WOMEN'S ROLE IN VIOLENCE AND UN WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY AGENDA

KADINLARIN ŞİDDETTEKİ ROLÜ VE BİRLEŞMİŞ MİLLETLER'İN KADIN, BARIŞ VE GÜVENLİK GÜNDEMİ

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ABSTRACT

The UN's Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda emphasizes women's victimhood and peacemaking roles. However, women participate in two-thirds of armed movements and affect conflict outcomes in unique gendered ways. This article argues that excluding female perpetrators from the WPS agenda generates new insecurities for them and broader societies. By highlighting women's contribution to perpetuating conflict, I propose a framework to incite policymakers to view women's empowerment as a mainstream security concern and implement policies aligned with the goals of the UN WPS Agenda. First, I explore reasons to avoid reinforcing gender norms that portray women as victims and peacemakers. These reasons encompass assessing: 1) women's contributions to armed organizations, 2) their exclusion from post-conflict rehabilitation programs, 3) the limited visibility of human rights violations by women and the underrepresentation of male civilians as victims, and 4) "saving vulnerable women" rhetoric as a justification for Western power involvement. Then, I examine gender inequality as a fundamental cause enabling these factors,

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underscoring the need to regard gender inequality and traditional gender norms as central security concerns.

Keywords: The Women Peace and Security Agenda, United Nations, Female Militants, Women in Political Violence, Gender Inequality.

ÖZ

Birleşmiş Milletler'in (BM) Kadın, Barış ve Güvenlik (KBG) gündemi kadınların mağduriyetini ve barışı sağlama rollerini vurgulamaktadır. Ancak, kadınlar, dünyadaki silahlı hareketlerin üçte ikisinde aktif olarak yer almakta ve çatışma sonuçlarını erkeklerden farklı şekillerde etkilemektedir. Bu makale, şiddet eylemlerine katılan kadınları KBG gündeminden dışlamanın, kadınlar için ve içinde bulundukları toplumlar için yeni güvenlik sorunlarına yol açtığını anlatmaktadır. Özellikle, silahlı çatışmaları devam ettirmede kadınların rollerini vurgulayarak, cinsiyet eşitsizliğini temel bir güvenlik sorunu olarak ele alan bir kavramsal çerçeve öne sürmektedir. Bu çerçevenin, liderler ve yasa yapıcıları, cinsiyet eşitliği için daha çok çaba sarfetmelerine ve BM KBG hedefleriyle uyumlu politikalar uygulamalarına teşvik etmesi beklenmektedir. Makale, öncelikle, kadınları yalnızca mağdur veya barışçıl olarak tasvir eden cinsiyet normlarını güçlendirmenin neden sakıncalı olduğunu dört ana başlıkta incelemektedir: 1) Kadınların silahlı örgütlere sağladıkları faydalar, 2) Kadınların çatışma sonrası rehabilite programlarından dışlanmaları, 3) Kadınların işledikleri insan hakları suçlarının daha az görünür olması ve erkek sivillerin mağduriyetinin kabul görmemesi, 4) "Mağdur kadınları kurtarma" söyleminin Batılı ülkeler tarafından işgallere zemin olarak kullanılması. Ardından, bu faktörlere ortaya çıkmasının arkasındaki ana neden olarak cinsiyet eşitsizliğini vurgulayıp, cinsiyet eşitsizliğini ve geleneksel cinsiyet normlarını temel ve anaakım güvenlik meselesi olarak ele almamız gerektiğini anlatmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadın, Barış ve Güvenlik Gündemi, Birleşmiş Milletler, Kadın Militanlar, Kadınların Siyasi Şiddet Eylemleri, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği.

INTRODUCTION: RECOGNIZING WOMEN'S ROLE IN VIOLENCE AND ADVANCING THE UN WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda was established by the United Nations (UN) in 2000 to address the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and to ensure their inclusion in peace and security efforts (UNSC, 2000). However, the focus of the agenda has primarily been on women as victims and peacemakers, neglecting the significant role that women play in armed movements and the ways in which their actions can impact conflict outcomes. This approach is limited in scope. In reality, women not only experience victimization but also actively participate in armed movements, exerting unique gendered influences on conflict outcomes.

The main research question I ask in this article is "Why is it important to recognize women's role as perpetrators of violence?" I argue that, although women represent a smaller proportion of perpetrators in contemporary armed conflicts compared to men, the WPS agenda should not overlook their presence and instead acknowledge how they shape conflict to further the goals of the WPS agenda. I maintain that their exclusion from the WPS agenda inadvertently generates new insecurities for them and broader societies. To address this issue, I propose a comprehensive framework to incite policymakers and bureaucrats to perceive women's empowerment as a mainstream security concern and to implement (and advance) policies aligned with the objectives outlined in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325). In doing so, I examine secondary sources and existing research on gendered conflict dynamics based on quantitative and qualitative analysis, allowing me to establish a connection between the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, gender inequality, and their impact on mainstream security issues.[1] By gendered conflict dynamics, I refer to the mechanisms displaying that conflicts are not gender-neutral, and that gender plays a critical role in shaping the causes, processes, and consequences of conflicts. Specifically, as gender is not purely a biological concept but is socially constructed, gender roles influence actors' behaviors, opportunities, and vulnerabilities differently, where power relations and gender inequalities are often intertwined.

To discuss the perils of overlooking women's agency in violence by the UN, I draw mainly on feminist security studies, emphasizing the central role of women and gender for understanding security. This perspective questions the assumption that the state reliably protects women, and problematizes the idea that women are

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[1] This study does not rely on specific data collection, as it does not conduct empirical analysis. Instead, its objective is to construct a framework by synthesizing research from various academic studies related to WPS since its inception in 2000, alongside theoretical insights from feminist international relations and feminist security studies.

inherently linked to peace (Blanchard, 2003). This approach is grounded in critical theory perspective, where security is redefined and expanded beyond traditional, state-centric definitions (Sjoberg, 2009). In contrast to the prevailing neorealist and neoliberal paradigms within international relations, feminist security studies perceive security not merely as a matter of military defense or safeguarding state boundaries, but as a broader concept centered on guaranteeing the freedom of individuals from a spectrum of threats, including, but not limited to, domestic violence, sexual assault, economic instability, and environmental degradation. This perspective recognizes that individuals experience security differently based on multiple identities (i.e., the intersection of gender with other factors like race, class, sexual orientation, and ethnicity) and that security policies must be responsive to these multifaceted layers of discrimination (Sjoberg, 2018). As such, peace is not regarded as the absence of war instead, the war/peace dichotomy is challenged, questioning whether peacetime provides peace for women and other minorities. I rely on this perspective to problematize the UN WPS Agenda's association of women with peace and, thus, men with war – an association that remains strong despite the feminist critiques and changes in the gender makeup of state militaries and non-state armed groups in the twenty-first century.

Underlying this association is the concept of militarized masculinities, which asserts "traits stereotypically associated with masculinity can be acquired and proven through military service or action, and combat" (Eichler, 2014). While men are not inherently militaristic, defining masculinity with military, war, and violence is socially constructed, maintained, and reproduced in various ways in different contexts, typically defined in opposition to femininities, which are viewed hierarchically as less desirable traits. Feminist scholars argue that upholding the gendered division into "masculine protectors" and "feminine protected" legitimizes unequal gender dynamics and the use of force (Eichler, 2014; Young, 2003). This division illustrates how traditional gender stereotypes remain relevant within security contexts. In a broader sense, I use the term "traditional gender stereotypes" to describe deeply rooted and constructed assumptions about gender roles and identities that have historically shaped security policies and practices. These stereotypes often revolve around a binary understanding of masculinity and femininity. For instance, men are expected to embody traits such as strength, assertiveness, independence, and a willingness to take risks, while women are anticipated to exhibit qualities associated with nurturing, passivity, compassion, and emotional sensitivity. I maintain that these traditional gender stereotypes not only reinforce gender inequality but also foster discrimination and social pressures both for women and men.

This feminist security studies approach shows differences from earlier feminist traditions where some scholars and activists advocated the inclusion of women in security-related domains based on the reasoning that women are

naturally predisposed to peace and nonviolence, and thus a stronger force than men for preventing war (Ruddick, 1983; also see Leonardo, 1985). Further, this feminist security theory perspective I rely on here differs from liberal feminism, which the UN WPS Agenda heavily draws on (Hudson, 2015; Arat, 2015). The liberal feminist approach primarily advocates for attaining gender equality by working within the established societal structures and legal frameworks. In contrast, feminist security theorists question these very structures as the root causes of gender inequality (Arat, 2015; Sjoberg, 2018).[2]

Scholars have used this approach to highlight the key limitations within the UN WPS Agenda. These limitations encompass challenges in implementation, resource scarcity, the political commitment needed to carry out the agenda, and its applicability to vastly different conflict contexts (Pratt and Richter-Devroe, 2011). The UN agenda is further criticized for failing to address structural factors (such as poverty), hindering women from effectively assuming transformative roles (Shepherd 2011). The agenda's narrow concept of justice, primarily centered around criminal prosecution, also draws criticism for perpetuating victim hierarchies and overlooking the links between structural inequality and vulnerability (Aroussi, 2017). Furthermore, scholars have observed that WPS resolutions and numerous National Action Plans (NAPs)[3] reinforce gender stereotypes, portraying women primarily as victims of violence or neglect to consider their potential roles in perpetrating or supporting violence (Shepherd, 2008; Kirby and Shepherd; 2017, Henshaw, 2017; Basu et al., 2020). In this context, I delve deeper into the issue of perpetuating stereotypes and explore why gender essentialism is problematic, not just in principle, but also in its real-world impact on achieving the core objectives of the WPS Agenda and ensuring the safety of women and broader societies. This assessment challenges the primary assumption of the WPS Agenda, which implies a direct and linear relationship between increasing the participation of women and achieving peace.

The first section of this article critically examines the rationale behind avoiding the reinforcement of gender norms that narrowly portray women solely as victims or peacemakers. Specifically, it delves into four key aspects: 1) the significant contributions of women to armed organizations, 2) their exclusion from post-conflict rehabilitation and reintegration programs, 3) the underrepresentation of human rights violations perpetrated by women and the limited visibility of male civilians as victims, 4) the problematic use of the "saving vulnerable women" rhetoric to justify external interventions. By shedding light on

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[2] See Duncanson (2019) for a broader overview of the overlaps and disparities between these approaches and their impact on shaping the WPS objectives.
[3] NAPs are documents prepared by governments that outline policies and programs to fulfill UN Security Council WPS resolutions.

these interconnected issues, a more nuanced understanding of the gendered dynamics within conflicts emerges.

Next, this article emphasizes gender inequality as a fundamental cause perpetuating the aforementioned factors. By recognizing gender inequality and traditional gender norms as central security concerns, it becomes imperative to address the structural barriers that hinder women's full participation and agency in conflict resolution processes. In doing so, a more comprehensive approach to the WPS agenda can be achieved, which not only acknowledges women's diverse roles but also addresses the root causes of gendered conflict dynamics.

Finally, this article offers policy recommendations for policymakers and international institutions to advance the objectives of the WPS agenda effectively. Incorporating the proposed framework will foster a deeper understanding of the complex conflict dynamics at play and contribute to a more comprehensive implementation of UNSCR 1325. By moving beyond the narrow understanding of women's roles in conflict settings, policymakers, as well as international governmental organizations (IGO) and international nongovernmental organizations (INGO) bureaucrats, can better comprehend the multifaceted interplay of gender dynamics within conflict and develop inclusive policies that empower women.

1. THE WPS AGENDA AND ITS LIMITATIONS: GENDER STEREOTYPES

The WPS agenda, which includes ten resolutions so far, is a complex and evolving agenda that aims to address two significant areas where the UN member states must progress. The first area is to increase women's participation in conflict prevention, management, and peace talks, while the other is to combat violence against women and girls during conflict. These two areas are elaborated upon in four pillars, which include the participation of women in peace and security governance, the protection of women's rights and bodies in conflict and post-conflict situations, the prevention of violence, and relief and recovery efforts in disasters.

Although the resolutions are viewed as groundbreaking for their efforts to promote gender equality, it has faced criticism from those who argue that the WPS resolutions demonstrate a narrow and distorted interpretation of the fundamental ideas of gender and security (Hamilton et al., 2020; Shepherd, 2017). Some scholars have even deemed the resolutions counterproductive (Aroussi, 2021).

Reproducing traditional gender stereotypes contributes to the insecurity of women and societies alike while undermining the suffering of certain groups. This limited understanding frames violence as a security emergency rather than

acknowledging its connection to broader structural factors such as gendered power dynamics and economic inequalities (True, 2012; Meger, 2016; Henshaw, 2022).

UNSCR 1325 emphasizes women's role as victims and peacemakers. This approach reproduces an essentialist understanding of women (Henshaw, 2017; Shepherd, 2008; Otto, 2010), while diminishing their agency in violence. Although women have played active roles as combatants and non-combatants in conflicts throughout history, the UN WPS agenda has only briefly mentioned the involvement of women in combatting groups through three articles: Article 13 in UNSCR 1325 encourages consideration of the different needs of female and male ex-combatants and their dependents in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration processes. Article 16(a) in Resolution 2106 (2013) requests that the UN assist national authorities in addressing sexual violence concerns in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration processes, including establishing protection mechanisms and trauma support for women and children. Article 27 in Resolution 2647 (2019) encourages the integration of gender analysis and training into national disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration processes, as well as the establishment of protection mechanisms and trauma services for women in cantonment sites and communities of return (UNSC 2000, 2013, 2019).

While these resolutions are positive steps towards addressing the needs of women formerly associated with armed groups, they are limited by the overall emphasis of the UN WPS agenda on portraying women overwhelmingly as victims and peacemakers; the focus on protecting women has overshadowed other objectives (Henshaw, 2017). Policy solutions derived from the WPS agenda at the NAP level often focus on raising awareness about violence against women in conflict and adding more women to the organizations within the security sector.

While this is valuable, it is also important to recognize that these solutions overlook the masculine and militarized nature of the organizations that implement such policies. The inclusion of women in the security sector is often used to maintain the existing system rather than transform it, with little or no emphasis on preventing the patriarchal structure that those security organizations are founded on. This not only diminishes the recognition of women's active involvement in armed groups but also integrates women's roles within military contexts while using peace-related rhetoric, potentially paving way to their militarization. In other words, including women in the security sector is "instrumentalized for 'pacifying' the system, rather than transforming it" (Antonijević, 2022: 9).

This approach embraced by the UN WPS Resolutions, namely, situating women as peacebuilders, are based on the understanding that there is a linear and direct link between women and peace. This approach is grounded on the argument

that women, and individuals who support gender equality, are less likely than men to be involved in the use of violence or support the use of violence, such as in instances of military intervention (Hudson et al., 2009, Wood and Ramirez, 2018).

However, the evidence shows that the positive relationship between women and peace is far from being monotonic, linear, or universal. Research demonstrates that women participate in political violence in various roles, including as state military officers or members of rebel groups (Wood and Thomas, 2018; Loken and Matfess, 2023). Women have been involved in war crimes, wartime rape, suicide attacks, and guerrilla fighting in different societies, from Japan and Ireland to Rwanda and Sri Lanka (Brockes, 2009; Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007; Loken, 2022; Cohen, 2013; Sharlach, 1999; Karcher, 2013; Gonzalez Perez, 2008; Alison, 2003) However, even when women actively engage in violence, it has been often attributed to mental illness, despair, or being influenced by their male relatives, rather than being recognized as an intentional, political, or purposeful act (Eager 2016). Some scholars have pointed out that even studies on women combatants assume they only play supportive roles to male fighters and do not directly participate in violent acts (Cohen, 2013), when in reality, women's violent acts can be more lethal than that of men's (Thomas, 2021). For instance, Boko Haram utilized more women as suicide bombers than men between 2011 and 2017 (Warner and Matfess, 2017), while approximately three-quarters of the Kurdistan Workers' Party's suicide attackers are estimated to be women (O'Rourke, 2009).

While feminist scholarship encourages challenging the essentialist view of women as passive victims, women's involvement in political violence has been denied by some feminists as well (Gentry, 2012). Research shows that both women (Alakoç, 2020; Parkinson, 2013) and gender-equal attitudes can be used to sustain violence exerted by armed groups (Başer 2024a). For instance, rebel organizations with women insurgents can increase their legitimacy based on the perception that they embrace gender equality, and attract more international support, which helps sustain their violent activities (Başer, 2024a). This growing literature suggests that regarding women as directly linked to peace is simplistic and is based on the assumption that women constitute a homogenous category. However, the relationship between gender and peace is complex and not always positive.

Therefore, the WPS agenda's approach, which assumes a direct and linear link between having women and peace, does not align with the varied evidence on the relationship between gender and peace. It is essential to acknowledge that women can play critical roles in conflict resolution by increasing the inclusivity of the decision-making processes and that they are affected by conflict differently than men, such as being more vulnerable to rape, and forced prostitution, and the risks of exploitation and human trafficking while fleeing their homes due to

conflict. But, focusing solely on their victimhood or peacemaking creates an incomplete and misleading picture of women's wartime experiences (Basu et al., 2020; Kirby and Shepherd, 2016). This is because 1) it disregards women's roles in violence, 2) it creates a duality based on the contradiction of perceiving women simultaneously as passive victims and active peacebuilders. This approach inhibits addressing the underlying systematic injustices, which perpetuate both conflict and gender inequality. Structural barriers that hinder women's political, social, and economic engagement in decision-making positions hinder women's ability to create a meaningful impact (Shepherd, 2011), making the expectation of women to "pacify societies" not only essentialist but also impractical. In sum, the approach adopted by the WPS agenda reflects a reductionist perspective that assumes women's mere presence can effectively transform aggressive security policies and mitigate conflict, despite evidence indicating that this belief may not be substantiated.

Consequently, people who do not fit into this essentialist framework, such as marginalized women and men –women who have joined armed groups, female perpetrators, victim men, and men outside traditional power structures – as well as LGBTQ+, are often excluded from the WPS agenda, even when they are victims of violence caused by patriarchal structures (Antonijević, 2022). As a result, the shortcomings of the WPS agenda have tangible repercussions on the security of both women and societies at large, which are discussed in detail in the next section.

2. UNVEILING WOMEN'S ROLE IN VIOLENCE AND CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES: *WHY* SHOULD WE RECOGNIZE?

Policies based on this flawed assumption create new insecurities for women and communities through four main pathways: The reproduction of the "peaceful women" stereotype that ignores women's agency in violence 1) increases women's impact in rebel groups, 2) leads to women's exclusion in rehabilitation and reintegration programs, 3) obscures human rights violations conducted by women and neglects the victimization of men, 4) propagates the idea of "saving vulnerable women" and used as a justification for foreign military interventions. Below, I unpack each factor in detail.

Women's Impact in Rebel Groups

It is estimated that around 40% of rebel groups worldwide recruit women combatants (Wood and Thomas, 2017). This ratio increases to around 65% when we include women participating in rebel groups in supportive roles, such as spying, arms delivery, and propaganda (Loken and Matfess, 2023).

Societal gender norms deeming women as passive, compassionate, peaceful, and victim help rebel groups to effectively recruit women combatants for their operations because they are less likely to arouse suspicion (O'Rourke, 2009). Women's involvement in these organizations spans from voluntary to forced recruitment. Rebel groups are interested in recruiting women as it diversifies their strategies, garners support, and helps resist counterinsurgencies.

Women join these groups for various reasons, including ideology, politics, economics, group characteristics or personal motivations aligned with the group's goals (see Asal and Jadoon, 2020; Parkinson, 2013; Thomas and Bond, 2015; Thomas and Wood, 2018; Viterna, 2006; Henshaw, 2019). The distinction between voluntary and coerced recruitment is not always clear-cut, as even those forcibly recruited may exhibit some level of autonomy within the groups, while voluntary participation can be influenced by material incentives, limited outside options, or strong social and familial pressures (Loken and Matfess, 2023). Understanding women's agential decisions to join rebel organizations is crucial for comprehending the gender dynamics of armed insurgencies. However, exploring the diverse reasons behind their participation warrants separate, in-depth studies. This article, instead, focuses on assessing their impact on conflict and security, regardless of how they entered the group, be it voluntarily or forcibly. This approach sheds light on the unique gendered effects of female insurgents on conflict processes, complementing existing research on their initial recruitment. That said, the factors relevant to this article's framework, influencing their decision to join rebel organizations, such as challenging socioeconomic conditions and the group's ideology promoting greater egalitarianism, have been discussed in the third section below.[4]

Once recruited into these groups, women take up diverse roles that contribute to their rebel organizations in unique gendered ways. First, women's perceived nonviolent nature makes them more successful at evading security measures and performing covert roles, such as suicide bombing, delivering weapons and financial resources, and spying (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). This can be especially advantageous in irregular conflicts where access to critical information can be decisive in the outcome of the conflict. For example, in India's Khalistan Movement, women were primarily deployed as messengers and spies who provided crucial information for timely attacks (Mann 2015). Their logistics and intelligence skills were crucial to the movement's success. Similarly, the capacity of female suicide bombers to evade detection is a significant advantage

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[4] For broader insights into the participation of women in non-state armed groups at a macro-level, see Thomas and Bond (2015) for an analysis of supply and demand dynamics of gender diversity in violent political organizations, and see Loken and Matfess (2022) for an overview of the factors enabling their participation.

that enhances their performance and lethality for their rebel organizations (Thomas, 2021). For this reason, female suicide attackers have comprised a significant proportion of various militant groups. It is estimated that women comprised 75% of Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) suicide attackers, approximately 45% of Syrian Socialist National Party's suicide attackers, and two-thirds of Chechen bombers (O'Rourke, 2009). Rebel groups disproportionately use women for suicide attacks and deliberately deploy women in regions where such gender stereotypes are more pronounced to prevent further scrutiny (Alakoç, 2018).

Furthermore, rebel groups exploit gender stereotypes to manipulate men into participating in the group, by glorifying their female fighters and shaming men who do not partake in further violence or join their cause, suggesting that they are not masculine enough. The strategic deployment of women in combat roles provides a tactical edge to rebel groups, boosting their resistance capacity (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007).

Second, the sustenance of these traditional gender norms associating women with peace helps rebel groups to adopt unarmed tactics more effectively and credibly, when other means of sustaining the group are no longer possible (Başer, 2022). While opting for nonviolent tactics may appear to be a move towards a more peaceful approach, in reality, it often strengthens the resilience of armed groups against changing war conditions, increasing the likelihood of returning to violent tactics after a period of recovery during unarmed resistance. Similarly, women's advantage in using irregular tactics (such as suicide bombing) can catch the regime forces off guard through novel tactics, which helps sustain insurgencies for longer periods. Moreover, the disadvantageous life prospects of women insurgents outside their organizations strengthen women's loyalty to the rebel organization, motivating them to resist internal and external threats against the organization's survival, which strengthen the central command structure and make the armed groups more resilient (Başer, 2022).

Finally, norms deeming women as peaceful allow women insurgents to be particularly effective in propaganda activities, attracting the support of the civilians. Women insurgents typically have an advantage in gaining the cooperation of locals because the public often regards it as less risky to engage with women. Moreover, women's involvement in a rebellion has typically been deemed an anomaly, as they are not considered the main actors of violence, contrary to men. The fact that "the most pacifist" actors of the society have taken up arms gives the impression to the civilians that the situation must be grave, increasing its legitimacy and appeal to broader audiences (Loken, 2021; Wood, 2019).

Gendered power dynamics enable female combatants to contribute to their rebel organizations; these traditional gender norms create the conditions that allow for the unique impact of women within these groups. Indeed, due to these gendered contributions of female combatants groups with gender-diverse cadres have higher prospects of survival and victory in armed conflicts (Giri and Haer, 2021). Specifically, statistical analysis of data from a global sample of rebel groups further shows that a high prevalence of women combatants in a rebel group can prolong the conflict by approximately five years (Wood and Allemang, 2022). Additionally, evidence shows that groups with female combatants are more likely to achieve victory in conflicts (Braithwaite and Ruiz, 2018). Other research underlines the significance of gender stereotypes behind these findings and shows that female members' advantage in sustaining the rebellion is only salient in societies with restrictive gender norms regarding women's participation in public life (Başer 2024b). In other words, "groups with female fighters are more likely to survive longer in settings where traditional gender norms are stronger" (Başer, 2024b: 3).

We know that prolonged conflicts result in higher casualties and human rights violations, alongside several other indirect conflict costs (Ratnayake et. al., 2008). Moreover, the perpetuation of violence leads governments to take sharper measures to cope with it, restricting citizens' freedom and eroding accountability, transparency and fairness that governments rely on. In sum, women are increasingly getting involved in political violence, perpetuating it through unique gendered ways, and increasing vulnerabilities for themselves and their communities.

Women's Exclusion in Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs

The traditional gender stereotypes associating women with victimhood and peace also inhibit women's inclusion in disarmament demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs, because even if they participate in combat as perpetrators, they are assumed to be non-combatants or to have played only minor roles in the conflict (Mazurana et al., 2002). However, this is not an accurate representation of the facts, as women participate in rebel groups worldwide, from groups embodying religious ideologies to nationalist or leftist ideologies (Wood and Thomas 2017; Loken and Mattfess ,2023).

While female insurgents' participation in DRR programs varies widely depending on the conflict context, DDR programs frequently fail to address the distinctive needs of female combatants adequately, and there is often a significant underrepresentation of female soldiers in these initiatives (Vastapuu, 2021; see below for exceptions). Often, women and girls withdraw from post-conflict initiatives due to fear of social ostracism that accompanies the public recognition

of their involvement with insurgent groups (Henshaw, 2017). In some cases, rebel groups deliberately prevent their female combatants from participating in such post-conflict initiatives, fearing stigma and potential prosecution due to using child soldiers. For instance, according to reports, some women associated with Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front claimed that their commanders confiscated their weapons after the conflict ended. As a result, they could not register for official DDR programs, which mandated the surrender of firearms by demobilized combatants (MacKenzie, 2009).

Several factors highlight the importance of including women combatants in rehabilitation and reintegration programs. First, these DDR programs allow women to reintegrate into society and rebuild their lives after experiencing war trauma. Women involved in armed conflict may have unique experiences and perspectives that differ from those of their male counterparts. These experiences may include sexual violence, forced recruitment, and gender-based discrimination, which can have long-lasting effects on their physical and mental health and, hence on their communities. Failure to address the needs of female combatants, while offering DDR opportunities to male combatants, poses a risk of perpetuating their victimization and exclusion from the larger community. Indeed, research has concluded that neglecting women's needs jeopardizes the success of post-conflict reconciliation efforts as equitable institutions are critical for maintaining ceasefires (Coleman, 2004; Lie et al., 2007).

Second, women often have different social and economic roles within their communities than men, which means that their reintegration into civilian life may require different approaches. Many women may resume caretaking responsibilities for children or elderly relatives after the conflict and may require support in continuing these roles. Similarly, women may face unique challenges in accessing education, training, and employment opportunities, which can limit their ability to rebuild their lives and contribute to the recovery of their communities (Henshaw, 2020) Therefore, it is crucial to include women combatants in DDR programs to ensure they can contribute to developing equitable and stable communities.

Indeed, women's involvement in the planning process of gender-inclusive programs has been found to have a significant impact. For example, in the peace process between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebels in 2016, a Gender Sub-commission was formed to assess the gendered impact of the final agreement. The involvement of female members of the rebel group produced a more inclusive outcome than the past settlements, and statistics showed a higher level of female engagement in the DDR process compared to previous settlements (O'Neill, 2015). The FARC women involved in the peace talks had an important voice in creating a gender-inclusive

DDR effort, and they also had the opportunity to provide input into matters beyond the FARC's ranks, illustrating the value of including women from all sides of a conflict in peace processes (Henshaw, 2017). Further, in El Salvador during the 1990s, women actively participated in post-accord negotiations and played a significant role in the post-conflict commission, which is likely to have helped female members of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front receive a substantial share of land redistribution and reintegration packages (Luciak, 1999). Similarly, in South Africa, the strong presence of women in decision-making forums, including those related to defense reform, led to the appointment of many ex-combatants to high-level positions within the Defence Secretariat (Tarnaala, 2016). These cases underscore the utility of adopting a gendered perspective in DDR efforts to maintain stability and improve women's conditions.

Obscurity of Human Rights Violations and Males as "Nonconforming" Victims

Another concern with the WPS agenda reinforcing the stereotypes that associate women with passivity and compassion is related to the human rights violations conducted by female perpetrators in conflict settings. This stereotype often results in human rights violations perpetrated by women being disregarded or overlooked because it contradicts traditional notions of women as caregivers and nurturers, even when they kill civilians, recruit child soldiers, or perpetrate sexual violence. For instance, the official report from Nepal Maoists highlights that the growing involvement of women in the People's War has led to the recruitment and political engagement of children in rural areas. These children actively contributed to the guerrilla war through tasks like information gathering and exchange. The report underscores the significant potential held by these children, referring to them as "little 'red devils,'" which bodes well for the future of the revolutionary People's War (The Worker, 1998).

Cohen (2013) demonstrates that some women have participated in actual rape (by inserting objects into victims' bodies) while some others were involved in gang rape (by holding down the victim) in Sierra Leone civil war. She shows through a population-based data that groups with female insurgents perpetrated one of the fourth reported gang rapes in Sierra Leone. Another study using population-based data conducted in 2010 in the Democratic Republic of Congo shows that 41% of female sexual violence victims and 10% of male sexual violence victims were victimized by female perpetrators and (Jonhston et al., 2010). Similar reports from Uganda, Rwanda, and Liberia demonstrate that women's involvement in severe human rights violations, including sexual violence, is not an anomaly, yet typically disregarded, as males are exclusively considered to be perpetrators, where the sex of the perpetrator is not even inquired in relevant nationwide surveys (Cohen, 2013).

Similarly, domestic legal systems perceive women's violence as atypical, making female perpetrators held less accountable for their actions. For instance, the Anti-Terror Chief of London's Metropolitan Police granted immunity to some women who joined ISIS, suggesting they are less of a threat to society than male recruits (Loken and Zelenz, 2018). Further, Steflja and Darden's (2020) study on female war criminals in contexts ranging from Rwanda and Serbia to the US shows that women facing criminal charges often relied on societal and gender-related stereotypes about women being naturally peaceful, their roles as mothers, and their perceived lack of political influence in their defense strategies, even when they held high-ranking positions in their violent organizations. Likewise, Alexander and Turkington's analysis (2018) on the US criminal justice system observed that not only commentators and news media, but also defense attorneys regularly portrayed female terrorists as naïve, gullible, and easily influenced by violent extremism even when they pleaded guilty. The authors note that women accused of supporting terrorist organizations tend to receive shorter-than-average sentences, which they attributed to prevailing gender stereotypes regarding women's limited political agency and inclination toward nonviolence (Alexander & Turkington, 2018).

While it is worth noting that these perceptions are not necessarily unfounded (because women do, on average, commit fewer violent crimes than men), it is crucial to underline that such beliefs are based on stereotypes that overlook the possibility of women's capacity for violence. Since men are perceived as more likely to commit violence, people tend to hold onto their pre-existing gendered beliefs even when confronted with instances of female perpetrators, rather than updating their attitudes, resulting in a tendency to view instances of female violence as aberrant (Başer, 2024a). This can have negative implications for transitional justice efforts in post-conflict societies, as it may lead to impunity for women who have committed atrocities and hinder efforts to establish lasting peace and stability.

Including women combatants in DDR programs is essential to ensure their full participation in society. However, this must be done without overlooking the human rights violations that they have committed. A lack of recognition of these issues can lead to a failure to address the root causes of conflicts and properly address the communities' needs. It is critical to restore justice and provide redress for victims of these abuses to create stable and resilient communities. Failure to address these issues can lead to a cycle of violence and instability, as people (i.e., victims of violence conducted by women) may feel that their grievances have not been addressed.

Moreover, the WPS agenda's reinforcement of peaceful or victim women stereotypes may inadvertently reinforce the notion that men are inherently violent

or not worthy of protection. This can lead to unwarranted stigmatization and violence toward male civilians. Indeed, recent research shows that the public tends to undervalue the extent of men's victimization in times of war, perceive male civilian victims as less innocent, and show less willingness to support humanitarian aid efforts or accept refugees when men constitute the majority of victims (Kreft and Agerberg, 2023). Traditional gendered views viewing men and masculinity through militarist ideals deeply affects men both in terms of discourse and practical consequences, and the WPS agenda's narrow focus overlooks the vulnerabilities and challenges civilian males face in conflict settings.

Research indicates that international organizations deliberately employ the discourse of "women and children" to refer to non-combatant civilians, even though they recognize that such a reference may not always reflect the reality of the situation; it frequently excludes male civilians (Carpenter, 2005). This strategic representation aims to highlight women and children's perceived innocence and vulnerability, thereby attracting donors' aid (Carpenter, 2005). While this approach may appear benign to achieve a greater good, reproducing this stereotype and overemphasizing women's victimhood by international organizations and human rights advocates can have negative consequences in the larger context.

This is problematic because it may create backlash and resentment among men who feel excluded or unfairly targeted by gender-specific policies. Innocent men may be targeted for no reason, creating further instability and conflict (see Carpenter, 2003). In the long run, this can lead to backlashes and undermine the legitimacy of peacebuilding efforts. To prevent this, it is essential to challenge and dismantle these stereotypes and acknowledge women's role in perpetrating human rights abuses during conflicts. This requires a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to peacebuilding that recognizes women's and men's diverse experiences and perspectives.

'Saving Vulnerable Women' and External Military Involvement

The notion of women's presumed victimhood has been used to justify military interventions in various countries, with the idea that Western countries need to "liberate" women from their oppressive regimes. The US' interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq are prime examples of this. In the lead-up to the 2003 Iraq War, the US leaders and American media claimed that the Saddam Hussein regime had brutally oppressed the women of Iraq. They sustained a discourse highlighting Saddam's record of human rights abuses, including his treatment of women, as a justification for the invasion, putting forward that they were fighting for the rights of all women (Jabbra, 2006).

Likewise, a central justification the US and its allies put forth for the invasion of Afghanistan was the liberation of Afghan women from the tyrannical grip of the Taliban regime and the restoration of their fundamental rights. This perspective framed the narrative that "the battle against terrorism is also a battle for the rights and dignity of women" (Bush, 2001). The Western media readily embraced and bolstered this rhetoric, amplifying its impact (Stabile and Kumar 2005). The prevalence of this rhetoric is argued to eventually prevented any serious public outcry against the invasions - even feminists, often known for their opposition to militarization and invasions abroad, remained somewhat subdued compared to what might have been anticipated (Mann, 2006). Mann (2006) illustrates this with the example of the March for Women's Lives in the US on April 25, 2004, which, despite being one of the largest feminist demonstrations in history with 750,000 participants, did not officially take a stance against the war.

This rhetoric enables the United States, Britain, France, and other interventionist countries to portray themselves as the "heroes" engaged in "just wars,", but these are merely a guise for a covert agenda. The US interventions have not improved the status of women in these countries; on the contrary, the invasion and subsequent occupation unleashed rampant violence and upheaval, wreaking havoc on the affected population. Indeed, the oppression of women solidified, especially after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan (Scharff, 2023). Using women's presumed victimhood as a justification for military intervention is a form of cultural imperialism, as it reinforces Western narratives of superiority and perpetuates the notion that non-Western societies are inherently backward and in need of Western intervention. In reality, the US and its allies have, on numerous occasions, been involved in acts of sexual violence during wartime. The US military, in particular, has a documented history of sexual violence against civilians and within its own ranks (Al Ali and Pratt, 2006).

As external actors and local male elites tend to hold more sway in determining post-conflict priorities, women's voices and experiences are often sidelined in the aftermath of war (Bond et. al., 2019; Şahin, 2021). This phenomenon is not limited solely to instances of foreign invasion but also applies to the actions of international actors in post-conflict societies concerning their justice and aid initiatives. For instance, Şahin and Kula (2018) have illustrated that certain international actors often obscure the struggles of Congolese women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo by actively advocating for particular directions of social change in the region. This advocacy is often accompanied by the implementation of narrow strategies, failing to acknowledge the complexity of Congolese women's lives within their communities, their roles as caregivers and providers, and their pursuit of justice. This fails to appreciate the cultural, social,

and economic contexts in which these women live, and to recognize their agency and autonomy.

This approach privileges certain perspectives (i.e. external actors and male elites) over others and overlooks the diverse needs of women in post-conflict settings. Similarly, it generalizes all civilians, portraying them as 'victims' or, as characterized in the 'salvation discourse,' as victimized. Over-reliance on simplified victimization narratives can reinforce stereotypes, skew policy responses and conceal other forms of suffering.

Based on all the four factors discussed, it is clear that policies that overemphasize women's victimhood and peacemaking roles can have severe consequences for women and society. Such policies can perpetuate the stereotype that all women are inherently and naturally peaceful, ignoring their potential as agents of violence. This can have many negative impacts, including increasing the likelihood of women being used in violent acts by extremist groups, precluding their inclusion in rehabilitation and reintegration programs, obscuring human rights violations committed by women, and overlooking male victimhood. Furthermore, such policies can be used to justify external military interventions. In order to prevent these negative outcomes, policymakers must recognize and understand women's capacity for aggression. In the following section, I delve into the root causes of women's involvement in political violence. I analyze the significance of acknowledging gender inequality as a prominent concern within the realm of security.

3. ACKNOWLEDGING GENDER INEQUALITY AS A MAINSTREAM SECURITY ISSUE

Despite the mounting evidence of women's participation in rebel groups and the negative impacts associated with this trend, the UN WPS agenda has yet to fully recognize its significance. Although a few articles have mentioned female combatants in the UNSC Resolutions, this is insufficient to take meaningful action to prevent its negative consequences.

Unlike in the UN agenda, the prevalence of women fighters has garnered significant media attention. For example, numerous news articles have lauded the bravery of women combatants who fought against ISIS. However, mainstream Western media outlets often rely on naive or sensationalized narratives rather than providing in-depth analyses (Dirik, 2014). While the idea of empowered women battling one of the world's most brutal organizations may be appealing, associating women's militancy with feminism, empowerment, and peace often portrays an oversimplified assumption about the realities of war.

In reality, women's participation in armed groups more often than not unleashes a new era of insecurities for women, such as increased vulnerability to sexual violence, forced marriage, kidnapping and other forms of exploitation, trapping thousands of women in cycles of repression. Once recruited, they are disproportionately used in the most self-destructive acts like suicide attacks, and are further repressed by male members for being "unfit" to fight (Düzel, 2018). Some women engage in more violent activities to alleviate this perception, leading to further radicalization (Alison, 2003). As a result, women's involvement in these organizations mostly results in limiting their rights, leading to different types of vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities have been documented in conflicts across the globe, ranging from the groups deemed most gender-equal to the least. Therefore, it is important to avoid romanticizing women's involvement in armed groups and instead focus on addressing the complex and often dangerous realities women face in conflict zones.

The peaceful and victim women stereotypes reflect broader societal attitudes and discrimination against women. This stereotype is linked to women's limited participation in public spheres, including labor force, politics and civil society. Women have historically been excluded from these spheres and have been confined to traditional household roles, which has deprived them of economic and political power. In turn, these broader discriminations perpetuate and reinforce the peaceful and victim-women stereotype.

Addressing these issues requires promoting women's participation in public spheres as well as challenging and deconstructing the passive women stereotype. Understanding the role of gender norms and stereotypes is also critical to neutralizing influences leading to violent radicalization and creating communities resilient to such influences. Policies aimed at advancing women's roles in conflict prevention cannot overlook women's critical role in maintaining conflicts.

While gender equality is often declared a normatively desirable goal by policymakers, it has yet to bring about meaningful improvements in women's status. Sexual abuse, systematic exclusion of women from peace negotiations, and the failure to integrate women into the security sector are persistent problems (Hamilton et al., 2020). Recognizing the detrimental consequences of women's deprivation of rights for the security of states can increase political will to take women's inequality seriously. Women's inequality is detrimental to the security of communities because it is the root cause of the four factors discussed above.

As discussed in length above, traditional gender norms strengthen armed groups, prolong the conflict, especially for groups with female combatants, and increase their lethality and military efficacy. At the same time, women's deprivation of rights is also one of the key factors explaining their participation in

armed movements in the first place. Macro-level data of a global sample of rebel groups shows that women are more likely to sign up for armed groups that promise gender equality (Thomas and Bond, 2015; Wood and Thomas, 2019) and are more likely to participate when they are deprived of socioeconomic rights (Dalton and Asal, 2011). Detailed case studies from different contexts, such as Palestine and Sri Lanka also suggest that women are driven to join these organizations in pursuit of empowerment and to break free from traditional gender norms (Alison, 2003; Victor, 2003). Sexual violence experiences also drive women to join armed groups. In Sri Lanka, victims sought retribution by joining the Tamil Tigers (Alison, 2003). Some Eritrean women joined the Eritrean People's Liberation Front for protection from assaults by Ethiopian security forces, while Palestinian women, after enduring trauma, are sometimes convinced to participate in suicide missions as a form of redemption (Thomas, 2017). In turn, armed groups employ gendered strategies to recruit both women and men.[5]

Similarly, these traditional gendered understandings, founded on and reproduced by women's deprivation of rights, limit women's participation in peace processes, inhibiting the establishment and sustenance of equitable post-conflict institutions, as examined in detail above. Further, the same norms can lead to turning a blind to serious human rights violations conducted by women. This undermines women's agency and denies them the responsibility and accountability for their actions. This can perpetuate impunity for women perpetrators, can create a backlash from males - who are less likely to be considered "innocent" or "nonviolent" even when they are civilians -, and may distort the notion of justice, decreasing overall trust among societies. Finally, holding on to these stereotypes, specifically the women's victimhood, allows foreign powers, who have a vested interest in intervening in countries, to instrumentalize women's rights and bring a façade of morality to their invasions, destabilizing those communities even further.

Overall, all these points show that gender inequality and traditional gender norms are not only destructive to women, but also to society as a whole. It is a security issue in which the local and global communities pay collective costs. Acknowledging this would encourage policymakers to include gender as a core issue in the national security agenda, implement policies that can mitigate violence caused by the gendered strategies of armed groups, and provide the international community with a more gender-equal framework that does not reproduce essentialist stereotypes.

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[5] It is important to note that these factors do not constitute an exclusive list of why women participate in armed groups, and that there are number of pull push factors leading women to join these groups. See Thomas (2017) and Loken and Meredith (2023) for a broader review.

Highlighting the tangible consequences of women's participation in political violence and security can work as a catalyst helping to reach the ultimate goal of gender equality. This can help further one of the main aims of the WPS agenda - the meaningful participation of women in the security sector. Indeed, research demonstrates that understanding the interests of states – and how they strategically bargain over normative pressures based on these interests - become a key in the acceptance and diffusion of international norms, or even in their inhibition at the level of IGOs (Grigorescu 2015). The alignment of strategic actors' interests with the promotion of gender equality can contribute to advancing inclusive policies, ultimately advancing the norm to uphold gender equality.

For instance, research shows that while changing the masculine culture faces strong resistance, militaries are more favorable to the arguments of women's integration for better effectiveness in military duties and are more likely to recruit women when defensive operations increase (Egnell and Alam, 2020). Communicating gender equality issues by focusing on their strategic importance appears productive in appealing to senior officials and shaping decision-making processes within international organizations and in integrating gender perspectives into various international initiatives (Hannan, 2013).

4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The previous section argues that understanding women's capacity for violence and acknowledging gender inequality as a mainstream security issue can motivate leaders and policymakers to implement more gender-equal policies, especially for those in conflict zones. It can motivate those who have not yet embraced the WPS agenda to enact and implement NAPs. It would be particularly of interest to policymakers in conflict zones where there is a high prevalence of female combatants, such as Turkey, Syria, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Ethiopia, and many more.[6]

The main aim here is not to advocate viewing gender inequality in an exclusively instrumental manner to ensure community security. It is important to note that viewing gender equality instrumentality as a solution to security issues can reinforce the perception that women's rights are only important insofar as they contribute to maintaining social stability and security, rather than being inherent and inalienable human rights. This approach can result in ephemeral and reactive policies, rather than long-term and sustainable ones. This situation undoubtedly falls far short of what feminists strive for.

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[6] See Wood and Thomas, 2017; Loken and Matfess, 2023, for an exhaustive list of countries where female militancy is observed.

Instead, the main argument is that promoting a clear and comprehensible portrayal of gender equality issues can foster progress from a normative standpoint. Fostering a common understanding among states, senior officials, and IGO workers about their strategic significance in achieving stable communities can facilitate advancements towards gender equality. The internalization and dissemination of such an approach – where women's agency, both as peacemakers and perpetrators are recognized and deemed important to achieve the key aims of the WPS agenda - would foster the development of a normative stance that considers gender equality to be an aspirational objective.

By presenting gender equality as a means to address security concerns, leaders can rally broader coalitions, deter the emergence of domestic factions opposing progressive gender norms, and create a greater political momentum to address gender-based violence and discrimination. This is critical because a key obstacle behind reaching WPS agenda goals is the lack of political will to pass and implement NAPs (Rayman et al., 2016). After all, crafting policies to advance gender equality requires the collaboration of state institutions, and implementing NAPs are the most effective when they are written in concert with state institutions (Alemdar, 2019).

Acknowledging gender inequality as a threat to broader societies does not negate the intrinsic value of women's rights; instead, it recognizes that in policymaking, demonstrating practical consequences can generate political will for gender equality initiatives. Indeed, Tickner and True (2018) emphasize that feminist pragmatist approach has been powerful in mainstreaming a gender perspective in international relations and UN policy-making, which contributed to the adoption of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda. I build on this approach to argue that by striking a balance between emphasizing gender equality's intrinsic value and its broader societal benefits through strategic advocacy with policymakers and stakeholders, driving positive change while pursuing gender equality as a fundamental right can be possible.

In sum, the broader international community and the WPS agenda should recognize the impact of women's involvement in violence, as well as the underlying gender inequality that contributes to this phenomenon. This recognition would bring to light the root causes of women's participation in political violence, exclusion from DDR processes, human rights violations, and external justifications for invasions. By acknowledging the detrimental consequences of women's deprivation of rights on collective security, there would be a greater impetus to take women's inequality seriously and address the underlying causes that lead women to take part in armed movements with greater motivation.

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