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Where Women Rebel

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Where Women Rebel

PATTERNS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ARMED REBEL GROUPS 1990–2008

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Abstract

While a significant literature on women's participation in armed rebel groups exists, much of this work is focused on individual cases or regional comparisons among movements. This has led to a lack of cross-national work on women in insurgencies, and a limited understanding of the extent to which women are engaged in civil conflict internationally. This article introduces new data on women's involvement in seventy-two insurgencies active since 1990, and assesses the validity of several assumptions about women and rebellion drawn from existing literature on women in conflict and on civil wars generally. I show that women are active in rebel groups much more often than current scholarship acknowledges. This involvement includes frequent service in combat and leadership roles, where male participants are often presumed to be the default. Finally, while forced recruitment tactics are frequently used to bring women into service, much of their participation appears to be voluntary in nature.

Keywords

gender, civil conflict, terrorism, insurgency

To what extent do women participate in armed rebel groups¹ and why do some groups appear to attract such large numbers of female fighters, while others appear to attract almost none? This question is deceptive in its simplicity, because in research on women in intrastate conflict it becomes evident that the lack of understanding about women in civil wars is indicative of larger issues within the field of international relations (IR) generally, and the study of civil wars in particular. Scholarly research tends to perpetuate – in a

manner either outright or implied – the stereotype that conflict is the domain of men. Consider these statements from recent scholarship on armed rebellion:

The [surveyed] noncombatant group overrepresents men . . . relative to the general population. (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008, 444)

Kadogos [boy fighters] “make very good soldiers . . . they are not concerned with getting back to their wife and family.” (Gates 2002, 128)

This study addressed the issue of whether or not men rebel out of grievance, or whether rebellion was most likely for opportunistic reasons. (Jakobsen and De Soysa 2009, 152)

Our second proxy [variable] . . . has the advantage of being focused on young males – the group from whom rebels are recruited. (Collier and Hoeffler 1998, 569)

These studies, and others like them, ignore the experiences and contributions of women. Where women are mentioned in accounts of conflict, they are often confined to the status of victims or peacemakers.

While a growing canon of literature exists exploring the role of women in armed insurgencies, one gap in current studies is the lack of a large-scale, cross-national investigation of this phenomenon. Several works on the topic are regional in nature, exploring cases that are often closely related and focusing on rebel groups in a contained geographic area such as South Asia or Latin America (Gonzalez-Perez 2006; Kampwirth 2004, 2003; Manchanda 2001). Other studies draw on a limited number of cases from a long time horizon – sometimes covering post-Cold War, Cold War and even pre-WWII era movements without much regard to differences in historical context or the difficulties in drawing meaningful generalizations from such a population of cases (Cunningham 2003; Eager 2008). Even more extensive works cover fewer than thirty cases, and these studies share a tendency to focus on only positive cases, looking at where women *are* instead of where they are not (Cragin and Daly 2009; Eager 2008; Gonzalez-Perez 2008; Tétreault 1994a).

To address the gaps in current literature on women and armed rebellion, I present the findings of a cross-national examination representing a random sample of over seventy rebel movements active since 1990. The data present a clearer picture of where and how women are contributing to insurgencies than we have had to date. They also offer some preliminary insights into how geographic location and ideology are related to rates of women’s participation. In presenting the data, my goals are twofold. First, I offer an overview of women’s roles in armed rebellion that is broader in scope and geographic coverage than what was previously available. Second, I seek to show how the data engage with current literature on intrastate conflict, presented in the form of several assumptions drawn from scholarship on civil wars. Importantly, I argue that the data refute notions about women and conflict that are

accepted but rarely problematized in mainstream IR scholarship. Among the relevant findings, the data show that women are active participants in well over half of the world's rebel groups. Additionally, while women tend to be more active in supporting or noncombat roles, I find that women also take part in armed attacks in nearly one-third of all rebel movements, and play leadership roles in over one-quarter of all movements. I also show that, while forced recruitment is a reality for women and girls in some rebel movements, the majority of movements incorporating women rely on voluntary participation. This should prompt a reconsideration of how we discuss women, agency and political violence. A final substantive section on gendered participation moves beyond the numbers to offer a view of women's participation in selected rebel movements included in the data.

WOMEN AND CIVIL CONFLICT

Attempts to explore women's participation are complicated by the ways in which women are marginalized or deprived of official status in many movements. Feminist scholars have noted various forms of silence surrounding women in revolution, such as the erasure or omission of women from archives, authoritative histories and postconflict transition programs (Jorgensen 1994; MacKenzie 2009; Sylvester 1994; Tétreault 1994b). Scholarly literature on civil wars and rebel recruitment further perpetuates assumptions about women and conflict that have acquired a taken-for-granted quality in the literature, but which have not been fully investigated through a cross-national analysis. I present some of this conventional wisdom here, and from it draw a set of assumptions that will be challenged in subsequent sections.

First, much of the work on civil wars in the mainstream political science tradition either underrepresents or completely ignores the experience of women. In discussing the microfoundations of rebellion in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Gates discusses the importance of child soldiers, but generalizes the experience of *child* soldiers to that of *boy* soldiers, implying that girl soldiers are either absent entirely or that they are not present in significant numbers (2002). In a cross-national analysis of civil wars between 1960 and 1999, Collier and Hoeffler use variables in their models that focus exclusively on the experience of young men (1998). Other quantitative work uses more subtly biased variables such as per capita income as a proxy for economic grievance (Jakobsen and De Soysa 2009), masking the different levels of deprivation that may be experienced by men and women. The work of feminist security studies scholars has challenged these gendered assumptions, showing how the projection of traditional gender roles onto wartime interactions minimizes the very-present contributions of women (MacKenzie 2012, 2009; McEvoy 2009; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007).

There is an even greater complexity when differentiating among the *types* of roles that women play in various rebel movements. Several authors have noted

the importance of women as camp followers throughout history, but the focus on women as auxiliaries also indicates a gendered understanding of participation in armed rebellion (Enloe 1999; Griset and Mahan 2002). Enloe demonstrates how the label “camp follower” devalues women, saying “[t]o ‘follow’ is not to be a part of, but to be dependent on, to tag along” (1999, 37). It is also unclear whether women prefer to be camp followers, or if they are excluded from combat or leadership roles deliberately (Park 1994; Tétreault 1994c). Additionally, the contribution of women in combat or leadership roles may be actively concealed in the postrevolutionary period. The influence of religious/traditional communities, a desire to control revolutionary myth or a concern for the potential costs of incorporating women in the postwar state may result in the construction of an alternative history that obscures the contributions of women (Åhäll 2012; Eager 2008; Jorgensen 1994; MacKenzie 2009; Sylvester 1994; Tétreault 1994d).

Questions of forced recruitment and agency are also relevant. Forced recruitment has been a part of the wartime experience for both male and female fighters throughout history. With regard to women, though, particular emphasis is placed on the use of force or coercion as a recruitment/retention tool. Research on suicide bombers has focused on the ways in which widowhood and rape allegedly drive women to rebellion, leaving them with no alternative for income or “rehabilitation” beyond martyrdom (Auchter 2012; Bloom 2007; Eager 2008). In Sierra Leone the assumption of participation by force was incorporated into postconflict reconstruction, with reports by the UN and nongovernmental agencies repeatedly presenting females as victims and assuming all female participants in the conflict were abductees (MacKenzie 2012). This notion is further reinforced by widely circulated accounts of women who, after being apprehended participating in rebel activity, claim they were kidnapped or forced into committing such acts.² The fact that such accounts are widely reported and readily accepted indicates the difficulty that many observers have reconciling women as willing participants in violent activity. It also reflects a dichotomous notion of agency that oversimplifies the realities of conflict. Specifically, work on women in African rebel movements suggests that women (and girls) may enter a movement through coercion, but then make a conscious decision to stay or seek out a more advantageous position within the group (Auchter 2012; MacKenzie 2012, 2009; McKay 2005; Utas 2005).

Based on this survey of the literature, there are three key assumptions about women in armed rebel groups that dominate mainstream scholarship:

- (1) Women do not participate in the majority of armed rebel groups.
- (2) Participation by women in active combat or leadership roles is infrequent or nonexistent.
- (3) Women are more likely to be present where forced recruitment or coercive recruitment tactics are used.

To this point, the type of large-scale, cross-national data that could confirm or challenge these assumptions has been lacking. However, the new data introduced in the following section offer a level of insight that has been previously unavailable.

WOMEN IN ARMED REBEL GROUPS

In conducting the present study, I compiled a cross-national data set on women's participation in various rebel groups. As a starting point, I consulted the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo (UCDP/PRIO) data set on intrastate armed conflicts from 1990 to 2008 and identified 140 organizations involved in armed conflict for at least two consecutive years during this time period.³ I then chose a random sample of eighty-five of these groups.⁴ Availability of data and organizational changes affecting the coding left me with a final sample of seventy-two groups.⁵ For each of the groups under examination, I investigated and coded information on the group's ideology and on the extent, if any, to which women participated in the group.

Ideological factors of interest that were coded include: the presence of a platform supporting women's rights (meaning one that is explicitly supportive of increased rights for women in a legal sense); a platform supporting economic redistribution (such as a Marxist or socialist ideology);⁶ and presence of an ethnic- or religious-based agenda.⁷ These were each coded as dichotomous variables. The most challenging of these variables to code was the one concerning support for women's rights. Unlike other ideological foci, this is clearly not viewed as a primary or central ideological orientation by many scholars. It is often not noted by authors, even when it is part of a movement's manifesto.⁸ In an attempt to be as inclusive as possible, I consulted a minimum of five sources in coding a group's ideological orientation. If there was some significant division among these sources on what the group's goals are/were, I consulted additional sources for verification. This information came from scholarly sources, documentation by governments or international organizations, and – where possible – primary documents from the movement itself.⁹

In coding the extent of women's participation in these movements, I reviewed several sources related to each movement that was sampled, looking specifically at those sources that documented women's engagement with the rebel group.¹⁰ Although women's participation in some rebel groups has been widespread enough to warrant significant scholarly attention, most of the movements included here have received little or no attention from scholars – especially in terms of the role of women. The sources I used to code women's participation were therefore a combination of sources including:

- Journalistic accounts.
- Academic studies on the group noting the participation of women.
- Data gathered by practitioners in the field, for example reports by organizations involved in the disarmament process and reporting by human rights agencies.

- First-hand accounts, including personal memoirs or testimonies and documents distributed by the rebel movement itself.

A minimum of five sources were consulted for each movement, and at least three sources indicating women's participation were needed to confirm that women were active in the movement. The requirement of multiple, confirming sources was introduced to improve accuracy as well as to establish a minimal threshold for determining participation. Under these rules, for example, a single report of a woman acting as a combatant would not be sufficient to confirm participation.

Additionally, in accordance with the literature discussed above I classified participation according to roles of interest, namely: combat; noncombat; leader; and forced participant. These categories are not mutually exclusive and can be organized along different axes (i.e. one dimension of rank-and-file participation including combat and noncombat roles while another dimension addresses vertical dimensions of rank). In particular, participation at any level could be forced or voluntary. Table 1 shows the criteria used in delineating and differentiating among these roles. In creating and defining them, I

Table 1 Summary of participant roles and criteria for identification

<i>Participant role</i>	<i>Criteria</i>
Noncombat	Clearly identify with the goals, ideology and/or efforts of one side in a conflict Routinely offer support to that side, contributing labor, supplies and assistance Provide general support, rather than lending support only to specific individuals (e.g. family members) Conduct the majority of their duties outside of a frontline or close-combat environment
Combat	Regularly engage in a frontline environment in support of one side of a conflict Engage in, are expected to engage in or directly support those engaged in close combat
Leader	Exercises direct control over and provides oversight of other participants, <i>or</i> Exercises direct control over the strategy, policies and/or ideology of the movement
Forced/coerced participant	Are under 15 years of age, <i>or</i> Are the target of physical assault, <i>or</i> Are the target of threats against self or family, <i>or</i> Are the target of forced administration of drugs, <i>or</i> Have not been provided an opt-out opportunity, <i>or</i> Have been the victim of acts designed to make return to former life impossible

sought to avoid relying only upon “rank” and “membership” categories as defined by rebel groups themselves, since these may not be an accurate assessment of who participates. By defining these roles as I have here, I hope to both provide some clarification on what it means to “participate” in an organized, armed rebel group (a concept that is at times opaque) and to address ways in which participation, narrowly defined, may obscure or marginalize the contributions of women.¹¹

Table 2 presents an overview of these new data on women in armed rebellion as they concern women in combat and noncombat roles.

The findings in Table 2 clearly challenge the first two assumptions noted in the previous section. First, the majority of all organizations active in this period (1990–2008) received support from women, with the most frequent contributions being in noncombat roles. However, while women participate at a lower level than their male counterparts in combat roles, they *are* active and participating in armed attacks in nearly a third of all rebel groups examined here. Therefore, while these data show that women are active in armed rebellion less frequently than men overall, they are present and active in the majority of all groups, and they are acting as combatants in rebel organizations far more often than scholarship currently recognizes.

Table 3 shows where women were observed as rebel leaders in the period under investigation. The data show a gendering of leadership roles. Fewer rebel movements include women in leadership roles (26.4 percent) than in combat (31.9 percent) or noncombat roles (58.3 percent). At first glance, it may not seem odd that fewer individuals move up the ranks compared to the overall pool of participants, yet it seems noteworthy that less than half of all movements including women give women a voice in leadership.¹² The data reinforce the statistics presented in Table 2: women are less active in leadership roles overall than men, but are active much more often than current scholarship seems to imply. Returning, then, to my first two assumptions outlined earlier, it appears that the conventional wisdom about women’s participation in rebel groups overall and in leadership and combat roles in particular does not reflect political realities.

FORCED PARTICIPATION AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN

As mentioned earlier, forced participation tactics often affect women and girls. Because of this, it is tempting to conclude that this phenomenon accounts for much of women’s activities in armed movements. To contradict this argument, Table 4 summarizes the breakdown of voluntary versus forced participation in rebel groups. Based on the criteria outlined in Table 1, a minimum of three sources had to indicate that forced participation tactics were being used. Unlike the other categories, however, I looked for evidence of forced participation techniques being used against participants of either gender.

Table 2 Participation in rank-and-file (non-leadership) roles

Region	Total no. of organizations*	Noncombat only		Combat only		Noncombat and combat		No female participation	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Mid. East/North Africa	14	3	21.4	1	7.1	5	35.7	5	35.7
Asia	22	8	36.4	0	0.0	5	22.7	9	40.9
Sub-Saharan Africa	27	8	29.6	0	0.0	5	18.5	14	51.9
Eastern and Western Europe	3	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	66.7	1	33.3
Latin America	5	1	20.0	0	0.0	4	80.0	0	0.0
North America	1	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0
Total	72	20	27.8	1	1.4	22	30.6	29	40.3

*Of all rebel groups identified by PRIO as being active for two consecutive years in the period 1990–2008, twenty-two are in the Middle East/North Africa, forty-one are in Asia, sixty-one are in Sub-Saharan Africa, nine are in Eastern and Western Europe, six are in Latin America and one is in North America. This sample underrepresents Sub-Saharan Africa overall, which largely reflects a higher rate of missing data for this region due to lack of information and group fluidity. More so than any other region, rebel groups in Sub-Saharan Africa tend to arise, become active and dissolve within a short period of time. This also only notes the primary state of activity recognized by PRIO. For example, Al-Qaeda is classified as the lone North American group here because PRIO recognizes the United States as the primary target state.

Table 3 Women in leadership roles, by region

Region	No. of organizations*		Leadership	
	Total	Female-inclusive**	No.	%
Middle East/North Africa	14	9	3	21.4
Asia	22	13	6	27.3
Sub-Saharan Africa	27	13	3	11.1
Eastern and Western Europe	3	2	2	66.7
Latin America	5	5	5	100.0
North America	1	1	0	0.0
Total	72	43	19	26.4

*See note to Table 2.

**Represents the number of organizations where women are in rank-and-file positions.

The information in Table 4 shows that impressment, abduction or coercion do not fully account for the global extent of women's participation. While movements that use forced participation techniques include women and girls more often than not, most of the movements in which women are active are those that did not appear to use these techniques systematically. It is also worth noting that even where organizations do kidnap or force women to participate, women may also be joining the same movement voluntarily. These practices are not mutually exclusive. To further illustrate the variety of movements that use forced participation, Table 5 breaks out these movements by ideology.

As illustrated above, movements of all ideological leanings employ forced participation tactics. Rates are highest among "other" movements, those that do not fit into any of my ideological categories. This is perhaps unsurprising; while some of these movements do have political goals, many of these groups are factions supporting various warlords or other movements with no clear ideological focus. Without well-defined goals to unite fighters, it may be logical that these groups would rely heavily on coercion to accrue members. The majority of these "other" groups are also in Sub-Saharan Africa, which may also explain why the overwhelming majority (all but two) of the movements using forced participation were in that region. The prevalence of coercive recruitment in this part of the world is also worth noting because, as referenced above, Sub-Saharan African rebel groups have been used as

Table 4 Comparing women's participation and forced participation*

	Forced participation	No forced participation
Women present	12	31
Women absent	5	24

*See discussion supra.

Table 5 Composition of movements using forced participation by ideology*

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Forced</i>	
		<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Pro-women's rights	4	2	50.0
Redistributive	19	2	10.5
Ethnoreligious	51	7	13.7
<i>Islamist</i>	18	2	11.1
<i>Non-Islamist</i>	33	5	15.2
All others	11	8	72.7

*Since movements may fall under one or more ideological categories, the "total" here exceeds the actual sample total of seventy-two movements.

cases to challenge a dichotomous notion of agency. Scholars have pointed out that individual women and girls who come into a rebel group by force may make conscious choices to stay in these groups, cultivating social relationships and rising through the ranks (Auchter 2012; McKay 2005; Utas 2005). While the measurement of forced participation that I have used here is indeed dichotomous, I hope the data could be used as a starting point for a deeper investigation into these questions of agency and rebellion.

It is also interesting to note that half of the groups that claim to support women's rights also use forced participation techniques, though of these two movements one (the Kurdistan Worker's Party [PKK] in Turkey) did not officially endorse this practice and claimed to have abandoned the use of these techniques (Gonzalez-Perez 2008; Ozcan 2007). The other, the Sudanese People's Liberation Army in Sudan, had rhetoric supporting women's rights but did not appear to have a significant number of female participants. These findings further illustrate a complexity in the relationship between gender consciousness, agency and rebellion.

Overall, based on the data I find that assumptions about women primarily entering armed rebellion through force or coercion are highly dubious. While forced participation tactics do target women, it appears that such practices do not account for the majority of female participation in organized rebel groups.

GENDERING PARTICIPATION: CROSS-NATIONAL COMMONALITIES OF EXPERIENCE

Moving beyond the numbers, some patterns of gendered participation are evident across regions. As noted above, the historical role of women as "camp followers" has been discussed by researchers on the topic of women in civil wars (Enloe 1999; Gonzalez-Perez 2006; Goldstein 2001; Griset and Mahan 2002). These women, present in military campaigns throughout history, would

carry out tasks including laundry, tailoring, nursing, cooking and the allocation of provisions. At the same time, though, the labels of “camp follower” or “auxiliary” mark these women as outsiders. In accordance with this tenuous status, the level of recognition women receive for their work in support roles varies across movements, both historically and in the present day. Work on historical rebel groups at the single-case level suggests that women have, in some places, been excluded from formal membership in rebel groups, have been stripped of membership or have been denied advancement opportunities despite their active roles in conflict (Sylvester 1994; Tétreault 1994c). The current data bear out this trend as a global phenomenon, showing that women continue to be denied status despite providing crucial noncombat services.

In the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) women reported having to overcome their exclusion from membership in the organization’s early days, an exclusion that was in place despite women’s contributions in transporting arms and researching targets – roles that may be noncombat in nature but which are still tasks of strategic importance (Wilson 1991). In the Moro National Liberation Front in the Philippines, women were actively involved in the movement from its inception, but the lack of a formal membership structure in the organization’s early years meant that women who participated often did not identify themselves as part of the movement. Later, women’s involvement was also concealed by the fact that many women worked in a noncombat capacity outside of camps and/or inside the home, performing tasks such as sewing, provisioning and fundraising (Angeles 1996). In Angola, while official statistics note few women as “combatants” in the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), women identified themselves as participants in provisioning, relaying messages and other support tasks – at the same time not identifying themselves as “members.” According to one report, “it is extremely difficult to distinguish between soldiers and non-soldiers within the female population that accompanied UNITA troops” (Human Rights Watch 1994, 24). This quote speaks to the powerful role that labeling and self-identification have, and how women’s service can be rendered invisible.

Sexuality is also linked to the roles of women in armed rebellion worldwide. The phenomenon of “combat wives,” kidnapped women and girls being used for domestic work and sex, was quite commonly reported in Sub-Saharan African rebel movements. This practice was widespread in movements that were active in Angola, Burundi, Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda.¹³ However, these practices were also reported in other parts of the world. In North Africa, Islamist groups reportedly encouraged forced marriages after religious officials issued a *fatwa* to make these unions legal¹⁴ (IWHR Law Clinic 1997). While not included in this sample, the experience of combat wives in Africa is similar to experiences reported by Bosnian women in testimony at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) (Mumba, Hunt, and Pocar 2001). The role of combat wife or girlfriend is often one based on force or coercion, but this is not always the case. Some women have made the conscious choice to seek out wartime relationships, either to ensure their own protection or to gain access

to privileges and goods. Utas (2005) shows how women in times of conflict could move from relationship to relationship, sometimes between men on different sides, seeking out a new “boyfriend” when an old one is killed or apprehended. As in the case of camp followers, “combat wife” can become a label that wrongly excludes women from agency or formalized status and conceals their contribution to the rebel effort.

Women’s bodies and sexuality have been deployed in other ways. In India, female fighters in the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) were told that part of their job would be to act as “honey traps” for leaders of rival organizations, assisting in kidnappings and assassinations. This, in effect, creates a gendering of the combat role – a space within the field of direct engagement in which women take on strategic importance (SATP 2001). In a noncombat capacity, members of the ATTF and the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) reportedly confessed to using female cadres for prostitution, human trafficking and the making/distributing of pornographic films to raise money for the organization. While some of the women involved in these projects were allegedly kidnapped and used as forced labor, women who voluntarily joined these organizations also reported being asked to take part in these operations (Azizur Rahman 2005; Kumar 2005). In other instances, the strategic use of women as embodied women is implied, if not stated outright. The use of women in noncombat roles such as intelligence gathering and in smuggling people, arms and goods is a recurrent theme and suggests a perception that women are more likely than men to evade suspicion and capture. The strategic use of women in this way has also been widely discussed and speculated about in relation to the use of women as female suicide bombers, a role I define as one of a combat nature.¹⁵

The data also yield some interesting insights into the gendering of leadership roles. As noted above, researchers in the area of feminist security studies have critiqued a tendency to either deliberately or passively erase women from revolutions, especially in postconflict phases of state construction or reconstruction. My definition of leadership roles also included places where women were leading without rank, that is, where women were controlling strategy, ideology and so on, regardless of whether they held formal titles and positions. While I did find women acting in leadership roles in insurgencies worldwide, it was noteworthy to me that these leadership roles often corresponded to women leading women – within women’s regiments or women’s wings of a rebel group such as those existing in the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, the Party of Free Life in Kurdistan and Shanti Bahini in Bangladesh. In at least one group, the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, women’s leadership was also localized, with women having significant representation in local assemblies, but never reaching the highest leadership ranks of the movement overall (Muller 2005; Wilson 1991). A topic worthy of further consideration, then, is whether all women in leadership roles are equally likely to be heard. Where women are only able to lead at the community level or in women’s wings, are they influencing the movement, or are they being contained by it?

CONCLUSION

This work offers new insights into women's involvement in armed rebellion, offering a more comprehensive look at women's participation in post-Cold War rebel groups than what was previously available. I have introduced a new data set on women's participation in armed rebel groups between 1990 and 2008, drawing on a cross-national, random sample of groups active two or more years during that time period. In presenting these data, I have also illustrated how they engage with current scholarship on political violence and civil wars, using them to explore the validity of three assumptions drawn from literature on women and conflict, which represent widely held views about how and where women participate in political violence.

In exploring assumptions that women are largely absent from rebel groups and that they are particularly underrepresented in combat and leadership roles, I find that women are actively involved in nearly 60 percent of all rebel groups I examined, that they are combatants in nearly one-third of all groups and that women hold leadership positions in over one-quarter of all rebel groups represented in the sample. Additionally, my findings challenge a third assumption suggesting that women primarily join armed insurgencies where they are forced or coerced into such activity. To the contrary, the data show that most movements where women are active rely primarily on the voluntary solicitation of recruits, refuting accounts that paint female participants as victims and instead suggesting that the decision to rebel is often a conscious choice. Even in situations where women are pressed into service, the fact that some of the same movements have women in combat and leadership roles suggests the need for a more nuanced view of agency.

One novel contribution of this study is the finding that women appear to share similar experiences in rebellion on a global scale, particularly insofar as their experiences are shaped by gender roles, sexuality and common barriers to advancement in and recognition by rebel organizations. The lack of cross-national data on the topic has heretofore limited researchers' ability to examine the similar experiences of women across borders, but this exploration offers support for what many feminist researchers have suggested based on work at the regional or case-study level; namely, that there is a tension in many rebellions between a rebel group's need or desire to mobilize women and its interest in fully recognizing and valuing their work. It also raises the question, as prior work in the area of feminist security studies has alluded to, of whether the process of state formation is inherently a masculine one, invariably creating situations where the consolidation and institutionalization of power necessarily leads to the devaluation of women's labor.

Certainly, there is more work to be done in this area. The expansion of such a data set to include more groups and a longer time span would be of particular interest, as would the introduction of testing for inter-coder reliability. Along the same lines, it is also likely true that the reliance on English- and Spanish-language sources introduces a bias against groups operating where neither of

these languages is in wide use. For example, the majority of the rebel movements excluded from the data due to lack of available source material were operating in Sub-Saharan Africa. Finally, a reliance on secondary sources, especially news reports, may result in a reproduction of bias against women – though I would argue that a reliance on these sources also has certain benefits. For example, in many of the secondary sources that I used the perceived curiosity factor of women in combat and leadership roles paradoxically led to women's service in these roles being highlighted over and over again. The reliance on secondary sources in addition to or instead of official, archival records may also reduce the danger of reliance on an “official” narrative in which government or rebel group officials may actively work to conceal the extent of women's participation, a phenomenon that has been noted in places such as Zimbabwe and Vietnam (Sylvester 1994; Tétreault 1994b).

Acknowledging the limitations present in the current data, this work offers an unprecedented view into women's roles in civil wars in the post-Cold War era. It supports the argument that women are stakeholders in civil conflict, a presumption underlying the development of global norms related to gendered security. It further shows that women's contributions to conflict extend beyond what scholarship in the field of IR generally recognizes, suggesting that women are themselves agents of conflict and are often in a position to influence the rebel movements in which they serve. The findings presented here offer new avenues for research, while simultaneously helping to demystify the phenomenon of women in political violence. What stands out most clearly is that the trope that women in armed rebellion are anomalies or aberrations should be retired, and scholars of civil conflict going forward should do more to recognize and account for the active presence of women and girls in war.

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Notes

- 1 Throughout this work, the term “armed rebel group” refers to opposition actors as defined by Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), “defined as any non-governmental group of people having announced a name for their group and using armed force to influence the outcome of [a] stated incompatibility” (Pettersson 2014, sec. 4).
- 2 For example, a would-be female suicide bomber apprehended in Chechnya after her device failed to detonate claimed that she had been kidnapped and forced to participate in the bombing plot (Eager 2008). In Vietnam, females working with the Indochinese

Communist Party (ICP) and, later, the Viet Minh report being instructed that they should play dumb, feign illiteracy or otherwise pretend they were not willing participants in the event they were captured (Eager 2008; Hayslip and Wurts 1993).

- 3 My unit of analysis is the rebel group, not the conflict. Therefore, when multiple groups are indicated to be active in the same country at the same time, such as the National Council for the Defense of Democracy – Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) and the Party for the Liberation of the Hutu People – National Forces of Liberation (Palipehutu-FNL) in Burundi, each group was treated as a separate observation. The exception to this is where groups merged during the time period considered here, which is discussed further infra. Unorganized rebellions, such as those noted by PRIO as “insurgents” or “irregulars” without an associated organization were not counted, nor were coups. As to the decision to work with data from 1990 onward, one of my goals as mentioned above is to narrow the historical field of my inquiry. The post-Cold War period seems appropriate for analysis here, though there may be some minor debate about when this period actually “starts.” Several UCDP data sets, for example, start at 1989 rather than 1990 or 1991.
- 4 In selecting a random sample, I was guided by the notion that random selection “constitute[s] the most reliable way to ensure conditional independence” of observations in large-n analysis, and that random sampling from a larger population is the best way to obtain a representative sample of rebel groups (Gerring 2012; King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 94). In particular, several existing studies of women in rebel groups examine only those groups where women are present (see, for example, Cragin and Daly 2009; Eager 2008; Gonzalez-Perez 2008), resulting in a problem of selection bias. While these works do an admirable job of profiling women’s involvement in the groups under examination, it is not always clear how accurately the selected cases represent overall levels of involvement in armed rebellion. Likewise, such a research design limits our ability to glean knowledge from negative cases – that is, those cases where women are not present, or are not present in certain roles. Random selection of groups in the current sample was accomplished by assigning a unique identifying number to each group and selecting a subset of IDs through a random number generator.
- 5 “Organizational changes” generally refers to the merger or splitting of groups, which occurs rather frequently. Where my research indicated that a group merged or split during the time period under investigation, I established the date of the merger or split. If a group remained unified for the majority of the period under investigation by PRIO (1990–2008), I coded it as a single group. If the group was operating as multiple organizations or factions, they were coded separately. Overall, this served to reduce rather than increase my number of cases. Cases with insufficient data, that is, where at least five sources on the movement could not be identified, were omitted from the final data.
- 6 Generally, all movements that received a score of 1 on this dimension were explicitly Marxist or socialist. However, there were exceptions to this. Most notable is the case of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) which, while not explicitly Marxist or socialist, made the redistribution of wealth a major rallying point (Australian Army 2012; “Bougainville Revolution” 2014; Downer 2009; Jane’s 2009).

- 7 These ideological orientations reflect the various dimensions of political, economic and social grievance identified by mainstream IR research (see, inter alia, Collier and Hoeffler 1998; Jakobsen and De Soysa 2009).
- 8 Marxist movements pose particular difficulties on this count. While Marxism theoretically implies a promise of gender equality, research on Marxist movements has suggested that in fact this is often downplayed, with women sometimes being encouraged to put aside their concerns as women in favor of first resolving the class struggle (Park 1994). For this reason, I was reluctant to code these movements as being in favor of women's rights without further evidence that there was actually discourse explicitly supporting the rights of women. Another valid concern here is to what extent movements that express support for women's rights are genuinely supportive of women's rights. By relying on multiple sources, it was my hope that I could identify movements that were not consistently supportive of women's rights and exclude them from this category. For example, in the case of Shanti Bahini in Bangladesh, the movement itself expresses a commitment to women's rights, but activism in this area is not noted by outside commentators analyzing the movement's agenda. In several such cases where I was unable to find multiple sources confirming a commitment to gender equality, I assigned a value of "0" for this variable.
- 9 English- and Spanish-language materials were used in coding, although some of the materials (for example, news reports and reports by human rights organizations) were also available in other languages. See the appendix for a complete list of cases.
- 10 "Engagement" should not be read to indicate that I looked only at sources where women were identified as working with the rebel groups. Sources documenting women's engagement with the group also include those sources where women were victims of attacks by a group, where women were working within civil society groups engaged with the rebels and so on. Thus these sources offer an opportunity for positive as well as negative observations.
- 11 As an illustration of this ambiguity, disarmament data from the UN Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL) attempts to make a categorization of participant roles held by participants in the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador, but the exact definition of these categories is not clear even to researchers who have relied on these data (Luciak 2001). Furthermore, it has been pointed out that definitions used by ONUSAL and other agencies involved in the postconflict transition employ the separate and ambiguous category of '*tenedores*' to describe some individuals who were active supporters of the FMLN, but who were not considered to be members. Complicating matters further, *tenedores* has also been described as a category that includes displaced persons and possibly civilians who were supporters of the government (Conaway and Martinez 2004; Vargas 2003).
- 12 To be exact, forty-three total movements include women and nineteen have women in leadership positions, a percentage of 44.2 percent.
- 13 See, for example, Human Rights Watch (1994); Dilworth (2006); Amnesty International (2004a, 2004b); Human Rights Watch (2007, 2004); Utas (2005); Ellis (2001); Restoy (2006); Mazurana and Carlson (2004); Amin (1991) and Annan et al. (2010).

- 14 Wives, of course, are frequently active in these movements in a voluntary capacity as well. Sometimes wives may even perform services to a movement without knowing it. In at least two groups, Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Algeria and al-Itahad al-Islami (AIAI) in Ethiopia, rebel commanders encouraged cadres to marry local women in order to establish “cover” or strengthen their ties to the community. Since there is no indication that those women provided any support beyond what may have been given to their own husbands, I coded both of these movements as having no female participation, but these cases do shed light on how women can be strategically important even where they are not “participating” as I define it here (Abu al -Ma’ali 2012; Shinn 2004, 2009; Smith 2009).
- 15 Among the many who have written on the topic, Bloom (2007) and Eager (2008) each devote an entire chapter to discussing women and suicide attacks.

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APPENDIX

List of Rebel Groups Analyzed*

Group name

al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade
 al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya
 Al-Ittihad al-Islamiyya
 All Tripura Tiger Force
 Allied Democratic Forces
 al-Mahdi Army
 Al-Qaeda
 Ansar al-Islam
 Bougainville Revolutionary Army
 Committee for Action for Peace and Democracy
 Communist Party of India-Maoist
 Communist People's Party of the Philippines
 Congres National Pour la Defense du People
 Conseil National Pour la Defense de la Democratie
 Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda
 Devrimci Sol
 Eritrean People's Liberation Front
 Euskadi Ta Askatasuna
 Fatah
 Forcas Armadas de Cabinda
 Forces Nouvelles
 Fretilin
 Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy
 Gerakan Aceh Merdeka
 Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity
 Hezbollah
 Hizb-i Islami-yi Afghanistan
 Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia
 Islamic Courts Union
 Islamic Salvation Army
 Jam'iyyat-i Islami-yi Afghanistan

Junbish-i Milli-yi Islami
Justice and Equality Movement
Kachin Independence Army/Organization
Karen National Union
Khmer People's National Liberation Front
Khmer Rouge
Kosovo Liberation Army
Kurdistan Workers' Party
Lord's Resistance Army
Moro Islamic Liberation Front
Moro National Liberation Front
Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad
Movement for the Liberation of the Congo
Movement of Democratic Forces in the Cascamance
National Democratic Front of Bodoland
National Liberation Army
National Liberation Front of Tripura
National Patriotic Front of Liberia
National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang
National Union for the Total Independence of Angola
Oromo Liberation Front
Palipehutu-FNL
Parbayata Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity/Shanti Bahini
Party of Free Life of Kurdistan
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
People's Liberation Army Manipur
Provisional Irish Republican Army
Rally for Congolese Democracy-ML
Reformation and Jihad Front
Revolutionary Armed Forces
Revolutionary United Front
Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
Sendero Luminoso
Sudan Liberation Movement/Army
Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army
Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq
Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement
Union of Forces for Democracy and Development
United Liberation Front of Asom
United Somali Congress
United Tajik Opposition

*Groups were identified using the UCDP/PRIO data, with group names reflecting those used in that data set.