Cindy D. Ness

The rise in female violence

Whether encountered in the mythos of the Madonna or in the image of the dutiful wife and obedient daughter, females have been regarded over the ages as having a special capacity to reinstate balance where it has been undermined by the excesses of men. While exceptions to this stereotype are easily found throughout history – the young Joan of Arc wreaked havoc against the English for a brief period, and Catherine the Great led the Russian army in many victorious campaigns – women have been celebrated chiefly for their ability to give and nurture life, not their ability to take it away.

It is this hallowed view of feminine nature, evident across cultures, and the extraordinary inner strength associated with it that informed Gandhi's ideas about womanhood and led him to envision women playing a special role in carrying out his project of *satyagraha* (the search for truth) based on his doctrine of *ahisma* (nonviolence). For Gandhi, *ahisma* was the only viable road, politically or spiritually, upon which to challenge and transform the moral recalcitrance of British rule in India and the injustices that flowed from it; essentially, *ahisma* was a counterforce powerful enough to check blatant aggression without responding to it in kind. Gandhi fully believed that peace came about by changing the heart of one's adversary through moral, not physical, force.

Gandhi's early experiences with *satyagraha* helped shape his thinking about the relationship of men and women to violence. The picketing of liquor and foreign clothes shops in 1921, though successful in achieving many of its goals, was in the end a failure in Gandhi's eyes because the crowd (decidedly male), trained for civil disobedience, instead turned violent. Gandhi's writings of the time suggest that the incident convinced him that men lacked the discipline to carry out nonviolent protest. He saw men as by nature prone to arrogance, easily angered, and thus ill-suited to sustain insult without retaliating. If men came to exercise *ahisma*, he believed,

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they only did so by traversing "a laborious analytical process,"[1] whereas women, given their tendency "toward service and sacrifice," came to it "naturally and intuitively."[2]

Perhaps nowhere more clearly than in his classic message, "To the Women of India in 1921," does Gandhi articulate his faith in women's civilizing capacity. In his passionate appeal to women to take up picketing and spinning, he underscores women's centrality to the cause: "If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women."[3] Though Gandhi never spelled out a specific agenda for women to carry out, he held that it was they, and not men, who were best suited to awaken the conscience of the world. He wrote, "If Europe will drink in the lesson of non-violence it will do so through its women."[4] Indeed, he believed, "it [was] given to her to teach the art of peace to the warring world"; to do so was "her special vocation and privilege."[5] It should be noted that Gandhi's call for women's political involvement was at the time nothing short of radical.

Yet, despite the great faith that Gandhi placed in women's capacity to create widespread peace, there is little evidence that, since his assassination in 1948, the world has become less violent or that women have come close to bringing about its transformation. On the contrary, during the last thirty years, straddling the close of the twentieth century and the opening of the twenty-first, the extent of female participation in violence around the globe has grown as never before. Girls and women now make up 30 to 40 percent of the combatants in numerous ethnoseparatist/guerrilla struggles, and they have carried out suicide bombings in several parts of the world. In many Western countries, too, the incidence of females being arrested for violent criminal offenses has increased sharply. One must wonder what accounts for the appearance of this trend across such widely disparate cultural realities. One must also wonder what it means for our world for females, purportedly 'the better half of humanity,' to exhibit a strong and ever-growing presence in war, personal violence, and destruction in general.

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While we should not lose sight of the fact that girls and women who participate in militancy and terrorism are, at the outset, frequently forced to do so, coercion alone does not account for the mobilization of thousands of girls and women as combatants in guerrilla wars. It would also be inaccurate to perceive females as only following orders when political conflict turns violent. Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, the Rwandan national minister of family and women's affairs, and the first woman to be charged with genocide and crimes against humanity for ordering the rape and murder of countless Tutsi men and women, stands out as an example, albeit an extreme one, of violent leadership by a woman.

Additionally, it is important to note that norms regarding the use of violence by women have undergone a marked

1 M. K. Gandhi, *Non-violent Resistance: Satyagraha* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 330.

2 Ibid.

3 *Young India*, April 10, 1930. Quoted from M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. XLIII (Delhi: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1971), 217.

4 M. K. Gandhi, *Gandhi on Women: Collection of Mahatma Gandhi's Writing and Speeches on Women*, compiled by Pushpa Joshi (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Publishing House, 1988), 24.

5 Ibid., 26.

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shift not only in conflict zones, where the need to defend one's life is acutely felt, and in disenfranchised communities, where life is comparatively hard. They have changed dramatically in mainstream culture as well. In the United States, for example, it has become common to see female heroines and villains committing violence in action movies and on prime-time television.[6] Rather than being portrayed as gender anomalies, violent females have come to be lauded in American media as formidable opponents. Such portrayals fly in the face of the female pacifist Gandhi imagined over three-quarters of a century ago, who was by nature disinclined to do battle.

In fact, it would be fair to say that, in the last few decades, the use of violence by females has become visible and attained categorical significance in an unprecedented way. Concomitantly, a discursive space has opened up in which we can problematize the social basis of, and the symbolic structures associated with, females both acting and being constructed as 'naturally' violent. While the resort to violence by females is not quite the 'new normal,' its increase certainly delivers a blow to the self-sacrificial and pacifistic trope that has widely characterized female behavior for centuries. The matter now at hand is how one should understand that behavior and the variables influencing its evolution.

In this essay, I will argue that, over the last several decades, the use of violence by females has been granted a new degree of legitimacy in *traditional* as well as modern societies. I will consider some of the structural and cultural changes of the mid-to-late twentieth century that have set the stage for the escalation in violence by females, keeping in mind that violence is also always driven by conditions, context, and language that are unique to the setting in which it emerges. (Indeed, without an accounting of the unique factors that leave females primed to engage in violence in their particular locations, the observation that females today resort to violence in greater numbers than their predecessors did is of little practical value.)

The structural and cultural changes that I believe underwrite this social trend are a fading demarcation between the public and private spheres (particularly in the West), a growing recognition of (and dependence on) the political utility of women, and a significant lessening of the divide between combatant and noncombatant status in war zones. I will attempt to make the case that the three together have contributed significantly to the *democratization of violence*, a phrase first introduced by the editor and commentator, Fareed Zakaria, but used here to reflect an increased access to violence and its instruments by both genders.[7] Not only has violence ceased to be a resource monopolized by nation-states, as Zakaria contends, it has also ceased to reside solely in the hands of men.

It is important to underscore, however, that the changing relationship of females to violence should not, in most instances (if at all), be construed as indicative of progress toward gender equality, whether in a terrorist organization, an ethnoseparatist struggle, or an American

6 See Martha McCaughey and Neal King, eds., *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), for an extensive treatment of this subject.

7 See Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

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inner city. A review of the literature on women militants in traditional societies reveals a pattern whereby women combatants are viewed as equal to men in issues relating to struggle, but not outside of them.[8] To be sure, it is a commonplace of political violence that, in the name of the cause, traditional mores can be overridden without making a fundamental, or even long-term, alteration in a society's values regarding gender relations. Leila Khaled's observation of more than twenty years ago that nationalism is the first cause seems particularly relevant to the majority of politically violent struggles today in societies that do not have egalitarian gender-role expectations to start with. Where the two collide, nationalist aspirations take priority over feminist ones; the frequently cited reason is that equality between men and women cannot be realized in an environment of oppression. A more candid analysis of the situation would include the reluctance that movement leaders and their surrounding societies feel toward fundamentally challenging the structure of gender relations.[9]

But while the increased numbers of females participating in violence may not indicate gender reform, it does violate conventional notions of gender and power. With few exceptions, political violence has been an overwhelmingly male arena across most cultures. For this reason, any society, whether traditional or modern, that sanctions female violence must justify the breech of its social order to itself in its own cultural terms. So as not to be dismissed as being 'deviant' and simply marginalized, females who commit violence must in all other ways 'belong' to their social world, the organization of which is predicated on a host of structural arrangements and deeply felt moral beliefs.[10]

Scholars typically agree that with the emergence of industrialization in the late eighteenth century, the world of work was gradually separated from family life and, for all intents and purposes, the public sphere became the province of men. Though differing in degree depending on location, social group, and historical period, the virtual exclusion of females from the labor force, politics, voting, and institutions of higher education – and the ideological premises their exclusion rested on – sustained the divorce between public and private life up to World War II.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, however, progressive ideas regarding social and economic equality, in combination with technical innovation, undermined the legitimacy of these divisions, dramatically increasing opportunities for women outside of the home. As large numbers of women in Western societies entered the work force, the public/private binary, which had played a significant role in structuring their behavior, became increasingly blurred and porous, with regard not only to employment but to many realms of public life. The movement from one sphere into an-

8 For instance, discussion of this point can be found in Leila Khaled, "Arm the Spirit," http://www.pflppal.org/opinion/interviews/khaled/arm.html (accessed August 6, 2006); and Marieme Heile-Lucas, "Women, Nationalism, and Religion in the Algerian Liberation Struggle," in *Rethinking Fanon: The Continuing Dialogue*, ed. Nigel Gibson (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 1999).

9 For a detailed discussion of gender reform via female political violence, see Cindy D. Ness, "In the Name of the Cause: Women's Work in Secular and Religious Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28 (5) (September – October 2005): 353 – 373.

10 Ibid.

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other raised questions about the inevitability of their separation and the norms that underwrote it.

To begin with, the entry of females into the public sphere via the workplace set in motion a gradual shift in ideas about authority and subordination in gender relations. As females in Western countries began working for wages and gaining professional status following World War II, the financial independence and the psychological empowerment that went along with working rendered women 'new' social actors in many ways. With their expanded role as protectors and enforcers in the workplace, in their communities, and eventually in the collective imagination came the increased likelihood of their becoming real and imagined agents of aggression.

Perhaps the best-known attempt to explain the spike in female criminal activity, some of it violent, in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s was Freda Adler's "female liberation theory."[11] Adler's contention – that the increased rates of female crime, both violent and nonviolent, were an outcome of the greater opportunities that females had access to – struck an emotional chord given the rapid redefinition that gender roles and the institutions that reinforced them were undergoing. On the other hand, many feminist scholars of the day argued that Adler's framing of the 'new' female criminal was little more than a reworking of older arguments that cast female aggression as a move from the feminine to the masculine, rather than identifying the changed sociocultural and economic circumstances particular to females that drove them to their new behavior.[12] Even more damning were actual studies that debunked the idea that employed females made for more violent ones by showing that arrest rates for females, like those of males, actually decreased during periods of strong economic growth and higher employment.[13]

Yet Adler's inclination to connect the new statistics to the new roles women were occupying was not altogether misguided. Economic trends alone could not explain why, in the 1970s, women of all classes gradually began to mete out violence alongside men in action movies, sometimes preserving law and order and at other times undermining it; why heroines in literature were more readily turning to violent solutions;[14] and why, a decade or so later, female characters who maimed and killed appeared in video games. These images, which would have been taboo a few years earlier, had crossed into the mainstream. What these movies and other popular cultural forms were telling us was that if the contemporary Western female – independent and self-directed – chose, she was capable of aggressing in ways not unlike those of her male counterpart, even for sport.

Essentially, when women gained access to the public sphere, it set certain changes in motion. One, they became physically present in public spaces. As

11 See Freda Adler, *Sisters in Crime: The Rise of the New Female Criminal* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975).

12 Carol Smart, *Women, Crime, and Criminology: A Feminist Critique* (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1976), and Ngaire Naffine, *Female Crime: The Construction of Women in Criminology* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), to name two, have written critically of Adler's theory.

13 For instance, see Jane Chapman, *Economic Realities and the Female Offender* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1980).

14 For example, see Gail Goodwin, *Glass People* (New York: Knopf, 1972).

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mothers and caregivers, women were removed from public life and their bodies 'privatized.' In the marketplace, however, females were much freer to make use of their physicality, including their physical strength, as they saw fit. No longer were female egotism, rage, and self-hatred destined to be subdued through internalization.[15] Unlike her homebound sister, the female in the marketplace needed both to appear and actually be strong enough to defend herself – if not physically, then psychologically. In tandem, the culture no longer saw strength and aggression associated with women as deviant, but accepted it as a part of modern womanhood.

To put it another way, whereas competitiveness and skills of domination are not highly valued attributes in the private sphere, they are commonly thought to be instrumental in the public sphere. Not only self-defense, but also personal empowerment and retaliatory violence, gradually came to be seen as legitimate forms of expression for females operating in the public sphere. No longer was the female limited to the role of victim – she could also now 'perform' the role of aggressor. In essence, by the end of the twentieth century, a space had opened up for women to be both violent and 'legitimate' in mainstream culture.

While the entry of females into the public sphere, especially since the 1980s, has been a worldwide phenomenon and not just a Western one, it has been most pronounced in Western nations. Indeed, in conservative societies, where gender roles are extremely traditional, it is that much more incumbent upon women and girls to improvise techniques by which they take on new roles while still adhering to the gender dictates of the dominant social structure. Yet, surprising as it may seem, in many such societies, females have still come to play a large and growing role in political violence. As we shall see, the usefulness of women as violent political actors increases in proportion to the exigencies of war.

What began before World War II in many parts of the world as resistance to colonial rule became the bloody task of nation building and the clash of ethnoseparatist claims in the decades that followed it. During the second half of the twentieth century, separatist guerrilla struggles, and conflicts between ethnically or religiously divided populations, increasingly came to characterize the landscape of collective violence.[16] Never had the world seen the proliferation of so many separatist or intrastate conflicts at the same time, most of them arising in non-Western societies where gender relations and the hierarchies that supported them were extremely traditional.

While women had been involved in separatist struggles before the cold war, in the last decades of the twentieth century, separatist groups pursued an unprecedented policy of deliberately recruiting women and children into their cadres. The introduction of women and girls into combat was a response to logistical demands: the mounting number of casualties, the intensified governmental crackdowns, and the ability of women to escape detection more easily than men can.[17] The turn toward female re-

15 See E. E. Maccoby and C. N. Jacklin, *The Psychology of Sex Differences* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974), on the internalization of anger by females.

16 See Charles Tilly, "Violence, Terror, and Politics as Usual," *The Boston Review* 27 (3 – 4) (Summer 2002).

17 See Ness, "In the Name of the Cause," 357.

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cruitment swept across the continents of South America, Africa, and Asia. The influx of women and girls significantly strengthened groups such as the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Ealaam (LTTE), the Shining Path, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC), all of which might not have been able to sustain their operations had they not welcomed women. Women actively sought to join these armed struggles – although coercive recruitment is a staple of many ethnoseparatist groups, the widespread poverty and lack of economic opportunity that has historically afflicted third-world nations set the stage for females to join rebel movements *en masse*. Being part of a rebel force ensured that at least one's need for food and shelter would be met.

If women and girls were initially admitted into a wider range of roles based on necessity, their participation gradually became integrated into the organizational structure of many such groups. In essence, the more time women and girls engaged in these less conventional roles, the more conventionality these roles came to assume. In fact, the female militant, over a relatively short period of time, developed a global presence in armed struggle on a scale that was without historical precedent. Rather than an exotic exception, the female combatant was transformed into a familiar figure on the battlefield. News coverage of sectarian strife depicting the female militant with an automatic rifle announced to the world that men were not the only ones who could claim expertise in violence and destruction.

In addition to providing militant groups with increased personnel, females also brought them greater flexibility in carrying out their offensive operations. Both secular and, more recently, religious militant groups were able to trade on expectations that females were adverse by nature to committing violence: as such, women were particularly successful in slipping through tight security arrangements under a number of guises. As part of an overall strategy to inflict maximum damage, females in many groups were called upon to carry out a disproportionate percentage of suicide missions.[18] The female suicide bomber put a new face on the use of lethal force – not in the movies or in the imaginary world of a novel, but in real time.

While the numbers of females engaged in ethnoseparatist struggles had always been much greater than the numbers involved in religious terrorist groups, it is the sensational acts of the latter that brought global attention to female participation in political violence. Indeed, a hallmark of religious terrorism had been its lack of female participation and the specific ideology that deterred it. For example, given the strict gendered demarcation of the public and private spheres in Islam, the resort to violence by women and girls, rather than constituting a restorative act, until recently amounted to a sign of cultural fragmentation.[19] But as religious terrorist groups came under increased pressure and their support base was threatened, they, too, often looked to women to embrace violence and to introduce new vigor into their struggle.

For example, in 2002, at a point when Chechen rebel forces had suffered heavy, demoralizing losses, Hawa Barayev drove a truck into a building housing

18 See Yoram Schweitzer, "Suicide Terrorism: Developments and Characteristics" (lecture, Institute of Computer Technology, Herzliya, Israel, February 21, 2000).

19 See Ness, "In the Name of the Cause," 360.

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Russian Special Forces, killing twenty-seven soldiers. Wafa Idris, the first Palestinian female suicide bomber, struck the same day that Yassir Arafat made a speech inviting females to join the armed resistance against Israeli occupation. Arafat's call to women was an attempt to radicalize the fight for independence at a time when his popularity was waning and his control over the Palestinian Authority was in question.[20] Although females have figured prominently in secular groups such as the PKK and the LTTE over the last twenty years, it was the spate of Palestinian female bombers in 2002 and the six attacks by Chechen women in 2003 that truly captured media attention. Since then, Al Qaeda–associated groups have flirted with the idea of using females on a number of occasions, in an attempt to regain the element of surprise they have lost because of the increased government surveillance of their operations.

Clearly, the political necessity for females, in both secular and religious struggles, to engage in violence has come to override the long-standing cultural barriers that have inhibited them from doing so. Militant/terrorist organizations have mastered the rhetoric for leaving intact the sense of what proper gender roles are in normal times, even as they encourage females to break with tradition for specific ends. By placing the representation of female violence within ethically or religiously justifiable frameworks, they have also gone far in redrawing the symbolic boundaries that define who is defending the group and its cause and who is defending his or herself. In many conflicts, the dividing line between combatant and noncombatant has become increasingly blurred.

20 See Barbara Victor's case study of the female Palestinian suicide bombers that struck in Israel beginning in 2002. Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers* (Philadelphia: Rodale Press, 2003).

Whereas a century ago male soldiers on the battlefield accounted for approximately 90 percent of war-related deaths, in the twentieth century civilians became the main casualties of war.[21] In significant part, the shift was an outgrowth of more powerful weaponry and advanced technologies that made it possible to use lethal force at a distance (the aerial bombardment of cities, rocket grenades, etc.). Strikes specifically aimed at fixed military targets (i.e., airfields, suspected ammunition sites), while in one sense delivered with great precision, were not sufficiently exact to avoid causing 'collateral' or civilian damage. That intrastate conflicts over the last half-century were routinely fought in the spaces where people lived also placed civilians on the frontlines. Not surprisingly, when battlefront and civil arena occupy the same geographical space, the distinction between civilian and soldier is compromised, if not entirely obliterated.

Advances in weaponry and the 'localizing' of the battlefield left women and children particularly vulnerable to attack, especially since, all too frequently, they were left behind in the villages from which men were either killed or taken by force, or which the men had abandoned in anticipation of being killed. As Carolyn Nordstrom describes the situation, political violence moved "from the trenches to the backyards," putting women at the epicenter of war. In her analysis of how females live and survive

21 See Ted Gurr, *People Versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000), for a discussion of this and related issues.

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in war zones, she concluded, "Women and girls do not have an option about fighting in wars of the 21st century."[22]

No longer exempt from being a military target by dint of being female (the concept of noncombatant immunity has historically not been as sparing as the term suggests), women were placed in the position of having to protect and provide for themselves and their children in any way that they could. To be certain, in many hostilities the rape and killing of women and children became the preferred weapon to destroy the enemy – by targeting what an enemy holds sacred one could strategically undermine his or her morale and ultimately weaken him or her. Avoiding capture and persecution sometimes meant that a woman had to move her family from place to place, while at other times it required the direct defiance of government or rebel orders to survive. It could mean, for example, running food shipments, carrying medical supplies to a remote part of the countryside, or shooting a rebel or government soldier in self-defense.

Thus, while not formally combatants, given the reality of their everyday existence, women and children in conflict zones have had to become 'actors' in their own defense, meeting violence and its threat not through males but directly. Indeed, it would be fair to say that the new forms of insecurity and violence, including terrorism, which have come to characterize the majority of armed conflict in the late twentieth century, and which by definition do not allow for preparation, challenge the assumption of the traditional protector/protected relationship that historically has been laid down along gender lines – danger is no longer limited to a physical challenge that can be reserved for males.

The dismantling of this relationship has dealt a serious blow to the construction of the feminine, which to a large extent rests upon the necessity (and supposed naturalness) of the protector/protected binary. No longer can the female exist in her state of 'innocence'; thus, humanity can no longer be assured of her 'civilizing' capacity, as Gandhi conceived of it, since she is now herself a party to destruction on the world stage. And so, as she experiences herself and the world around her differently, the world must see her differently, too.

Gandhi never lived to see the realization of the culture of nonviolence that he envisioned, nor have women disavowed the use of violence as a means to an end as he anticipated. Rather, over the last several decades, the assumption that women are innately nonviolent has undergone major revision. Our collective ideas about who does and who does not possess the potential to be a violent actor have been changing. Depictions of females as violent figures are no longer considered the exception but have become mainstream cultural representations.

If we are to understand the rise in female violence, it is essential that we move away from a belief, like Gandhi's, in the determinative force of human, and especially female, 'nature,' and that we acknowledge the contributions made by social forces. These underlying conditions – poverty, religious and ethnic rivalries, and the techniques of modern warfare, as well as the perception that females are valuable assets to the functioning of such organizations – drive females into armies of liberation and best explain their voluntary participa-

22 Carolyn Nordstrom, "Gendered War," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28 (5) (September – October 2005): 399.

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tion. Moreover, in conflict zones that rely on lethal force from a distance or guerrilla hit-and-run tactics, the doctrine of noncombatant immunity – that civilians who do not participate in the operations of any armed force are granted protection from attack – is rendered meaningless. As the concept of 'danger' becomes something that an individual cannot anticipate with any certainty, traditional gendered notions of protection also become far less instrumental and, therefore, less relevant.

During the closing decades of the twentieth century and the opening ones of the twenty-first, the violent female has become a category with new options of behavior and representation – both heroic and antiheroic. No longer can females simply be thought of as the observers or witnesses to 'evil' : the will to violence, rather than being a male characteristic, is gender-neutral and dependent on a host of contextual factors. As the roles of protector and predator – real and imagined – become more open to them, the likelihood of females acting as agents of aggression is sure to increase.

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