

Feminism Done Wrong

What motivates Women to Join Terrorist Organizations?
A Case Study of the Black Widows

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Abstract

Perhaps one of the most understudied aspects of terrorism is that of the female terrorist. This research analyzes the motivations of female terrorists to join organizations and compares them to the motivations of male terrorists. I use an extreme case study of the Black Widows for my comparison of motivations because of the organization's all-female composition and overall success. I argue: that women join terrorist organizations to seek out a solidarity group; women join terrorist organizations due to personal and political grievances; Women join terrorist organizations due to a desire for non-material incentives. After careful analyzation of interviews, interview analysis, and background literature, I conclude that: women are to some extent motivated by the wish for a solidarity group as well as (to a lesser extent) non-material incentives. Women motivated by grievances (both personal and political) proved to be the most significant variable in determining female terrorist motivation.

In the Dubrovka Theater of Moscow on October 23, 2002, a group of around 40 terrorists stormed the stage and surrounded the audience, taking nearly 850 hostages in one of Russia's attacks in modern time (Shuster 2010). Heavily armed men threatened the crowd and demanded their wants be met, or they would be blown up by the 20 women, dressed head to toe in black veils, heavily strapped with explosives and holding massive firearms. The holdout lasted over two and a half days until Russian Special forces intervened and eliminated the threat. The women who stood next to (what would come to be known as) their brother organization were dubbed the "Black Widows," beginning their streak of arson, kidnappings, assassinations and suicide bombings that continues today (Williams 2014).

The Black Widows, also known as the "Brides of Allah," is a separatist (and also considered religious), terrorist organization with a unique defining feature: they are completely constituted by female terrorists. The official name "The Black Widows," as well as their less common nickname were bestowed upon them by the media, who interpreted the high percentage of widows in the organization to signify motivation (Volcheck 2010). Along with their base location in Chechnya, they are active in Russia, most notably in Moscow. The most recent mention of the Black Widows included a threat to the 2014 Sochi Olympics, where Ruzana Ibragimova was arrested for plotting revenge of her late husband, a militant in the Chechen army.

The Black Widows are known around the world for perpetrating some of the most deadly (and costly) atrocities in Eastern Europe (Volcheck 2010). Known for their famed black garb and vengeful motives, these (sometimes) literal widows spin webs of explosives in restaurants, hospitals, theaters, and government buildings, not to ravage vengeance on a lost lover or brother, but to further the cause of a Chechen rebel group.

Misconceptions of who the Black Widows are run rampant, as does their significance. The Black Widows are thought to be the worlds only (and certainly most successful) female terrorist organization. The significance of this? We may finally have an answer to a question that for decades only the voices of men answered: what are the motivations behind women joining terrorist organizations.

In this original research paper, I will present in-depth and significant background literature that discusses the most common explanations of the phenomenon of female terror. These schools of thought are as follows: Women as passive joiners (Coercion, "Honor Suicides," and Human Trafficking), and the relationship between men and women. Next, I will present three individual hypotheses based off of previous literature, as well as background information on the formidable Black Widows. In addition, I will present my independent, dependent, and control variables. After discussing the advantages of using an "extreme" case (Gerring 2008), I will begin my analysis of why women join terrorist organizations: a case study of the Black Widows.

Why men (and sometimes women) join terrorist organizations

Little research breaks the trend of passive actors to examine relationships between the possible relationship of men and women. There are several key motivators that draw men to enlist in a terrorist organization including ideology, financial incentives, solidarity, and grievances (Abrahms 2008). Of the literature reviewed for the purposes of this case study, very little literature dealt directly with motivations of female terrorists, but added them as a footnote, paragraph at the end of a study on men, barely alleviating the lack of research in this area. Research that has compared the motivations of men and women are far and few between, leaving bi-gendered research to fill the gaps. When referring to bi-gendered research, I am referring to research that ei-

ther assumes motivations remain constant across men and women, or, research that lists one set of motivations and notes subtle differences in emphasis across motivational factors.

Most common to bi-gendered research is a note, presenting the argument that, while there are few differences in motivations between men and women, women tend to be more violent and draw more public attention for their actions. The European Institute of Peace remarks that there is no compelling evidence that suggests a female terrorist would have any significant differences in motivation from their male counterparts (EIP 2018). Further, while arguing that women may have nearly matching motivations, there is no mention that women use the same thought process while enlisting (Kruglanski 2009). Simply put, this refers to the idea that a woman has a different thought process than a man, including differing priorities, concerns, and responsibilities. While the motivations for a woman to join a terrorist organization may be close to the same as a man, there is much research to be done regarding the difference weight of the decision to enlist.

Focusing on Women: Coercion, "Honor Suicides," and Human Trafficking

Women are often viewed as "too docile" and "domestic" to resort to terrorist activity. Out of these views come theories that women join terrorist organizations, not with any specific motive, but because of passive forces. The idea of a "passive" motivation, in this case, refers to the idea that circumstances outside of one's control were the motive to engage in some action (in this case, terrorism). In these theories, women are seen as "preyed" upon by organization recruiters (nearly all men) who force the hand of the new female recruits. Passive forces include human trafficking, specifically sex, (Powell 2016), being "married in" to the organization (Saripi 2015), or being left with no other option (Powell 2015).

Human trafficking is a coercive style of enlisting in an organization, this usually begins with kidnapping and ends with being used as a "tool for pleasure" at the will of male members

(Saripi 2015). Being “married in” refers to when a “keeper” (usually a father or husband) enlists in the organization, which then usually places the woman in a position within that same organization (Powell 2015).

Other theories suggest that women are coerced from young ages to become child soldiers. While these young women are likely to become entertainment to militia leaders (even as children), some are sold (trafficked) into becoming full fighting forces on the ground (Sjoberg 2011). There are certain advantages to coercing women and children into an organization's ranks to be discussed later.

Being left with no other option refers to two separate concepts. First is the concept of an “honor suicide,” which will be described in further detail in the following literature review. Second is an abstract situation where a young woman may be blackmailed or in a similar situation.¹ While there may be some implication of choice on the matter, this is essentially meaningless given social constraints and impossible alternatives.

An organization may recruit women passively into their ranks for different reasons; the different methods of passive recruitment correspond to differing roles and ranks, though generally low within the organization (mostly maintaining physical encampments, looking after children, cooking, foot soldiers in some cases and so forth) (Berko, Erez 2007). For example, a religiously based organization may recruit women passively via being left with no other option, or more commonly because a family member (usually a husband) has joined the organization (Herschinger 2014). This woman is more likely to become a low-rank suicide bomber rather than a woman who is trafficked into a politically or oppression based terrorist organization, where she is most likely to be "entertainment" or a decoy (Herschinger 2014).

¹ To avoid confusion and complication, this second concept will be left out of this case study.

Most common in religious-based organizations is the concept that women are motivated by the will to participate in "honor suicides" and martyrdom. An "honor suicide" is a suicide that takes place for a morally acceptable reason. Such reasons for approving an "honor suicide" are the loss of womanhood (usually the inability to produce children), loss of purity (for example rape, sex before marriage, and infidelity) and the loss of one's husband (Cashman 2017). Participating in a martyrdom is the morally acceptable sacrificing of one's life for the cause of the group; the idea of a martyr's death often involves suicide bombing (Cashman 2017).

The case of an "honor suicide" is typically a childless woman, who may be married or unmarried (Sofer et al. 2012). Women who become martyrs are often single, childless and while they are motivated by a specific purpose, are often self-radicalized (Ness 2004). Martyred female terrorists often have no substantial connection to the group (unlike men who, in most initially "isolated" incidents have hidden connections to be found) (Ness 2004). It is most common for a martyr to join a religious organization, as few secular or politically motivated organizations would see much use in suicide for the cause versus having another soldier (Cashman 2017).

In cases of religiously motivated terrorist organizations, women often leave behind a warning, statement or prayer to their family. Within these last words, these women often reveal that they are giving their lives to the cause, though their sacrifice does not become clear until news of a suicide bombing breaks (BBC 2002; McGreal 2004). In times of conflict, or during the early to peak stages of a terrorist organization's formation, women who have "imperfections" (such as those listed above) are offered the chance to commit themselves to the movement by engaging in an honor suicide (Cashman 2017; Sofer et. al. 2012).

Theory: Why women join terrorist organizations

While it is clear that most background literature pertaining to women in the world of terror regards them as passive actors, there are cases and arguments that refute this lack of agency. I argue that women not only have agency in their organizational recruitment, but that they are strategically invaluable to the organization itself. A strong argument that showcases the improbability of women as passive actors state that the event of a female "lone wolf" disproves any lack of agency (Blair 2015). Another such argument states that women have agency through their status as "strategic" members of organizations, in essence, women present certain advantages for terrorist groups carrying out attacks (Al Jazeera 2010). To give a potential example, two suicide bombings take place: one, in London by a middle class, an ordinary woman, the other by a man in Germany. In London, news of the bombing makes international news; the woman is dubbed the "White Widow" of London, the man makes the local, maybe national news before disappearing out of focus forever, but why? Because of the docile and nurturing expectations women, an act of terror committed by a woman reverberates a shock through the media cycle and draws attention to the organization (Huckerby 2015). Because of the "shock value" found in female terrorist acts, especially suicide bombers, they are often regarded as invaluable assets, especially to nationalist and separatist groups where international attention is paramount to success (Huckerby 2015).

While women and girls are most often used for their shock value, they also have a unique ability to bypass already loose security and sneak weaponry by in their clothing, as women and children are less stringently searched (Huckerby 2015). This means that female terrorists have the ability to carry out missions that may be impossible or improbable for men. Instances of women concealing weaponry and explosives undergarments, in purses entering a nightclub, and

tucked into an innocent looking stroller have all been recorded in Eastern Europe (Sofer, Addison 2012).

Women who join terrorist organizations actively tend to do so without the direct input of male members of the family (Turner 2016). Women who find themselves "tethered" to a man in some way will go to extreme lengths to remove constraints and join terrorist organizations.

Women who join terrorist organizations are given social opportunities and ability to increase "status" within the ranks of the organization. Women find job purpose and fulfillment as well as a sense of community while being involved in a terrorist organization.

Men in comparison

Given the plethora of literature analyzing the motivations of male terrorists, comparisons can be made based off of interviews and interview analyzations further into this study. Using a mixture of literature, I have found that there are five common reasons for men to join terrorist organizations. These motivations include: ideology/ religious agreement, Solidarity, financial incentives, grievances, and social or non-material incentives (Atran 2008).

An ideological agreement is the most common answer when begging the question of motive. By "ideology" or "ideological or religious agreement" I refer to an individual having sympathizing or mirroring views with the mission or purpose of the group (Hassan 2012). For example, a Catholic separatist in Northern Ireland would most likely join the Irish Republican Army because his ideology aligned with the purpose of the group (which was, among others, to separate from the Protestant UK).

Another motive for a male to join a terrorist organization is solidarity. Solidarity refers to men enlisting because they have a drive to be a part of something, to make friends and to be a part of a group (Cragin, Daly 2004). While in most cases this requires some form of ideological

agreement, a solidarity movement has the ability to foster powerful ties to the organization, which can lead to deadly consequences. An example of solidarity in action is the self-radicalization of American men to join ISIS in the Middle East. Young men are radicalized at home, and rather than carry out attacks, they find themselves drawn to the feeling of being "in a group," which causes them to relocate to wherever their new group may be (Jenkins 2001). Extending this same logic to female terrorists leads us to predict:

Hypothesis 1: Women join terrorist organizations to gain a solidarity with a group.

I find that incentives based on non-materialistic rewards are common motivators for men. This motivator is a sort of "catch-all" category that ranges from obtaining a wife and family, increased status including personal (personal fulfillment, a purpose), religious rewards in the afterlife (virgins promised to Muslim men when they die), and so on. While this is a diverse category, seldom are men recorded as having only one reward based motivator. For example, a man may join Al-Qaeda because they align with the mission and ideology, wish for financial protection for their family and seek rewards in the afterlife. This leads to my final hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Women join terrorist organizations to gain non-material incentives.

Finally is the financial incentive to join a terrorist organization. When referring to "financial incentives," I refer less to masses of wealth or resources and more to a steady income or a twisted form of life insurance. Those motivated for financial reasons may not have a strong ideological agreement with the group, nor experience any other motivations typically associated with men. These men typically enlist for a "job," financial protection for their family, or to voluntarily become a suicide bomber to afford their family a life safe from terrorist threat, and, financially secure.

Most commonly associated with ideology, grievances are also strong motivators for male terrorists. Ranging from political oppression, religious or social oppression or even international grievances, these slights can run deep and force men into an outlet beyond the law. An example of enlisting in an organization as a result of similar grievances is enlisting in the ETA (Basque Liberation Front), a separatist terrorist organization in the Basque region of Spain, encroaching onto France. One may join the ETA to become a so-called “freedom fighter,” or perpetrator of terror to further Basque nationalist and/or separatist ideals. This leads to my second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Women join terrorist organizations due to grievances.

Methodology

The Black Widow: A “Most Extreme” Case

Like most terrorist organizations, very little is known about the true foundations of the Black Widows. In fact, there are large gaps in data surrounding the Black Widows, including actual group size and the male to female ratio² (Abdullaev 2013). At conception, the Black Widows were recruited and trained by infamous leaders including: Shamil Basayev (known for a "highly sophisticated" hospital bombing), and Aslan Maskhadov, who's relationship to the organization (other than consultation) is unknown (Volcheck 2010).

Like the foundations of the organization, the technical "mission" or purpose of the organization is unclear. Motivations of the organization itself shift with the motivations of the current members, and what once was allied mission with brother and sister organizations (such as the event at the Dubrovka theater), has become strategic suicide bombings by the women of the Black Widows to forward their anti-Russia, pro-Chechen nationalist agenda (Walker 2010). More simply put, the Black Widows have separated from a mixed male and female group to only a fe-

² Although most estimates now believe the organization to be 100% female.

male group, centered on nationalist and separatist missions that are often interpreted as revenge-driven.

This case study employs Gerring's concept of the "extreme" singular case. An extreme case exemplifies unusual qualities relative to some variant distribution (Gerring 2008 653). In this case, the Black Widows are considered "extreme" because they exemplify the unusual quality of being a majority, if not all, female. The benefits of using an "extreme case" are two-fold. First, using an extreme case in this situation provides us with a relatively "pure" sample to draw evidence from (Gerring 2008 653). Secondly, using an extreme case can bring out potential abnormalities and assist in the formation of new hypotheses in this area, given the extent to which it is understudied (Gerring 2008 654).

The benefits of using the Black Widows in this case study tie heavily into the concept of the "extreme case." As discussed, the Black Widows exemplify the unusual quality of being all female, in addition, they happen to be the only recorded female group to have perpetrated a significant attack in recent years. In addition, where there is a severe insufficiency in data, we can effectively rule out coercion and male influence. Finally, where there is no reputable quantitative data, the Black Widows supply (little), however significant qualitative data.

Operationalization

The independent variable in my case study will be gender because I am looking at the variation of motivation across women and men. My dependent variable are the motivations themselves. My control variables will be the circumstance of joining (as in, must not have been coerced). The reason I will only have one control variable is that motivations to join may be strongly influenced by variables such as economic status, age, type of organization and so on. As the idea of joining passively (via coercion specifically).

To test my hypotheses I employed several methods of data collection. First, I collected basic background information pertaining to the Black Widows to give me a base search point. While the name of the founder eluded me, I did find interviews with two men who had once been associated for training purposes. I also found interviews, quotes, and images from their most recent activity including the 2014 Sochi Olympics where one of the elusive Widows was arrested under suspicion of "plotting a terrorist attack."

Some significant issues I faced while collecting my data were: language barriers while researching interviews and news sources, a lack of interviews themselves, and an overall insufficiency in data. To overcome the language barrier issues I employed two strategies: first I used Google Translate to convert Russian interviews into English; this was especially useful while researching interviews including male associates. Second, I enlisted the help of two undergraduate intermediate Russian students who translated posters, handwriting, and all other articles I was unable to run through a digital translator. As for the insufficiency in data, I broadened my search from direct interviews to reported and analyzed interviews; simply put, I researched interviews that had been surmised rather than displaying exact quotes after verifying that the resource in question was reliable.

Conclusions

To use an informal term, the constraints of my research were frustrating. An overall lacking in both qualitative and quantitative made the research process taxing as I found myself reading through dozens of proclaimed "interviews" that came from unreliable resources, inconclusive research papers and the complication of a language barrier. In addition, I worked with what little data escaped the Russian "extremist literature ban" which filters content such as interviews, propaganda, literature and other valuable cites (Kostro, Riba 2014). While on some level, the Black

Widows are to be congratulated for their ability to avoid arrest, their elusiveness was unappreciated and frustrating.

Black Widows as (not very) passive actors

There have been claims asserting varying levels of coercion, human trafficking and solicited “honor suicides” as motivations for the Black Widows. While I cannot account for all instances, there is overwhelming evidence that this is untrue and there is no compelling evidence that the Black Widows fit this model (Kurz, Bartles 2007). The structure of the Black Widows organization is not rigid, rather works in the way of a web with multiple leaders and no “top dog” (Abdullaev 2013). Because of this flexible, yet impenetrable network, it is completely possible that a coercive phenomenon may occur; these phenomena should be discounted for a more accurate model of motivations and recruitment.

According to Viv Groskop, two women who had been arrested within the last ten years had experienced forced enlistment to the Black Widows (Groskop 2004). She argued that 19-year-old and 22-year-old had been drugged, raped and left to one of two fates: to become a suicide bomber or the abuse continues, or to become a suicide bomber or her family would be at risk (Groskop 2004). While overall horrifying, there are three compelling shreds of evidence that suggest the story to be either false or unrelated.

First, Volcheck argues that, while at one point recruitment and training were handled by males, the overwhelming amount of ranking and “training” Black Widows took over the duties after the initial founding years of the organizations (Volcheck 2010). Second, Groskop admits herself that the writers of the “Russian narrative” had fabricated such tales before, and that these particular cases do fit the model of a fabrication (Groskop 2004). Third, Kurz, Bartles 2007 argues that, even if these two events had taken place, the Black Widows overall do not fit this

model and that there is sufficient evidence to say these women have agency and their own, individual motivations.

Analysis

After researching the available qualitative data, I was able to test my data and arrive at the following conclusions. Table 1 denotes my original hypothesis; Table 2 denotes the results my case study yielded. Within each row are listed the top five motivators for males terrorists as well as a representative two passive motivations (coercion /trafficking and Honor Suicides). In Table 2, row 4, column 5, the star denotes qualitative significance.

Ideology was not included in my preliminary hypothesis building because of the categorical nature of the Nationalist or Separatist Black Widows. While the possibility of outliers remains, I assume that most if not all of the Black Widows enlist with some significant level of agreement. Also left out of my hypotheses was the motivation of financial incentives. There is little to no evidence that women are monetarily motivated, unlike their male counterparts.

Addressing Hypothesis 1, given background literature relating to female terrorists, one may find it a natural assumption that women would join an organization for solidarity, assuming the theorist afforded the concept of agency to the terrorists at all. I myself considered the idea that women renowned for their permanent single status would, (even if self-radicalized), seek out some group to share ideological power and a sense of kinship with. What I found overwhelmingly with the Black Widows was that this was false.

Contrary to this hypothesis, however, the Black Widow women rarely, if ever, have any contact with each other (Williams 2014). During interviews, Shamil Basayev noted that the Widows were trained in smaller cohorts, with he himself training around 50 of the women that would later become tactical suicide bombers (Williams 2014).

While there is no evidence that there were no forms of solidarity between the ill-fated Widows, I found no evidence to support the hypothesis within this group.

Now to consider Hypothesis 2's prediction on non-material incentives. What is known concerning a specific terrorist organization's non-material incentives is difficult to decipher at best, and even more obscure for the Black Widows. Despite a general insufficiency in data, I was able to uncover the following incentives from analyzed interviews, translated from Russian: personal fulfillment, assured "salvation" for their sacrifice, and the self-gratification of revenge (Kostro, Riba 2014).

To summarize, grievance is the strongest motivator when it comes to female terrorists. Non-materialistic incentives as motivators for the Black Widows has some support, but only marginally. The abstract and amenable nature of non-materialistic incentives makes a strong and (semi) logical argument for Religious-based organizations, and a weak case at best for nationalistic and separatist organizations. For these reasons, though technically correct to some extent, I feel as though the data is insufficient to make an affirmative claim that this is a qualitatively significant variable. However, given the isolated nature of the Black Widow operations, the "solidarity" motivation is weak to non-existent for this particular terrorist group.

Turning to Hypothesis 3, I examine whether members of this group are motivated by personal or political grievances. When considering what we know of the Black Widows according to popular culture, we think of women dressed all in black, loose clothing, and with the fiery drive of revenge behind the straps of explosives lining her waist. While I was initially hesitant to consider personal grievances in conjunction with legal and oppressive grievances, (not wanting to confuse the influence of a partner with revenge or heartbreak). What I found when testing this

Original Hypothesis

Motivation	Men	Women (Background Literature)	Black Widows
Passive (Coersion)		X	
Ideological	X		X (Assumed)
Solidarity	X		X
Grievance	X		X
Non-material Incentive	X		
Financial Incentive	X		
Passive (Honor Suicides)		X	

Results

Motivation	Men	Black Widows
Passive		
Ideological	X	X (Assumed)
Solidarity	X	
Grievance	X	X*
Non-material Incentive	X	
Financial Incentive	X	
Passive (Honor Suicides)		

hypothesis was that overwhelmingly, Black Widows were motivated by grievances, more specifically personal grievances (NYP 2014).

While the Black Widows frequently evade capture (and the questions of researchers), in the rare event someone comes into contact with a deadly Widows and *survives*, we are given insight into the thought process and behavioral patterns of these women (Groskop 2004). What was reported by nearly all of the survivors was that while the men stood guard, the women behaved as “nuns,” assisting in bathroom breaks, bringing food and water and offering one reassuring line: that they were only acting out of a sheer will to see a political change that would create a better life for their children (Groskop 2004).” While perhaps at face value these acts can be seen as misdirected gaslighting, there is further evidence to support that an overwhelming number of motivations stem from personal and political grievances (Kostro, Riba 2014; Groskop 2004).

In addition, there is evidence that there are personal grievances beyond the assumed family and wifely duties assumption. While the investigations remain open, there are multiple pending cases of state abuse and sexual assault against Chechen women within the last 20 years, the same years that have experienced the highest increases in probable enrollment and deadly attacks (Abdullaev 2013). There is evidence that women have joined the Black Widows, not to avenge a family member, but to seek agency where the state has taken it and reap revenge for a higher purpose (Abdullaev 2013).

Furthering the idea that grievances have a strong correlation with motivation, multiple interview analyses have argued that the fact that women who have gone to such lengths to sacrifice their lives (and lifestyle), putting aside any personal grievances, shows a strong and clear motivation to join based off of the belief that the “team” they signed up for may bring some

sort of social or political change (Toto 2015; Volcheck 2010). Where the Widows are often dismissed for assumed motivation via grief from losing a family member, the presence of *only* a personal grievance motivation is not significantly present. To surmise, I found grievances to have the strongest correlation to motivation. This includes both political and personal grievances, though these often intertwined. For example, while a Widow may be motivated to join because her husband was killed for the cause, overwhelmingly the Widow had some connection to the brother organization and movement as a whole, thereby linking both political and personal grievances as the strongest motivators.

Conclusions

The idea that women could not possibly have their own political motivations, grievances or agency to join a terrorist organization is the reigning theory on female terrorists. In this case study, however, we see that not only are women not passive actors, but have a variety of motivators that align with that of their male counterparts. Starting in the early years, the Black Widows were part of a “bigger, separatist strategy” (Abdullaev 2013). Because of their enlistment and the effect a female terrorist has on the success and direction of the organization as a whole, female terrorists have political and social agency, thereby further nullifying the theory that women are mere passive actors in the world of terror. While traditionally women are perceived as weaker, making them the “target” of compulsory recruitment by male recruiters, evidence suggests that the motives of female terrorists rarely denote anything less than bloodlust and fully committed determination for revenge or social change (Kostro 2014).

As a society in whole, our unwillingness to admit that women are capable of committing such atrocities as plane hijackings, mass shootings, arson, and especially suicide bombings has

hindered our ability to develop an effective counterterrorism strategy to thwart these attacks.

While my research is a start in deciphering the true motivations of female terrorists, there is a massive amount of both qualitative and quantitative research that can not only answer the puzzles I was unable to solve, but to take this research further and explore the underground strategies employed to recruit women terrorists.

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