

Blooming in the Silence: Dynamic Roles of Women in Violence in Asia

Yixuan Wang^{1, a, *}

¹The Bartlett, UCL, London, WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom

^aCorresponding Author Email: yolandaares777@gmail.com

Abstract

Females are assigned multiple roles and identities which mostly displayed in form of dynamic transition in specific periods. According to Foucault's theory that aims to provide mechanism of transition relevant references during violent confrontation. However, such transition is not limited to hierarchical top-down regulation in traditional significance. It is actually triggered the internalized agency of women in the violent environment.

Keywords

Dynamic roles; Female child soldiers; Violence; Asia; Terrorism.

1. Introduction

The United Nations has defined violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (United Nations 1993: 1). It can be argued that violence against women constitutes an extreme means by which women are retained in a social status that is inferior to men's. It is also often deemed axiomatic that women are usually the victims of male orchestrated armed conflict. In this respect Susan Brownmiller in her seminal work ‘Against our Will’ in the 1970s argued that all women were victims of rape and by extension male violence, inasmuch as the fear and threat of rape ordered the way women were constrained to live their lives. It can be argued that Brownmiller's thesis can equally be applied to all women being victims of male oriented wars and conflicts. This view however of women being passive victims to what she terms ‘accidents of biology’ has been criticized on the grounds that it portrays all women as lacking any agency in being dynamic or resilient to male violence. This research will be examining the role of female child soldiers in conflict zones such as Sri Lanka, and the way they have been used and co-opted into military service (Mazurana et al 2002). It will especially be examining the way power is used in indoctrinating and motivating female child soldiers, and the agency these girls exhibit in surviving or crafting their own roles and responses.

2. Literature Review

Feminist security studies make the point that international relations, diplomacy and politics are male centred and predicated on the use of power by men. There is therefore a gender bias in the way issues such as war, violence, peace, security and the state is dealt with (Puechguirbal 2004). For example, it is men who decide what constitutes security issues, men who define international relations issues, policies, norms, laws and diplomacy. This gendered approach has often found expression in the institutionalized use of rape and other forms of violence towards women in times of conflict. These forms can include forced prostitution, trafficking, forced pregnancy, abortion or sterilization, forced marriage or cohabitation, torture or medical

experimentation. The proliferation of inter and intra state wars since the end of the Cold War has only increased the opportunities for women to become victims of conflict related violence (MacKinnon 2001: 897; Dietz 1994). There are a number of reasons why violence is used against women in times of conflict. For example, violent acts such as mass rape of women can be a conqueror's way of portraying the conquered men as weak and inferior inasmuch as they are unable to defend their women. In this respect Swaine states, Sexualized violence is most often described as being instrumental when it is utilized within military engagements or tactics. Significant is that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia found that rape itself was also perceived to be a ritual enhancing the power and virility of fighters (Swaine 2015). In other contexts, it can be a display not of violence towards women, but rather of acquiring the property of conquered men and tarnishing it in such a way as to make it less valuable (Burgess-Jackson 1996; Wishnant 2007). In like manner it can also be used to demoralize, instil fear, destroy trust in the state to provide protection and even in some cases as a tool of ethnic cleansing (Russell-Brown 2003). Therefore, rape can be used as a strategic weapon to wipe out not just a community but an entire ethnic group as well.

However, it should also be noted that rape is not a ubiquitous or inevitable event applicable to all conflicts. Indeed, the use of sexual violence in conflicts can differ across countries, groups and types of armed conflict. The United States Institute for Peace makes the following comments regarding the generalized nature of sexual violence in combat: "Some armed groups can and do prohibit sexual violence. Wartime rape is also not specific to certain types of conflicts or to geographic regions. It occurs in ethnic and non-ethnic wars, in Africa and elsewhere. State forces are more likely to be reported as perpetrators of sexual violence than rebels. States may also be more susceptible than rebels to naming and shaming campaigns around sexual violence. Perpetrators and victims may not be who we expect them to be. During many conflicts, those who perpetrate sexual violence are often not armed actors but civilians. Perpetrators also are not exclusively male, nor are victims exclusively female. Policymakers should not neglect non-stereotypical perpetrators and victims" (Cohen et al 2013: 1). This data contradicts the feminist argument that sexual violence in war time is specifically a manifestation of male dominance over women. This is especially relevant by the fact that men can be victims and women the perpetrators of sexual violence. For example, Aron et al make the point that during the civil war in El Salvador both male and female political prisoners were subject to sexual abuse and torture (Aron et al 1991: 37). Also research has shown that of all forty-eight conflicts in Africa between 1989 and 2009—including both civil conflicts and interstate state wars—and all 236 active, organized armed groups—including armed state organizations, rebel groups, and pro-government militias—64 percent of armed groups were not reported to have engaged in any form of sexual violence (Cohen and Nordas 2013: 16-17). Furthermore a range of conflicts have shown the following characteristics: 41% of the victims of sexual violence in the civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo state these atrocities were committed by women; female paramilitary groups in Haiti committed gang rape on women in other gangs (Duramy 2014); during the Rwandan genocide, women were active participants in both the killing and sexual violence against other women; the prisoner abuse scandal in Abu Ghraib showed American female soldiers engaged in sexual abuse of Iraqi prisoners" (McKelvey 2007). This data shows that the issue of war time sexual violence against women is therefore not always solely an expression of male patriarchal aggression.

A key area of analysis for this research will be the experience of women and child soldiers who have been forced into becoming fighters. In particular, the thinking of Michel Foucault on the way the circulation of power is internalized, and individuals regulate themselves will be applied to the case of female child soldiers in Sri Lanka. This will be used to underpin the argument that women are always the victims of violence. There has been a range of research conducted on the causes for women becoming female fighters, the effect it has on them and their status as fighters.

For example, Miranda Alison challenges the idea that women are more peaceful than men and instead examines how the propensity for female violence will vary according to the particular context. For example, she argues that “Anti-state, ‘liberatory’ nationalisms often provide more space (ideologically and practically) for women to participate as combatants than do institutionalized state or pro-state nationalisms, and this can be seen in the cases of the LTTE in Sri Lanka and the IRA in Northern Ireland when contrasted with loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland” (Alison 2004:447). This point has also been emphasized by Dolan who states “solutions to violence against women remain unlikely if violence against women is imagined through mono-categorical lenses such as gender lenses of male perpetrators and female victims” (Dolan 2016).

3. Methodology

This research will include the collection and analysis of primary and secondary qualitative data. It will especially make use of a case study on female child soldiers in Sri Lanka. The cases study will apply the thinking Foucault on how power is used to order the behaviour of individuals. The advantage of the cases study approach is that it will give some in depth insights into the thinking and motivations of female child soldiers and the meanings they attach to their actions. The main disadvantage is that it will not be possible to make generalizations based on the findings of a single case study.

Foucault and the Use of Power

Power generally, and in this case over women and children can be theoretically exercised in two main ways. The first is in the traditional manner as espoused by Max Weber’s view of how power is exercised in society. From this perspective power is exercised in a hierarchical top down manner (Weber 1978). Those who hold power at the top or apex of social institutions exercise power over those operating below them in the hierarchical chain. This can be manifested in bureaucratic rules, manipulation, coercion or persuasion. Therefore from this perspective women and children commit violence due to being indoctrinated by those exercising power over them. They have little or no choice in this decision.

Foucault however took a different approach by theorizing that such action does not always stem from indoctrination or power exercised from above, but rather from people exercising agency. This is based on his belief that power is not situated in one place, but circulates throughout society and social institutions (Foucault 1980). Instead of being directed from above, individuals internalize what is expected of them and regulate their own behaviour accordingly rather than being controlled in a typical top down Weberian manner. Gaventa describes Foucault’s view of power by stating, “His work marks a radical departure from previous modes of conceiving power and cannot be easily integrated with previous ideas, as power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them” (Gaventa 2003: 1)

Having internalized what is expected of them, individuals use their own agency in ordering their own behaviour. Therefore from the perspective of women and children pressed into combat situations, it is less an issue of being forced to do so, and more about their regulating their own behaviour to suit the circumstances. In this respect the case study of child soldiers in Sri Lanka will be examining the way power has been exercised to see which of the two explanations provides a more cogent and comprehensive explanation. It will also need to ascertain the extent to which true agency is possible under such circumstances and whether it is not simply a case of internalizing being the mere acceptance of the orders of those exercising power. From the perspective of this research the interview data will be analysed to ascertain the extent to which female child soldiers were simply being controlled by those above them

through indoctrination, or whether they were able to exercise agency in regulating themselves, either to show their power and effectiveness over their male counterparts, or as a mechanism for survival. Consequently the research will make use of primary and secondary qualitative data which will be based on a case study of the experience of female child soldiers in Sri Lanka. The data will include interviews with a selected group and will aim to ascertain how they have dealt with their predicament.

4. The Indoctrination of Women and Child Soldiers into Violence

Women and Violence in Asia

It is axiomatic that women and children as the more vulnerable members of society, are also the ones to suffer disproportionately in times of conflict. It is also noticeable that they also experience a much wider range of different types of violence than men. These can include: physical violence, rape, military prostitution; forced pregnancy and abortions, sexual slavery, being abducted and or trafficked, being infected with HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases. This means that the men and women tend to have vastly different experiences of wars and conflicts, especially as they differ in their access to resources, and decision making power. There has been a long history of women participating in armed conflicts in Asia especially within the context of anti-colonialism struggles. For example, women were active participants in India's struggle for independence. They especially became active and valuable in filling the void left by British imprisonment of Indian freedom fighters. One notable example was Vijay Lakshmi Pundit who was the niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister. "She entered the Non-Cooperation Movement to fight against the British rule. Vijay Lakshmi represented India in many of the Conferences abroad. She attended numerous public lectures and challenged the British dominated delegate's rights to represent India therein. She was a great fighter and took parts in many of the freedom movement. She was arrested in 1932 and sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment. She was arrested in 1940 and yet again during the Quit India Movement in 1942" (Kaur 2013: 114). Another prime example is the under-reported role of female fighters in the struggle for independence in Timor Leste. Many women flocked to join FALINTIL (Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste or the Armed Forces for the National Liberation of Timor-Leste), whose commanders were initially reluctant to allow women to become combatants. Women eventually not only fought in combat but some rose to become leaders on the battlefield, while others played an invaluable support role. In these as in other similar examples the decision to become combatants was voluntary by women inasmuch as they were fighting for a cause they believed in; the liberation and independence of their countries. This however leads to the question of why women decide to become involved in violent conflicts in what has been described as non-state armies.

Kearns provides a partial answer to this question by stating, "The reasons for joining non-state armies are multiple. Some women and girls are forcibly recruited, whilst others join to flee oppression and abuse at home, including forced marriages. Some join to gain better control over their lives and for their own protection. Others long to 'be someone' and feel valued. Armies can provide a career with perceptions of leadership and strength" (Keairns 2002: 3). However this work applies specifically to child soldiers in Sri Lanka and offers a valuable insight into the way child soldiers are recruited and treated and the way they respond. For example there is a preconception where child soldiers are concerned that they are invariably raped or are the victims of sexual abuse. However this was not necessarily the case in the data collected by Keairns. Instead she found that many groups actively forbade any form of sexual violation of child soldiers, or even sexual contact without the express approval of both the female concerned and the camp commander. In many of these instances the girls interviewed stated that they willingly exchanged sexual favours in return for benefits such as more food, better

living conditions and opportunities to ride rather than walk over long distances. However, in no instance was there any evidence provided that information regarding sexually transmitted diseases was made available to girl soldiers (Ibid 3).

5. Case Study on Female Child Soldiers in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is situated in the Indian Ocean and has a population of approximately 14 million people. It has endured ethnic tensions ever since it won independence from British rule in 1948, during which the island was known as Ceylon. The population is fairly diverse with the major ethnic group being the Sinhala (82 percent of the population) who are a combination of mainly Buddhist and Christian and live in the south of the island. The other significant ethnic group are the Tamils (9.4 percent of the population) who are mainly Hindu and reside in the north of the island. Finally the Sri Lankan Moors constitute 7.9 percent of the population. Ethnic tensions in the country became a serious issue in the mid 1970s and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was formed in 1976 as a terrorist organization that was fighting for the establishment of a separate homeland Tamil Eelam in the north and east of the island. It became engaged in a civil war with the Sri Lankan government from 1983. India which has a Tamil population of its own intervened in 1987 by sending the Indian Army into Sri Lanka to act as a peacekeeping force. However the Indians were unable to prevent the escalation of violence by the LTTE and left Sri Lanka in 1990. As the LTTE escalated its campaign of suicide bombings and confronting the Sri Lankan Army throughout the 1990s, it became listed internationally by the United States as a terror organization. In the process both sides committed a range of war crimes and human rights abuses. A ceasefire was eventually brokered by the Norwegian government in 2001. However, peace negotiations broke down when the LTTE withdrew due to lack of progress in establishing its aims of an Interim Self-Governing Authority. The Sri Lanka Army eventually defeated the Tamil Tigers in 2009 with the conflict accounting for an estimated 100,000 casualties. Since its defeat the pro LTTE Tamil National Alliance has dropped its demands for a separate state and is now campaigning for the institution of federalism in the country that would allow the Tamils a measure of regional autonomy.

One of the most controversial aspects of this conflict has been the abduction of children, both before and after the ceasefire, by the LTTE for use as soldiers. Human Rights Watch makes the point that "Under the cease-fire agreement, the LTTE was allowed to open political offices in government-controlled areas, effectively providing it with access to new recruits. While the LTTE claims that these offices are used to educate people about the LTTE, local human rights activists believe that the offices were used for recruitment purposes, including forced recruitment of children" (Human Rights Watch 2004).

The issue of child soldiers has been defined in extreme terms; either as psychotic, crazed killers on the one hand, or as hapless and innocent victims of evil and violent men on the other. It has been argued that not all child soldiers were coerced into joining, but that some may have been enticed or possibly duped into joining voluntarily. There have also been a range of factors associated with this tendency. For example, the LTTE were very adept at disseminating reasons for joining through literature and the media generally. For example, Somasundaram (1998: 230) has theorized on 'push and pull' factors associated with joining the LTTE. These included: joining as a means of seeking retribution on the Sri Lankan Army for the killing one's parents and family; the hero worshiping, glamorization and glorification of martyrs who had died heroically; economic reasons as a means of escaping poverty and supporting their family; as a means for lower caste Hindus to escape their repressive caste systems; and as a means of acquiring advanced technical training (De Silva et al 2001).

One key aspect of the abduction and use of child soldiers was the Weberian concept of power being exercised from above through domination and coercion. This is certainly applicable to

the way the LTTE recruited young girls into their organization. The evidence for this can be found in the following accounts.

However, while this data shows the exercise of force in recruiting children, there was a noticeably more nuanced approach to the way some female child soldiers reacted to their time with the LTTE. This feature will be explored through some of the interviews given by female child soldiers.

“Before we were given guns to carry we had to carry a piece of wood (a dummy). All the while we had to carry and after quite some days when we were used to it, we were given rifles. The day I got the rifle I was thrilled and happy.” (Keairns 2003: 15)

This sense of thrill and achievement often comes up in the account of female child soldiers. This needs to be understood within the context of the harsh and difficult training each girl receives. This involves waking at 4am every morning and undergoing intense physical training between 8am and 12 noon. After lunch, training in special skills takes place between 1,30 and 4pm with the day ending with parade between 5 and 6pm. After months of this intense training girls begin to feel a sense of pride and accomplishment with their development. Every step up the ladder such as promotion from dummy to real guns is a sign of progress and reward for their hard work. It is at this stage that Foucault’s concept of internalization begins to take form. As with any other form of conventional military training it is only a matter of time before recruits begin regulating their own behaviour rather than having to be coerced by someone from above.

“The ultimate achievement was to be honoured at a “Hero’s Welcome.” A hero’s welcome was a special honour granted to those who risked and/or sacrificed their life in battle by killing and destroying the enemy. The supreme hero’s welcome was celebrated and took place after the girl’s death. If by some chance the girl was not killed in battle and had escaped capture and had not swallowed the cyanide capsule her “Hero’s Welcome” might include a visit from some member of her family. When someone goes out for a Hero’s death, they are honoured. I feel sorry for them. Many die and never come back. Some have come back after performing dangerous missions. They are then promoted and become respected. (Ibid 16).

This interviewee also reiterates the honour attached to those who have triumphed while dying in battle. If a girl has triumphed and returned without having to take the cyanide capsule, she is not just awarded a hero’s welcome but given the extra privilege of seeing her family. Strangely enough the interviewee also expresses remorse for those who die in combat. The implication is that those who die never get the opportunity to be promoted, respected or even re-united with their families.

These examples do not detract from the horror of being abducted as a young child and torn away from one’s family. Nor does it underplay the harsh treatment that these children undergo having to train as if they were adults. However, what it does reveal is the extent to which they eventually internalize their roles as child soldiers. This is not just top down coercion as envisaged by Weber, but more in line with Foucault’s views of how individual’s come to accept what is expected of them and regulate their own behaviour accordingly.

Examples from other sources corroborates this view. For example, research by Hart showed that young people from every region of Sri Lanka as well as across Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim ethnic lines all gave a response in the region of between 25% and 52.2% of those questioned that violence was a legitimate tool to use against opposing ethnic forces. In addition there were several examples of both boys and girls voluntarily choosing to leave their villages to join the LTTE (Hart 2002: 62-63). Gates and Reich however make the point that child soldiers in Sri Lanka grew up in an atmosphere in which violence was an everyday occurrence. They were therefore socialized into thinking of violence as the norm. In time militancy is the only viable career path and war becomes a way of life (Gates and Reich 2009). In such a scenario the LTTE did not find it difficult to find male and female child volunteers for suicide missions. Young girls

were especially valued as they were more easily trusted by adversaries, and would gain access to areas no one else easily could. In this respect they cannot just all be viewed simply as victims. Within certain contexts they are also dangerous assailants. It is because of the propensity of some child soldiers including female child soldiers to be relentlessly violent that such a large section of the media have characterized them as dangerous, evil, sociopaths, monsters and killing machines rather than as victims (Honwana 2006; Rosen 2009).

6. Discussion

The evidence provided in the case study bears out the point made in the literature review regarding the feminist view of the gendered approach to the institutionalization of violence against women. In the case of Sri Lanka, it was men in the LTTE who decided on how to prosecute the civil war as an intra-state war, and that this process should include the abduction and use of female child soldiers. In this particular case these abductions were used as a means of destroying trust in the ability of the Sri Lankan government to protect all its people. This failure left poor villagers with little option but to acquiesce to the wishes of the LTTE. The literature review also made comments regarding the civil war as an anti-state device which theoretically gives women the opportunity to participate in struggles for liberation (Alison 2004); as well as the idea that women make less effective combat personnel (Browne 2001). The data presented in the case study addresses both these issues by showing that despite the harshness of their induction into the LTTE, many of the girls interviewed eventually took pride in their training, skill and combat ability, as well as the plaudits they earned when they were victorious. In this the data indicates that there was little or no substantial quality differential between male and female fighters. Therefore, this can be construed as an example of what D'Amico referred to as the overcoming of the gendering of society's construct of war (D'Amico 2007). In this context many of the girls interviewed have shown their propensity for adopting dynamic roles of violence. This shows that while women may experience being the victims of violence, they are not without agency in negotiating roles for themselves in which they can be as effectively violent as their male counterparts.

7. Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate whether all women are victims of violence or whether they can have agency in taking on dynamically violent roles. There is little doubt regarding the extent of male patriarchal force and dominance in the way these girls have been abducted and coerced into becoming soldiers. This process has included being separated from their family and being physically and emotionally abused. However, the data has also shown the many factors that can go into this process as well including the push-pull factors that may make joining groups like the LTTE an advantageous or prudent option. However, there was also clear evidence of Foucault's concept of internalization in action, in that many of the respondents revealed their agency in regulating their own behaviour that is a key element of Foucault's view on how power operates. As Keairns stated "They lived with contradictions and intense feelings of ambivalence about supporting the movement and being recognized for their accomplishments and at the same time being perpetrators of violence. They also however wanted to be someone and they longed to be valued" (Keairns 2003: 14). This form of ordering oneself led many of these female child soldiers to excel in their performance as combatants and in the process negate the generalization that all women are merely victims of violence.

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