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Women's Evolving and Diversified Roles in Terrorism and Militancy

The participation of women in terrorist organisations of differing categories is increasingly visible in primary (propagandists, recruiters, fighters and suicide bombers) and secondary roles (mothers and wives). Their involvement is not a new phenomenon, as seen in their past and present active participation in ethno-nationalist groups such as the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, left-wing extremist (LWE) groups, such as the Naxalite-Maoist insurgents in India, and religious-nationalist/Islamist groups, such as the so-called Islamic State (IS)-affiliated Jamiatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (Neo-JMB). Beyond, the militant groups covered in this issue, other groups that amassed female membership include, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Chechen Black Widows.

Al Qaeda (AQ), as a transnational jihadist group, has also utilised women for indoctrination and recruitment operations to expand its social support base and increase its female membership. A 2009 AQ communiqué entitled "*Risala Ila Al-Akhawat Al-Muslimat* (Letter to My Muslim Sisters) by Umayma Hassan Ahmed, the wife of current AQ chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri, encapsulates the roles for women.

The advent of IS in 2014 contributed to an unprecedented increase in the number of women travelling to Iraq and Syria from the West (United Kingdom, Germany, France, Australia, United States and Canada), and South, Southeast and Central Asia, resulting in renewed interest in the subject. More recently in July 2017, IS deployed women as suicide bombers as it fought to regain control of Mosul to showcase its strength and gain tactical advantage against the US-backed Iraqi and anti-IS coalition forces. In addition, IS regularly

dedicates a section in its English online magazines, *Dabiq* (now ceased publication) and *Rumiyah* to discussing the roles and participation of women in building the so-called 'caliphate'. More recently, following in IS' footprints, the umbrella organisation of the Pakistani Taliban groups, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has also issued a magazine for women entitled *Sunnat-i-Khaula* —The Way of Khaula. The magazine encourages females to join TTP and take up the so-called jihad.

In the case of Islamist terrorist organisations, even though women are absent from leadership positions, they still form a critical support base. One of the key roles female terrorists are assigned includes acting as recruiters on social media to bring in more members (men and women) to support their cause. In mainstream media coverage there is a tendency of reducing female terrorists to gendered roles, depicting the group's violence in androcentric terms. Not only does this approach undermine the important roles of women in terrorism, but it also overlooks women as violent actors. The articles within this issue affirm that in one Islamist and two non-Islamist terrorist groups, the roles of women have gradually evolved from passive to pensive and peripheral to central.

In the case non-Islamist terrorist organisations like the LWE groups in India and other such groups, women are offered the rhetoric of empowerment and gender equality couched within local dynamics and varied contexts to further their recruitment. However, similar to Islamist terrorist organisations, women are exploited by terrorist organisations for strategic and tactical advantages to the group. They are recruited to increase the group's support base in numbers, and further the recruitment

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Women's Evolving and Diversified Roles in Terrorism and Militancy

processes of more women. Also, these terrorist groups tend to deploy women as suicide bombers to increase the shock value of attacks perpetrated. In addition, another benefit attributed to women is that they can pass through high security zones, without physical checks due to the lack of female staff and the general perception that women are unlikely to engage in terrorist attacks.

Specifically, in Islamist terrorist organisations women's roles are expanding beyond their traditional duties as mothers and wives. In January 2015, Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) announced the creation of the Shaheen Force, the women's suicide wing training at least 500 female suicide bombers. In April 2015, a video released online showed a group of women, suspected to be IS members, engaging in weapons training in Syria. This suggests a need for broadening counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation efforts to focus on women, who are also likely to perpetrate attacks whilst being influenced by the group's ideology.

The following articles in this issue of the CTTA focus on the diversity of women's roles in terrorist groups, women's motivations for joining such groups as well as the challenges they face: (a) "Women in the Tamil Tigers: Path to Liberation or Pawn in a Game?" by **Sara Dissanayake**, (b) "Growing Trends of Female 'Jihadism' in Bangladesh" by **Nazneen Mohsina**, and (c) "Roles and Participation of Women in Indian Left-Wing Extremism: From 'Victims' to 'Victimisers' of Violence" by **Akanksha Narain**.

This issue also includes a commentary entitled "Implications of Hambali's Trial" by **Bilveer Singh** on the prosecution of a senior Indonesian terrorist leader in the United States and its implications on Jakarta's internal

security and the country's on-going counter-terrorism and counter-extremism efforts.

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Women in the Tamil Tigers: Path to Liberation or Pawn in a Game?

Sara Dissanayake

The Sri Lankan insurgent group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) amassed a large membership, which consisted of a significant number of women. The LTTE is notorious for perfecting the tactics of suicide terrorism, including pioneering the use of suicide belts and the use of female suicide bombers in South Asia. The group prided itself in propagating gender equality and women's rights for female terrorists within the conservative Tamil society. This paper examines how women's status was supposedly elevated, but simultaneously exploited for the strategic and tactical advantages.

Introduction

Even though political violence has predominantly been a male-dominated domain, in recent times, women have been playing a significant role in furthering the goals of terrorist and insurgent groups. Some women who have pursued their ideological convictions by joining terrorist and insurgent groups include Leila Khaled of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Ulrike Meinhof, co-founder of the German Red Army Faction, Fusako Shigenobu, the founder of the Japanese Red Army, Wafa Idris of Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade, and Samantha Lewthwaite of Al-Shabaab. Women in terrorist organisations have effectively served in multiple realms from mobilising agents (recruitment and propaganda) and administrative roles (supporting the day-to-day operations) to direct combat roles (front-line fighters and suicide bombers).

Over the years, ample research has been conducted on gender identity and the multi-dimensional role of women in armed conflicts in various geographical regions. Generally, the prominent concepts that underpin female terrorist membership are 'emancipation' and

'empowerment'. Likewise, the female membership of LTTE is characterised by these concepts and is worthy of examination due to the significant roles women played in the 26-year long armed struggle. This article discusses how LTTE portrayed, exploited and 'elevated' women's status in order to fulfill the strategic objectives of the movement.

The Sri Lankan Civil War and the LTTE

The LTTE, founded in 1976, emerged as an ethno-nationalist insurgent group, which fought for an independent Tamil state in the North and Northeast areas of the island state of Sri Lanka. During the nascent stages of Tamil militancy in the 1970s, there were approximately 34 active outfits. By 1986, the LTTE had emerged as the most violent and strongest militant group in the region.¹ Described by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 2008 as the "most dangerous and deadly extremist outfit in the world",² the LTTE is known to have perfected the tactics of suicide terrorism. It pioneered the use of suicide vests and female suicide bombers as a tactic used by an insurgent group in South Asia. The LTTE has claimed hundreds of lives in attacks targeting civilians, national infrastructure and military installations. Furthermore, the group has assassinated some of Sri Lanka's leading military and government officials as well as the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The civil war came to an end in May 2009, when the Sri Lankan army gunned down the LTTE leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, in Mullaitivu, Northern Sri Lanka.

¹ *No More Tears Sister: Anatomy of Hope and Betrayal*, Documentary Film, PBS Point of View Productions, Canada, 2005.

² [Ruthless LTTE Most Dangerous Extremists: FBI](#). *Express India*, 11 January 2008, accessed 15 June 2017.

‘Birds of Freedom’: Evolution of Women’s Roles

Even though women began to join the separatist movement in 1976, female cadres were initially confined to supportive roles such as propaganda, fundraising, recruitment, medical care, and information collection.³ Later, in 1983, the LTTE founded the Women’s Front of the Liberation Tigers.⁴ According to Alison, the first batch of female cadres was trained in Tamil Nadu by 1985, and they first engaged in combat in 1986.⁵ By the following year, there were LTTE camps training female cadres in the Jaffna district.⁶

Women were recruited to increase manpower on the battlefield, with a rising number of male cadres being killed in clashes and operations of the Sri Lankan army and the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF).⁷ This allowed the female membership to feel empowered, as they engaged in armed conflict for their supposed ‘liberation’. The LTTE Women’s Wing, also known as the ‘Birds of Freedom’, consisted of multiple divisions: (i) the political wing that performed administrative tasks and promoted social awareness on women’s empowerment, (ii) the militant wing that engaged in combat operations and (iii) suicide units that conducted suicide attacks.⁸

By 1989, LTTE had established *Sothiya*, its first female-only military brigade, followed by the *Malathi* brigade in 1994. Broadly, the militant wing included an anti-tank unit, heavy weapons unit, and anti-aircraft unit.⁹ The increase in the number of female cadres

coupled with the success of female fighters in combat elevated the stature of women in the group. This facilitated female LTTE fighters to assume full control over the women’s military unit and their training.¹⁰ Alison estimates that the number of female combatants in the LTTE varied between 15 to 20 percent and one third of the group’s core combat strength.¹¹

Within the Women’s Wing, the ‘Women’s Front’ division was established in 1991 to address various social issues and to advocate gender equality. Their manifesto mentioned the following objectives¹²:

- abolishing oppressive caste discrimination and customs like dowry;
- eliminating all forms of discrimination against Tamil women and securing social, political and economic equality;
- ensuring Tamil women control their own lives;
- securing legal protection for women against sexual harassment, rape, and domestic violence.

In a conservative society where women were largely confined to the domestic realm, LTTE’s membership denounced pre-existing societal norms in many respects. For the female cadres the pursuit of an independent Tamil homeland was synonymous with being empowered and personal liberation from socio-cultural oppression. As such, joining combat roles elevated the status of women to that of fellow male combatants. Women underwent extensive training in the use of weapons and explosives, and specialised in various combat and combat-support roles.¹³

Similar to their male counterparts, women laid and cleared mines, carried weapons alone, operated heavy machinery and dug bunkers. Thus, LTTE’s female membership defied traditional gender stereotypes within the Tamil society primarily because they were granted the possibility of being on an equal footing with men in all operational aspects of the terrorist outfit.

³ Doreen Chawade, “Roles of Women During Armed Conflict: Narratives of Jaffna Women in Sri Lanka”, (PhD Dissertation, University of Gothenburg, 2016), p. 70.

⁴ Amrita Basu, “Women, Political Parties and Social Movements in South Asia”, (Occasional Paper 5, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2005), p.9.

⁵ Joanne Richards, “An Institutional History of the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam”, (CCDP Working Paper, The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding, 2014), p.26.

⁶ Miranda Alison, “Cogs in the Wheel? Women of liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam”, *Civil Wars*, 6:4 (2003), pp. 37-54, p.39.

⁷ Alison, *Cogs in the Wheel*, p.39.

⁸ Chawade, “Roles of Women”, p. 71.

⁹ Adele Ann, *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers*, (Thasan Printers:1993).

¹⁰ Richards, “An Institutional History”, p. 27.

¹¹ Alison, *Cogs in the Wheel*, p.39.

¹² Alison, *Cogs in the Wheel*, p.45.

¹³ Trawick (1990), Balasingham (1994) and Jeyamaha (2004) cited in Chawade, “Roles of Women”, p.71

The women's political wing conducted classes that touched upon female liberation and feminist ideologies. They also ran a Centre for Women's Development and Rehabilitation, which was responsible for a wide range of projects from welfare centres to employment ventures. In addition, they organised campaigns against gender discrimination in the society. These campaigns encouraged women to be independent and self-sufficient by conducting training programs in auto mechanics and small-scale businesses for women among other tasks.¹⁴ The LTTE also opposed the local dowry system, imposed strict provisions against domestic violence, punished and imprisoned the offenders, while providing the victims with refuge, counseling and legal assistance.¹⁵ Overall, LTTE had five females in its 12-member central committee although their role in final decision-making was minimal.¹⁶ In addition, during the 2002 ceasefire, the Women's Wing participated in the Geneva talks, and was also a prominent member of the Sub-Committee for Gender Issues that aimed to address gender discrimination and other areas of concern.¹⁷ In this way, the LTTE strived to construct new gender roles not only by providing paramilitary training and assigning combat roles, but also addressing broader gender inequality-related issues within the organisation.

Prabhakaran on Women: Strategic Benefits for LTTE

The LTTE propagated empowerment and uplifting of female status from the onset by tying in emancipation (to construct identities beyond their traditional domestic duties) and national liberation (to actively contribute to the fight for a homeland) as synonymous. This strategy was mutually beneficial as it gave the female cadres a sense of empowerment and also granted strategic and operational benefits to the overall campaign trajectory. LTTE leader Prabhakaran

¹⁴ Alison, *Cogs in the Wheel*, p.50

¹⁵ N Malathy, [Women Under LTTE: 'Cannon Fodder' or Women's Liberation?](#) *Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka*, 26 July 2013, accessed 28 June 2017.

¹⁶ [Female Combatants of the LTTE and the IRA: a Comparative Study](#). *Tamil Canadian*, 2004, accessed 28 June 2017.

¹⁷ Basu, *Women, Political Parties and Social Movements*, p.11

regularly attributed the growth and success of the movement to women. In this regard, on multiple occasions he stated the following: "The ideology of women liberation [sic] is a child born out of the womb of our liberation struggle"¹⁸ and "[t]he Tamil Eelam revolutionary women has transformed herself as a Tiger for the Liberation of our land and liberation of women. She, like a fire that burns injustices, has taken up arms".¹⁹ On International Women's Day in 1992, Prabhakaran also added: "...the origin, the development and the rise of women's military wing of the Liberation Tigers is one of the greatest accomplishments of our movement... [it] marks a revolutionary turning point in the history of the liberation struggle of the women of Tamil Eelam."²⁰

These statements constructed a discourse that female cadres are the highest symbol of empowerment and emancipation in Sri Lanka, and that women can achieve liberation from oppressive gender roles through active combat. Overall, Prabhakaran's frequent reference to women served two broader strategic purposes for the organization. First, it encouraged existing female members, who revered the leader, to be more proactive and consolidate their dedication to the cause. Second, this permitted the organisation to recruit more female members by propagating gender equality in a society where women were marginalised and often faced gender-based discrimination.

LTTE's Female Members: Defying Gender Roles

LTTE continued to ensure that women and their participation were valued, and this was reflected in the strategic marketing of argued 'female liberation'. First, Sothiya brigade was named after the leader of the first women's unit, while Malathi brigade was named after

¹⁸ V Pirapaharan, 'Tamil National Leader Hon. V. Pirapaharan's Women's International Day Message' (EelamWeb 8 March 1993) cited in Alison, *Cogs in the Wheel*, p.45

¹⁹ Peter Schalk, "Women Fighters of the Liberation Tigers in Tamil Ilam. The Martial Feminism of Atel Palacinkam", *South Asia Research* 14:2 (1994), p. 163.

²⁰ Neloufer De Mel, *Women and the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: New York, 2001), p. 208

the first LTTE female ‘martyr’, who was killed in combat against the IPKF in 1987.²¹ Her death is said to have inspired many women to join the movement. Malathi’s legacy was kept alive with a memorial statue erected in 2004.²² LTTE also commemorates her death annually in October as ‘Women’s Awakening Day’, which reiterates the equality of women.²³

Second, LTTE also promoted female membership through the construction of various female ‘icons’. Adele Balasingham, the Australian wife of LTTE theoretician Anton Balasingham, regularly promoted the importance of women joining the separatist cause. She entrenched herself in the women’s wing by wearing combat attire and cyanide capsules around her neck - similar to the male cadres. She also published books about the conflict that specifically encouraged more female participation. In her book, *Women Fighters of the Liberation Tigers* (1993), she described a Tamil woman’s decision to join the outfit as signifying her willingness to defy patriarchal authority. Besides Balasingha Sivakamy Sivasubramaniam alias Thamilini, the head of the women’s political wing, was also an important figure. She frequently appeared on domestic and international broadcast interviews restating that women could be empowered through the liberation struggle. On one occasion, she stated: “We participate in our liberation struggle on an equal footing with men...she should defend herself and face the oppression... we not only acquired the combativeness required to face an invading army, but also the wisdom to face life itself.”²⁴

Over the years, Thamilini gained recognition as a dedicated female combatant and became the face of female empowerment within the LTTE. She has been featured in several interviews as the female spokesperson of LTTE’s struggle.²⁵

²¹ Chawade, *Roles of Women*, p. 71

²² [Malathi Memorial Opened in Kilinochchi](#). *TamilNet*, 10 October 2004, accessed 30 June 2017.

²³ [LTTE Commemorates First Woman Martyr](#). *TamilNet*, 10 October 2003, accessed 30 June 2017.

²⁴ Kerry McBroom, [Women and the LTTE](#), *Advocacy Project*, 3 October 2010, accessed 30 June 2017.

²⁵ e.g. [Sri Lanka’s Female Tamil Tigers](#), *Al Jazeera*, 31 July 2007, accessed 20 July 2017 and [Interview](#)

‘Isaipriya’, another female member, who served primarily as a journalist and television broadcaster for the outfit, was a singer and actor in many of LTTE’s propaganda video productions. Even though she was not a part of the broader female cadres who had direct combat roles (due to health conditions), her femininity and physical attractiveness was exploited to add glamour to the movement through the media and propaganda unit.²⁶

LTTE’s Black Tigers: Tactical Advantages

Over the years, LTTE exploited women for the tactical advantages they offered to the campaign. First, rigorously trained female combatants were able to effectively carry out duties on multiple fronts like their male counterparts. Hence, the group did not suffer from lack of manpower due to prohibiting women from combat roles.

Second and more specifically, women largely served as effective suicide bombers. Overall, it is estimated that at least 30-40 percent of the suicide attacks perpetrated by the group were conducted by females.²⁷ The LTTE institutionalised the practice of female suicide bombings as a dominant tactic, thus providing a model for other terrorist groups around the world. Women could easily penetrate hard targets and higher security zones compared to men²⁸ as women generated less suspicion and increased the element of surprise. Female cadres were formally employed in the Black Tigers (suicide squad) from 1997 onwards,²⁹ and over the decades female suicide operatives carried out multiple attacks. LTTE was highly selective with the time, occasion and the target to employ females for a suicide attack. The level of tactical innovation was unprecedented. Out of 23 suicide attacks conducted by LTTE that aimed for high-value

[with Thamilini](#), *International Human Rights Association*, April 2003, accessed 20 July 2017

²⁶ [Sri Lanka ‘War Crime’ Video: Woman’s Body Identified](#). *Channel 4 News*, 8 December 2010, accessed 20 July 2017.

²⁷ Debra Zedalis, “Female Suicide Bombers” (Strategic Studies Institute, 2004), p.2.

²⁸ Alisa Stack-O’Connor, “Lions, Tigers, and Freedom Birds: How and Why the LTTE Employs Women,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 19:1, 2007, pp. 43-63, p. 46.

²⁹ Tanya Narozhna and W. Andy Knight, *Female Suicide Bombings: A Critical Gender Approach*, University of Toronto Press: Buffalo, 2016, p.57.

targets (politicians and top-ranking army officials) and security establishments around the country, 15 were perpetrated by female cadres.³⁰

One of the most notorious LTTE suicide attacks was carried out by Thenmozhi Rajaratnam, also known as Dhanu, a teenage female Black Tiger who assassinated Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi during his election campaign, in southern India in May 1991. Dhanu was presenting Gandhi with a flower garland and bent down to touch his feet when the bomb detonated, killing them along with 19 others. This suicide attack is important because the LTTE had selected a female to execute the first high-profile as well as the only suicide attack conducted outside Sri Lanka.³¹ Dhanu was an ideal candidate to execute the mission as she was not likely to raise suspicion among the authorities. She was an 'ordinary looking' teenage girl dressed in traditional clothing, and was seemingly approaching Gandhi in order to pay her respects to him. Given that female suicide operatives were employed rarely during that period, the LTTE exploited the element of surprise by selecting a young woman who blended within the environment to ensure success.

Dhanu's suicide attack was followed by other female Black Tigers, who were mainly exploited to execute high-value political targets in Sri Lanka. The LTTE also introduced tactical innovations, such as bra, underwear and pregnancy bombs to disguise the explosives and maximise the success of women as suicide bombers. For instance, in 2006, a Black Tiger disguised as a pregnant woman penetrated the Army Headquarters, in an attempt to assassinate the Sri Lankan Army Commander Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka. In 2004 and 2007, Minister Douglas Devananda evaded two assassination attempts by female bombers who had detonated bra bombs.³² The tactical advantages of female suicide members were mutually beneficial for women in the organisation as being selected for the Black

Tiger mission reinforced gender equality and provided a sense of empowerment which defied notions of women's weakness and submissiveness.

Conclusion

Despite the attempt to elevate the status of women, female cadres were mere 'cogs in the wheel' and victims of a male-dominated and patriarchal leadership.³³ Even though, women had broader roles, the organisational decision-making was ultimately in the hands of men. Authors such as De Mel (2001), Maunaguru (1995), de Alwis (1998b) and Coomaraswamy (1996) have downplayed the role of LTTE in promoting female empowerment and equality, stating that their objective was merely to fulfill the need for human resources.³⁴ Indeed, as Balasingham noted, the "overall impact made by the fighting girls on Tamil society is yet to be assessed. It is also too early to predict the future in relation to the position in Tamil society after the war is over."³⁵

Today, after eight years since the conclusion of the war, Tamil women and former female LTTE cadres continue to face multiple challenges in the post-conflict phase. A 2015 report mentioned that Tamil women in Sri Lanka have been negatively impacted by a surge of violence against women in the North, as the war contributed to a breakdown of the social fabric as a whole. Former female combatants have also faced particular risks of public presence due to the social stigma attached to their past as former militants. According to the report, many former female members of the group are reluctant to discuss their experiences or engage in political discourse, adding that "the predicament of Tamil women has been the greatest impetus for a society-wide nostalgia for the LTTE".³⁶

³⁰ Ibid. p.59-61.

³¹ It is pertinent to note that the LTTE did not officially claim responsibility for this attack until 2006, due to fear or political backlash.

³² [Bra Bomber Targets Minister](#). *News 24*, 28 November 2007, accessed 30 June 2017.

³³ Coomaraswamy (1997), De Mel (2001) cited in Chawade, *Roles of Women*, p.96.

³⁴ Tamara Herath, "Women Combatants and Gender Identity in Contemporary Politics" (PhD Dissertation, London School of Economics, 2014), p. 44.

³⁵ Cited in Miranda Alison, *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-nationalist Conflict*, (Routledge: Oxon), 2009, p. 178.

³⁶ Nimmi Gowrinathan and Kate Cronin-Furman, *Forever Victims: The Tamil Women in Post War Sri Lanka*, The City College of New York, 28 August 2015, p.20

On hindsight, LTTE displayed interest in granting women greater roles in their struggle and within the Tamil society. Regardless of whether female empowerment was the genuine intention of the LTTE leadership, it is evident that the diverse roles for women were mutually beneficial to the combatants and the organisation at strategic and tactical levels. For the women, national liberation was synonymous with their personal liberation and it consolidated their commitment to the ethno-separatist ideology of the group. As such, the LTTE did benefit from projecting the gender equality rhetoric, as they provided a platform for women to seek liberation while in return, the group was equipped with invaluable (wo)manpower with strong ideological convictions to carry out some of the most deadliest attacks within Sri Lanka.

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Growing Trends of Female 'Jihadism' in Bangladesh

Nazneen Mohsina

In recent months, Bangladesh has witnessed an upsurge of female participation in 'jihadist' groups in diversified roles. Since the IS-directed Holey Artisan Bakery attack in July 2016, Bangladeshi militant groups have become more assertive and violent. At the same time, they have also developed a transnational outlook and linkages. The role of female Bangladeshi 'jihadists' have evolved from passive to active and from peripheral to central as suicide bombers and combatants. This change marks a new and more dangerous phase of violent extremism in the country. The article will highlight the implications of women's participation in violent extremism for Bangladesh's internal security landscape and propose a gender-sensitive approach to counter-terrorism related legislation, policing, and law enforcement.

Introduction

Bangladesh is not new to violent extremism and Islamist militancy. Following the end of the US-supported Afghan 'jihad' in the 1980s, various 'jihadist' groups and networks infiltrated Bangladesh.¹ The period from 2001 to 2005 represents the peak of militancy in Bangladesh underscored by a series of nationwide bombings and a number of suicide attacks. Then there was a relative lull in violence from 2006 to 2012.

In the aftermath of the Shabagh protest movement in 2013 in which more than 100 people lost their lives and the domestic political situation became more volatile with Bangladeshi militant groups rekindling their violent activities. The movement was led by a few secular bloggers who demanded capital punishment for some leaders of the religious-political party Jamaat-e-Islami (Jel), among

¹ Riaz, A., & Fair, C. C. (2010). Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh. Routledge.

others, who were convicted of war crimes during the Liberation War of 1971.

The Shabagh demonstrations triggered counter-protests from Jel and other like-minded religious political parties. Overreactions from the security forces coupled with the suppression of political opponents worsened the already polarised Bangladeshi society drove radicals to join militant groups such as pro-Al-Qaeda militant group Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT, Ansar al-Islam) and Jama'atul Mujahedeen Bangladesh (JMB). An ultra-radical faction of JMB, known as Neo-JMB gravitated towards the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group in 2015.

Since then, Bangladesh has been reeling from a spate of extremist violence. This new phase of violence is punctuated by targeted assassinations of social media activists, secular bloggers, foreign workers and tourists, Hindu and Christian priests as well as members of the Shia community. Most of these attacks have been claimed by Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS), Al-Qaeda's South Asian affiliate, and Neo-JMB.²

Bangladeshi Female "Jihadists"

Notwithstanding the Bangladeshi security forces' counter-terrorism campaign, the growing participation of female fighters since 2016 marks a new phase in Bangladesh's experience with violent extremism. The emergence of IS extremist narrative revolving around the so-called Caliphate, has significantly changed how extremist groups in Bangladesh view the evolving roles of women in terrorism - from playing peripheral roles to more central and assertive roles as suicide bombers, combatants, recruiters, preachers and propagandists.

² S. Niloy. [How JMB evolved to NEO-JMB](#). *bdnews24.com*. 17 August 2016.

Bangladesh witnessed its first female suicide bombing in December 2016 during a police raid at a militant hideout in Dhaka.³ According to Bangladesh's Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC), the suicide bomber blew herself up while pretending to surrender to the police when their safe house was sieged.⁴ The bomber, Shakira, was the wife of Rashedur Rahman Sumon, a militant member of the Neo-JMB.⁵

In 2017 alone, as many as seven female militants have been arrested and six others were killed in counter-terrorism raids. A sizable number of female 'jihadists', mostly belonging to Neo-JMB, have also been arrested in Dhaka, Sirajgonj, Rajshahi, Tangail, Sylhet and Chittagong districts earlier in 2016. According to police investigators, the top leadership of the Neo-JMB aims to recruit more females for its organisational activities.⁶

The trend indicates that violent, extremist organisations are deliberately engaging young women and girls as potential recruits in Bangladesh. Security agencies busted Neo-JMB's first female unit on 21 July 2016 after the detention of Mahmudul Hassan Tanvir, a Neo-JMB militant for the southern region.⁷ Tanvir was arrested in connection with the Gulshan café attack. Following his arrest, police and counter-terrorism officials detained four Neo-JMB female operatives on 24 July 2016;⁸ who were undergoing training to carry out attacks in Bangladesh.⁹ The police also recovered low-intensity crude bombs, explosive materials and extremist literature in their possession.¹⁰

Similarly, on 16 August 2016, four more female jihadists were apprehended in Dhaka. Three were students of Manarat International University (MIU), and the other was a trainee doctor at the Dhaka Medical College

³ Jamil, M., Rabbi, A. R., & Hasan, K. [Dhaka sees first female suicide bomber](#). 25 December 2016. Dhaka Tribune.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Rabbi, A. R., & Khan, M. J. (n.d.). [Recruiting Women New Goal of Terrorists](#). 2016.

⁷ The Daily Star. [JMB Women Arrested](#). 25 August 2016.

⁸ *ibid*.

⁹ *ibid*.

¹⁰ *ibid*.

Hospital.¹¹ Likewise, four female militants were detained in September. Before the arrest they were waiting for directives from the Neo-JMB high command to participate in *fidayeen* or suicide attacks.¹² More recently, during a police raid in Rajshahi on 12 May, a few militants including two females attacked security personnel with sharp weapons, leaving one fireman (who was helping the police) dead and eight others injured.¹³

Evolving Roles of Females in Jihadism in Bangladesh

The roles of women in 'jihadism' have evolved from wives and nourishers of 'jihadists', to suicide bombers, combatants, preachers and ideologues.¹⁴ Furthermore, they are being used as human shields in combat operations and they also facilitate the transmission of operational details.¹⁵ They are also emerging as important chat-room administrators of various online social platforms, translators of extremist materials from English to Bengali language, and leveraging on social media to radicalise and mentor other potential female 'jihadists'.¹⁶

This shift mirrors trends concerning the growing popularity of IS vis-à-vis Al-Qaeda in Bangladesh. Al-Qaeda 'restricts' the role of women in 'jihadist' activities.¹⁷ In one of Al-Qaeda's communiqués entitled "*Risala Ila Al-Akhawat Al-Muslimat*" (Letter to My Muslim Sisters), the present Al-Qaeda chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri's wife Umayma Hassan Ahmed has forbidden women from participating in combat operations.¹⁸ Umayma has defined

¹¹ Khan, M. J., & Hasan, K. [JMB Woman held in Dhaka](#). *Dhaka Tribune*. 16 August 2016.

¹² The Daily Star. [Neo-JMB Financers Hit Dead End](#). *The Daily Star*. 10 October 2016.

¹³ Bdnews24. (12 May, 2017). Retrieved from <http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2017/05/12/police-storm-militant-hideout-in-rajshahis-godagari>

¹⁴ Shishir, S. (5 May, 2017). Retrieved from <http://www.dhakatimes24.com/2017/01/05/15043>

¹⁵ Sultan, T. (26 December, 2016). Retrieved from <http://www.prothom-alo.com/bangladesh/article/1047001>

¹⁶ RAB. (n.d.). *যাঁবের অভিযানে রাজধানীর উত্তরা ও মোহাম্মদপুর থানা হতে একজন নারী জঙ্গি ও জঙ্গি আর্টিকেল অনুবাদকমহ জেএমবির (সারোয়ার-তামিম গ্রুপ) ০২ জন সক্রিয় সদস্য গ্রেফতার।* Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2vDaz1r>.

¹⁷ Rahmah, U. (10 May, 2016). Retrieved from <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/role-women-islamic-state-dynamics-terrorism-indonesia>

¹⁸ Insite Blog on Terrorism and Extremism. (n.d.). *Translated Message From Zawahiri's Wife To*

the main role of women “to preserve the mujahedeen in their sons, houses and secrets, and to help them in raising their sons well”.¹⁹

IS, on the other hand, outwardly encourages and recruits women to take up arms against its enemies.²⁰ The group permits women to assert themselves by carrying out responsibilities side by side with men and taking part in the struggle.

Lately, perhaps to widen their appeal some al-Qaeda ideologues have modified their earlier conclusions and have given ambiguous statements about female participation in armed actions. However, the ‘fundamental’ commitment of Al-Qaeda women remains to the family, with ‘martyrdom operations’ accorded a lesser priority.²¹

Driving Factors

The individual motivations for women to engage in terrorism are multifaceted. According to Bangladeshi security forces, most female radicals are influenced, and often pressurised by their husbands to become militants.²² Hence, female participation in terrorism is often linked to female subordination and not ideological attraction. Indeed, women militants in Bangladesh have tended to have one or more male family members who are also involved in militancy.²³

This could be because of patriarchal norms of Bangladeshi society in which female support for her husband is seen as a socio-cultural duty. In such traditional social frameworks, women are encouraged, and

indeed, expected to follow the men in the family. If women leave their husbands, they are shamed and ostracised by the society. Also, most women in Bangladesh are not financially self-sufficient. Hence, they are economically dependent on their husbands. These factors make it difficult for women to reject the extremist influence, and often oblige them to ‘follow’ their husbands or other male relatives’ direction.

While it is true that radicalisation of women is, sometimes, facilitated by relationships with others and also their social circumstances, there are also cases whereby women have voluntarily participated in militancy. Their militant activism can be understood as a response to the perception propagated by violent extremist groups – that Islam is in danger and the Muslim world is under attack and therefore ‘Jihad’ is the only way to fight back and protect the religion. The worldview constructed by these violent groups is characterised by violence, injustices and oppression to which the only panacea is their version of “Islam”. Violent images and videos online create strong emotionally-charged narratives that reinforce these claims.

A small but growing number of young, educated women from mostly middle-class backgrounds in Bangladesh are persuaded by this “Islamist vision” of a salvific, pristine polity. The declaration of the so-called “Caliphate” by IS has been instrumental in attracting these women to the idea of contributing to a utopian society governed by Sharia laws. These women purportedly feel empowered to be in the fight for the rights of Muslims who are portrayed as besieged and assailed by sustained extremist propaganda. The implied innocence of the suffering Muslims increases a sense of moral outrage that generates anger and provokes a strong desire to retaliate.

Some female ‘jihadists’ also harbour a secondary goal relating to greater gender equality. For instance, they are attracted to IS propaganda which often pushes for “Islamic feminism” and underlines the role of women as important state builders, while still following Islamic principles.²⁴ In other words,

Muslim Women. Retrieved from <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/about-us/21-jihad/227-translated-message-from-zawahiris-wife-to-muslim-women>

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ Rahmah, U. (10 May, 2016). Retrieved from <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/role-women-islamic-state-dynamics-terrorism-indonesia>

²¹ al-Shishani, M. B. (7 October, 2010). BBC. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11484672>

²² Rony, A. R. (19 October, 2016). *Bangla Tribune*. Retrieved from <http://www.banglatribune.com/national/news/149693>

²³ Alam, S. (12 September, 2016). Retrieved from <http://www.kalerkantho.com/print-edition/first-page/2016/09/12/404611>

²⁴ Baker, A. (6 September, 2014). Retrieved from <http://time.com/3276567/how-isis-is-recruiting-women-from-around-the-world/>

they view militancy as a form of empowerment, liberation, and an opportunity to live in a society with a belief system that they subscribe.

In most cases, the process of radicalisation in women begin with a pursuit for spirituality, a longing for recognition, a quest for identity, a sense of belonging, and a desire to practice pure Islam. Their recruitment takes place both online and offline. Acquaintances, friends and relatives can facilitate the recruitment as well as online interactions with like-minded people. In recent years, online chat forums and social media platforms have become a new recruitment and meeting place between recruiters and aspiring jihadists. Because of its apparent anonymity, people are more likely to self-disclose via computer-mediated technology, which contributes to feelings of greater intimacy. The mutual validation of ideas among the participants may not only lead them to develop ideas at odds with the rest of society, but also harden their beliefs as interaction among them acts as an echo chamber which gradually radicalises them collectively.

Neo-JMB: a Pioneer of Female Jihadism in Bangladesh

Although other banned militant organisations in Bangladesh such as Hizb-ut Tahrir and ABT have female followers²⁵, they do not play an active role in jihadist operations²⁶. Besides AQIS, Neo-JMB is the only other 'jihadist' group in South Asia that recruits and trains women for combat activities that include suicide missions.²⁷ It is reported to have a "Sisters Department" which plays an active role in this process.²⁸ Generally, most of the female militants are family members of male operatives. However, the Neo-JMB also recruits women beyond their families and

marry them off to fighters.²⁹ The female Neo-JMB militants use social media platforms such as Facebook and encrypted social media applications like Threema and Telegram for communication.³⁰

It is essential to point out that the participation of females as combatants is not new to South Asia. Apart from Bangladesh, female militants have fought in the Sri Lankan civil war and the insurgency in Indian Kashmir, and joined in the attacks in various parts of Pakistan.³¹

Advantages of Recruiting Females as Jihadists

Female involvement in terrorist activities in Bangladesh has increased due to several reasons. First, following the Gulshan terror attack, Bangladesh's security forces have intensified its counter-terrorism efforts across the country. The increasing number of arrests has thinned out the male fighters and dented the operational capability of these networks. As such, 'jihadist' groups have been recruiting women to supplement their manpower and remain functional.

Second, female 'jihadists' offer operational advantages. For instance, they can get closer to their targets without being suspected. Women are usually considered to be passive and non-violent, and are thus subjected to less rigorous security checks. Moreover, Bangladeshi security forces are dominated by males who cannot conduct rigorous physical checks on females for reasons of propriety.

Third, as females do not conform to any profile that would trigger law enforcement red flags, their radicalisation is less noticed by people in their social surroundings. For instance, the presence of women in militant dens is less likely to arouse public suspicion as they are assumed to be unlikely perpetrators of terrorist violence.

²⁵ Acharyya, K. (20 August, 2016). Retrieved from <http://www.firstpost.com/world/well-educated-women-jihadists-recruited-by-bangladeshi-terror-groups-pose-serious-threat-2967048.html>

²⁶ Sultan, T. (26 December, 2016). Retrieved from <http://www.prothom-alo.com/bangladesh/article/1047001>

²⁷ Afrad, K. (26 December, 2016). Retrieved from <http://www.dainikpurbokone.net/134984/>

²⁸ Parash, S. H. (27 December, 2016). Retrieved from <http://bangla.samakal.net/2016/12/27/258671>

²⁹ Sultan, T. (26 December, 2016). Retrieved from <http://www.prothom-alo.com/bangladesh/article/1047001>

³⁰ DailySun. (18 August, 2016). Retrieved from <http://bangla.daily-sun.com/post/2259/>

³¹ Parashar, S. (2009). Feminist international relations and women militants: case studies from Sri Lanka and Kashmir. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 235-256.

Finally, at the strategic level, female attackers attract more publicity and media attention, as they are perceived to generate greater psychological impact on the adversary or the target audience. Even symbolic participation by female militants in combat and training activities attracts more media attention compared to their male counter-parts. All these imperatives often make female members 'highly effective' actors for their organisations. Nonetheless, female militants would continue to play subordinate roles to men as both Bangladeshi society, and the ideologies of the Islamist militant outfits are traditionally patriarchal in nature.

Conclusion

As extremist groups are increasingly recruiting women to engage in a range of activities, female militancy in Bangladesh should be given due attention. The involvement of women as combatants can have grave implications for Bangladesh's internal security, inter-religious harmony and tolerant socio-political fabric.

Gender-specific counter-narratives and counter-extremism messaging to counter the appeal of violent extremist propaganda need to be revised to cater to gender nuances. Bangladesh's counter-terrorism efforts have been generally successful so far but terrorism cannot be eliminated by eliminating the terrorists alone. Addressing the underlying socio-economic, political and ideological factors that sustain radicalisation and breed violence have to be addressed in the longer term along with neutralising the operational strength of the militant groups.

Militant groups in Bangladesh will continue to find supporters and willing participants unless the country adopts a more inclusive approach that is particularly focused on eliminating conditions conducive to radicalisation, and promoting gender equality. For instance, campaigns focusing on empowering women and their socio-economic development based on the Islamic way of life rooted in the Quran and Sunnah could be introduced to increase their 'bargaining power' and self-esteem and encourage them to take a firm stand against violent extremist ideologies.

Also, as most women in traditional societies like Bangladesh mainly depend on informal sources and traditional institutions like the madrassas for religious knowledge the government should engage the Islamic scholars to counter the narratives employed by 'jihadists' to recruit women. In addition, women should be trained to be religious preachers and employed in the community, mosques and social media forums to facilitate a moderate understanding of religion. Lastly, more female officers should be involved in law enforcement and counter-terrorism measures to effectively deal with gender sensitivities.

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Roles and Participation of Women in Indian Left-Wing Extremism: from ‘Victims’ to ‘Victimisers’ of Violence

Akanksha Narain

Women’s experience in India’s left-wing extremist (LWE) groups cuts both ways. While association with these groups has allowed women to transcend the traditional, gendered roles imposed by a patriarchal society, they have still been kept subservient notwithstanding the Naxal rhetoric of “restructuring the society.” In other words, paradoxically, a subtle form of patriarchy exists within India’s LWE movement, which it, otherwise, rejects.

The participation of women in Indian Maoist groups¹ is instructive to understand their multifaceted roles and diversified experiences as ‘victims’ and ‘victimisers’. These two dimensions are not only understudied but also inadequately understood in war and conflict studies because of the broad binary view of women as either ‘victims’ or ‘perpetrators’ of violence. This article argues that women are both ‘victims’ and ‘victimisers’ in conflicts rather than just being ‘victims’ or ‘perpetrators’ of violence.²

Introduction

LWE in India draws inspiration from the Marxist ideological rhetoric of “restructuring society” into a purportedly classless one, and the Chinese communist revolutionary Mao

Tse-Tung’s art of tactical warfare.³ The movement in the country has emerged in areas where widespread socio-economic differences, poverty, social injustices and growing inequalities have adversely impacted the lives of the impoverished masses.⁴

The violence by the State and corporations coupled with the failure of market reforms to trickle down to the grassroots level even after 70 years of India’s independence has only further expanded the LWE membership in India.⁵ The multiple forms of violence, include denial of land and forest rights, incursions of mining companies, unfair crop sharing agreements between landlords and farmers, caste-based violence, and physical and sexual abuse committed by certain landed-folks and State forces against the indigenous tribes (*Adivasis*), Dalits (lower castes/untouchables) and farmers.⁶

This year marks fifty years of the Naxal uprising against the landed-aristocracy, and genesis of the left-wing movement in India. In early 1967, facing economic exploitation and social oppression, a group of peasants in Naxalbari (a remote village in West Bengal) rebelled against the rich landlords and seized

¹ Terms Maoism, Left-Wing Extremism and Naxalism are often used interchangeably. Naxalism derives its name from the confrontation that started between the landed-gentry and the peasants in Naxalbari, in West Bengal. Meanwhile, Maoism, in the Indian context, is a combination of Marxist ideals and Mao’s warfare strategy;

² Shekhawat, Seema, and Chayanika Saxena. “Victims or Victimizers? Naxal Women, Violence and the Reinvention of Patriarchy.” In *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-Conflict Reintegration*, 117-31. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

³ Ibid.

⁴ In 2009, the then home minister told Parliament that around 223 districts in India were affected by Naxalism. In March 2017, according to the current Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh, the number of districts affected by Maoist violence has reduced from 106 to 68. Today, Naxalism has been confined to seven northeastern Indian states affecting as many districts.

⁵ Ramchandra, Guha. “Adivasis, Naxalites and Indian Democracy.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Aug 2007.

⁶ Ramchandra, Guha. “Adivasis, Naxalites and Indian Democracy.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Aug 2007.

their lands.⁷ A young woman, Shanti Munda, among others, led the charge with a 15-month-old baby strapped to her back. Shanti fired the first of a slew of arrows on a policeman, an event which the forces retaliated by killing eleven peasants and tribals.⁸ This incident sparked India's five decade-long Maoist movement.

Women - whether *Adivasis*, peasant or Dailt - in India's hinterland (including India's resource-rich central plateaus and forests and tribal belts) have joined the Naxal movement to fight for their rights and justice. Besides this primary catalyst, there are other additional motivating factors. For example, the decision to join Naxalism is also driven by the desire to seek agency and combat sexual abuse, which they face from some sections of upper caste men and security personnel (read 'State').

Left-wing Extremism (LWE) and Women as Active Participants

Women have joined the Naxal movement, in a multitude of roles be it as cooks, nurses, couriers, spies or propagandists, to fight against violence perpetrated by the landed-gentry and the State.⁹ The primary motivating factor to join the movement is based on the overarching experience of violence rather than gender. According to Chakrabarty et al, "A large section of women is being drawn to the political process not as 'women' or individuals but as members of a community holding a sectoral identity."¹⁰

'Revenge' and 'relationship', as explained by Mia Bloom, are key factors that account for women's participation in a violent movement, especially as combatants.¹¹ A loss of dignity

or attack on a close relative can galvanise a person to seek 'revenge'.¹²

The arrests and torture of male members of the society, relative deprivation, loss of dignity and poverty push women towards LWE, as they seek 'revenge' in Naxal-dominated areas. A case in point is Rebbeca, a tribal girl, and her sister who joined the movement after their brother succumbed to death in security forces' custody due to severe torture.¹³ Additionally, the onus of fighting in LWE-hit regions often falls on women simply because men are absent -- either due to mass urban migration for better livelihood opportunities or en-mass arrests of young males by the security forces on charges of being Naxal operatives.

Moving beyond fact that tribals, Dalits and poor farmers are denied equality, women also join Maoist groups to seek 'agency.' Patriarchy is deep-seated in Indian society, especially in the less-developed regions. The opportunity to 'fight like men', pick up arms, work as spies, and transport food and arms for the groups, gives them a sense of recognition/identity which they do not receive from the society, otherwise. The intense training and harsh conditions in the forests where the Naxal cadres live, train and fight leaves no room for special treatment of women. Consequently, both men and women train as equals, giving female comrades a sense of equality.¹⁴

Within militant and insurgent groups, women have proven themselves as able members and combatants, and "are preferred as couriers of messages, money, arms and ammunition."¹⁵ In fact, female members are considered to be more brutal than most of

⁷ Jyoti, Dhruvo, and Pramod Giri. [Naxalbari@50: Maoist uprising was sparked by this tribal woman leader](#). *Hindustan Times*. 29 May 2017.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Shekhawat, Seema, and Chayanika Saxena. "Victims or Victimizers? Naxal Women, Violence and the Reinvention of Patriarchy." In *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-Conflict Reintegration*, 117-31. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

¹⁰ Chakrabarty, Bidyut, and Rajat Kumar Kujur. *Maoism in India: Reincarnation of Ultra-Left Wing Extremism in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Routledge, 2012.

¹¹ Shekhawat, Seema, ed. *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence*

and Post-Conflict Reintegration. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ [Why women join India's Maoist groups](#). *BBC*, 20 November 2013.

¹⁴ Shekhawat, Seema, and Chayanika Saxena. "Victims or Victimizers? Naxal Women, Violence and the Reinvention of Patriarchy." In *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-Conflict Reintegration*, 119. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

¹⁵ Singh, Pratibha. 2015. *Women in the Maoist War in India: Two Sides of the Spectrum*, European Consortium for Political Research Conference, Sweden, 11-13 June 2015. University of Uppsala: Sweden.

the male cadres.¹⁶ In the case of India, the violent persecution of police informers by female Maoist cadres is well documented.

For instance, a female Maoist militant from Orissa, Jamuni narrates the account of her professional callousness as follows: “I led the group who killed a police informer in 2009. I was the one who shot him in full public view. Before killing him, we cut his three fingers. He shouted and I laughed, daring the people standing there to come forward to rescue him You may call it cruelty but it served [a] dual purpose: one for the movement and [the] other personal. The public torture and killing of the person sent the message that if people acted against us, they will have a painful death.”¹⁷

Moreover, the involvement of women serves the tactical needs of the Maoist groups. Females are less likely to be inspected and detected by security personnel as compared to men. The fear of adverse media coverage and human rights watchdogs reduces the likelihood of forces attacking public places and Naxal hideouts in the presence of women and children - the ideal human shields.¹⁸

The steady flow of women filling the ranks does not stem only from the desire to break free from patriarchy and the aspiration to gain respect. It is also a response to ‘real’ or ‘perceived’ sexual violence. It is ‘real’ for those who have been abused sexually or witnessed their relative and friends suffer this trauma., and ‘perceived’ for those womenfolk who are simply afraid of the possibility of falling victims to sexual violence by the State. A case in point is a claim by the Communist Party of India (Maoist) that the Sukma attacks carried out in April 2017 which resulted in the death of 37 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel, “were in retaliation to the alleged sexual violence by

¹⁶ Shekhawat, Seema, and Chayanika Saxena. “Victims or Victimizers? Naxal Women, Violence and the Reinvention of Patriarchy.” In *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-Conflict Reintegration*, 121. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Singh, Pratibha. [Women's Role in the Naxalite Movement](#). *Center for Land Warfare Studies*. 27 April 2013.

security forces against tribal women in the conflict zone.”¹⁹

Gender and LWE: Reinventing Patriarchy

Notwithstanding the high number of females playing critical roles in Indian LWE, they are often portrayed as caregivers and nurturers who need to be protected. Charu Mazumdar, the Naxal leader whose eight articles (known as ‘Historic Eight Documents’) formed the ideological foundation of the Naxal movement, himself wrote that women should not be among the troops “because women need a place to stay at least for the night”.²⁰ Even when the Naxal/Maoist literature focuses on women as combatants and not as ‘victims’ or persons who need to be ‘protected’, it often highlights the drastic conditions (i.e. poverty or State and upper class/caste violence) that create anomalies of women ‘fighting like men’.

This suffices to show that despite the lofty rhetoric by LWE groups to “restructure society” and bring about gender equality, they paradoxically reinforce patriarchy albeit a benign one.²¹ The afore-mentioned assertion that female cadres are often believed to be more brutal than their male counter-parts, is not without its own set of problems. For instance, women have to work extra hard to prove their ‘worth’ as a fighter in order to be promoted and therefore the disposition to be more violent. It is this brutality that attests a woman’s right to be a fighter and a leader, without which upward movement is unlikely.²²

Despite the unsaid rule of women having to prove their mettle more compared to male members, female comrades hardly find a

¹⁹ Dahat, Pavan. [Sukma attacks in retaliation to sexual violence on tribal women, say Maoists](#). *The Hindu*, 27 April 2017.

²⁰ Singh, Pratibha. 2015. *Women in the Maoist War in India: Two Sides of the Spectrum*, European Consortium for Political Research Conference, Sweden, 11-13 June 2015. University of Uppsala: Sweden.

²¹ Singh, Pratibha. [Women's Role in the Naxalite Movement](#). *Center for Land Warfare Studies*. 27 April 2013.

²² Shekhawat, Seema, and Chayanika Saxena. “Victims or Victimizers? Naxal Women, Violence and the Reinvention of Patriarchy.” In *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-Conflict Reintegration*, 121. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

seat on the front tables.²³ While negotiating peace and ceasefire agreements with the authorities, women have rarely represented the Maoist groups in spite of filling up the lower ranks proportionally. During the October 2004 ceasefire agreement between the State Government of Andhra Pradesh and the LWE groups, none of the women who were part of the movement were represented.²⁴

The issue of gender-based discrimination is not limited to such 'glass ceilings' in Maoist groups alone. Although Dalit, *Adivasi* and lower caste/class women often become Naxalites to escape or avenge sexual violence, yet they face, more or less, similar experiences while serving in these groups. Rapes and sexual slavery are often legitimised in the name of boosting the "morale of the troops". Some women quietly submit to such exploitations; those who resist are shunned by both female and male cadres.

Shobha Mandi, 25, a former Maoist, in her autobiography - *Ek Maowadi ki Diary* (The Diary of a Maoist) - captures the plight of female cadres and patriarchal structures within the groups. "Every woman is seen as an object which would satisfy the lust of all male cadres. The movement had lured me in 2003 by making me believe that men and women would be equal in the new order it strives to create. But what I experienced over there was horrifying, worse than the oppression that the women of rural India face", she writes.²⁵

Victimisation of these women, who themselves have been perpetrators of violence, does not end with them quitting or retiring from the movement. They find it

difficult to re-assimilate into the society, especially if they have been victims of sexual violence. Even though they overstepped gendered boundaries in order to fight for the rights of their communities, the communities are less willing to accept them given this transgression. They often have to leave their homes and settle in other places to start a new life. Most often, these ex-female Maoists look after the children who serving female comrades have been forced to abandon by the movement.²⁶

Moreover, restructuring land rights does not extend to women. While Naxals continue to fight for equitable land distribution, poverty alleviation, and freedom from widespread hunger and malnutrition, the demands for equal land distribution between men and women and the right of women as coparceners in land inheritance is not central to the debate.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding claims and efforts to establish a more equitable society, the reality is far from this. No movement is immune to the social environment out of which it is born, hence resulting in the re-creation and reinforcement of patriarchal norms within Left-Wing groups. Men and women have different experiences in conflict and it is important to recognise and address the concerns accordingly.

The enforcement of binaries - solely as either 'perpetrators of violence' or 'victims of violence' - while viewing the role of women in conflict zones eschews our understanding the multi-layered experience of women. On the one hand, the Naxal movement has given women from India's rural and tribal belt the opportunity to take up arms and activities that have been usually reserved for men. At the same time, the external patriarchal structures are re-created and re-imposed in the form of sexual abuse, rape, denial of seats at the high tables and falling back into gendered roles once the conflict is over. The task at hand for policymakers is to ensure that

²³ Mann, Carol. "Women in Combat: Identifying Global Trends." In *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-Conflict Reintegration*, 20-35. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

²⁴ Shekhawat, Seema, and Chayanika Saxena. "Victims or Victimizers? Naxal Women, Violence and the Reinvention of Patriarchy." In *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-Conflict Reintegration*, 117-31. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

²⁵ Haque, Saiful. [Former Naxal commander who was raped and tortured by comrades reveals the culture of brutal misogyny in the Maoist movement](#). Daily Mail UK, 9 June 2013.

²⁶ Shekhawat, Seema, and Chayanika Saxena. "Victims or Victimizers? Naxal Women, Violence and the Reinvention of Patriarchy." In *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-Conflict Reintegration*, 117-31. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

reconciliation and rehabilitation policies recognise and address this unique experience of women.

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Commentary: Implications of Hambali's Trial

Bilveer Singh

Indonesian terrorist Hambali's prosecution in the US will ease the pressure on Jakarta. It will also avert the possibility of turning him into a terrorist icon that could have created additional security challenges for Indonesia's counter-terrorism and counter-extremism efforts. Hambali is the first Southeast Asian terrorist leader to be tried under the Donald Trump administration. This development comes amid shifting terrorist terrain in Southeast Asia from an IS-dominated landscape to a more complicated and hybrid threat environment.

Introduction

The US decision to prosecute Hambali, a leading militant of Al-Qaeda (AQ) affiliated Indonesian terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) is a welcome relief for Jakarta. Hambali's trial in Indonesia would have turned him into a martyr, fuelling militant recruitment, emboldening local militant groups and strengthening the extremist narrative.

Hambali, also known as Riduan Isamuddin, 53, was the operational head of JI's Mantiqi 1 that covered Malaysia and Singapore. The charge sheet against Hambali implicates him in a number of terrorist plots and attacks, including the 2002 Bali bombings, which killed over 200 people.¹ He was arrested in August 2003 in Thailand and was detained in an overseas secret CIA prison called 'Black Site' for three years before being re-located to Guantanamo detention centre in September 2006.

Hambali's Ideological Orientations

Hambali, who hails from Cianjur, West Java, moved to Malaysia in search of employment

¹ [Bali bombing: Guantanamo inmate Hambali charged over 2002 attack](#). *The Guardian*. 24 June 2017.

in 1985.² He was then ushered into the path of radicalism by Kharis, a close follower of radical Islam.³ Kharis' home was close to Hambali's residence in the Sungai Manggis area, Banting (near Kuala Lumpur). Various groups and activists that swore allegiance to the 'Islamist' group Darul Islam, including Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Bashyir and their followers, also stayed in the same neighbourhood; most of the JI exiles stayed here as well.⁴

According to one account, Abdullah Sungkar, the founding leader of JI recruited Hambali. For six months, Hambali attended Sungkar's lectures that changed Hambali's worldview and drew him towards extremism and terrorism.⁵ At the end of his stint as Sungkar's student, Hambali went to the infamous 'Sada Camp' in the Kurram tribal region for militant training.

The veteran Afghan 'jihadist' Abdul Rasul Sayyaf ran the 'Sada camp' along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area. During his stay Hambali was ideologically indoctrinated and trained for combat operations returning to Malaysia in 1988.

In Afghanistan, Hambali met AQ's founding leader Osama bin Laden and the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks Khalid Sheikh Muhammad. His long-term association with

² Kenneth J. Conboy, *The Second Front: Inside Asia's Most Dangerous Terrorist Network*, (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2006), p.47.

³ Interview with Asad Said Ali, the former Deputy Head of the National Intelligence Agency of Indonesia, Jakarta, July 2017.

⁴ Interview with Asad Said Ali, the former Deputy Head of the National Intelligence Agency of Indonesia, Jakarta, July 2017; Darul Islam was involved in a bloody struggle to establish a Shariah State in West Java from 1948 to 1962.

⁵ Kenneth J. Conboy, *The Second Front: Inside Asia's Most Dangerous Terrorist Network*, (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2006), pp.47-48; this was also verified by Asad Said Ali.

extremist ideologues and terrorist leaders such as Abdullah Sungkar, Abu Bakar Bashyir, Osama and Sheikh Muhammad, transformed Hambali into a violent 'jihadist' harbouring an anti-Western, anti-Christian and anti-Israel ideological outlook. Moreover, he believed in the creation of an Islamic state and governance based on *Shari'ah* laws. He also subscribed to *qital fisabillillah*, where jihad only meant war, and that it was legitimate to launch pre-emptive strikes as Muslims were purportedly living in a war situation or *Darul Harb*, a conflict or war zone. In the narrative of extremist Muslim groups, the term *Darul Harb* refers to the status of Muslims residing in the West or non-Muslim communities.

For Hambali, AQ/JI's version of 'jihad' was an individual obligation (*fardhu ain*) and not just a collective responsibility (*fardhu kifayah*). He also believed in the concept of *irhabiyah* (the use of terrorism as a strategy or means). For him, it was 'permissible' to attack states whose political systems and laws were established by non-Muslims through acts of violence and suicide bombings.

Charge sheet against Hambali

The US Department of Defence's Prosecutor Office notified Hambali of a trial in June 2017, making him the first detainee to be tried under the Donald Trump administration. The charges framed against Hambali include promoting militancy, planning and organising bombings against Western interests in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar and the Philippines.⁶

The charge sheet also included allegations regarding Hambali's involvement in facilitating JI military training in Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) camps in the Philippines. He also worked with Southeast Asian militants and assisted in the transfer of money, personnel and supplies for JI and AQ operations in the region.

Further, Hambali is charged with being the mastermind of the 2000 Christmas' Eve bombings in Indonesia that killed 19 people.

⁶ See, "[Notification of the Swearing of Charges in United States v Encep Nurjamen](#)". Office of the Chief Prosecutor of Military Commissions, Department of Defense, Washington. 23 June 2017.

He also assisted terror plots in Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Cambodia and Singapore. He directed the 2002 Bali bombings after the planned attack on the Caltex refinery in Sumatra was aborted. Additionally, he ordered the acquisition of 5-7 tons of explosives for bombings in Singapore, and funded the attack on the J.W. Marriott Hotel in Jakarta in 2003 (where 11 people died).

The US has also accused Hambali of being involved in AQ's anthrax programme. He is also implicated in a plan to attack Israel's El Al airline and its embassy in Bangkok. Hambali was instrumental in creating the safe house for Southeast Asian jihadists in Afghanistan called the Philippines House in southern Kandahar province. He also established the *al-Ghuraba* cell in Karachi to groom the next generation of JI leaders in Southeast Asia, which was led by Gun Gun, Hambali's brother.⁷

Implications of Hambali's trial

Evidentiary issues have been the major stumbling block in trying Hambali.⁸ Almost all the terrorists involved in the various bombing operations in Indonesia, such as in Bali and Jakarta, have been tried and sentenced. Three have been executed for their roles in the first Bali bombings. Even if Hambali is implicated in the Bali bombings, he might escape the death sentence. At the most, Hambali could be convicted for providing funds for the 2000 Christmas' Eve bombings and the 2003 Marriott Hotel bombings.⁹

In 2009, on the invitation of the Obama administration, three officers each from Densus 88, Indonesia's main counter-

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See Paul Maley and Peter Alford. [Bali mastermind Hambali may escape trial despite Guantanamo Bay evidence](#). *The Australian*. 27 April 2011; Paul Toohey, "Australia asked to consider conducting trial of alleged Bali terror mastermind", *Daily Telegraph*, 27 November 2016. Australian Indonesianist, Greg Fealy, however, believes that the trial is only taking place now because Hambali was "tortured extensively" and as "it has taken him some years to recover psychologically, if not physically". See Samantha Hawley. [Australian terror attack plots detailed in accused Bali bombing planner's charge sheet](#). *ABC News*, 28 June 2017.

⁹ Interview with Asad Said Ali, the former Deputy Head of National Intelligence Agency of Indonesia, Jakarta, July 2017.

terrorism agency, and the state intelligence agency Badan Intelijen Negara (BIN) visited Hambali in Guantanamo.¹⁰ The US was hoping that Hambali could be tried and executed in Indonesia. However, due to evidentiary issues and fear that Hambali would be given a light prison sentence in Indonesia, the Trump administration decided to proceed with his trial in Guantanamo.

For Indonesia, Hambali's trial in the US is a welcome relief as prosecuting him at home could have serious security implications. He is likely to be hailed as an iconic Indonesian 'jihadi' because of his antecedents in Afghanistan, and involvement in several major military operations in the region. He would be further exalted as a survivor of Guantanamo, a detention centre where detainees are said to have suffered gross abuses through enhanced interrogation procedures.¹¹ His return would heighten militancy and augment the morale and standing of various local militant groups, fuelling fresh recruitment. His trial in Indonesia also carried the inherent risk of polarising the consensus to further strengthen Indonesia's counter-terrorism and extremism policies.

Further, if he returns and is imprisoned, there is the risk that he could radicalise fellow inmates. At the time of his detention, Hambali was carrying a Spanish passport, giving Jakarta grounds to reject his return. Overall, keeping him away from home for as long as possible will ease the domestic pressure on Jakarta.

Conclusion

A long-term detainee and 'high value' terrorist, the US considers Hambali too dangerous to be released from custody. This is not surprising given the re-involvement of many ideologically hard-core ex-Guantanamo detainees in terrorism activities upon release, the US fears that Hambali would also re-engage in terrorism if he is released.¹²

¹⁰ Interview with Asad Said Ali, the former Deputy Head of National Intelligence Agency of Indonesia, Jakarta, July 2017.

¹¹ Interview with Nasir Abbas, former JI Mantiqi 3 Commander, in Jakarta in July 2017.

¹² For details, see, "Notification of the Swearing of

In view of this, the question arises as to what the US would do if Hambali should be acquitted. If he is to be released, the question regarding his repatriation arises. Would Indonesia accept his return at that stage? Is it possible for the US to continue to detain him if Indonesia refuses to accept him? Hambali's conviction and punishment would also present other problems. He is likely to be held up as a hero and martyr by Southeast Asian militant groups. His execution might also trigger violent backlash against US interests in the region and the Indonesian government. Hambali's trial and its outcome will therefore require close monitoring and the ground needs to be prepared for the outcome.

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Charges in United States v Encep Nurjaman, (Office of the Chief Prosecutor of Military Commissions, Department of Defense, Washington), 23 June 2017; also see [Bali bombing: Guantanamo inmate Hambali charged over 2002 attack](#). *The Guardian*, 24 June 2017.

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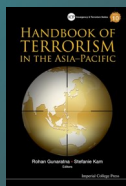
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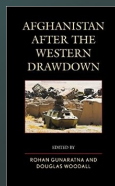


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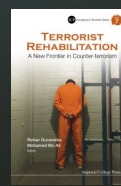
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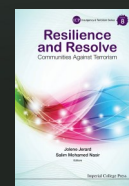
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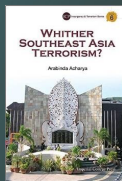
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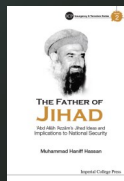
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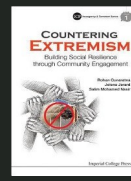
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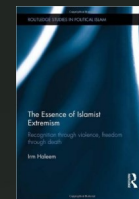
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