# The Women of Daesh: Thinking about a Decade of Research on Women, Gender, and Terrorism

https://www.e-ir.info/2015/12/06/the-women-of-daesh-thinking-about-a-decade-of-research-on-women-gender-and-terrorism/

LAURA SJOBERG, DEC 6 2015

My research on women's political violence was originally very selfishly motivated: I wanted to figure out why *I* was shocked by visual images of women's violence when, as a scholar who researched gender issues in global politics, one of the first premises of my work was that women can, and do, participate in all of the activities that men do, in daily life and in global politics. Fifteen years ago, I would have been the first to tell you that women can, and should, be political leaders, car mechanics, professional athletes, and all of the other professions that are stereotypically understood to be men's work. Then I saw women's participation in prison abuse, war crimes, torture, terrorism, and conflict sexual violence, and *I* was shocked. I thought about, and could not understand, that shock.

I came to the conclusion that it was multifaceted. It was in part an unexamined assumption that women are men's equals without their flaws. It was in part an unexamined assumption that women, as the primary victims of political violence and gender subordination, would have learned about the counterproductive nature of that behavior through their experiences with victimization. And it was in part an unexamined assumption that any participation in violence by women would need to be coerced by men to be possible.

I dealt with, analyzed, and got over *my* shock by researching how these stereotypes come to exist and how they are so salient, in everyday life, in the media, in politics, and in scholarship. In so doing, I would like to think I learned a fair amount both about women's involvement in political violence and about how it is represented in a variety of outlets from tabloids to courtrooms. Over the years, Caron Gentry and I noticed that some sorts of participation by women are initially sensationalized (e.g. women's engagement in martyrdom for Al Qaeda Iraq) then normalized, while others (e.g. Chechnya's "black widows") continue to be sensationalized no matter how commonplace their participation in violence is. The sensationalizations of politically violent women include, but are not limited to, narratives that suggest that it is what is *broken* about femininity that at once makes women's political violence possible and distinguishes politically violent women from real or normal women.

Eight years ago, we also noted that there was a racialized element to sensationalistic framings of women's engagement in political violence. Following the story of Myrium Goris, the first known white, Western martyr for Al Qaeda, we paid attention to the ways in which some media outlets minimized Goris' origins and upbringing (especially photographically) while others used her 'Westernness' to emphasize the presence, and threat, of Islamic extremism in the West. Now, in some media coverage and some early scholarly work on the women of/in Daesh, we see some of those themes recurring.

Daesh is an extremist group that is in kind and in scope different than others in some ways; each group has its unique features. When it comes to women, Daesh has paired actively recruiting women to be a part of the organization with a formal ban on female fighters. This is unique because there are a lot of organizations that *either* ban female fighters *or* recruit women, but few that do both. Note that the formal ban on women participating in violence does not mean that women *don't* participate in violence: a number of credible stories about women as police suggest that women have committed violence on behalf of the organization. Still, the formal role that women are to have in Daesh is as biological and cultural reproducers of the Caliphate: wives and mothers, both literally and figuratively, of the cause.

# The Women of Daesh: Thinking about a Decade of Research on Women, Gender, and Terrorism

Written by Laura Sjoberg

In a lot of ways, this expectation is neither new nor what has been garnering attention about women in Daesh. Instead, as Reed Wood and I find, much of the attention to date about women in Daesh is the organization's ability to attract Western women to travel to Syria and Iraq to join its ranks. Media have used a wide variety of phrases, from "jihadi brides" to "marriage migrants" to describe the women who emigrate from the United States, Western Europe, and Australia to join Daesh. In many of these stories, a picture is painted of innocent young women lured by older men with the promises of religious redemption, love, and material well-being. Very few of them attribute agency, personal or political, to the women who move across the world to join the organization. Another group of stories about women and Daesh is about the female victims of rape, sexual violence, and sexual slavery. These stories tell of alleged Daesh policies to rape women to make them Muslim, or to provide women to foreign fighters as part of their expected reward.

One of the original lessons of the research that I and others did on women's participation in political violence in global politics is that there is danger in making *anyone* two-dimensional in narratives of international security and global politics. The stories that make the women who join Daesh into manipulated pawns and the stories that reduce Daesh's female victims to their victimhood have in common this sense of collapsing dimensionality: that the women of/in/under Daesh are people, not pawns. That does not mean that they always have choices, or that they are not subject to terrible and inhumane treatment – evidence suggests that there are a lot of circumstances being in and/or around Daesh that constrain women's choices and abuse women's bodies. But the pictures of both those women and the organization as *just* that desperately lacks complexity – complexity which is necessary both to understand what is really going on with Daesh, and women, gender, and terrorism more broadly.

In *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, Caron Gentry and I called for the field of gender and IR to pay attention to women's agency in political violence. We framed agency relationally: as a world of individual, but incomplete, choice, structured by gendered opportunities and gender expectations. As work addressing these issues evolved, critics have suggested that the very notion of agency itself has a number of gendered layers. We agree, and have started thinking about these questions in terms of gendered contexts, gendered behaviors, and levels of dimensionality. The gendered contexts of the women of Daesh are multiple: gender relations within the organization, gender roles played in the organization, gender roles in the places that those who emigrate to go to Daesh experienced pre-departure, and gendered relations among the states, nations, and religious groups contending for the attention of these women. The gendered contexts of the abuses of Daesh are likewise multi-faceted: gender subordinations homed in militarism, homed in poverty, homed in particular interpretations of masculinity, and homed in particular interpretations of religious correctness are only the tip of the iceberg. The responses, in academia, in the media, and even by Western governments can also be contextualized in gendered relations, among states and people. In recent decades, treating women well (or at least appearing to) has become a *sine qua non* of liberal, developed statehood – and critique of Daesh (deliberate and resolute) failing on those axes also serves a delegitimizing function for the organization.

Research on women, gender, and terrorism has come a long way in the last decade – and some of the sample sources in the reference section below show that. The work has become more theoretically sophisticated while circling around the same basic theme: the women who participate in extralegal violence are often more complicated than the gender stereotypes they tend to be portrayed as. Available empirical research has expanded what we know about the roles that women play in, and gendered relationships within, violent extremist organizations, but the information provides more ammunition for a well-rehearsed basic contention: that women play a wide variety of roles in politically violent organizations, where their experiences are often constituted by gender but rarely limited by sex. Yet sensationalized, stereotypical, and partial accounts of what the women of Daesh are, and how they come to be related to or victims of the organization, remain the norm.

So long as gender stereotypes rule our understandings of what women's participation in terrorism is, those understandings will necessarily be partial. In a research project on women and Daesh that Reed Wood and I conducted last summer, one of our interviewees suggested that one of the reasons that women were joining Daesh in such large numbers was because the organization was better at listening to, and catering to, the sex-specific needs women express than its opponents who were putting together counterterrorism strategies. While this varies on a person-to-person level, the point is well-taken: those who do not think about gender, or who think about gender in

over-simplistic ways, do so at the risk of the accuracy, coherence, and effectiveness of their engagement with violent extremism, as analysts or activists or both. A decade of research on women, gender, and terrorism around the world suggests that, and a quick look at women of/in/under Daesh confirms it.

**Further Reading**

Ahall, Linda. 2012. "Motherhood, Myth, and Gendered Agency in Political Violence," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14(1):103-120.

Alison, Miranda H. 2011. "'In the War Front We Never Think We are Women:' Women, Gender, and the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Elam," in Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, eds. *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 131-155.

Alison, Miranda H. 2008. *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict* . Abingdon: Routledge.

Auchter, Jessica. 2012. "Gendering Terror." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14(1):121-139.

Brown, Katherine E. 2011. "Blinded by the Explosion? Security and Resistance in Muslim Women's Suicide Terrorism," in Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, eds. *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 194-226.

Gentry, Caron E. 2013. "Patriarchal Terrorism," *International Feminist Journal of Politics Annual Conference*, Brighton, UK.

Gentry, Caron E. 2011a. "The Neo-Orientalist Narratives of Women's Involvement in al-Qaeda." In Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, eds. *Women, Gender, and Terrorism.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 176-193.

Gentry, Caron E. 2011b. "The Committed Revolutionary: Reflections on a Conversations with Leila Khaled, in Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, eds. *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 120-130.

Gentry, Caron and Laura Sjoberg. 2014. "Terrorism and Political Violence," in *Gender Matters in Global Politics*, ed. Laura J. Shepherd. London: Routledge, pages.

Gentry, Caron E. and Laura Sjoberg. 2011. "The Gendering of Women's Terrorism." in Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, eds. *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 57-80.

Gentry, Caron E. and Kathryn Whitworth. 2011. "The Discourse of Desperation: The Intersections of Neo-Orientalism, Gender and Islam in the Chechen Struggle," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 4(2), 145-161.

Hirschmann, Nancy. 2004. *The Subject of Liberty: Towards a Feminist Theory of Freedom.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

MacKenzie, Megan. 2012. *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security, and Post-Conflict Development.* New York: New York University Press.

MacKenzie, Megan. 2009. "Securitization and Desecuritization: Female Soldiers and the Reconstruction of Women in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone," *Security Studies* 18(2):241-261.

McEvoy, Sandra. 2009. "Loyalist Women Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland: Beginning a Feminist Conversation about Conflict Resolution," *Security Studies* 18(2):262-286.

Ness, Cindy, ed. 2008. *Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility, and Organization*. Abingdon: Routledge.

# The Women of Daesh: Thinking about a Decade of Research on Women, Gender, and Terrorism
Written by Laura Sjoberg

Ortbals, Candice and Lori Poloni-Staudinger. 2014. "Women Defining Terrorism: Ethnonationalist, State, and Machista Terrorism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 7(3): 336-356.

Parashar, Swati. 2011. "*Aatish-e-Chinar:* In Kashmir, Where Women Keep Resistance Alive," in Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, eds. *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 94-119.

Parashar, Swati. 2010. "Women, Militancy, and Security: the South Asian Conundrum." In Laura Sjoberg, ed. *Gender and International Security: Feminist Perspectives.* London: Routledge, 168-188.

Parashar, Swati. 2009. "Feminist International Relations and Women Militants: Case Studies from Sri Lanka and Kashmir," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22(2): 235-256.

Qazi, Farhana. 2011. "The *Mujahidaat:* Tracing the Early Female Warriors of Islam," in Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, eds. *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 29-56.

Sjoberg, Laura. forthcoming. *Rape Among Women.* New York: New York University Press.

Sjoberg, Laura. 2013. *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War* New York: Columbia University Press.

Sjoberg, Laura. 2011. "Conclusion: The Study of Women, Gender, and Terrorism," in Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, eds. *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 227-240.

Sjoberg, Laura. 2009a. "Feminist Interrogations of Terrorism/Terrorism Studies," *International Relations* 23(1):69-74.

Sjoberg, Laura and Caron Gentry, eds. 2011. *Women, Gender, and Terrorism.* Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Sjoberg, Laura and Caron Gentry. 2008. "Reduced to Bad Sex: Narratives of Violent Women from the Bible to the War on Terror," *International Relations* 22(1):5-23.

Sjoberg, Laura and Caron Gentry. 2007. *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics.* London: Zed Books.

Sjoberg, Laura and Jonathon Whooley. 2014. "The Arab Spring for Women? Representations of Women in Middle East Politics in 2011." *Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy* [Publication Details].

Stack-O'Connor, Alisa. 2011. "Zombies Versus Black Widows: Women as Propaganda in the Chechen Conflict," in Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, eds. *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 83-95.

Tétreault, Mary Ann, ed. 1994. *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia, and the New World* . Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.

---

**About the author:**

**Laura Sjoberg** is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida. She is author of *Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq* (2006); *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (with Caron Gentry, 2007); *Gendering Global Conflict: Towards a Feminist Theory of War* (2013), and *Gender, War, and Conflict* (2014). She is currently editor of the International Feminist Journal of Politics and International Studies

**The Women of Daesh: Thinking about a Decade of Research on Women, Gender, and Terrorism**
Written by Laura Sjoberg

Review, and has edited several books and special issues, including, most recently, Queer International Relations (a forum in International Studies Review with Cynthia Weber). Her work has been published in more than two dozen political science and International Relations journals, and she currently serves as the Vice President of the International Studies Association.