

Major Research Paper:
Feminist Perspectives in Conflict: Unraveling Motivations Behind Female Combatants
in Insurgent Groups

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“I have learned that a woman can be a fighter, a freedom fighter, a political activist, and that she can fall in love, and be loved, she can be married, have children, be a mother...

Revolution must mean life also; every aspect of life”

– Leila Khaled, Palestinian Political Activist (Viner, 2021)

1. Introduction

“We are not just good fighters, we are feminist revolutionaries,” Sarah says in a meeting with a Canadian civil society delegation in Rojava, Syria in August of 2023 (Neve, 2023). Alongside Roxanna and Khabet, Sarah represented the Kurdish Women’s Protection Unit (YPJ), operating within the Syrian Democratic Force as the official military wing of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Their unit, tasked with overseeing detention camps for mostly foreign Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorists, has garnered international support, including from the United States. When first learning about Sarah and her fellow soldiers, it sounds like an extraordinary feat, however, female insurgency is a longstanding, albeit historically overlooked, reality worldwide (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015). This paper seeks to bring the unseen reality of women's participation to light. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that ideology, personal grievances, and socioeconomic factors explain participation. However, when reading this anecdotal evidence I saw the potential for a more intersectional explanation as to how these factors interact with each other and external factors, and therefore I did more structured research to find targeted evidence.

The twentieth century observed a shift from interstate conflicts to asymmetric and civil wars, shifting who we see fighting in these conflicts. Jessica Trisko Darden et. al. (2019), explain that “the shift from international warfare to asymmetric conflict and civil war has contributed to the blurring of the boundaries between soldiers and civilians (p.2)”. This transition has led to more fluid movement between the roles of civilian and combatant, resulting in unexpected actors and outcomes – particularly in non-military regimes.

Female combatants in irregular armed forces represent a valuable yet under-researched area. This paper proposes an evidence map to bridge the gap, establishing a foundation for understanding what leads to women’s participation. By identifying existing research and unanswered questions, it aims to inform future studies and potential policy development. This preliminary step is crucial before formulating concrete theories or policies

regarding irregular armed groups. This evidence map will provide insights into the composition of these groups and the factors driving women's participation, laying the groundwork for future exploration and analysis. This paper can be considered a first step, or pre-research, to let us know what questions we should even be asking as a starting point.

Methodology

The primary issue with this research area is that there are insufficient sources to address questions about women's participation. With the help of our research librarian, different databases available through the university's library were searched to pull sources which then were combed through and categorized. Various subjects and keywords were used relating to conflict, irregular armed groups, women, and participation in the PAIS database (Appendix A).

This search yielded 2,400 results in PAIS. The results were then filtered for peer-reviewed journal articles written in English between the years of 2014 and 2024. Results were then filtered again to exclude healthcare, the labour force, or mentions of education as these subjects fell too far outside of the scope. This narrowed the search to 1,400 sources. As the pool could not be narrowed down further, a manual review and selection of articles which had any mention of war, terrorists, rebel groups, etc., in the title or abstract took place. This manual selection yielded 58 sources from the PAIS database. There were limitations as a result of the filtering ability of the tools, which will be elaborated upon within Chapter 9. Once sources were compiled, the next steps were to codify them and categorize them based on whether motivations are mentioned at all. 13 sources from the databases made mention of motivation or context as a means behind participation. The sources were then categorized based on motivation, contexts, and other relevant information (Appendix B).

To further strengthen the research, I sought out additional anecdotal resources to provide background context such as specific groups and conflicts to complement the targeted

evidence found. What these specific cases tell us can then be applied more broadly across other groups in the region or the same cultural makeup. It will also take into account the fact that the date range of the database search may have hindered which conflicts or groups were discussed.

Through data and source collection, this paper will seek to better explain the participation of women by analyzing variables that contribute to higher levels of engagement. First, it will examine specific motivations, encompassing individual, political, and social aspects, to understand what drives women to join armed groups. Moving beyond motivations, the study will explore the contextual factors of conflict and organizations that allow women to participate in these groups. This includes regional differences, insurgency dynamics, and cultural and religious influences. Looking at these contexts will lead to a discussion of the diverse roles women assume within insurgencies, emphasizing the significance of support roles alongside combat positions. Looking at these different variants will give the reader a strong image of what it looks like for women to be recruited into and then their roles within fighting groups.

The latter part of this paper will shift the focus from specific conflict to exploring future research directions. It will examine the role of feminism in understanding the phenomenon of women combatants, acknowledging differing perspectives within feminist discourse. Additionally, it will address the methodological challenges of studying female combatants, and how agency and autonomy influence their decision to participate. Central to this paper, although perhaps not explicitly stated, is the agency of women and the lack of recognition of this agency by authors, academics, and society. The discussion will also touch on the evolving landscape of non-state conflicts and its implications for women's participation, reflecting on changes in the perception of civilian and combatant roles. Finally,

the paper will summarize identified research gaps, providing insights into the current state of research and directions for further study.

Why Study Women Combatants?

For a long time, women were not even found in regular armed forces. For example, in Canada, women were scarcely found outside of nurturing roles, until 1989 when they were finally able to enlist beyond Nursing Sisters into combat roles (Government of Canada, 2023). Despite the lack of visibility in fighting roles – being a woman, and gender more broadly has always played an important role in conflicts. Berko and Erez (2007) explain that gender identity has long been an organizing basis for movements against “perceived oppression, and struggles to preserve autonomy, gain independence, resist occupation, or oppose globalization (p.494)”. These gender structures have also been used to mobilize individuals and achieve aims (Berko & Erez, 2007). So, women have always occupied this space, it merely has been grossly unrecognized and underreported.

It is important to understand the environment of conflicts in order to properly address resolving and preventing them from occurring in the future. In doing so, we must fully understand what causes conflict, and which actors are present. This paper will primarily focus on addressing the latter of these. Further, as conflicts are fought by individuals, it is crucial to understand who individual actors are and why they choose, or are coerced, into fighting. There has certainly been an increase in research surrounding rebellion groups in recent decades. However, gaps persist in literature that looks at women in conflicts and specifically as actors in these rebellion groups. Women are becoming more active agents of warfare, but the research is simply not keeping up.

Defining Conflict

Before delving further into this paper, clarifying key concepts is essential. Political violence, which is researched across disciplines, requires shared understanding between the author and the reader. A civil war, also referred to as an internal or intrastate war is fought between domestic actors within a state with various aims from social change to the creation of a new government, and is often fought between government and non-state actors (Kalyvas, 2019). These conflicts are most prevalent today, with 83 of 182 conflicts in 2022 categorized as non-state violence (Department of Peace and Conflict Research, 2022). Mass protests or rebellions, typically peaceful expressions of opposition, occasionally escalate into violence, such as riots or revolutions (Kalyvas, 2019). For instance, the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia catalyzed the Arab Spring in 2011. The final conflict type, and arguably the most broadly encompassing is terrorism. Most definitions agree that terrorism is violence executed by non-state actors to cause intimidation beyond the immediate victims (Kalyvas, 2019). There is an inherent political end to the means. Given its political nature, states may claim groups in opposition as terrorist groups, so we must be careful with making any sweeping assumptions that a terrorist group equals the enemy.

Who fights in these conflicts? Conflict participants include state actors and various groups interchangeably termed insurgents, paramilitaries, rebels, guerrillas, or militias. As such, the terms for these irregular armed forces will be used interchangeably unless in the instance where a case-specific term is used.

Defining Islam

The dataset primarily focuses on Islamist terrorist groups due to search parameters and the prevalence of Islamist organizations among designated terrorist groups. As such, it is important from the outset to be clear in the distinction between Islam as a religion and as an ideology, especially because few of the authors make this distinction themselves. Further, it is

important to distinguish between the terms Islamic and Islamist. Islam is a religion, but it is also a religious-based ideology. Islam, traditionally understood as a religion emphasizing unity, is based on texts like the Qur'an which outlines that the whole universe is fundamentally an interrelated reality created by One God (Wilkinson, 2018). Islamism, on the other hand, is the ideological adoption of Islam, and some extreme interpretations of this ideology advocate for the establishment of an Islamic State by overthrowing the existing world order (Wilkinson, 2018). For this paper, an Islamist refers to someone practicing Islamism, often holding a fundamentalist view of Islam and non-belief (Wilkinson, 2018). While there are non-violent Islamists, in the context of this topic and paper, the term Islamist is used to describe violent extremists or those who make up extremist groups.

2. Bridging the Knowledge Gap

Current Gaps between Women and Perpetrator

Alexis Henshaw (2015) highlights the limited scope of existing research on women in insurgencies, mostly focusing on individual cases or regional comparisons. Consequently, there is a scarce number of cross-national works on the matter. This paper aims to identify themes and gaps in current research to guide further inquiries that seek to explain the participation of women. Presently, most research agrees that the participation of women in groups can be categorized based on one of three motivators: 1) ideology; 2) personal grievances; and/or 3) socioeconomic factors (Asal, 2020; Eager, 2010; Amusan, 2019). However, these conclusions stem mainly from individual cases, making it difficult to generalize. For example, in the war between Russia and Chechnya, Russia dehumanized Chechens to justify their violence against the population (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015). In response to this, many Chechen women took up arms in untraditional ways. Chechen female suicide bombers were then labelled 'Black Widows' in an attempt to explain that women

carried out violent acts to avenge the loss of the men in their lives, and only in that instance (Struckman, 2010). These single case studies, though useful to help better understand what circumstances lead women to fight, fail to fully address the whole picture. Many depictions of the case of Chechen female suicide bombers fail to acknowledge the influence of Islamist terrorism combined with the cultural “othering” of women and girls who were deemed unsuitable for marriage after being victims of Russian attacks and rape, culminating in the voluntary and involuntary participation of women in these roles (Bloom, 2012). Focusing on specific contexts or motivators across conflicts further limits generalizability. Instead, this paper shows the strength of a holistic approach, considering various necessary but insufficient determinants like geography, religion, and culture, to understand women’s participation fully. These determinants need to exist for factors like political or individual motivations to take place. This approach is largely amiss in the research so far.

Women Beyond Mothers, Daughters, and Sisters

The traditional idea that women are peaceful and nurturing, or innocent beings that must be saved has caused a significant lack of recognition of women as actors of warfare. Current research tends to either victimize or exemplify women who act outside of the expected social norm. The Black Widow label was previously mentioned, but this has been done by scholars who have described women as fitting into categories of mother, monster, or whore (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015). Instead, this paper will argue that the motivations behind women joining these groups are not so different than that of their male counterparts, generally speaking. Women are not necessarily more nurturing by nature, nor are they incapable of being motivated by more “masculine” desires like power, for example. Women have agency and use this agency to act in numerous roles in various contexts. And by acting in roles that may be outside of the traditional norm, that does not make them less of a woman, or bad at being a woman.

Additional Gaps that Persist: Invisible Adjectives and Organizational Makeup

Beyond providing a foundation for further research and closing the gap between women and violent acts, there are a few smaller objectives within this paper. The first is to move away from seeing combatants or soldiers or fighters as being synonymous with man. The second is to better understand these groups by fully grasping their demographic. By working towards these smaller objectives, it will help to better understand the positioning of female combatants alongside their male equivalents and within the groups in which they fight.

Men as Synonymous to Soldier

When considering terrorists, guerrilla fighters, or rebels, the default perception includes an invisible adjective: “man”. This stems from entrenched gender norms portraying men as perpetrators of violence and women as victims. Trisko Darden, et. al. (2019) explains that failing to acknowledge that combat is not always synonymous with men also stems from the challenges of differentiating between civilians and combatants in conflict environments. Today’s conflicts blur traditional lines, prompting a re-evaluation of who qualifies as a fighter. No longer are wars fought on faraway frontlines with images of doting women sending off their husbands and sons. The new reality is that conflicts, especially irregular conflicts, take place in front yards - effectively changing how civilians and combatants interact with the violence. Feminist movements and evolving conflict dynamics have led to increased recognition of women as combatants, yet their portrayal often minimizes their agency or emphasizes their exceptionalism or deviance from gender norms (Trisko Darden et al., 2019). Reframing the notion of a “soldier” to include women is essential; their invisibility perpetuates their marginalization. By reviewing existing evidence on female combatants, we can bring them to the conversation and begin to shift the dialogue. Simply being visible is a strong start to removing the invisible adjective that persists.

Group Structures and Ideology

The organizational makeup of insurgent groups is an important determinant in how they achieve their objectives as well as how they recruit participants. Instead of focusing on the differences between motivations for men and women to join groups, the literature is beginning to suggest that greater importance should be given to the social conditions of the groups involved. Organizations play an important role in whether or not women are inclined to participate in conflict, as they can choose who they allow to join. For example, although Islamic tradition places women strictly in the private sphere of society, ISIS has strategically used women to entice other female recruits, especially Western women, into jihad by creating an illusion of a lucrative life under Islamic Law (Makanda et al., 2018). Additionally, research has shown that the ideological framework, region, and who they are trying to garner support from play a role in whether or not groups have higher levels of women in combat roles. Asal & Jadoon (2020) explains that various factors might lend to increased participation from women in groups including ideology, age, and size of the organization. These elements can also determine which roles women hold, which will be discussed further below.

3. Sources Collected

Based on the search strategy outlined in the methodology section of Chapter 1, we included 13 studies as a basis for this evidence map. These sources proved useful in identifying gaps in existing research on explaining women's participation. Appendix B provides a visual representation of the evidence gap map that this section will briefly outline, and Appendix C has a full list of titles.

Joseph Makanda, Emmanuel Matambo, and Vumile Mncibi (2018) explored the multidimensional nature of women's participation in the Syrian War. They highlighted the subversive role of women that is traditionally adopted in Islamic terrorist groups, such as

providing food and medical care that only saw them as indirect participants in conflict (Makanda et.al., 2018). Additionally, they outlined the concept of jihad feminism, bringing forward the notion that ideology is an important motivating factor, although perhaps not in the Western interpretation of certain ideologies (Makanda et.al., 2018). They concluded that the chaotic environment created by the outbreak of war allowed ISIS to adapt its strategy to include women in its ranks (Makanda et.al., 2018). Although these authors highlighted recruitment efforts that came out of this adoption of jihadi feminism, particularly abroad, it does not consider broader factors such as the presence of the opposing force being an egalitarian group (Makanda et.al., 2018). The presence of the PKK in contrast to ISIS in Syria especially may have provided an important conflict context that allowed ISIS to mirror the group structure as an offensive or defensive tactic.

Elife Krasniqi's (2021) article about women in Kosovo between 1970 and 1990 looked at the political participation of women, so it was not extremely relevant to the evidence map. However, a former member of an armed insurgent group was interviewed and it provided useful context detailing how women experience oppression for being women and for being part of the ethnic minority (Krasniqi, 2021). Similarly, Elizabeth Pearson's (2016) article was not pertinent to the knowledge base as it was looking at the case of an individual as opposed to a group. As such, it did provide useful context for future considerations on how recruitment is going to continue playing out virtually.

Farahnaz Ispahani's (2016) article was important because it was the first indicator that the divide in participation might not be on the gender binary, but more so related to national or other relevant identities. They explained that women have similar motivations to participate to men, and many were dissatisfied with the Western idea of feminism, that it was not intersectional to include the religious roles that they want to uphold (Ispahani, 2016).

The article by Uzi Ben-Shalom et. al. (2023) looks specifically at the case of Palestine, which was useful in rooting theoretical conceptions in a real-world scenario. It was an interview-based article that provided a breakdown of what women involved in the intifada claimed their motivations to be, which helped situate what motivations I would be looking at (Ben-Shalom, 2023). This article was more focused on individual actors, who for the most part did not have ties to a group or organization, so it was not extremely relevant to the research question posed in this paper (Ben-Shalom, 2023).

The article by Oluwatoyin O. Oluwaniyi (2021) looks at women's participation in Boko Haram. This is one of two articles that looked at groups operating in Africa, and as the title suggested, it addresses specifically the recruitment and roles of women (Oluwaniyi, 2021). The author highlights that there is an absence of studies that show the intersection of motivating factors (Oluwaniyi, 2021, 455). Additionally, they are interested in the victim perpetrator continuum, with a focus on women who are first victims and then voluntary participants so it does not fully address the explanation of voluntary participation in a way that is generalizable (Oluwaniyi, 2021). It does show though how roles change, not only from support to combatant but also from unwilling to willing participant for various reasons (including Stockholm Syndrome) (Oluwaniyi, 2021). Clémence Pinaud's (2015) article was the second that focused on a group in Africa, describing the ideological context of the country and the group. It looked at the absence of women in ideological texts and highlighted their participation in supportive roles (Pinaud, 2015).

Rafia Zakaria's (2021) article on the redefinition of the role of women in jihadi groups focuses on recruitment efforts being redesigned to centre women. It is a good example of how groups adapt when needed but is narrow in its explanation of motivation to participate (Zakaria, 2021).

The article by Reed Wood and Jakana Thomas (2017) was an in-depth look at the ideologies involved in women's participation from the group's perspective. It was useful to compare Islamist and leftist groups, as well as other identifying factors of an organization and how it impacts the participation of women (Wood & Thomas, 2017). Although it might have been beneficial to incorporate a more multidimensional approach by including other factors beyond ideology, it was the article that was most directly related to the research question of this paper.

Other than Wood and Thomas's article, Mia Bloom's (2012) book was perhaps the most comprehensive in addressing the research question of why women participate. This book looked at various conflict contexts from Chechnya and Palestine to Northern Ireland and Indonesia (Bloom, 2012). Through anecdotal accounts, the author compared various factors such as oppression, ideology, and societal and cultural standards to explain how women end up in various groups (Bloom, 2012). It even addressed the intersection between ideologies and culture through the case of the Jemaah Islamiyah (Bloom, 2012). This book is an outlier as it provides the most holistic approach to the phenomenon of women in terrorist groups (Bloom, 2012). The fact that this is one of the only sources found that address this topic in this manner highlights that more pieces like this must be done.

Victor Asal and Amira Jadoon (2020) explored various explanations for participation, from the perspective of a supply and demand structure. They looked at the environmental factors that make women more likely to join and what makes some insurgent groups more likely to employ female combatants (Asal & Jadoon, 2020). They attributed socioeconomic factors to the former and strategic advantage for the latter. They also highlighted the challenges of measuring motivations as they are case-by-case and looked at the roles of women within groups (Asal & Jadoon, 2020).

The remaining articles share similar characteristics, looking at a specific component that contributes to participation in a specific context. Anat Berko and Edna Erez (2007) looked at Palestine and the intersection of ideology and religion, while Jocelyne Viterna (2013) looked at women in El Salvador and how their participation during times of conflict translates to post-conflict political engagement.

4. Motivating Factors

One of the primary determinants of the participation of women in irregular armed forces is whether or not they, as the actors, feel motivated to join. Early literature on women's participation in violent conflict presented two perspectives on this motivation. One view portrayed women as lacking agency, coerced into violence by male-dominated leadership, exemplified by the Chechen "Black Widows" who exhibited signs of Stockholm syndrome during the Dubrovka theatre hostage crisis (Bloom, 2012). This viewpoint positions women as not having agency, or simply being bodies to be used by those in charge, who are majority of the time men. Alternatively, if women's agency is recognized, it is done by linking participation to retaliatory actions against harm inflicted on male relatives. Indeed, while revenge for a son, husband, or father, is a valid motivating factor to take up arms, and has been shown as being at least one of many motivating factors, it is not the sole reason women choose to join a non-state group.

Despite this earlier branch of research that positions women's motivations to participate in relation to the men in their lives, women engage in political violence for a variety of reasons, independent of their gender identity. These reasons include but are not limited to strategy, ideological commitments, and personal or community grievances. Gentry and Sjoberg explain, "women, like men, sometimes see violence as the best means to their political ends. Women, like men, sometimes commit senseless and heinous acts out of deprivation of some other socio-economic motivation (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015, 3)."

Motivations are complex, varied, and context-dependent, making quantification challenging. Over half of the sources from the selected dataset mentioned at least one if not multiple motivating factors, be it political, individual, social, or a combination of the three. This diversity underscores the need to avoid oversimplified narratives and recognize the multifaceted nature of women's engagement in political violence.

Individual

The first explanation of women's participation can be categorized as individual motivation, or the personal reasons a woman chooses to join insurgent groups. This can include personal grievances associated with the men in their lives but also includes socioeconomic factors such as employment opportunities, personal security against state repression, and empowerment.

Individual motivations like revenge, grievances, and security concerns are all predictors for participation in insurgent groups, regardless of gender. This indicates the first speed bump when looking at research on what specifically motivates women. Sources cite ideological beliefs, or the loss of a family member, to fight for a bigger cause, or fear for their security as reasons why women might choose to engage in illicit violence. Helplessness, or the feeling of abandonment can be a strong motivator, although it does not act on its own. A woman who fought with Hamas explains her motivations for joining were that, "the Israelis were killing us like rats and nobody was doing anything, not the Arabs, nobody. And I thought: No one will help us. I must make these dogs know how we feel. Even bullets that miss make noise (Bloom, 2012, 130)". Contrasting the earlier research based on what causes women's participation, the sources from the dataset have shown that women have a broad range of reasons for wanting to join an insurgent. Additionally, these motivations transgress gender binaries so time would be better spent exploring how the sources highlighted women-specific individual motivations.

Socioeconomic factors play a large role in why some women choose to participate in insurgency. Asal & Jadoon (2020) explains that high levels of unemployment in the female labour force lead to a higher likelihood of women joining insurgent groups. Limited legal job prospects lead women to seek alternative employment avenues, such as insurgent groups, that may offer education opportunities and economic security. In patriarchal societies that may be unturned due to conflict, women often become the sole breadwinners in a society that does not recognize them as taking up space in public. This increases the allure of economic stability offered by insurgencies that may outweigh the opportunity costs of traditional employment.

Another economic consideration in joining an insurgent group is the access to resources or promises thereof. The actual or promise of financial compensation for participation can act as a way to transform the economic lives of women (Oluwaniyi, 2021). For example, in Nigeria, a case study was done on women who voluntarily rejoined Boko Haram after going through the disengagement process. This study indicated that women returned to Boko Haram due to poverty, social marginalization, and a lack of socio-economy opportunities which awaited them once they reintegrated into society (Oluwaniyi, 2021). In many cases, financial compensation, or the booty of war, is simply an empty promise as part of the recruitment process, but it still serves as reasoning - at least alongside additional motivations - to push women to join insurgent groups. Nonetheless, women seek out this promise, empty or not, if there is no other option.

Political

“Like men, women are often motivated to engage in high-risk collective action by their commitment to political or social causes (Zakaria, 2017, 32)”. Many sources highlight ideological or political motivators as key factors in explaining women’s participation in insurgencies, although searching for political motivations can sometimes yield papers on

political participation instead (i.e. political leaders, involvement in the democratic process, etc). Although some women were motivated at least in part by politics, there is a connection to draw between political violence and political participation, such as a woman who was part of the IRA and then went on to play a role in Sinn Fein after the peace agreements in the 1990s.

Conflict can often be a vehicle for women's empowerment in economic, political, and societal spaces. Yadav (2021) suggests that the absence of men in families during conflict, along with increased exposure to the public sphere, contributes to this empowerment. Asal and Jadoon (2020) concurs, noting that involvement in violent organizations offers women freedom and equality they might not otherwise experience, especially in patriarchal societies. For example, Palestinian women participated in terrorism as a means to rebel against their patriarchal society (Asal & Jadoon, 2020). When governments are enforcing societal norms that oppress women, it makes sense that women would turn to those fighting against these oppressive forces as a way to achieve freedom, or at the very least freedom from inequality.

Additionally, there is an ongoing discourse on the various theoretical approaches to the understanding of women combatants, with feminist perspectives offering a more comprehensive and inclusive framework to challenge harmful stereotypes that affect both men and women. Trisko Darden et. al. (2019) critique the oversimplified paradigm of war, highlighting that "soldiers and policymakers learn to see young men as enemies by default while at the same time creating a blind spot regarding the role of women in perpetrating violence (p.2)." Oluwaniyi (2021) argues against the binary view of violence, emphasizing that both men and women can be perpetrators and victims. This binary view of violence, but more specifically terrorism and insurgency is harmful to everyone involved.

Furthermore, it is worth exploring how wartime participation can reshape women's political engagement and image. Using the case of the FMLN in El Salvador, Viterna (2013)

observes varied post-conflict outcomes: some women who were involved continued engaging in politics and advocacy for women while others returned to their homes where they viewed their duty lied. The latter of the two reinforces the notion that women acting in combat roles are acting outside of their socially bound roles, which will be discussed in more detail below. Specifically, concerning political participation, Viterna (2013) found that warfare and the genderbending that often goes with it allows women to see themselves as political entities for the first time, opening them up to recognizing and being less likely to put up with sexism that exists in revolutionary movements. After the conflict, research has found that women who participated in wartime activities in turn had higher levels of participation in the paid labour force, as well as greater levels of self-confidence and political power (Viterna, 2013). While women may have political motivations in joining a group, there is no strong evidence that their political position changes in society post-conflict, or that they can see their political aims achieved once in the group.

Social

Men and women share individual and, to a lesser extent, political motivations for joining insurgent groups. However, the primary divergence lies in social motivations. Women, who are influenced by their societal roles, are more swayed by social and community factors when deciding to join. For instance, they may be more inclined to join if someone from their social circle does. This susceptibility is exploited as a means of recruitment, increasingly through social media as it has resulted in more global communities, which will be explored further below. Additionally, societal norms and family support, whether reinforcing or abandoning these structures, influence women's decisions to become combatants. Participation may also be seen as liberation from ordinary life, as was the case for middle-class girls in Pakistan (Zakaria, 2017). This section will illustrate how various social considerations impact radicalization through a few examples.

For some who participate in jihadi groups, they are driven by the want to marry a “true” Muslim, which in combination with bonds had with other women who have joined as well as the doctrinal belief in a duty to provide support for their definition of jihad acts as a powerful means for participation (Ispahani, 2016). Conversely, marriage has been used as a recruitment tool to recruit women into jihad groups, especially ISIS and Al-Qaeda - but this will be discussed further in the section on organizational contexts. Additionally, within conservative societies, especially those which are influenced by Islam, it is believed, or people are told, that if you sacrifice your life in the name of Allah and kill some non-believers, you would go straight to heaven regardless of your previous sins (Bloom, 2012). This was an important deciding factor for many Chechen girls and women who were previously raped by Russians and in turn, seen as being “wasted” and could never be married within their society. A life outside of the expected societal norm was so grim that many concluded that they might as well die, especially if they were to convert to Islam, then they would at least make it to heaven (Bloom, 2012). This was the case of at least one of the women involved in the hostage-taking in Moscow, as one of the hostage-takers confided to the hostages that she was infertile which caused her to be heartbroken and dishonoured by her first husband (Bloom, 2012). Bloom (2012) explains that through her despair she was connected with the Islamists who had come to Chechnya, and later her second husband who was a jihadi warrior. When you have been told your entire life to remain pure until marriage, and that rearing children is your ultimate purpose, this outlook being shattered even if by measures beyond your control can lead to desperate acts including radicalization.

In the case of women involved in the Provisional Irish Republican Army (Provos), many grew up as the minority Catholic in Belfast and Derry, Northern Ireland. Being raised in hostile environments where you are face to face with the harsh realities of conflict, from hearing those around you speak about the “other” to only being allowed on certain streets for

fear of safety, to eventually throwing stones at Loyalist soldiers because that's what the other kids were doing, these all contribute to radicalization (Bloom, 2012). This type of radicalization is not the result of one specific traumatic event but rather a series of continuous micro-events that shape the socialization process. The Northern Ireland conflict is used as an example here but this is the case for many groups that have been a part of longstanding tensions. The conflict becomes part of society. To a point where it is hard to pinpoint this social experience as a specific motivation. For many, like Dolours and Marian Price, it was just a statement of fact that they would join the Provos one day, regardless of their gender (Keefe, 2018). They saw family members be involved and saw what the others were doing to their city, so they acted how everyone else acted.

Motivations are crucial, particularly in explaining the voluntary participation of women in organizations. However, apart from gender-specific barriers to societal entry, motivations largely mirror those of men. While existing research supports this, there remains a gap in understanding due to the assumption that everyone enters these groups in the same way and for the same reasons. But that negates a larger picture. Motivations exist because of the contexts in which the conflicts, and women, exist. A woman is motivated to change her positioning in society because somewhere at some point, someone told her that she could, and gave her the power to do something about it. Therefore, it's vital to consider the complex factors surrounding their decision to participate, beyond mere gender distinctions.

5. Contextual Factors

Contextual factors create space for motivations to materialize. In the absence of additional contexts, certain motivations, such as personal grievances or political empowerment, may not even arise. For example, women would not feel compelled to fight to avenge the death of a family member if the family member had not been killed in the first place fighting against an oppressive regime. Similarly, women would not have to seek

alternative income sources if they had equal economic opportunities. While many sources noted specific motivations case by case, they often overlook or disregard that there are other pre-existing factors determining why women choose, or are forced, to take up arms.

Consider Kurdish women, whose ideological motivation for feminism stems from living in a society valuing gender equality. For the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has had women involved in various roles for decades, Kurdish freedom hinges on overcoming the patriarchal system (Tank, 2017). This fundamental tenant provides the backdrop through which women feel empowered to join and develop motivations of their own. However, not all groups share this ethos. The PKK's stance demonstrates how contextual factors shape women's willingness or ability to join insurgencies.

In their article, "When women fight: unemployment, territorial control and the prevalence of female combatants in insurgent organizations", Asal and Jadoon (2020) pose two questions to address contextual factors. These questions can serve as a stepping stone to begin understanding the interplay between societal, economic, and organizational dynamics that influence women's involvement in insurgencies. They inquire about environmental conditions shaping women's inclination to join insurgencies and factors making certain organizations more prone to employing female combatants (Asal & Jadoon, 2020). This prompts a deeper understanding of societal, economic, and organizational dynamics influencing women's involvement from the individual as well as the organizational perspectives.

Numerous authors, among them Asal and Wood, contend that the majority of insurgent groups recruit women, or use them beyond their traditional roles, out of necessity, raising the question of why it becomes imperative to involve women, even if they do not fit the traditional soldier mold. Understanding this requires examining the broader context of conflicts and the environments in which all actors operate. By examining the environments

that all of these actors exist in, we can better grasp why insurgent groups feel compelled to include women, even if they do not fit the traditional mold of a fighter.

Conflict context

In the early 2000s, the rise of nationalism in Palestinian society led to a redefinition of women's roles, urging them to participate more actively in collective life as “national actors: mothers, educators, workers, and even fighters (Berko & Erez, 2007, p.494).” This departure from women's confinement to the private sphere posed a challenge to Islamic tradition which was largely adhered to by Palestinian resistance fighters. Moreover, national movements encouraged women to voice their grievances within culturally acceptable boundaries. This created a paradox for women: while urged to articulate their struggle as part of the resistance, they were also expected to uphold traditional femininity within the patriarchal society as dictated by Arab and Islamic culture (Berko & Erez, 2007). The tension arising from this situation underscores the dilemma faced by women in conflict environments, where they navigate opportunities to redefine societal roles while navigating the constraints of traditional values.

Palestine as a Case Study

How do women go from navigating the paradox of societal expectations to assuming active roles, including roles such as suicide bombers? How do they go from being the “mothers, daughters, and sisters of martyrs to being martyrs themselves (Asal & Jadoon, 2020)”? When examining Palestine, a nation grappling with recognition amid enduring Israeli occupation, a number of conflicts and tensions emerge, notably the second intifada in the 2000s in response to ongoing Israeli military presence in Gaza and the West Bank (Johnson & Kuttab, 2001). Political shifts that followed the first intifada paved the way for the second, welcoming an era of instability and a new form of Palestinian political activism that

marginalized segments of society, including women (Johnson & Kuttab, 2001). Concurrently, this period saw political shifts and the rise of a women's movement striving for gender equality that was enshrined in the 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence (Johnson & Kuttab, 2001). Despite this, Palestine's historical instability and post-peace agreement landscape, coupled with a burgeoning women's movement, provided opportunities for insurgent movements to gain momentum and for women to advocate for traditionally male roles.

Indeed, conflicts like those in Palestine offer a glimpse into the breakdown of societal norms, allowing women to participate in 'gender-bending' by assuming roles previously inaccessible to them. The complex and fragile environments of conflicts of this nature provide just enough instability for non-state actors, in the form of resistance groups or terrorist organizations, to gain footing and support and engage in conflict. It is for this reason that the majority of conflicts that exist today are in what the Western worldview calls failed or fragile states. Indeed, most of the sources in the dataset focus on conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe, with only one article out of the 13 looking at a conflict outside of this geographical region. While it is impractical to delve into each conflict individually, major themes or factors present in the sources underscore how conflict serves as a context that explains why women participate in violent groups.

Other Conflict Contexts

In many conflicts in the Middle East since 2010, sparked by the Arab Spring, women have taken more active roles in terrorism compared to their traditionally supportive roles, particularly before September 11, 2001 (Makanda et al., 2018). This shift was especially notable in Syria following the outbreak of civil war in 2012. The chaos of war allowed terrorist organizations in the country, such as ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra, to strategically alter their dynamics by increasing female participation (Makanda et al., 2018). Before this, women

were primarily involved in Kurdish groups such as the PKK and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) of the Syrian Democratic Forces. The incorporation of women into ISIS's activities in Syria allowed for new evasive terrorist tactics, such as infiltrating global networks and using women for propaganda to promote fundamental Islamic principles (Makanda et al., 2018). The disorder caused by civil wars provides opportunities for groups to expand and experiment with recruitment. Moreover, the disruption of everyday life offers women seeking change an opportunity to join groups that may be more receptive due to escalating tensions.

The dataset highlights various specific contexts within conflicts, such as the influx of jihadi fighters and ongoing oppression from patriarchal structures. In Chechnya, Islamic mercenaries integrated into separatist units, offering tactical and ideological support to secular nationalists as new allies and resources (Bloom, 2012). Chechen women, who had been the main victims of atrocities by Russian soldiers, were promised entrance to heaven for their martyrdom - a dire choice for many who felt they had no alternative (Bloom, 2012). Wartime rape, prevalent in Chechnya, further exacerbated the plight of women, perpetrated by both Russian forces and Chechen fighters, leaving them marginalized and often viewing martyrdom as their only recourse (Bloom, 2012). The offences committed against women by both opposing factions left them nowhere to turn, as they were stigmatized and deemed unmarriageable within their culture, often leading them to view martyrdom as their only salvation (Bloom, 2012). This and other forms of indirect coercion are a recruitment tool used by various organizations, a topic that will be discussed further in the subsequent section.

Across conflicts in the dataset, patriarchal structures deeply entrenched within social and political systems are evident. When these structures start to break down whether it be through revolution, a coup, or other forms of disruption, it fosters a chaotic nature where irregular soldiers become strategically viable. This phenomenon is not exclusive to

“non-Western” states; patriarchal systems have also played a significant role in motivating women to join movements like the Provisional Irish Republican Army during Northern Ireland’s Troubles, particularly in the latter half of the 20th century. Mairead Farrell highlights how Catholic women in Northern Ireland faced oppression by the ruling government on two fronts (Bloom, 2012). Religious and gender oppression intersect in many societies, regardless of faith, fueling women’s involvement in conflicts driven by national identity. However, women often face additional barriers due to their gender, even in European societies, where their role in safeguarding identity traditionally remains in the private sphere, supporting men and preserving societal identity.

Organizational Context and Recruitment

Wood and Thomas (2017) argue that ultimately women are only present when the leadership of an organization decides to openly recruit women, emphasizing the role of the organizational structure in explaining participation. Regardless of whether or not women have the desire to join insurgent groups, they cannot unless the group allows them to join. This raises questions about why certain groups opt to recruit women. Most sources in the dataset cite organizational contexts for women’s involvement. Ethno-nationalist groups may assign women to supportive roles, while those with leftist ideologies or greater gender inclusivity are more likely to enlist them as combatants (Asal & Jadoon, 2020). While analyzing each organization’s recruitment motives individually would be inefficient, major themes can illuminate how structure and ideology affect female participation. Existing research primarily focuses on Islamist terrorist groups, with some mention of leftist organizations, thus highlighting trends within these contexts.

Structure and Strategy

Typically, an insurgent group may choose to allow women to be active participants when doing so provides a strategic advantage. They excel at discreet attacks, such as suicide

bombings, due to their nonconforming insurgent profiles and ability to conceal explosives, such as under traditional garments like the Abaya (Oluwaniyi, 2020), or disguised as pregnant stomachs (Bloom, 2012). In Chechnya, women were used as suicide bombers, capitalizing on the focus of Russian troops on men aged 17-40 (Bloom, 2012). Women's inclusion also expands the group's human capital, depleting opponent resources (Asal & Jadoon, 2020). Additionally, desperation drives the strategic deployment of women, as their deployment serves as a last resort as conflicts drag on.

There are strategic benefits to recruiting women fighters beyond combat zones. Their societal roles as peacemakers, mothers, and healers draw significant attention, especially female suicide bombers, who receive more media coverage than males (Oluwaniyi, 2021). This captivates the general public, especially those in Western countries, raising questions about the motives behind women's involvement in such atrocities. What drove her to act in a way that is so outside of her nature? As if we are to know her and her motivations. Consequently, this media attention raises awareness of the causes championed by terrorist groups but also has the potential to garner public sympathy or even support from external governments.

Understanding women's involvement in insurgent groups requires considering the structural characteristics of these organizations. Asal and Jadoon (2020) point to two primary characteristics influencing women's participation: the age and the size of the group. Larger, more established groups with mature organizational structures are more likely to recruit women due to their expanded recruitment pool and greater mobilization capacity (Asal & Jadoon, 2020). As groups age they undergo evolutions that involve updating their tactics to respond either to setbacks or new adversaries (Asal & Jadoon, 2020). In this context, as mentioned above, women can play a beneficial role by serving as unexpected combatants.

Additionally, the nature of the organization, such as its use of guerrilla tactics or territorial control, affects women's integration. Groups engaged in guerrilla warfare, like the Sudan People's Liberation Army, are more likely to use "unconventional" fighters, and rely heavily on women to support their troops (Pinaud, 2015). Conversely, organizations with territorial hold have a greater need for deeper connections within local communities, making women valuable for maintaining social links and facilitating long-term objectives (Asal & Jadoon, 2020). Given that women often serve as the backbone of society, they are valuable for maintaining social links between the organization and the community. While the presence of women fighters is essential for protecting the home base, they also are instrumental in capacity-building processes, which are pivotal for long-term success and eventual post-conflict rebuilding, provided the organization is successful in transitioning governments.

Ideology

Ideology plays a crucial role in shaping the recruitment and participation of women in insurgent groups. The ideology of the state and of the women themselves are important, but this section will speak specifically to how the ideology of the group influences the recruitment and participation of women. Woods and Thomas emphasize that groups' ideologies impact leaders' decisions to recruit women and the willingness of potential recruits to take on traditionally male roles, like combat (2017). However, while ideology is considered, it does not significantly affect the presence of women across different groups. For instance, both Islamic and leftist organizations, such as the PKK in Syria, include women, albeit for different reasons. Kurdish organizations prioritize egalitarianism, while Islamic groups often adapt to external factors or transcend cultural norms to recruit women.

A brief aside is necessary before exploring the varying ideologies of organizations. Woods and Thomas, and many other authors use Islamist ideology as the opposite of leftist ideologies like Marxism or Maoism. However, Islam is not an ideology, it is a religion.

Instead, it should be understood that when referencing Islamist ideological groups, really the authors are referencing ethno-religious and ethno-nationalist groups that exist within countries/societies with a strong Islamic presence. This distinction is critical as barriers to women's participation in these groups can contradict religious teachings and perpetuate Western misconceptions, furthering instances of “othering.” Despite this nuance, the term “Islamist ideology” is consistently used in research. While acknowledging its implications, it remains used in this paper to maintain consistency.

Islamist Groups. “Despite stereotypes about their domesticity and passivity, women are drawn to groups like the Islamic State by many of the same forces as men: adventure, inequality. Alienation, and the pull of the cause (Ispahani, 2016, 102)”. Among the 13 sources in the dataset, six specifically examine Islamist terrorist organizations including ISIS, Al Qaeda and Boko Haram. This is an interesting theme to find because in many instances women are often fighting for regimes that will turn around and remove any rights given to them during the movement once they seize power (Ispahani, 2016). Further, from 1985 to 2010, women in Jihadi groups were responsible for over 230 suicide bombings (Ispahani, 2016). While classical Islamic texts do not explicitly exclude women from jihad, their participation is typically restricted to support roles, barring specific fire circumstances (Wood & Thomas, 2017). Trends related to the role of women across various types of groups will be explored further below. For this current discussion, though, it is important to note that women traditionally adopted supportive roles in Islamist groups, because they wanted to - not because they were forced to.

Many women are drawn to these groups because of their desires to fulfil traditional support roles that are consistent with their religious convictions (Wood & Thomas, 2017). Only in recent decades have women started to take on more active roles, primarily as suicide bombers, in response to their use by secular groups, suggesting a flexible view of women’s

roles (Wood & Thomas, 2017). This perhaps also indicates, unfortunately, that they are seen as disposable, as evidenced by their strategic deployment to evade security scrutiny and free up men for combatant roles. Wood and Thomas (2017) explain that extremely conservative and reactionary ideologies, which seek to restore traditional hierarchies, dissuade leaders of rebel groups from integrating women into combat roles. Although extremely conservative ideologies often resist integrating women into combat roles, groups like ISIS challenge this notion by employing women as combatants, highlighting the need for a comprehensive examination of the issue (Wood & Thomas, 2017). Groups will adapt their ideologies to advance their goals either when the opportunity presents itself strategically or out of necessity, as seen in the case of ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra.

Leftist Groups. While Islamist groups typically assign women to support roles, leftist ideological groups often involve women in active combat positions. For instance, the significant presence of women within Kurdish forces, not just in supportive roles but also as combatants and leaders, challenges the traditional perception of women as victims in male-dominated armed conflicts (Wood & Thomas, 2017). Influenced by Marxist philosophy advocating for class struggle and revolution to liberate oppressed groups, many leftist terrorist organizations, like the PKK, prioritize gender egalitarianism as part of their revolutionary goals (Wood & Thomas, 2017). Many modern leftist groups have adopted gender egalitarian philosophies, both because it aligns with their goals of revolution, and to achieve strategic objectives as mentioned in the previous section. The Communist Party of Nepal, for example, considers women as a basic revolutionary force, while the PKK leader has said on many accounts that freedom and equality of all sections of society are determined by the freedom and equality of women (Wood & Thomas, 2017).

Non-Islamist groups in the dataset often operate in patriarchal societies leading them to adopt ideologies promoting gender equality in opposition to prevailing norms. The

Provisional Irish Republican Army (Provos) can serve as an example as they are a socialist group in which women not only hold equal roles but are at the forefront of the history of the group (Wood & Thomas, 2017). Although some participants may not identify with ideological motivations, the group's overarching cause, centred on self-determination and statehood, aligns with nationalist ideologies (Wood & Thomas, 2017).

Political ideologies are not mutually exclusive and often interact. As mentioned, nationalist ideologies, which will be discussed below, such as ethno-nationalist and separatist movements intersect with both Islamist and leftist ideologies (Wood & Thomas, 2017).

Intersectionality of Environmental Contexts and Ideology

Civil conflicts create a breakdown of societal norms, resulting in a chaotic environment and a conflict-specific context, without which certain motivations like personal grievances or political empowerment might not arise. The organizational structure and strategic outlook of insurgent groups play a crucial role in determining whether women are recruited. As conflicts progress, organizations evolve, altering their structures, recruitment methods, and ideologies to accommodate women in roles previously inaccessible to them. While it is important to consider women's perspectives, understanding the context of conflicts and organizations provides a foundation for examining motivations. However, as it was discussed, motivations do not vary drastically between men and women, and what has been found is that ideology, while instrumental in how women are part of the groups, does not see any large variance in its impact on participation. The reality, as Wood & Thomas (2017) explain, is that women are present only when a group's leadership makes the categorical decision to openly recruit women. Instead, researchers should look at the context alongside motivations to accept roles when they become available to understand how the former creates space for the latter to exist.

6. Cross-Cultural Variations

Variations in culture and religion can help explain the participation of women as active combatants in insurgent groups. These influences may be implied but not explicitly stated in the research. Surprisingly, the majority of sources in the dataset focus on groups influenced by Islam, despite the traditional dominance of women in behind-the-scenes roles in Islamic culture. This raises questions as to whether in the context of conflict, the integrity of a religious backing breaks down, or how important is religion when measured against achieving political aims. Further, how do existing cultural norms determine how similar-goal groups organize differently based on their cultural context? Although authors have generally overlooked these specific questions, they are beginning to draw interesting connections between culture, religion, and women's participation in terrorist organizations.

Cultural Influences

Cultural influences shape recruitment and participation in insurgent groups, often reflecting gender hierarchies prevalent in groups across physical borders. Leila Khaled, who was quoted at the outset of this paper, explained her experience in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine as follows: "PFLP women are members the same as men. They have the same rights and the same duties. But, in fact, they are not [the same]. There is still all this inheritance of old traditions and the culture of our society, affecting the people, even in our organizations. But when... the majority [of] men... see that some of the women are... determined and [the women] do their work... with the same efficiency as men [then they women] are looked upon as equal to men. If not... women always come second" (Gentry, 2011, p.124). Many organizations discussed throughout this paper exist in cultures in which a gender hierarchy exists, placing women below men in all aspects of life, except perhaps that of childrearing. Indeed, it is by challenging this cultural norm, that so many groups can gain a strategic advantage. However, as was discussed when looking at the ideology of groups, the

relationship of women and participation in terrorist organizations transcends political, cultural, and even religious norms. Instead, much like previous themes, the difference that emerges is whether or not women are included at the genesis of the group and to what extent they are allowed to participate.

Despite stereotypes placing women in passive roles, they have long been involved in terrorist activities, drawn to groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS for similar reasons as men, often viewing their roles as complementary rather than equal (Ispahani, 2016). The various roles held by women will be discussed further in the following section, but it will be seen that many roles are culturally rooted, especially in more conservative organizations. Culture also plays a role in the external and internal legitimacy of women fighters. As Gentry & Sjoberg (2015) explain, even if women join groups like al-Qaeda on their own accord, their agency is denied because of their religious or cultural background. Additionally, it was already discussed earlier that many of the Chechen suicide bombers were coerced into participation because they were deemed to no longer be culturally pure, and saw no other alternative beyond sacrificing themselves in the name of a greater cause.

Jemaah Islamiyah as a Case Study

Islamist groups, like Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia, demonstrate adaptability to cultural contexts, reflecting the country's existing social norms where upper-class and high-caste Indonesian women were able to maintain their public roles even after Islam's arrival (Bloom, 2012). This resulted in the JI being more woman-friendly than its counterparts in the Arab world and South Asia. JI has largely been successful in maintaining its strength in the region, with its nexus expanding throughout Southeast Asia to the Philippines and Malaysia, which can be attributed to its dependence on strong kinship and familial bonds (Bloom, 2012). Bloom (2012) explains that marriage alliances act as the glue holding the organization together and that women are fundamental in both the ideology and

the children of succeeding generations. Women in JI primarily assume supportive roles, upholding cultural aspects of Islamic ideology, unlike their counterparts in Palestinian and Chechen conflicts where women are fighting against oppressive states (Bloom, 2012). Unlike Indonesian women who face fewer government restrictions, Palestinian and Chechen women must contend with repressive measures, shaping their roles differently within conflicts (Bloom, 2012). The dataset emphasizes how Muslim culture influences women's roles within these groups, but it is equally important to consider societal culture outside of the organization, which also affects participation. This can help to show what part of the organization creates the draw for women. The attraction could be the opportunity to "try on" roles otherwise not available to women in everyday society, or it could be the opportunity to use the skills they have but apply them to further a cause that is more aligned with their ideals.

Religious Contexts

Insurgent groups often blur the lines between culture, religion, and ideology, making it difficult to separate. In many cases, especially for ethno-religious groups, religion is the cultural identity and the ideological foundation. For instance, Islam can function as both a religion and ideology, shaping societal norms and guiding the beliefs of radical groups. Within these groups, religion influences political, social, and economic structures. Groups like ISIS, which are fundamentalist religious groups, seek to establish an Islamic state governed by their interpretation of Islamic law and justify violence as a means to achieve this goal.

Research indicates that religion is primarily an important influence for Islamic groups, however, its impact extends to other ethno-religious and extremist groups as well. While religion often plays a central role in recruitment, it is not always as rigid as presumed. For example, there has been a notable shift in women's jihad in conservative Islamic societies

from passive facilitators to active operatives (Asal & Jadoon, 2020). In these groups, it can be seen how religious documents are interpreted and then adapted to help groups achieve their objectives. In the Islamist worldview, women's role is clearly defined in the Qur'an and the Hadith. The worldview, as interpreted by many states and groups in the Arab world, sees the wide embrace of patriarchy, which leads to women's acceptance of the gender roles assigned to them (Isapani, 2016). While many women are drawn to Islamist groups for similar reasons to men, they often adopt roles aligned with traditional norms, such as providing support to men, and having children (particularly boys) to breed the future generations of the jihad, because they are consistent with their religious convictions (Wood & Thomas, 2017). Not every woman identifies as a feminist seeking gender equality, which can explain their support for groups aiming to uphold traditional societal structures, despite the potential impact on women.

More broadly speaking, religion may influence women to join an organization because it aligns with their beliefs or their ingrained notions of societal norms. Women who grew up Catholic in Northern Ireland were more likely to join the IRA because they identified with the cause and shared the plight that the members highlighted. Instead, religion can provide the backing for ideological movements. In the case of Hamas, suicide operations were not carried out because of religious reasons, but because the religion reinforced the nationalist movement that was at hand (Bloom, 2012). Religion is used to achieve an end. It is political.

Religion can provide an organization with a set of beliefs to situate its central mission around. However, it is not always as rigid of a contributing factor as initially thought, at least not on its own. Instead, research has shown that more often groups change their interpretations of religion to recruit women into unconventional roles as strategy necessitates.

This is much the same for cultural influences and highlights again why each contributing factor cannot be explored in isolation from each other.

7. Roles

The primary purpose of this paper is to highlight gaps in the explanation of why women participate in irregular armed forces, with a specific interest in violent roles. However, it is crucial to recognize the diverse roles women undertake within insurgent groups, all vital for achieving group objectives. This section delves into the array of roles women undertake as outlined by the sources in the dataset and examines how traditional gender norms are challenged or reinforced during times of conflict. Asal and Jadoon's (2020) study spanning 72 armed conflict groups revealed that while 31.9% of women engaged in combat roles, a majority (58.3%) served in noncombatant roles, with 26.4% in leadership positions. This aligns with anecdotal evidence present in the rest of the dataset, especially regarding more conservative Islamist groups, where many women assume supportive roles. While the primary aim of this paper was to examine women's involvement in perpetrating violence, it is crucial to acknowledge that noncombatant roles, as well as logistical and supportive roles, are equally important in achieving the objectives of the group. Furthermore, not everyone desires direct engagement in combat, and their contributions should not be diminished simply because they adhere to more traditionally gendered roles.

Similar to the historical exclusion of women from combat roles in conventional warfare, the involvement of women in unconventional roles has undergone a transformation. Initially tasked with logistical duties like intelligence gathering and recruitment, women eventually became active combatants, exemplified by the Tamil Tigers' recruitment of female suicide bombers (Asal & Jadoon, 2020). Similarly, within Islamist groups, women traditionally spread propaganda and recruit male relatives but have increasingly demanded and have been granted larger roles in offensive combat (Ispahani, 2016). These shifts

highlight how women's engagement in conflict evolves within organizations, reflecting the changing contexts of conflict and organizations.

Combat Roles

When organizations have a higher need for armed fighters, whether it be because they are a territory holder, or because the conflict has endured for a long time, it creates optimal conditions for women to participate in combat roles. Integrating women into combat positions can offer strategic advantages for the group's long-term sustainability and immediate effectiveness (Asal & Jadoon, 2020). These combat roles, whether they be as armed soldiers, drone operators, snipers, or suicide bombers, attract significant attention from society due to perceptions of women acting contrary to societal norms. Additionally, women tend to seek out combat roles because they are viewed as more prestigious, in part because of the risk associated (Wood & Thomas, 2017). Much like men, rebel women can be motivated by power.

However, women in combat roles are frequently viewed as expendable assets, as seen in conflicts like Chechnya, Turkey, and Sri Lanka. These instances saw women effectively sacrificed to preserve the lives of "actual" soldiers (Bloom, 2012). In organizations like the PKK, where women make up a substantial part of the overall combat force, they are often assigned specialized roles such as suicide bombers or assassins, reflecting their significant presence in combat forces compared to other rebel groups (Wood & Thomas, 2017). Boko Haram shows women undertaking various roles, from support to frontline operational leadership, further complicating the categorization of combat and non-combat roles (Oluwaniyi, 2021).

Sacrificial Lamb or Strategic Advantage?

Insurgent groups often strategically deploy women as active combatants to leverage the element of surprise. Their ability to blend into society unnoticed makes them particularly

suited for roles such as suicide bombers. This tactic is widespread across various conflicts, including Chechnya, Syria Palestine, Nigeria, and Iraq. Although not suicide bombers, girls as young as thirteen would smuggle bombs into the city centre of Belfast, Northern Ireland, often targeting shops after they have closed to make a statement while reducing the human cost (Bloom, 2012). When women are deployed into violent roles, their strategic advantages see them as highly valued. Indeed, one of the articles explained that because of the element of surprise, female terrorists have a four times higher kill rate than men in similar roles (Ispahani, 2016). The high rate of female suicide bombers does raise questions of whether or not they are being used just as extra bodies, saving men for “real” combat though, which may open another avenue of questions on agency to be discussed later.

Not all women combatants are suicide bombers, though. Leftist organizations like the Syrian Democratic Forces have established all-female squadrons, such as the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) (Jaresand & Nilsson, 2022). The YPJ, composed solely of women, has played a pivotal role in combating ISIS in Syria. The YPJ has seen large amounts of success, in two respects. The first is in their instrumental role in the defeat of ISIS in the region because, in ISIS’s ideology, fighters believe they will not go to heaven if killed by a woman during combat (Neve, 2013). Further, they have received international recognition, included in CNN’s list of Leading Women of the Year in 2014 and gained the United States as a powerful supporter and ally (Parke, 2014). Whether as suicide bombers or in other roles in direct combat, women have strategic advantages that often go overlooked by security measures, providing insurgent groups with a tactical edge.

Noncombatant Roles

Women’s involvement in rebel groups predominantly occurs in noncombatant roles, spanning from leadership to logistics, recruitment, and propaganda. Women’s societal positioning grants them influence over community perceptions, making them valuable tools

for recruitment and propaganda dissemination. Despite their capability for direct combat discussed above, their strategic advantage lies in their ability to engage in softer objectives, leveraging their central role in community dynamics, childcare, and household management. This unique position makes them effective agents for advancing the group's goals beyond traditional warfare.

Recruitment and the Spread of Propaganda

Women play a pivotal role in recruiting other women into extremist groups. Patriarchy and paternalism are widely embraced, even in relatively tolerant Muslim societies, which leads to women accepting gender roles assigned to them (Ispahani, 2016). Women are more likely to be receptive to other women sharing their stories, true or not, about their experiences of joining extremist groups that have been divinely ordained. Zakaria (2017) notes that women are not duped into joining, but rather they are seduced by promises of a better life. Propaganda often highlights women's historical contributions to Islam, emphasizing their importance in jihad (Zakaria, 2017, 42)". ISIS, for example, entices female recruits with promises of a better life under Islamic law - good husbands, good homes, and unrestricted devotion to their God (Makanda et al., 2018). This is where the notion of a Jihad bride emerges from. Social media amplified recruitment efforts, with women accounting for nearly 10% of ISIS recruits from Western countries (Ispahani, 2016).

Despite stereotypes, non-combat roles are equally attractive for women to join groups and are crucial, using women to gather intelligence and recruit without raising suspicion. This is especially the case in Muslim and other communities of the sort that place high societal importance on collective life as it gives women many opportunities to engage with each other in ways that do not raise flags.

8. Agency and the Role of Feminism

Director of Sinn Féin's Women's Department, Mairead Keane said, "We are actively involved in the struggle at all levels raising the issues of sexism, violence against women, and discrimination, women must fight for their freedom. (Bloom, 2012)." The issue of agency is central to discussions on female combatants, with scholars noting women's ability to make individual choices. However, organizational contexts can limit this agency, raising doubts about women's autonomy in such settings.

Women in rebel groups often face intersecting forms of oppression. For instance, female members of the Provos in Northern Ireland and Albanian women in Kosovo, including members of Illegalja, faced oppression from both the state and from patriarchy (Bloom, 2012; Krasniqi, 2021). In fact, discrimination based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or religion, further complicates their experiences and motivations for joining rebel groups. Understanding these intersecting considerations is crucial in explaining women's desire to participate in insurgency.

Agency and Autonomy

Miranda Alison (2004) explains, "the mere fact that it is necessary to specify 'female combatants' indicates their historical rarity and symbolic position as unconventional figures (p. 447)". Across the board, the argument that should be made is that women are capable of acting in various roles, even if they make society uncomfortable, or are deemed to be "outside" of traditional gendered norms. Gender stereotypes regarding conflict place women in peaceful or innocent victim roles and conversely place men in roles of inherently violent perpetrators, which also invalidates the experiences of men as victims (Trisko Darden et al., 2019). These stereotypes result in an oversimplified paradigm of conflict, where "soldiers and policymakers learn to see men as enemies by default at the same time creating a blind spot regarding the role of women in perpetrating violence (Trisko Darden et al., 2019, p.2)". We

have already seen the consequences of having a blind spot regarding women, as groups have adapted to use this oversight as a strategic advantage in carrying out attacks to achieve their objectives.

Women's roles in conflicts must be understood beyond simplistic narratives of victimhood or exceptionalism. Even when seen as participants in conflicts, they are regarded as pawns in larger struggles for power - being brought in against their will (Viterna, 2013). While some portrayals sensationalize their involvement, such as the instance of Kurdish women fighting ISIS, women can be victims, and perpetrators, or exist along a continuum between the two (Oluwaniyi, 2021). In Boko Haram, many women who were brought into the group involuntarily returned to the movement voluntarily after going through disengagement programs, because they had perceived better economic opportunity within the organization (Oluwaniyi, 2021). Women may transition between various roles, indicating a fluidity not captured by binary labels of victim or perpetrator. Recognizing women's autonomy and diverse motivations is important in explaining their participation.

Feminism

Many articles in the dataset discuss feminism in relation to women's roles as actors or perpetrators in conflicts. Researchers often approach this topic from a feminist perspective, aiming to address women's oppression or recognize their agency in violence. However, through the examining of published pieces and comparing the different contexts surrounding women as part of these organizations, a key insight emerged: the Western-centric understanding of feminism that typically overlooks intersectionality, failing to consider factors such as culture and religion. Additionally, not all women in these roles identify as feminists. While it is important to acknowledge feminism's relevance, it is incorrect to assume that the women we are speaking about would be better off by adopting this feminist

lens through which “we” view women as perpetrators of violence. This highlights the challenge of applying a singular ideology to complex global issues.

Jihad Feminism

Feminist theory, in the Western interpretation, is a paradigm that looks at the inequality of the sexes against the backdrop of dominant patriarchal systems. It advocates for relative equality between men and women in social, economic, and political spheres (Makanda et al., 2018). Existing understandings of feminist theory lack intersectional understandings regarding race, religion, and cultural considerations of societies. Western definitions of feminism are insufficient for many non-Western women, and some find its simple aim of gender equality to be unfulfilling.

Jihad feminism is an emerging interpretation in Islamist groups as a contemporary radical interpretation of Islamic feminism (Makanda et al., 2018). Islamic feminism emerged as a response to women within the Muslim community advocating for the equality of sexes and was to be guided by the Islamic faith (Makanda, et al., 2018) It maintained that Western models of feminism are insufficient for Islam, resulting in misguided understandings of gender equality in Muslim communities (Makanda et al., 2018). This can be seen in broad Western discourse surrounding dress codes for Muslim women, how they are oppressed by being forced to practice modesty, and how what they wear makes them inferior to the men in their community.

Jihad feminism has been used to justify women adopting more assertive roles in terrorist organizations, particularly in Syria. Makanda et al. (2018) explain, “Jihadi feminism represents a propagandistic construct of feminism that advances the belief that it is a jihadi-feminist duty of all Muslim women to travel to Syria and Iran as active participants in the jihadi ideological agenda being carried out by ISIS (p. 250)”. This version argues for women to now fight alongside their husbands for ISIS, enhancing women’s perceived value

in society by pioneering jihadi agendas (Makanda et al., 2018). However, the long-term impact outside of conflict remains uncertain, and women's freedom in Muslim communities may continue to be misaligned with Western perceptions of equality. The equality of Islamic women is not determined by Western constructs but is solely determined by individual perceptions. In the context of women fighters, it can help to explain the participation in groups that appear to be counter to Western feminist ideas.

9. Discussion

Themes, Trends, and Gaps in Existing Research

The search set out at the beginning of the process resulted in 13 sources from two databases that made mention of women combatants and terrorist organizations/insurgency/rebellion in the title or abstract. Of these 13 sources, six focused on Islamist groups across the world, while the rest looked at leftist groups in the Middle East, Europe, Latin America, and Africa. Most of the sources looked at one specific context, while one article looked at various conflicts but in isolation from each other. Further, one article adopted a more theoretical approach, to see how different ideologies indicate the recruitment and roles of women in organizations. A theme throughout the articles is that while motivations do vary, they are often classified as being either personal, ideological, or economic. This could be because this is the existing structure in which motivations are classified. Overall, the representation of sources showcases how the phenomenon of women combatants has been studied thus far.

Something that potentially skewed the findings is that there simply was a lack of sources. Once filtering for the specific criteria set, there were not a lot of sources that fit exactly what was being searched for, which was aggravated by the inability to filter specifically for "women fighters" or any similar terms. Because of this, the search had to be

expanded a little bit, culminating in irrelevant results, even after filtering to exclude specific topics like health and labour force which were deemed. As such, it may have looked like there were a lot of results, but once culling through and manually selecting based on titles with keywords such as war, rebel, terrorism, and insurgent, I was left with 58 searches from the PAIS database. These searches then had to be narrowed down even more in articles in which motivations or contextual factors were explicitly explored, done by looking at the abstracts and tables of contents of each article. This exercise showed how difficult it is currently to search for women combatants. This shows the need for better infrastructure among databases and other search engines to include these groups of subjects in future filter sets, making accessing literature on the subject both more efficient and accessible.

As mentioned, the majority of the focus is on the Middle East and/or Islamist groups. This is likely a result of the current landscape of conflicts. The search parameters were for articles written between 2014 and 2024, so a lot of authors were likely focused on contemporary issues, coinciding with the increased interest in the Middle East post 9/11 and the United States-led “war on terror”. Although this arguably makes for a biased discussion, it remains representative of the current landscape of conflict. Looking at the map of current conflicts on the UCDP database (Appendix D), shows a concentration of conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa region, as well as throughout Africa. If, for example, the search parameters were to be set for the 1970s to the 1990s, there might have been more literature on Latin America. A final overarching theme worth noting is that many of the articles speak about women operating side by side with men, or shoulder to shoulder. However, when looking into it further, it almost always is women in auxiliary roles to the men. Showcasing again how different perceptions of involvement and the importance of varying roles in the West compared to the rest of the world.

Future Scenarios

Conflicts no longer take place on faraway fronts. At the same time, recruitment and motivation to join increasingly does not matter where the conflict takes place. Roshonara Choudry was a British teen who became radicalized into Islam through online recruitment tactics aimed at Western women joining ISIS (Pearson, 2016). Additionally, many women involved in Islamist groups specifically take part in recruitment by reaching out to other women over social media, especially women in diaspora communities around the world who might already be feeling alienated as perceived and real ongoing Islamophobia. Indeed, the perceived threat to Muslim communities all over the world is a strong motivation for men and women to join Islamist groups (Ispahani, 2016). This trend is likely only going to increase as globalization continues through online social networks, and as conflicts continue to move to more unconventional battlefields.

Challenges in Studying Women Combatants

Perhaps one explanation for the research gaps can be attributed to the methodological challenges faced by researchers, namely the lack of reporting done by irregular armed forces. It is difficult to fully understand the contexts in which women act as female combatants when they are doing so in unconventional ways that evade any need for formal reporting. When looking at conventional armies for comparison, it is difficult to get a breakdown of the demographics as having access to that information could give potential opponents a strategic advantage. This is one methodological way that may pose challenges in studying this demographic. Further, because a lot of women are engaging in roles that place them outside of socially acceptable positions, they may be more hidden from the limelight or it may be difficult to classify them as directly being involved in the conflict. For example, women may not be considered members of an organization if they are supporting members like husbands or sons who are directly involved.

This is a good point to mention the largest limitation of the research process, which further justifies the need for this type of research collection. Despite using the thesaurus function in databases, attempts to locate information on “female combatants” or “women fighters” were unsuccessful. The closest options, like “women and politics,” yielded irrelevant results, necessitating broader searches and manual sorting. The inability to narrow down results directly related to the topic highlights the urgency for more research to be done into the topic of female fighters but that the tools used for research need to be updated to include this field as well.

Ethical Challenges/Considerations

When studying female combatants, especially in a way that tries to bring them to the same level as their male counterparts, there can be a tendency to overcompensate. For example, in previous research that examines women in these deviant roles, there has been an inclination to make the connection that a violent woman equals a bad woman (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015, p. 3). Eager explains that there is a paradox in which societies, regardless of culture or religion, feel uncomfortable with women who are violent while simultaneously celebrating historically fierce women who fought (Eager, 2010, p. 269). Thus, a balance must be struck, not just in this paper but across the field that recognizes women as combatants or as capable of violent acts without also seeing them as an extreme or unnatural case.

10. Conclusion

"Stigmatisation affects women's dignity disproportionately as their association with terrorist groups is seen as a transgression of traditional gender norms (Oluwaniyi, 2021)". Through the creation of the evidence map, it was found that women's motivations do not differ from their male equivalents. What is more important is the intersecting contexts in which they exist. More importantly, it was found that information is lacking and more research is needed to fully explain women's participation in irregular armed groups.

This paper sought to affirm the position of women beyond the Western-imposed stereotype of an innocent soul that must be protected or fought for. This is to begin the process of recognizing the unseen reality experienced by women around the world. An evidence map was created with sources pulled from various databases and coded for intersecting variables such as motivations, contexts, the role of women, and cross-cultural variations. A search across the PAIS database found 13 sources that fit the search criteria, and these sources were then categorized based on their mention of motivations, contexts, and other important factors influencing women's participation in irregular armed forces. Finally, a discussion on the research gaps helped to outline how better research can be done on the topic moving forward.

It is instinctual to look at women in unconventional settings as an abnormality. In doing so, authors tend to overcompensate by either illustrating women as shattered victims or heroic idols. Once we acknowledge that women are capable of violence, we can then move to maintain a neutral attitude about women who are participating in such acts. They are not bad at being women just because they are violent. If the discourse can move to a place where they see women as they are, then research can begin to address the phenomenon, which is not a phenomenon but a fact of life.

Additionally, research has shown a concentration of study of women in Islamist groups. This is not inherently incorrect and indeed it is an area that warrants research, especially considering women's participation in these groups tends to counter what is widely understood to be Islamic beliefs. How the sources discussed women in Islamist groups shows that efforts are being made to understand women in varying settings, but there are still steps to be taken.

Implications

So what does this mean for future research? As stated at the outset of the paper, there is not even a foundation of knowledge to know what questions to ask, or where to look to begin creating themes surrounding this phenomenon. The evidence map has shown that while disjointed, there does exist some research on different components of women's participation in terrorism. Case-by-case studies, and focus on specific conflict or regional contexts are important and can provide a micro-level understanding of individual instances. However, there needs to be more of a holistic body of work at the macro-level that these individual cases can then build upon. That is where research can start, by focusing on the intersectionality of the topic. How the historical, religious, social, and structural contexts exist in environmental (i.e. conflict) contexts. Then, look at how the individual interacts with these contexts that allow them to have individual motivations. It cannot be understated how important it is to look at the context alongside the structures of the groups and the individual motivations. Especially in groups that seem to go against their own set of beliefs by including women, there is a reason for that and by better understanding that reason we can begin to address it.

It was discovered that the major contributor to women's participation is whether or not leadership explicitly decides to let them join, this is an area that warrants further research. Ask what compels leadership of groups to open up their ranks to allow women to be recruited. Is it strictly strategic? Or are there more leaders like the leader of the PKK who believe women are central to achieving their means? By compiling a sample of the existing research into one place, we are better able to understand who the individual actors are and why they choose or are coerced into fighting. Further, while there is a place for feminist discourse, it needs to be done through the appropriate lens. The research in general can be done through a more appropriate lens, which will happen when looking at all of the variables

at play. Efforts are being made to better address the emergence of women in irregular armed forces. But more can be done to understand all of the components and how they interact with each other. Doing so will help to better understand the state of conflicts in the world today and in the future, and can provide a knowledge base to begin addressing these new, asymmetric conflicts.

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Appendix A

The following main subjects were searched in the PAIS database: civil war, political violence, rebellions, terrorism, insurgency, guerilla, paramilitary group.

These main subjects were then combined with the keywords “women” or “female” or “girl” to be mentioned in either the title or abstract. These keywords were to be within three words of the following words: “participation/participate/participating”; “inclusion/include/including”; “agent/agency/agents”; “involvement/involved/involve/involving”; “role(s)”; “implicate(s)/implication(s)”; “empower(s)/empowerment/empowering”; “power/powerful”; “engage(s)/engagement/engaging/engaged”; “active/activity/activities”; “organization/organisation”; “group(s)/grouped”; “soldier(s)”; “network(s)/networking”; “combatant(s)”; “fighter(s)”.

Appendix B

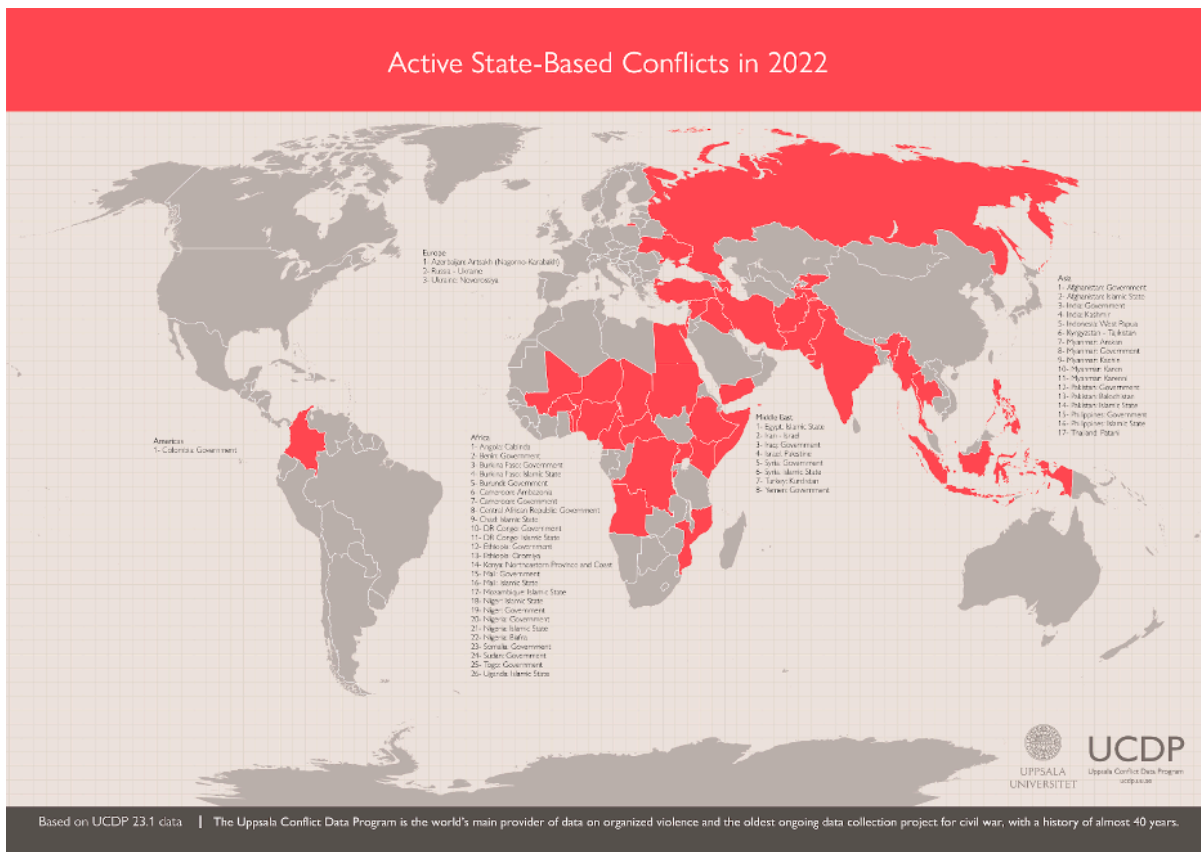
		Motivations			Context				
Author	Addresses Research Question?	Individual	Political	Social	Conflict	Organization	Role	Recruitment	Feminism
Makanda, et. al.	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Krasniqi	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
Pearson	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
Ispahani	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
Ben-Shalom, et. al.	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗
Oluwaniyi	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
Pinaud	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Zakaria	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
Wood & Thomas	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗
Bloom	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Asal & Jadoon	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
Berko & Erez	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Viterna	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓
Total:	1	3	7	6	6	9	8	7	5

Appendix C

Full list of titles included in dataset:

1. Asal, V., & Jadoon, A. (2020). When women fight: unemployment, territorial control and the prevalence of female combatants in insurgent organizations. *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 13(3), 258-281. 10.1080/17467586.2019.1700542
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Appendix D



UCDP GED map: Active state-based conflicts in 2022 (UCDP Charts, Graphs and Maps, n.d.)