Women and Terrorism:

Challenging Traditional Gender Roles

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From Jihad Jane to the Black Widow, women's involvement in terrorism is particularly intriguing as it's typically viewed in defiance of traditional concepts of gender. Because of men's involvement in the majority of acts of terrorism, terrorism is associated with masculine traits such as strength, assertiveness, and dominance. Consequently, when women--whose gender is dictated by feminine qualities such as passivity, sensitivity, and submissiveness--dedicate themselves to the same acts of terrorism that men do, it raises many alarming questions. Although there is a significant difference in terms of masculinity and femininity, instead of analyzing female terrorists as merely female terrorists, I will attempt to analyze female terrorists as terrorists so that their agency and capacity to commit acts of terrorism is fully recognized. Moreover, I will examine the reasons in which women become involved, their roles in perpetrating acts of terrorism, and the media's coverage of women involved in terrorism in order to thoroughly answer the question, "what is the significance of women's participation in acts of terrorism?"

Without regard to gender, trying to understand the reasons that motivate terrorists to commit horrific acts of violence is complex in and of itself. Many scholars who research terrorism hypothesize that socioeconomic conditions as well as psychological factors help explain why terrorists act the way they do. In the current scope of terrorism and especially after the September, 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, "national politicians and United Nations officials were quick to identify poverty, global income inequality, unemployment, and low levels of education as key causes of terrorism" (Gottlieb 38). In a general sense, it's easy to point to poverty as the source of the world's overwhelming problems, and adding the issue of terrorism to the world's list of problems prompts world leaders to take poverty more seriously. Likewise, the psychological status of terrorists concerns many who wish to identify the origins of terrorist attacks. Although most scholars typically don't follow a "mental illness model," the psychological background and behavior of terrorists also helps to explain their motivation to carry out attacks. Psychological damage such as trauma during childhood sometimes triggers terrorists to "see the world in a grossly unrealistic light," which ultimately pushes them to justify their extreme violence (Mahan 13). These aspects lend us in our understanding of the motivations behind terrorist's actions, but they are only small steps in revealing the context of terrorist motivations.

While looking at terrorist motivations irrespective of gender aids us in our understanding of terror-

ism as a whole, gender still provides a vital role in grasping the reality of terrorism. Specifically, many feminist scholars use approaches such as the idea of relational autonomy to explain the motivation of women involved in terrorism (Sjoberg 72). Other scholars in the field of terrorism use already existing approaches such as the impact of traumatic events and historical context and develop them further so that they apply to women's involvement in terrorism (Jacques 305).

The theory of relational autonomy critiques traditional concepts of autonomy. While autonomy brings up issues of self-awareness, individuality, and the ability to make decisions, autonomy as a theory also aligns itself with notions of masculinity, according to many feminist philosophers. Because masculinity stereotypes favor treating men as strong and independent and femininity stereotypes emphasize treating women as weak and dependent, the traditional view on autonomy lacks the perspective in which these stereotypes were historically used to employ oppression against women. Consequently, the first question imposed on women involved in terrorism usually wonders whether the terrorist woman or women were forced by a male authority or if they actually had the capacity to commit and plan terrorist acts themselves: "Did she do it under influence? By ideology? To aid and abet?" (Huckerby). Yet, it's actually almost impossible that anyone would ask a male terrorist whether they were forced by a woman to commit an act of terrorism. Thus, these questions in connection to the theory of relational autonomy indicate the important role that power relations play when trying to understand what motivates female terrorists to dedicate themselves to terrorism.

Jihad Jane

In the case of Colleen LaRose, also known as "Jihad Jane," some of the theories covering the reasons in which she became an extremist through the internet are particularly representative of the aforementioned ideas. Although LaRose certainly lived an obscure life--since she married a 32-year-old man when she was just 16 years old and dropped out of high school, she committed minor crimes such as writing bad checks, and she had a reputation as an eccentric alcoholic who talked to her cats--her background by itself does not necessitate a turn to extremist violence. Rather, according to scholars Jeffry Halverson and Amy Way, she found the online community that supported Jihad terrorism to be one of the only places where she found consolation:

The normative social structures of her troubled daily reality were subverted by the internet and the communitas she found in extremist circles that shared her scorn for American society. In this new reality, she was not only an important participant in a worldwide struggle encoded with profound transcendent status, but apparently valued romantically, which may reflect a longing for appreciation. (Halverson 143)

As LaRose engaged Islamic radicalism over the internet, she found a new community that finally welcomed her, which demonstrates that her primary motive in perpetrating a terrorist attack was more personal than ideological. LaRose did not find autonomy in her marriage or other parts of her life, but she did find autonomy when she corresponded with other marginalized individuals over the internet. Ultimately, LaRose's feelings of marginalization plus her access to an online community of radical Islamists gave her a new sense of empowerment that was not previously granted to her.

Historical Context

Other than relational autonomy, looking at the historical context in connection to gender is important as well in trying to understand women's motivations to become terrorists. As previously mentioned, gender stereotypes that place men as strong and active and women as weak and passive appear in institutions throughout history, both domestically and internationally. Further, in the case of the Black Widows of Russia, also known as Shahidka, women "joined the rebel group willingly in search of terror groups or deepening their involvement with them in response to deeply traumatic events" (Griset 240). The Black Widows were not driven by ideology nor alienation from society like LaRose but were driven by the fact that they had witnessed the death or torture of a family member during Russia's harsh counterterrorism campaign against Chechen separatists. Russia as a state also conformed to gender stereotypes as they tried to garner support from Russians against the Black Widows "by telling Russians that Chechens sell their women into terrorism, and drug them to force them to carry out their missions," even though no evidence supports their claim that women were forced to commit acts of terrorism (Sjoberg 72). Additionally, in terms of concepts of gender in the US, the Bush administration somewhat gave force to these stereotypes about gender when "in the famous 'axis of evil' speech, one of the things that

separated good and evil… was how civilized people treat women – which is not to involve them in terror" (Sjoberg 72). While trying to gain support from Americans to advance the war in Iraq, this comment from George W. Bush accepts the clash of civilization theory, which believes that in this day and age, conflict will arise mainly due to a difference in culture. Nevertheless, in times of conflict such as during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, when society at large acknowledges that women have little to no agency, women will then seek ways so that society will recognize them. Empirically, most groups who experience oppression or poverty do not turn to terrorism. However, a perceived sense of oppression, whether or not that oppression actually occurs does not matter, but the fact that a perception of oppression exists might trigger a violent response from the oppressed. Thus, examining the historical context is significant when determining the motivating factors of a woman involved in terrorism.

Role of Participants

Similar to the "why?" question that scholars in the field of terrorism try to answer, it's also important to consider the roles of participants in terrorist groups and adding the scope of gender to those issues remains pertinent. As with many organizations who ascribe to a patriarchal point of view, even if women wish to participate, terrorist groups themselves reinforce gender stereotypes with "men [being] the planners and decision makers and the women [taking] orders" (Griset 241). Because of the prevalence of gender stereotypes, women's roles in terrorist groups mostly keeps them on the sidelines of terrorist activity. Scholars Griset and Mahan of Terrorism in Perspective provide four main labels that identify the role of women terrorists: sympathizers, spies, warriors, and dominant forces.

Women who follow the "sympathizer" identity indirectly support acts of terrorism. "Sympathizers" observe the traditional patriarchal order. When the men of terrorist groups are busy planning, funding, and strategizing attacks, the women help them by performing domestic duties such as cooking, sewing, and being at their disposal for sex (Griset 242). Albeit their form of participation does not serve a prominent or superior role, sympathizers are "nevertheless crucial to the success of terrorist attempts to disrupt the social order" (Griset 242). Moreover, the sympathizer position challenges the myth that women participate in acts of terrorism because they are a "product of women's liberation and feminist ideas" (Griset 247). Suggesting that women only want to take part in acts of terrorism because they want to overthrow the traditional way societies mandate gender roles completely fails to take into consideration the role of sympathizers.

Along the same lines as sympathizers, "spies" utilize gender stereotypes by having women participate as "decoys, messengers, intelligence gatherers, and spies" (Griset 243). Although this role is more direct than "sympathizers," spies do not take an active role in the same manner that men of the group do when it comes to leading an attack. Spies carry out attacks through dramatic exploitation of feminine stereotypes. For instance, women will hide bombs in baby carriages or even pretend to be pregnant to disguise explosives (Griset 243). Because of gender stereotypes and the overwhelming conception that men dominate the sphere of terrorism, no one suspects women to commit terrorist acts. Accordingly, gender stereotypes work against those who counter terrorist forces as stereotypes about femininity and masculinity actually help "spies" in their terrorist attacks.

Additionally, Griset identifies a third category of participation among women terrorists: "warriors." Warriors, as the label suggests, play a direct role in executing the violence necessary to conduct a terrorist attack. However, while "warriors" are vital in using weapons and incendiary devices against enemies, they do not lead the group as they "seldom have any say in the policies or plans they are carrying out" (Griset 243). Ultimately, warriors signify that men of terrorist groups are committed to widening the group's appeal, but when it comes to women having a say in their status, the leaders are reluctant.

In large contrast to the previous labels, Griset recognizes the "dominant forces" role, a small number of women involved in terrorism who become key developers of "ideology, leadership, motivation, and strategy" (Griset 243). Women rarely take on this position as a prominent leader, but when women become leaders of terrorist groups, they might bring about even more fear than a man who leads a terrorist group since "their actions are so far outside the boundaries of traditional behavior expected from women" (Griset 243). Women who act as leaders of terrorist groups, unlike sympathizers, spies, and warriors, confirm women's sense of agency. Their leadership also differentiates them from the other groups as women who lead terrorist groups are strongly motivated by political ideology rather than personal experience. Moreover, the women who sustain "dominant forces" in a terrorist group signify the capacity of women to direct their anger with gender inequity towards militancy. Overall, the various ways women engage in terrorism shows that terrorist groups must

consider what role, if any, women should partake in if they wish to achieve their goal.

Media Coverage

Media coverage of women in general perpetuates stereotypes about gender, and the media's attention towards terrorism also extends those stereotypes to women involved in terrorism. As the media makes traditional gender roles apparent in its coverage of women, terrorists who adhere to those traditional roles go on to exploit them, i.e. "spies." Further, in the same way media covers women in politics, media depicts women in terrorism with regard to their physical appearance, connection to family members, involvement due to love or romance, aggressive attitude as feminists, and cluelessness (Nacos 255). These depictions completely undermine and overlook the reality that women in terrorism pose the same threat as their male counterparts, and the media evidently needs to take women's contributions in terrorism more seriously.

The media's exaggeration of physical appearance in regards to women seems the most obvious in their perpetuation of stereotypes. Since media often deems women's involvement in terrorism more newsworthy than men's involvement, the media also has a huge interest in the way women "look and dress" (Nacos 252). In particular, the media especially evokes feminine imagery when describing the way women terrorists look first and foremost:

> A newspaper article about Palestinian suicide bomber Wafra Idris began with the sentence, 'she was an attractive, auburn haired graduate who had a love family and likes to wear sleeveless dresses and make-up.' In another report, Idris was described as a woman with 'long, dark hair tied back with a black-and-white keffiyeh. Another report on the wave of Palestinian women suicide bombers headlined 'Lipstick Martyrs: A New Breed of Palestinian Terrorists.' (Nacos 252)

The examples in which media sources portray women and their value as terrorists in connection to their feminine appearance truly seems infinite. Further, the media's focus on women's appearance suggests that although women terrorists participate in an "utterly male domain," women still conform to their gender-specific role by maintaining a feminine appearance.

Likewise, the media utilizes women's status as a wife, mother, or daughter to try to explain their involvement in acts of terrorism. In particular, when covering women terrorists, the media often emphasizes their connection to family as a partial exploration; however, this emphasis on male family members and their links to terrorist women indicate that familial relationships, marriage especially, bear more importance than other facts that could explain a woman terrorist's motive. For example, the explicit nicknaming of the Shahidka as Black Widows symbolizes them as "vengeance-seeking widows who become a terrorist because their husband was killed by Russian troops" (Nacos 253). Further, the media and other institutions refer to the Shahidka as Black Widows to directly compare them to the black widow spider. Black widow spiders, known for killing their mate after mating and also known for being one of the most dangerous spiders to humans, represent power and treat vengeance as a natural state of occurrence. So, in comparison to terrorism, when the media reports on the "Black Widow" women involved in terrorism it reduces their participation to a reaction to a mere personal grievance.

Another relevant framework, the involvement of women in terrorism due to love or romance, also mediates stereotypes about gender. When the news media attempts to investigate the reasons for why women participate in terrorism, they sometimes conclude that "'women join because they admire someone in the terrorist movement'" (Nacos 254). For example, in the case of Colleen LaRose, news sources linked her enthusiasm for becoming a jihadist through the internet the same way a middle-aged woman fantasizes about finding a spouse through internet dating services. In fact, an editorial by Gwen Florio that was reproduced in several different news outlets describes LaRose as "[using] the jihadist site and others almost as a dating service… 'like she was looking for a soul mate'" (Conway 16). While the news makes notice of women's participating in terrorism because of love, it's particularly quiet about men's participating in terrorism for the exact reasons. Ultimately, the media's depiction of women--an emphasis on appearance, family, and love--serves to mislead and undermine the significance of women in terrorism.

In conclusion, after illustrating women's motivations, roles, and mediated outcomes of becoming involved in terrorism, the angle of gender in terrorism signifies a challenge to traditional gender stereotypes.

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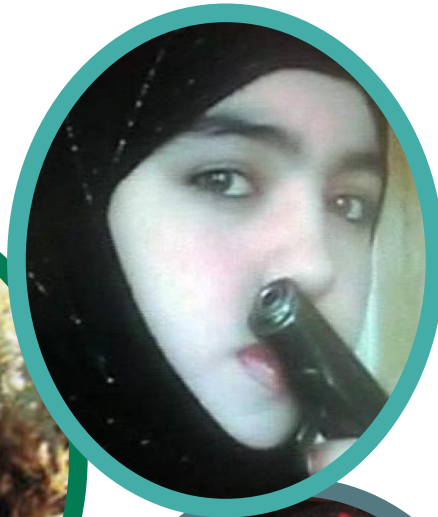
The random horror engendered by acts of terrorism are almost incomprehensible, but the existence of female terrorists runs counter to assumptions about male aggression. More and more frequently, the killers turn out to be women, and their roles and motivations can vary considerably. From left, Colleen LaRose, in a 1997 booking photo; Palestinian suicide bomber Wafra Idris; "Black Widow" 17-year-old Dzhennet Abdurakhmanova, who was a suicide bomber involved in the 2010 Moscow subway bombings; and Amanda Miller, who with husband Jared, carried out mass shootings in Las Vegas in 2014.

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