

Behind Stereotype: The Relationship between Women and Violence

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Abstract. In people's traditional impression, men are inherently violent and women are naturally peaceful. Liberal feminists argue that gender does not dictate one's capacity for peace or violence; instead, societal factors play a crucial role. This article first expounds the reasons for the stereotype of women being naturally peaceful from the aspects of history and society. Secondly, it puts forward that women will also commit violence, and analyzes the scenes and reasons of women's violence.

Keywords: Women and violence, Feminism, Female image.

1. Introduction

The traditional view that women naturally represent peace, while men provoke and perpetuate war is a prevalent societal belief, which has been supported by some feminists. Difference feminists posit that women's biological characteristic makes them inclined towards peaceful conflict resolution and be less aggressive [1], whereas liberal feminists refute this pinion, arguing that gender does not dictate one's capacity for peace or violence; instead, societal factors play a crucial role[1]. Liberal feminists point out that men and women share more similarities than stereotypes suggest. They possess analogous possibility of engaging in political violence driven by almost identical motivations that are linked to their societal positions rather than their gender identities[1].

This article will argue that women are capable of exhibiting the same level of violence as men, and even surpassing them under certain conditions. It will first challenge the conventional belief that women are naturally inclined towards peace through a postmodern feminism perspective, and propose this perception is a product of societal construct. The exclusion of women from warfare, whether through physical barriers or historical omission, has contributed to the perpetuation of this stereotype, which is consolidated by media that may diverge from reality. In practice, women may engage in acts of violence to a greater extent than their male counterparts, especially in conflict areas.

2. The causes of stereotypes

2.1 Constructed ideology in a patriarchy order

The concept of the relationship between women and peace, along with the notion of gender, is a construct of society, which is less about biological sex and more about the influence of male dominance. Gender inequality is predominantly perpetuated by societal institutions and ideologies such as ethnicity and racism[2]. Connell's research states that states and their institutions are predominantly governed by men, with societal norms that are biased towards their interests[3]. The perceptions of femininity even gender are constructed by society to uphold the dominant ideology, as Rajan[4], Radtke and Stam[5] have noted. The distinctions between the identities of men and women are exaggerated as a product of a hierarchical social construct [6]. These are aimed at creating and sustaining a society that is differentiated by gender, guarantying the perpetuation of male dominance.

In this case, the stereotype that men are inherently violent and women are naturally peaceful is a component of the societal construction designed to exaggerate the dichotomy between the two genders. The portrayal of women being peaceful serves to cast them as the "natural subjects" of men, which is instrumental in perpetuating male dominance. This is a strategy that patriarchal societies are keen to preserve. As Eager observes, societies are generally averse to the notion that women can be violent[1]. Women are expected to be peacemaker, thereby distinguishing themselves from the

dominant gender and being an appropriate subject. Therefore, the idea that women embody peace is tied to the "stability" of the social hierarchy; while the reality may be overlooked. Postmodern feminists challenge this view by asserting that both genders are equally capable of being violent; yet, society has chosen to construct women as non-violent in stark contrast to the violent male image[1]. The societal omission of women's capacity for being violent helps to frame a peaceful image that is distinguished from men, which reinforces the patriarchal order.

2.2 The naturally peaceful image of women created by the media

The systematic exclusion of women from war is a common strategy adopted to uphold the image that women are inherently peaceful. The media plays a pivotal role by consistently framing women as non-violent. The deliberate exclusion of women from military service and the portrayal of women as anti-war are instrumental for the dominant patriarchal group to retain control in society. The prospect of women serving as soldiers and engaging in violence are seen a threat to the established social order, which is why patriarchal societies are resistant to it.

In terms of historical records, the limited documentation and underrepresentation of women in war serve as a means to preserve "national security", which, in that context, equates to the perpetuation of patriarchal dominance[7]. As Enloe has pointed out the link between military and patriarchy power, to preserve the gender hierarchy, women's involvement in wartime activities is deliberately limited [8]. In terms of media portrayal, Bloom observes that the media often treat female terrorists as anomaly cases, thereby reinforcing the notion that "normal" women do not engage in acts of violence[9]. This differential representation is also evident during wartime, where men and women are depicted distinctly. Although women comprising 20% of the U.S. military force, a mere 8% of media coverage focuses on them[10]. When women are featured in the media, they are typically portrayed differently from men; men are framed as the traditional agents of war, while women are more often depicted as subjects[10]. This lack of reporting and recording of women's violent acts facilitates society's stereotype that women are more peaceful than men. Even when women demonstrate equal levels of violence in reality, society is less inclined to acknowledge or accept this fact.

3. The role and image of women during clash

3.1. The framed portray of naturally victim

Some insist that women endure greater hardships than men during wartime and are more frequently the victims of war and other conflicts. It is often posited that women's inherent nature, shaped by their experiences as subjects of war, inclines them towards peace and aversion to conflict. Difference feminists perspectives support this notion. They assert that women are more susceptible to losing their dignity, possessions, or family members; hence, they are more inclined to oppose war and act as peacemakers, particularly within democratic societies[1]. In practice, as Steflja and Darden have pointed out, during wartime the deaths of women, akin to those of children, are commonly assumed to be "clear civilian deaths", since they are naturally presumed to be civilians, even victims[11]. For instance, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has reported that, as of 29 April, 2024, 34,488 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, of which 14,500 are children and 9,500 are women; moreover, 75% of the injured are "estimated to be female". The deaths of women are listed separately, just as children; and, the estimate proportion of female injured are highlighted[12].

But in reality, both genders have the potential to become victims or perpetrators when an occupying force seeks to assert its dominance over its adversaries. It is a widespread practice across many cultures and throughout history to feminize one's enemy, as an approach to signify dominance over them[8]. Practices such as rape and castration, which are aimed at feminizing the enemy, are prevalently utilized during wartime to convey this dominance, and these actions are not necessarily linked to the biological sex of the individuals subjected to them[8].

3.2. The “unseen” perpetrator of war crime

Despite the tendency for women to be portrayed as victims or subjects of violence in media, they are equally capable of being aggressors if given the opportunity. Patriarchal societies prevalently exclude women from depictions of war and violence to safeguard the “order” through legal and media means. However, this exclusion has never been absolute, and in certain situations, women can exhibit greater violence than men in an attempt to assert themselves, especially in societies with significant gender inequality.

In situations where women are part of the occupying force, they may temporarily assume the power dynamics of the dominating side. This can lead to the unleashing of their violent tendencies as a means to assert control over the occupied territories. For instance, in the “Abu Ghraib torture and prisoner abuse scandal”, one of the most infamous figures Lynndie England was a female soldier, as reported by Frank[13]. Ms. England claimed that she was simply following orders; however, the photographs from the incident depicted a sense of enjoyment in her role of oppression[13]. This challenges the notion that women inherently embody peace, as she should not have appeared to take pleasure in the abuse, even if she was unwillingly involved in the scandal. Contrary to the belief that women are naturally inclined towards peace, Goldstein posits that her actions as part of the occupying force were a display of dominance, which is not inherently linked to her gender or that of the victims[8].

3.3. Participants and supporters of war and violence

Despite the constraints imposed by societal ideologies and patriarchal systems, women have never been completely excluded from war and violence. In fact, they have often exhibited a level of aggression rival even surpasses that of their male counterparts. This is particularly evident in societies where patriarchal structures are less entrenched, or during prolonged periods of chaos when the maintenance of patriarchy is not the societal priority. Elshtain posited that instances of women engaging in political violence typically arise during periods of political chaos, a time when the societal structures that traditionally confined women fall down[14]. Herrmann and Daniel highlight the significant role women have played throughout history as troop leaders in various cultures, citing notable figures such as Fu Hao, Queen Boudica, Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, and Joan of Arc[15]. These female elites represent a broader trend of female participation in warfare, transcending the traditional limitations imposed on their gender. Despite societal limitations, ordinary women have found innovative ways to engage in war, extending their roles beyond that of peacekeepers. Summerfield's research [16] emphasizes the extensive involvement of women in the war effort during World War II, with nearly all British women contributing in some form. Women also have played an instrumental role in encouraging their male relatives to become more aggressive participants in warfare, as Elshtain observes[14]. Berko and Erez provide evidence that a considerable number of women are supporters of violent actions, including terrorism[17]. They actively send their male relatives into battle or to join terrorist groups, providing them with both physical and emotional support. Throughout history, figures such as the Spartan mother, the "five Gold Star" mother, and the US Palestinian mother exemplify this phenomenon[14]. These women did not engage in direct violence due to societal limitations, but they participated in conflicts by sending their sons to war or to violent groups.

3.4. Terrorist actors and suicide bombers

In societies where gender inequality is pronounced, women may be more inclined to engage in violent actions during conflicts, including taking part in terrorist actions and even becoming suicide attackers. Studies have revealed that gender-based discrimination against women could lead women to become both perpetrators and victims of terrorism[18]. Dalton and Asal have noted that there is an inverse relationship between gender equality and the likelihood of women's involvement in terrorism[19]. In conflict zones, women are typically found to have fewer rights compared to men[20], which can lead them to feel they have less to lose, thus making them more willing to embrace death than men.

Comparing to men, women are more likely than men to become suicide terrorists due to personal reasons, such as feeling alienated from society, experiencing unhappiness, or desiring to end their lives[21]. Schweitzer, further posits that for numerous female suicide bombers, their current living conditions are worse than death, hence they are more inclined to become bombers and exhibit less hesitations[9].

In societies with significant gender inequality, women are often afforded fewer opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities and earn recognition. Consequently, the desire to assert themselves within such societies can be a strong motivation for women to become involved in acts of terrorism[22]; Dalton and Asal Engaging in violent acts and achieving martyrdom may be one of the few approaches available, in contrast, men have a wider range of options to assert their presence. This could drive women to exhibit more extreme violence in order to seize these opportunities[19]. Banks notes that women have consistently been integral to terrorist organizations, fulfilling roles of both supporters and fighters[23]. Laster and Erez observe that women have been associated with terrorist groups regularly, even earlier than 9.11[17]. In 2000, it was estimated that 20% to 30% of international terrorist activities were executed by women[24]. By 2015, at least half of the individuals carrying out suicide bombings were female[17]. Some female terrorists have been known to exhibit a high degree of fanaticism and to contribute significantly to the operations of terrorist organizations. Bloom highlights that female terrorists play diverse roles within their “groups”, including using social pressure to persuade men to join the global jihad[9].

4. Conclusion

The notion that women are inherently peacemakers is a socially constructed stereotype perpetuated by the dominant gender in patriarchal societies to preserve their authority. The constructed image results in women exhibiting greater violence than men. On one hand, the stereotype of women as emotionally driven peacekeepers might potentially drive them towards violence. Women may rationalize their violent acts as expressions of love or efforts to establish peace. Eager, in his interviews with terrorists, indicate that while men may turn to terrorism for reasons such as pride and personal loss, women engage in political violence for a diverse range of motivations, even including the concept of love. On the flip side, in an attempt to break free from the peacemaker stereotype and demonstrate their strength, some women may resort to even greater violence than their male counterparts[1]. As Eager points out, women might adopt a more violent approach to establish themselves as equally qualified fighters[1]. Female terrorists can exhibit a level of ruthlessness that surpasses that of men, driven by the desire to prove their capability as fighters. Thus, whether it's by embracing or defying the stereotype that women are inherently peacemaker, the constructed image can ironically inspire women to display more violent tendencies than men, as they strive to assert their identity and capabilities.

It is essential to confront the reality that women are not inherently peacemakers. The social treatment and stereotypes that link gender with violence must be altered.

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