria of analysis and the quality of sources that authors aggregate in and extract from databases. These sources include many cases where details

remain unknown. Between November 1982 and July 2014, the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism counts 148 to 161 attacks committed by up to 179 women, causing 10 deaths on average, while the overall number of attacks is 3 800, resulting in 40 000 deaths, 105 000 people wounded and an uncountable number of people traumatised (CPOST 2014). Other authors speak of twice as many women involved, while the CPOST databank delivers slightly different results via different search requests and in many cases lacks details even about the perpetrators' sex/gender.

The first registered woman suicide bomber in modern history, a 17-year-old Lebanese girl, acted on behalf of the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP) when blowing herself up near an Israeli convoy in Lebanon in 1985. (1982–2013: 46 attacks, 1985–1990: 9 by women). Four more women followed her in the first campaign, two of them Christians. The targets were clearly military – religion was not the primary motive. Thereafter, as the increasing generalisation of the phenomenon took a different shape – that of the stereotyped fanaticised Islamist suicide terrorist targeting innocent civilians – these women were gradually relegated to a mere footnote in history. This is reminiscent of how the famous state-sponsored kamikaze operations by the Japanese army in World War II were similarly 'foot-noted' in history. The next appearance of violent female agency in suicide attacks was in Sri Lanka, where the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) allowed women to join suicide operations (1987–2009: 78 attacks, 1994–2009: 26 by women). A decade later, women constituted a third of all suicide attacks organised by the PKK, Kurdistan's Workers' Party (1996–2013: 27 attacks, 1996–1999: 8 by women), in Turkey. At the same time, women joined suicide bombing campaigns in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (1994–2008: 99 attacks, 2002–2004: 7 by women). It was only then that female suicide bombing turned into an object of knowledge in its own right. This is despite the relatively small numbers compared to other regions, such as Russia (2000–2013: 78 attacks, 2001–2013: 26 by women), where we could observe a massive feminisation of suicide attacks in the last decade. Despite this increasing focus on women's participation in suicide attacks, other countries such as India, Somalia or Uzbekistan are less covered by scholarly analyses. This also applies to Pakistan (2002–2013: 380 attacks, 2007–2013: 7 by women), Afghanistan (2002–2013: 826 attacks, 2010–2012: 4 by women) and Iraq (2003–2014: 1 554 attacks, 2004–2014: 51 by women) that have been far less researched until now.

This is also in the face of the enormous numbers of attacks, attackers and deaths, and despite women's increasing involvement, especially in Iraq, where in 2005 a white European woman, francophone Belgian

citizen and convert to Islam, committed a suicide attack that raised remarkably more attention than hundreds of other attacks in the past.

But what is so different about women's participation compared to suicide attacks committed by men, except our own dismay over women's violent agency? The average woman suicide bomber is significantly older than her male compatriots. Due to deeply embedded societal gender norms, women are less subjected to security measures, feminine clothing allows for better camouflage of the explosives, and their use as operatives is still quite unexpected. Moreover, women often enter the stage of violent agency later in campaigns, when the tactic is more developed than in the beginning of the campaign and at a time when larger parts of society support extreme forms of violence. For all these reasons, women's operations are far more lethal than men's, and their impact on society is much more intense, because sexed-gendered reporting on the attacks mobilises more attention. In the West especially, audiences are more likely to deny the militant and violent capabilities of women, while claiming both gender-justice and political stability to be an exclusively Western achievement. This bundle of effects has, over time, turned female suicide bombing into an efficient battle tactic for those who lack more accepted tools of warfare.

Secular groups were the first and still are more likely to use this tactic than religious ones. Until 2009, 85% of all attacks carried out by women were sponsored by secular organisations, and none of them categorically rejects it (O'Rourke 2009). In contrast, during more than 20 years of suicide bombing since the 1980s, strict Islamist groups did not approve of women bombers. They only started to do this when secular groups in the same conflict did so. The most persistent Orientalist stereotypes about Islamist patriarchal oppression as a primary factor for female suicide bombing prevail about Chechnya, where the problematic image of the 'black widow' has been coined by Russian media, and in regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one of the most analysed and at the same time most generalised with regard to suicide bombing. The latter has also become a prime example for the sexed-gendered religionisation and culturalisation of political violence per se. At the same time, it is widely acknowledged that (female) suicide bombing has far less to do with religion or culture than it has with strategic military concerns. The simultaneity of these two framings is but one of many contradictions that we face when trying to find out more about women suicide bombers and female suicide bombing.

## WOMEN SUICIDE BOMBERS OR FEMALE SUICIDE TERRORISM?

Women suicide bombers transgress various boundaries and blur well-established dichotomies. These include the taboo of committing suicide and the prohibition of killing, especially when the victims are civilians. In terms of numbers, civilians do not constitute the main targets of suicide attacks, despite commonplace and scholarly claims, but these attacks do cause highest lethality, (see CPOST 2014). Other examples of transgression and boundary blurring are women's visible agency in a political conflict, their roles as life-givers and carers and their paramount place in the private realm. Last, but not least, the persistent idea that women are intrinsically peaceful. Yet, feminist scholars have pointed out for decades that women's violent agency has always been part of political conflicts, as it has always been central to the discourses that co-constitute these conflicts. While gender norms have changed across the globe in a parallel process, both legitimate and illegitimate armed organisations – in effect militaries and terrorist/resistance movements – have gradually integrated women into their ranks, while remaining deeply masculinist. Men's and women's motives to participate in a suicide attack may be largely similar in a given conflict, but the means of their political mobilisation by organisations, as well as the ways of being heard in the public, vary remarkably along sexed-gendered lines. In terrorism studies and International Relations (IR) too, for a long time gender issues were ignored. With the rise of female suicide bombing, both fields of study seem to have discovered a certain obsession about it. From a feminist intersectional perspective, discourse, experience and reality, violence and the political, knowledge and power, meaning and (il)legitimacy are intimately entangled in a multidimensional societal process that spans across time and space. And in addition to race, class, religion, geopolitical location and possible further categories, sexuality and gender are deeply involved in this challenging object of inquiry at all stages – as they are in the procedures of its interpretation.

The constantly increasing literature on the topic largely agrees that (female) suicide bombing has become the ultimate tool of warfare and the distinct method of the so-called fourth wave of terrorism. Most work on the issue applies gender as a variable that seems not to enter analysis until a woman visibly takes part in suicide attacks – as if the overwhelming masculinity, heteronormativity and androcentrism of inter-state warfare and sub-state political violence was untouched by gender at all. At the same time, political violence that is considered illegitimate by those with

the power of the dominant definitions and the tools to implement them, is often discursively feminised (through irrationalisation, pathologisation, sexualisation, culturalisation and similar discursive procedures) in order to maintain the rationality, sanity and, most importantly, the legitimacy of dominant modes of violence acted out by nation states and international alliances. From this it follows that the very notion of female suicide bombing/terrorism does not merely indicate women's participation in an attack. It also reinforces the idea that suicide bombing is *per se* something completely out of the scope of the masculinised notions of rationality and legitimacy in the domain of political agency and violence. As feminist analyses have shown, this intrinsic scheme underlies almost all conventional approaches to the topic, to a certain extent even including rational choice-based and gender-sensitive analyses.

## EXPLANATIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Explanations and interpretations of female suicide bombing are often influenced by the context. This is why it has to be noted that terrorism studies and other IR-related scholarship are often close to state-sponsored think-tanks or intelligence services. While explicitly feminist authors, who are rare in terrorism studies and marginalised within the wider field of IR, tend to choose an interpretative or deconstructivist approach that is critical of conventional analyses of political violence and gender issues and often informed by post- and decolonial theory (Brunner 2011, Brown 2011, Deylami 2013, Rajan 2011). The booming field of terrorism studies more likely yields problem-solving gender analyses. These often result in rather positivist and affirmative, and therefore widely received, but quite commonplace 'gender knowledge' on political violence (Berko 2012, Skaine 2006). Often, this does not significantly differ from popular journalistic accounts (Victor 2003) with respect to the specific categories of sexuality and gender. Of course, the range of approaches also includes non-feminist, but otherwise comprehensive attempts to grasp gender issues more substantially (Bloom 2011), but framings are repetitive, as it were.

When women suicide bombers are the object of analysis, individualising approaches are widespread and focus on sexuality-related family status variables or personal deficiencies in order to primarily explain the motives for violent women's agency. This early profiling-paradigm from criminology has today largely been replaced by more complex approaches in allegedly gender-neutral accounts on suicide bombing, taking the organisational level and the regional history of the given

conflict into better consideration. However, even within such a frame, psychologising perspectives are rarely questioned when women are at stake, while society is mostly understood as the personal surroundings of the woman in question. Even on the level of organisations and their inner dynamics and long-term strategies in regional conflicts, women's violent agency is likely to be framed as forced or, at least, women are represented as duped. This does not necessarily mean that men's attacks are per se seen as rational political agency. While leaders' political rationality has to be acknowledged sooner or later, the violent performance of the perpetrators themselves is often framed in terms of suppressed sexuality under the siege of orientalist patriarchy, as well. This is especially so since generalising accounts repeatedly position examples from the Middle East as paradigmatic. Moreover, the topic of women suicide bombers is often described by way of story-telling both in journalistic and in academic writings. Such presentations thereby reinforce the individual level as the major explanatory factor, while marginalising the international and global implications of a given conflict, including its repercussions with counter-terrorism policies and other considerations that IR-related studies should actually be capable of taking into account. The weak theoretical foundations and poor methodological self-reflection of terrorism studies add to these problems, which is why sexed-gendered stereotyping can be found at all levels of analysis. It is most strikingly condensed on book covers, the titles and illustrations of which very self-evidently show that *sex sells* – also in a domain that claims a maximum of distance and objectivity with regard to its object of research.

At the same time, the question about a potentially emancipative dimension of female suicide bombing is repeatedly asked. But it is not necessarily feminists who wonder whether women's participation in suicide attacks is a sign of liberation from triple oppression (by their society's patriarchy, the paternalist militant organisations and by the conflict itself). Rather, it is those who pursue a problem-solving gender approach. The idea that more gender-justice in their respective societies would reduce violence altogether may appear progressive in the first place, but at the same time it equally allows for the larger political context and its global dimensions to be disregarded. This is because gender is only applied as a variable and not conceived of as an intradependently and intersectionally composed category of analysis that would necessarily include geopolitics.

All in all, substantial and comprehensive intersectional feminist gender-sensitive analysis is rare, while an implicit counter-terrorist as well as a security- and state-centered perspective underlies much of the

research, even when gender is included in this. Prevalent depictions of women suicide bombers tend to mirror historical Western colonialist views of Third World women, guided by imperialist agendas and their specific Occidental genderism. But rebel groups equally frame them in specifically gendered rhetoric. Both narratives try to rewrite violent agency in female suicide bombing into patriarchal ideologies of gender relations, albeit under different preconditions and with different aims, but resulting in the recurring use of stereotyped tropes such as *black widows*, *army of roses*, *birds of paradise*, *virgins of heaven* or similar references on either side. Those forms of narrative or discursive violence clearly overwrite existing forms of the respective women's self-representation. For the most part, women's politically violent agency is policed and transformed in order to maintain masculine privilege. Western narratives particularly function as commodities that help maintain the real and the imagined global divide that so efficiently links political to epistemic violence.

## CONCLUSION

Most gender sensitive scholars claim that female suicide bombing has not been investigated enough yet and that we need to find out more about the alleged puzzle of female suicide bombing. I do not think that we need more of the so-called gender analyses that have rather obscured than illuminated the issue at stake. With regard to mainstream-compatible pieces of *gendering suicide terrorism*, we have reached a cognitive deadlock of redundant stereotyping that starts from and often ends up in embedded feminism in the larger context of Eurocentrist and Occidental counter-terrorism expertise. This needs to be challenged by feminist analyses that focus on the core of their competences, the public-private divide, that is so important in the delicate debate about (il-)legitimate violence at large. While gender expertise has gained certain ground in terrorism studies, I believe that feminist terrorism studies remain an oxymoron as long as they are clearly situated in the imperial framework of power and knowledge that dominates them today. From a state-sceptical, anti-militarist and postcolonial feminist point of view though, I believe that recent contributions from the margins of IR, critical terrorism studies and beyond can lay the foundation for the next level of discussion about gender and political violence in the context of globally asymmetric power relations in general and about female suicide bombing in particular. Those who will be able to grasp the larger picture, are those who analytically put power and resistance, subalternity and dominance,



agency and positionality on the agenda and who widen the perspective beyond the spectacular single woman in case. This involves having a look not only at femininity and masculinity, but also at the androcentrism, heteronormativity and masculinism in the field of IR and at its complicities with the Eurocentrism, Occidentalism and persistent coloniality in both politics and the academia. It is within this complex setting that women become suicide bombers, and it is these very same power relations that shape our knowledge about and our remedies against it. Therefore, a feminist gender approach to IR will have to continue insisting on the manifold entanglements between political violence on the one hand and epistemic violence on the other – and position itself with regard to these circumstances.

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