

# **How do numbers of female rebel group leaders affect leftist rebel groups' use of one-sided violence in civil wars?**

## **ABSTRACT**

Despite the frequent participation of women in non-state armed groups (NSAGs), few studies have explored how gender might influence violence during insurgencies. Our study aims to build on recent quantitative datasets on the participation of female combatants and leaders in NSAGs by providing a framework to explore the relationship between female leadership in leftist ideological groups and their use of one-sided violence in civil wars. Given women are more likely to enter leadership positions in leftist NSAGs, this paper purports that more female leaders mean lower numbers of civilian deaths in instances of one-sided violence in civil wars. Better understanding how female NSAG leadership affects violence in civil wars could enable policy makers to leverage gender for peace-building.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The rate of emergence of civil wars has been relatively steady since the mid-19th century (Sambanis, 2002; Kalyvas and Kenny, 2010). Yet civil wars remain ripe grounds for mass atrocities: the post-Cold War era has been punctuated by sharp increases in one-sided violence, with rebel groups becoming responsible for the majority of civilian deaths (Eck and Hultman, 2007; Von Einsiedel *et al.*, 2017). The literature on civil wars focuses on its causes and consequences (Blattman and Miguel, 2010; Cederman and Vogt, 2017); and while a growing canon of literature explores the role of women in insurgencies, the study of rebel groups in civil wars is largely gender-blind (Henshaw *et al.*, 2019).

Recent work has contributed data on the participation of female combatants and the roles of female leaders in non-state armed groups (NSAGs) (Henshaw, 2016b; Wood and Thomas, 2017; Henshaw *et al.*, 2019). These authors have highlighted the general lack of granular data on the topic. Alexis Henshaw is, to date, the only author studying female NSAG leadership. Our assessment of this seminal quantitative research provides an opportunity to explore the impact women might have on one-sided violence in civil wars. Understanding the inner dynamics of civil wars at the cross-section of female rebel group leadership and violence could enable policy makers to leverage gender for peace. Our argument rests on a hypothesis derived from the intersection of the literature on NSAGs and violence, the role of women in NSAGs and the effect of women on peace: leftist ideological groups with more female leaders cause a lower number of civilian deaths in one-sided violence in civil wars.

The paper proceeds with a literature review on NSAGs and violence, the role of women in NSAGs and the effect of women on peace. Next, we present its main argument, a hypothesis and the underlying causal mechanism. The subsequent section proposes a quantitative research design to test the hypothesis. We conclude by summarising the main arguments, considering limitations and proposing future research avenues.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **NSAGs and violence**

Eck and Hultman (2007) demonstrate that rebels tend to be more violent than governments. Further research suggests that rebel organisations are more likely to engage

in one-sided violence when they have foreign support (Salehyan *et al.*, 2014). Wood (2014) illustrates that “when rebels rely on alternative sources of support, greater capabilities produce greater levels of violence”. In contrast, when rebel groups have broad civilian or local constituencies, violence declines as NSAGs select lower-casualty targets to minimize public backlash (Wood, 2014; Stanton, 2016).

Research on leadership in NSAGs has largely been gender-blind (Henshaw *et al.*, 2019). Leaders have significant power over the framing of injustices, assigning blame for grievances and formulating policy solutions (Gurr, 2015). In ethnic conflicts, leaders can invigorate ethnic rivalries (Seymour and Cunningham, 2016). Leadership is critical at the foetal stages of a movement and seems important throughout an insurgency. For instance, ridding a group of its leadership can be an effective counterinsurgency strategy (Cunningham and Sawyer, 2019). Moreover, lack of leadership causes more violence against civilians (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2006; Abrahms and Potter, 2015).

### **The role of women in NSAGs**

A robust body of scholarship exists on women’s roles within NSAGs, many studies being regional (e.g., Kampwirth, 2002; Gonzalez-Perez, 2006). More recent quantitative studies complement over two decades of qualitative scholarship.

Cross-national research demonstrates that women can play both combat, leadership and supporting roles (Cunningham, 2003; Henshaw, 2013, 2016; Thomas and Bond, 2015; Wood and Thomas, 2017; Loken, 2018). Female recruitment is shown to be positive for rebel groups by increasing their territorial gains, increasing the likelihood of victory or attaining a negotiated settlement, prolonging a struggle and evading suspicion to carry out more effective attacks (Bloom, 2011; Braithwaite and Ruiz, 2018; Loken, 2018; Thomas and Wood, 2018).

Case studies and surveys of ex-combatants reveal that many women support NSAGs when given the opportunity (e.g., Kampwirth, 2002; Coulter *et al.*, 2008). A group’s political ideology is shown to impact the ways in which females participate. For instance, Marxist ideologies explain the high prevalence of female combatants in the FMLN, Sandinista, and Zapatista movements (Reif, 1986; Mason, 1992; Kampwirth, 2002). Leftist ideologies that advocate an egalitarian ethos encourage rebel leaders to create opportunities for women to occupy non-traditional roles (Wood and Thomas, 2017) For example, interviews with a PKK leader illustrate that women are encouraged to actively participate in armed struggle and given access to leadership positions (Haner *et al.*, 2020).

Datasets on the scope of women’s contributions to NSAGs have only recently become available. Henshaw (2016) demonstrated that fewer rebel movements include women in leadership roles than in combat. Wood and Thomas illustrate how ideology determines female participation in armed wings, as “groups interested in challenging existing social hierarchies are likely to recruit large numbers of female fighters” (2017:43). They conclude that Marxist-oriented leftist ideology increases the prevalence of female fighters. Henshaw *et al.* (2019) find that women in combat positions most consistently predict female leadership and that women are most likely to appear as leaders in leftist organizations. These studies, however, do not investigate how women impact groups’ strategies.

### **Women and peace**

No matter whether one adopts an essentialist or constructivist view on the relationship between gender and propensity to violence, it follows that the risk of political violence declines if women are increasingly included in governance (Conover, 1988). This is supported by feminist literature positing that equal societies ought to be less plagued by collective violence. For instance, in testing the grievance theory of intrastate conflict, Caprioli (2005) finds that states characterized by gender inequality are more likely to experience intrastate conflict.

Studies on women in positions of political leadership and gender differences on political issues can shed light on women's impact on violence. An increase in women in national legislatures has been associated with less aggressive foreign policies, lower military spending, and decreases in state-level conflict behaviour (Caprioli, 2000; Caprioli and Boyer, 2001; Koch and Fulton, 2011). Other research has demonstrated that higher percentages of women in parliament are associated with lower levels of personal integrity rights abuse (Melander, 2005). In terms of public support, "the divergence between men and women in support for the use of force represents the largest and most consistent gender gap measured" (Brooks and Valentino, 2011:2). Comparably, Wood and Ramirez (2018) find that increasing egalitarian attitudes decrease public support for the use of force to achieve security objectives.

### **THEORETICAL ARGUMENT AND HYPOTHESIS**

This paper contributes to the literature at the intersection of rebel violence, rebel leadership and women in NSAGs. Existing research shows that rebel leaders have significant power over the behaviour of their group (e.g., Gurr, 2015; Seymour and Cunningham, 2016; Cunningham and Sawyer, 2019). There exists a vast body of scholarship on the inclusion and deployment of female combatants in rebel groups (e.g., Cunningham, 2003; Henshaw, 2013, 2016; Kampwirth, 2002; Thomas and Bond, 2015; Wood and Thomas, 2017; Loken, 2018) and significant scholarship on the use of violence by rebel groups (e.g., Eck and Hultman, 2007; Salehyan, Siroky and Wood, 2014). Meanwhile, studies of female political leaders provide an appropriate analogy to understand how gender might influence violence in insurgencies.

Yet, the behaviour of rebel organisations is often analysed without accounting for gender. Recent quantitative literature provides a much-needed contribution in this vein, offering insights on the role of women in militant groups (Wood and Thomas, 2017; Braithwaite and Ruiz, 2018; Henshaw *et al.*, 2019). The authors stress the need for further quantitative inquiry, highlighting "[the lack of] examples to draw upon in assessing how female insurgents directly impact conflict outcomes" (Henshaw *et al.*, 2019:1106). Given sharp increases in the use of violence against civilians in post-Cold War civil conflicts (Eck and Hultman, 2007), there is a need to investigate the relationship between female participation in NSAGs and their use of one-sided violence.

This paper puts forward a causal mechanism for why women in leftist organizations reduce rebel groups' use of violence. This causal mechanism rests on a set of interlinked assumptions drawn from existing work. Given that women are more likely to enter leadership positions in leftist organizations, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

*H: Leftist ideological groups with more female leaders cause a lower number of civilian deaths in instances of one-sided violence in civil wars.*

This paper focuses on leftist NSAGs because existing literature demonstrates the higher prevalence of female combatants in leftist NSAGs (Wood and Thomas, 2017). The opposition to traditional gender hierarchies creates opportunities for women as combatants (ibid). Further, prevalence of female combatants is shown to be a strong predictor of women's access to leadership roles within leftist NSAGs (Henshaw *et al.*, 2019). Hence, leftist groups with more female combatants are more likely to see women in leadership.

Both Mahan and Griset (2008) and Henshaw (2016) have created typologies of women's roles in NSAGs, Henshaw stating that female leaders can "exercise direct control over the strategy, policies, and/or ideology of the movement" (2016:44). Moreover, female political leadership has been shown to be less bellicose and decrease conflict behaviour (e.g., Koch and Fulton, 2011). Though rebel groups tend to be more violent relative to governments (Eck and Hultman, 2007), there is evidence that leadership in rebel groups can influence the group's behaviour (Gurr, 2015; Seymour and Cunningham, 2016; Cunningham and Sawyer, 2019). Assuming political leadership is similar to leadership in ideological rebel groups, existing work on the outcomes of female leadership in national governments leads us to believe that female leaders in leftist NSAGs could have a significant impact on the group's use of violent strategies – specifically, the reduction of one-sided violence.

To summarise, female combatants are more prevalent in leftist groups due to the group's egalitarian ethos and are hence more likely to enter into positions of leadership. As rebel group leadership can influence the group's behaviour, and assuming that female leaders in rebel groups have similar effects as women in political leadership, female leaders in leftist NSAGs reduce one-sided violence in civil wars.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

To address the lack of quantitative knowledge on women and armed rebellion, we propose to carry out a cross-sectional quantitative study, building on datasets on the scope of women's contributions to NSAGs (Henshaw, 2016b; Wood and Thomas, 2017; Henshaw *et al.*, 2019). The proposed regression looks for a negative correlation between numbers of female leaders in leftist ideological groups and numbers of civilian deaths in one-sided violence in civil wars.

### **Independent variable**

The independent variable is the number of females in leadership positions in leftist armed groups, expressed discretely. As we were unable to find existing datasets using discrete values, a new dataset should be compiled. To compile the sample of leftist armed groups with female leaders, Henshaw *et al.*'s (2019) dataset should be used as a starting point. The authors collected information on leadership in NSAGs active between 1979 and 2009 based on two previous datasets: the Women in Armed Rebellion Dataset (WARD) compiled by Thomas and Wood (2017) and data on female participation in rebel groups compiled by Henshaw (2016), both of which are based on data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP).

In Henshaw *et al.* (2019), the presence of women in positions of leadership was coded as a binary variable. Female leaders in NSAGs are defined as “women who are actively involved in defining ideology, strategy, and/or motivation for an armed group and who either hold or have the expectation of holding some formal leadership position during or after the conflict” (Mahan and Griset, 2008, in Henshaw *et al.*, 2019). The sample of female leaders for this study should therefore be drawn from all observations coded as showing the presence of women’s involvement in a leadership role. The next step is to gather data on the *number* of female leaders in each group through newspaper articles; data gathered by experts or field practitioners; and first-hand accounts, including personal memoirs and group documentation.

### **Dependent variable**

The dependent variable is the number of civilian deaths caused one-sidedly by leftist armed groups with female leaders, expressed discretely. Data on one-sided violence will be drawn from the UCDP One-sided Violence Dataset for the period 1989-2004 (Eck and Hultman, 2007). One-sided violence is defined as “the use of armed force by the government of a state or by a formally organized group against civilians which results in at least 25 deaths” (ibid:235). The data for our dependent variable will be extracted from the “best fatality estimate” of the UCDP dataset, defined as “the aggregated most reliable numbers for all incidents of one-sided violence during a year” (Pettersson, 2019:4). The UCDP dataset does not, however, specify the type of conflict linked to incidents of one-sided violence. Thus, to ensure we are capturing data from civil wars, observations should be cross-checked using the Correlates of War (COW) Intra-state Wars dataset for the period 1818 to 2007 (Sarkees and Wayman, 2010), as this dataset distinguishes between conflict types. To ensure data from leftist rebel groups with female leaders is captured, observations should be cross-checked with Henshaw’s dataset on female participation in rebel groups (2016).

### **Control variables**

The study should control for several potential confounders. The NSAG’s military capabilities should be accounted for by the binary variables *weak rebels* and *forced recruitment*. Weaker rebels may be more likely to recruit female combatants to help address their resource needs (Wood and Thomas, 2017; Braithwaite and Ruiz, 2018). The *weak rebels* variable also controls for potential bias resulting from discrepancies in information available on different rebel groups - weaker groups are less militarily capable, hence less likely to generate media coverage (Wood and Thomas, 2017). The type of civil war may affect the scale of one-sided violence. The categorical variable *war type* using COW Intra-state Wars data can be used for control. The discrete variable *conflict duration* accounts for the fact that women may more likely be recruited at later stages of civil wars because groups become more established (Wood and Thomas, 2017; Israelsen, 2020). The engagement of female combatants may predict women’s advancement into leadership roles, but if they are placed in unequal leadership positions, their impact may be limited (Henshaw *et al.*, 2019). Thus, the ordinal variable *type of leadership position* is included. Lastly, a binary indicator *active since 2000s* accounts for potential bias arising from the fact that data on more recent conflicts may be better recorded.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper seeks to reduce a gap in civil war literature by exploring how female leadership in leftist rebel groups affects the groups’ use of one-sided violence in civil wars. Specifically,

we attempt to provide a framework to gather lacking quantitative data on the topic. We hypothesise that leftist ideological groups with more female leaders cause a lower number of civilian deaths in one-sided violence in civil wars.

The cross-section of various streams of existing literature have contributed to this argument. Female combatants are more prevalent in leftist groups due to the group's egalitarian ethos and are hence more likely to enter into positions of leadership. As rebel group leadership can influence the group's behaviour, and assuming that female leaders in rebel groups have similar effects as women in political leadership, female leaders in leftist NSAGs reduce one-sided violence in civil wars.

The proposed research design is not free from criticism. Most importantly, a correlation between female leftist NSAG leadership and lower civilian deaths in the context of civil wars may not imply causation. Though this provides a launchpad, further research is needed to nuance the claims presented in this paper and contribute to a more robust body of literature on female rebel group leadership and rebel violence.

As highlighted by Henshaw *et al.* (2019): "limitations on available source material for armed groups makes meaningful disaggregation difficult, and the small sample size for some types of leadership – for example, the extremely small proportion of female founders – precludes meaningful quantitative analysis." As such, our research design could be complemented by a qualitative study examining cases of women that joined leftist NSAGs as combatants and the effects this had on the group's use of violent tactics in civil wars. Various leftist groups in Latin America may provide a meaningful starting point, such as the FARC in Colombia.

Furthermore, ideologies are not mutually exclusive and a more fine-grained analysis could examine variations in leftist group ideologies and how this affects female NSAG leadership and hence violent strategies in civil wars. Cragin and Daly (2009) have suggested that female rebel group leaders serve a symbolic rather than an operational purpose. Other scholarship has suggested that women advance up rebel group ranks due to familial ties, raising questions about their degree of independent leadership (ibid, 2009; Henshaw, 2016b). Research on the extent to which this may be the case could provide further insight into how gender might influence the outcomes of insurgency.

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