Female Terrorists or Guerrillas & Militant Feminism

Angeliki Siafaka

PKK WOMEN
- Kurdistan Worker’s Party
- The Kurdish-Turkish Conflict
- Women’s Rights & Feminist Ideology
- The PKK Women

LTTE WOMEN
- Politically Violent Women
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FEMALE TERRORISTS OR GUERRILLAS AND MILITANT FEMINIS

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“It is women and children that are affected the most in a war, that is why women make better soldiers.”
-Malathy, LTTE soldier.

Abstract. This study examines the way that female terrorists fight for women’s rights, as well as the way their aspirations for women’s emancipation affect their agency, by analysing the cases of the female combatants in terrorist organizations in Sri Lanka and Turkey. Female militants challenge directly the traditional gender-based norms. By assuming roles contradictory to the gendered expectations, women soldiers become a symbol of women’s empowerment and they use this position to promote their feminist agenda. The women of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) were able to demonstrate gender equality, change traditional gender hierarchies and take action to promote women’s liberation. The agency, the demands and the persistence of the women militants in the LTTE and the PKK influenced the groups’ increased attention to women’s rights.

Keywords: female terrorists, militant feminism, female militants, women’s rights, LTTE, PKK
Introduction

This study aims to investigate the way that militant feminism is present in terrorist organizations. We will try to examine whether and how female terrorists fight for women’s rights inside and through the terrorist organizations. More specifically, the way that female terrorists’ aspirations for women’s liberation affect their choices and their course of action will be examined, and the way that female terrorists attempt to promote women’s rights and establish gender equality will be analysed. Since this study concerns female terrorists who fight for women’s rights, the focus will be on women who are eager to join the terrorist group, have strong incentives to fight for it and are engaged in combat roles. The focus on female militants is important in the sense that women in such positions challenge the gender-based norms. Such an approach offers the opportunity to examine how women achieved to assume roles that contradict the gendered expectations. This research will analyse cases of terrorist organizations in which female terrorists see themselves as equally competent to fight as men and in this way, they attempt to overcome gender discrimination, earn better positions for themselves and promote a social change that questions the traditional gender roles.

This study will contribute to our knowledge about female terrorists, as well as help us to discover female terrorists’ new patterns of behaviour. Traditional stereotypes and gender expectations form our perception of politically violent women in a way that is often misleading. Thus, it is important to try to approach women terrorists’ agency from different perspectives. In addition, it is essential to investigate why women fight, what motivates them and what are their political aspirations. Given the fact that women in armed groups generally tend to operate in ways that are defined by social norms, this research will also illustrate how women attempt to deviate from their established gender roles and what they can utilize for this purpose. The need to understand the choices of female terrorists is crucial, since acts of terrorism are not irrational acts, but on the contrary they are a calculated and conscious course of action, that seeks to achieve specific political goals by using extremely violent means (Sawicki, 2016). Terrorism is chosen to serve political objectives and follows a certain strategic logic that aims to force modern liberal democracies to make specific concessions (Pape, 2003). Terrorism is about a political war and terrorist acts are a political strategy, while nationalism and specific political goals are the crucial motive for terrorism (Bloom, 2011, Merari et al., 2009).

The cases of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) will be studied in order to investigate how women terrorists fight for women’s rights and how their aspirations about women’s empowerment affect their actions. These cases have been famous for the large numbers of women enlisted in their military wings and for embracing a feminist agenda. The research will show that women militants are in a position to question the patriarchal hierarchies and the perceptions about women’s position and abilities. Female soldiers become a powerful symbol of women’s emancipation and they use their position to promote women’s liberation by demonstrating that men and women are equals.

Perceptions of Politically Violent Women

The literature so far shows a tendency to minimize women’s role and contribution in terrorist organizations and insurgent groups, and to highlight female participation as exceptional and deviant (Darden et al., 2019). Women are perceived as mothers and caring figures, so that death and violence are not compatible with the common gender-based expectations of them (Bloom, 2011). Furthermore, women are considered to be unable to use violence (Cunningham, 2003, Speckhard, 2015), they are seen as peaceful, and during wars they are automatically assumed to be civilians in need of protection (Darden, 2015; Sjoberg, 2016). Thus, women are supposed to be the victims of violence and terror, rather than the perpetrators (Bloom, 2011; Cunningham, 2003). In addition to that, sometimes the media treats women
terrorists with sympathy, as if they are also victims (Bloom, 2011). Even though women commit, command and support political and sexual violence during wars, conflicts and genocides, these cases are not heard, or they are reconstructed in a way that refuses to accept women’s involvement in violence, labelling violent women as isolated cases (Sjoberg, 2016). Views as such help to perpetuate the stereotypes and the gendered expectations, while they also prevent us from truly understanding female terrorists and their agency.

Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) emphasize that politically violent women are categorized as criminals, anomalous or irrational, but not as just fighters. Additionally, the media often fetishizes female terrorists focusing on their physical features, or in other cases they suggest that there is something uniquely wrong with women who use political violence (Bloom, 2011). Female terrorists are generally “demonized” more than men and are perceived as even more psychopathic and insane than male terrorists (Bloom, 2011, p. 33). To give an example, Victor (2004) interviews a doctor who argues that when a man in Palestine is being humiliated, it is natural for him to become a suicide bomber, but when a woman performs a suicide attack it is obvious that she suffers from mental illness. These explanations draw a distinction between the damaged women who perpetrate political violence and the stereotypical normal women (Sjoberg, 2016). Sjoberg (2016, p. 14) argues that “while gendered orders in the world often position women differently than men, we often mistake that difference in positioning for a difference in nature”.

The question why women perpetrate political violence gets disconnected from the reasons why men become politically violent and is answered based solely on their gender (Sjoberg, 2016). The literature often insists that women choose to join terrorist groups only because of personal reasons, relationships or a personal tragedy (Cunningham, 2003), and their moral reasoning is said to be mostly based on caring relationships (Speckhard, 2015), which limits the scope of the research to emotional aspects. For instance, Victor (2004) in her book talks about the seduction of Palestinian women that persuades them to commit a suicide attack, their personal despair and the need to redeem themselves from a sin that stained their family’s name, without addressing women’s political motivations to fight. All the above misperceptions about politically violent women are problematic in the sense that they erase women’s political aspirations and ideologies, and refuse to recognize that women fight for their political goals and are motivated by their political consciousness.

Women's Participation Patterns

Terrorist organisations do not always accept women as members, but it is evident that women are often truly eager and persistent to join such groups, and succeed to execute particularly deadly attacks (Speckhard, 2015). Generally, women enlist in terrorist groups all around the world and they come from various social backgrounds (Bloom, 2011). Women are found to participate in most armed groups in the post-Cold War era and they assume combat roles in one-third of these groups (Henshaw, 2017). Additionally, women are more likely to participate in large organizations, in terrorist groups and in groups that include women’s rights in their political agenda (Darden et al., 2019). The fact that in contemporary civil wars the conflict zones are usually not clearly separated from the civilians, is thought to have contributed in higher rates of female participation in combat (Alison, 2004). At the same time though, the unclear distinction between civilians and combatants makes it difficult to identify the extend of women’s involvement (Darden et al., 2019).

Organizations with high rates of female participation usually aim at a social and political change, along with their military objectives, such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (Alison, 2004). Marxist-oriented, leftist organizations are more
open to enlisting women than Islamist groups (Henshaw, 2017; Raghavan & Balasubramaniyan, 2014; Wood & Thomas, 2017).

In this way, secular and egalitarian groups are generally more likely to be welcome to women, while in far right and Islamist terrorist organisations it is quite difficult for women to get accepted (Henshaw, 2017; Jacques & Taylor, 2009).

However, it is worth noting that Cragin and Daly (2009) found that terrorist organizations acting in conservative societies are not actually less likely to employ women as operatives than groups in more progressive cultural environments.

Due to the social norms and the perceptions around women’s role and nature, women’s participation in armed groups can also depend on the available social options (Darden et al., 2019), the opportunity structures and the social conditions, such as the way that society is organized, and the cultural, religious, and political limitations and opportunities (Darden, 2015). The historical factors, such as the nature of the conflict, the previous relationship between citizens and authority, as well as the intersection of gender and ethnicity, and gender and religion can also play an important role (Darden, 2015). Sometimes it is also useful to consider what women can actually earn for themselves from their participation in an armed group (Darden, 2015). Furthermore, in both the PIRA and the LTTE, the increased number of women enlisted was due to the ideological need to denote that the groups were mass social movements that represented the society as a whole (Alison, 2004). Additionally, increased recruitment of women often emerges from the need for more fighters (Alison, 2004; Darden et al., 2019), or the strategic need to use women terrorists since they can go undetected, as pointed out by the case of Al-Qaeda (Speckhard, 2015).

High numbers of women entering a terrorist organization and participating in its operations do not automatically mean that the group is welcome or respectful towards women, but rather sometimes suggest the coercive tactics of the group, as we can see for instance in the case of Boko Haram. About 50 per cent of Boko Haram’s suicide bombers are women, however in many cases this is the result of the group’s kidnappings of women and girls, such as the 2014 mass kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok (Darden et al., 2019). In the case of the Chechens, some families offer their daughters as suicide bombers against their will, and they even get paid to do so (Bloom, 2011). It is interesting however, that the Chechen female suicide bombers are heroines to their people, regardless of whether they were forced to martyrdom or not (Bloom, 2011). In addition, there are cases indicating that women who were victims of rape decide to carry out a suicide mission because they feel that they do not have any other choice, since they have no longer the opportunity to get married and live a normal life in accordance with the social expectations (Bloom, 2011).

**Women's Roles**

Women's roles in terrorist organizations can include leading operations, being political representatives, being combatants, recruiting new members mostly through the internet, managing logistics, controlling the female community and of course, being wives to the militants and bear their children (Spencer, 2016). Combat roles involve terrorist tactics, such as bomb-making and assassinations, along with more conventional forms of battle (Alison, 2004). Generally, stereotypes about women’s social role tend to define the female terrorists’ position in the organizations, while feelings of responsibility to be protective towards women can also have an impact (Alison, 2004). Women's position inside the group often reflects the traditional roles they have in the society (Spencer, 2016).

Liberatory, anti-state nationalisms usually offer ideologically and practically better chances for non-traditional roles for women and are more sympathetic towards feminism (Alison, 2004). Secular and
egalitarian groups are generally more likely to accept women in their military wings and in operational and leadership positions, while in far right and Islamist terrorist organisations the authoritative and operative positions are not usually given to women (Henshaw, 2017; Jacques & Taylor, 2009). Women in these groups usually take supportive or secondary roles and they do not take part in the leadership or the decision making.

However, it is evident that even in such groups women nowadays acquire more active roles in the fight and are chosen to perform suicide missions often in contrast to fundamentalist Islamic principles, as illustrated by the cases of Al-Qaeda and Hamas (Spencer, 2016). Furthermore, women's participation in combat roles is higher in groups that aim to question and change traditional gender roles and include gender equality in their ideological agenda (Henshaw, 2017). Good examples for that would be the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), the PIRA, the LTTE, the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

Moghadam (1993) identifies two types of revolution; the modernizing type which embraces ideas of gender equality and women's emancipation, and the type where the preservation of the traditional perceptions of the women’s role, behaviour and appearance are considered to be crucial for the society. Hence, the role of women as combatants can be seen to endanger the cultural security because it diminishes the established norms (Alison, 2004). In addition to that, women's participation in the military can also help them earn greater political roles (Darden et al., 2019), which can also be considered problematic for the preservation of the society’s order. However, if women’s emancipation and the nation’s liberation are thought to be interconnected, then the gendered tensions created by women's participation in the military wings can be more easily overcome because women’s freedom becomes a symbol of the nation’s freedom (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Moreover, Yuval-Davis (1997) emphasizes that women’s participation in the military wing signals that women are equal members of the organization. This is because women’s integration in the military and operational roles rejects the gender-based expectations that position women differently than men. Indeed, it is evident that in organizations where women are widely accepted in active combat roles, such the LTTE or the PIRA, they also enjoy equality (Alison, 2004). Even though we do not know the proportion of the women enlisted in the PIRA (Alison, 2009), they all claimed in their interviews that they did not experience any kind of gender discrimination or second-class status (Bloom, 2011).

The PKK military wing is considered to be around 40 per cent women (Darden et al., 2019), while the number of the LTTE female combatants had been roughly estimated to be between 20 and 50 per cent (Alison, 2009). Women guerrillas comprise 35 per cent of the FARC’s fighters, and they are combatants and operational leaders, and they have been characterized as “sexless”, since they are as ruthless and violent as men (Cragin & Daly, 2009). The Shining Path in Peru is also known for its significant number of women terrorists, constituting around 40 per cent of the total capacity, while many of these women were guerrilla fighters (Cragin & Daly, 2009). The Red Brigades in Italy, as well as the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in Spain have also included women as operational leaders (Cragin & Daly, 2009). Maria Soledad Iparraguirre Guenechea has been the leader of ETA since 2000, representing one of the two women leaders of terrorist organizations in the 21st century (Cragin & Daly, 2009). Comandante Ramona the leader of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Mexico is the other one (Cragin & Daly, 2009). The PIRA had also many women operatives and operational leaders, such as the famous Price Sisters who were the leaders of a cell executing bombings (Cragin & Daly, 2009).

In Islamist groups and conservative societies, women in terrorist organizations tend to have supportive, secondary and non-combatant roles. However, there are some surprising exceptions. To give an example, ISIS, one of the most misogynist organizations, has created an all-female morality police called al-Khansaa, consisting of both local women and women who come from the outside of Syria to join the group (Speckhard & Yayla, 2016). Especially the foreign women of al-Khansaa brigade have been reported
to have power and authority and to be able to act independently without taking orders from the emir (Speckhard & Yayla, 2016). They can carry their weapons in the streets, they are “sadistically brutal” and as cruel as men, while being exempted from punishment, and they are also able to go to war (Speckhard & Yayla, 2016, p. 166).

Some of the members of the al-Khansaa unit in Raqqa confirmed that they “have taken part in torture and have enjoyed doing so” (Barrett, 2017, p. 23). Generally, ISIS women have played an essential role as propagandists and recruiters (Darden et al., 2019). There have been a few ISIS women who have served as suicide bombers, snipers and combatants (Barrett, 2017; Eggert, 2015). Another example is the case of the Chechens, where there have been some women that earned positions of authority, such as training female suicide bombers for their missions (Bloom, 2011). Thus, we could say that there are women who have prominent positions and authoritative roles in almost every terrorist organization. However, in some cases this is the exception, rather than the rule.

Women’s participation in a terrorist organization is not of significant importance only when women enlist as combatants. Women in non-combat positions and supportive roles play a vital part in the development, the growth and the reputation of the terrorist group. For instance, in Al-Qaeda where women do not participate in combat roles, they are usually organizers, proselytizers, propagandists, recruiters, teachers and fund-raisers (Bloom, 2011), all of which are actually essential to a terrorist organization. Malika el Aroud, an Al-Qaeda propagandist and recruiter, who had also been behind all the attacks and terrorist plots in Belgium for at least a decade, was a female holy warrior with an important strategic role, as well as a role model for jihadi women (Bloom, 2011). Malika explained that a woman’s role is not to get involved directly in the fight and she claimed that her mission was to speak up: “That’s my jihad. You can do many things with words. Writing is also a bomb.” (Bloom, 2011, p. 204). Furthermore, women have supported the idea of childbearing and reproduction as a way to rebel and fight, bearing the next generation of fighters (Nilsson, 2018). Sometimes women also try to fight for a terrorist organization by encouraging or sending their children to become fighters and suicide bombers (Bloom, 2011).

Finally, women’s roles evolve and change over time. It is evident in several cases, such as the National Liberation Front (FLN), Al-Qaeda, ISIS, or the various groups in Palestine, that in the course of time the rules regarding women’s participation in the fight become less strict and new interpretations are developed to offer women the opportunity to fight, as well as to allow the groups to use women to their strategic advantage. In addition to that, during conflicts the perceptions about women’s contribution often change, the number of women participating in the fight significantly increases and women become accepted to serve in more roles, as illustrated for example in the case of the Chechen Wars (Bloom, 2011).

**Female Terrorists’ Effectiveness**

Female terrorists have been quite successful in taking advantage of the stereotypes regarding their appearance and their appropriate clothing, in order to transport arms or explosives and carry out terrorist attacks (Alison, 2004; Bloom, 2011; Cunningham, 2003, Speckhard, 2015). The conservative, oversized and shapeless clothing of women in the Middle East and South Asia is ideal for concealing improvised explosive devices, and women have also used their platform heels, maternity clothing and bras in order to smuggle bombs, weapons, ammunition and rifle parts through security checkpoints (Bloom, 2011, Cunningham, 2003, Speckhard, 2015). Moreover, female terrorists can benefit from the unwillingness of the security forces to exercise extensive scrutiny to women, due to the modesty around the female body and the people’s outrage regarding the body search of women (Alison, 2004; Bloom, 2011; Cunningham, 2003; Speckhard, 2015). For instance, the PIRA women have reported that the army was unable to
adequately search them and that indeed the British were afraid to go near them (Bloom, 2011). This is even more true for the conservative societies in the Middle East. As a consequence, women are usually able to pass through security checks fairly easily, or they even take advantage of their female nature, pretending to be pregnant in order to hide bombs (Speckhard, 2015), such as Dhanu, a young girl whose suicide vest suggested a late-term pregnancy. Dhanu was the LTTE member who performed a suicide attack to assassinate the former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi (Bloom, 2011).

Female suicide bombers are considered to be quite more successful than men. Women are generally seen as trustworthy and harmless by nature and they are not perceived as a threat (Cunningham, 2003, Speckhard, 2015). The terrorists’ profiles picture men, and thus, women do not usually arouse suspicion and can go undetected (Bloom, 2011). For example, the Chechens started to use more and more women, as the Russian troops received orders to focus on men between the ages of 17 and 40 (Bloom, 2011). Similar behaviours have been observed in the case of Al-Qaeda, as well as in various groups in Palestine, such as Fatah (Speckhard, 2015). Furthermore, female bombers are more effective in the sense that they often achieve higher kill rates, due to their ability to get closer and penetrate more deeply into the target, which increases the explosives’ effectiveness (Bloom, 2011). Several organizations have realized the benefits of employing female terrorists and have taken advantage of these benefits by increasingly using women for suicide missions (Bloom, 2011).

It is worth noting that terrorist attacks perpetrated by female suicide bombers receive about eight times more media attention than those perpetrated by a man (Bloom, 2011). Women terrorists are indeed able to gain more publicity and higher media coverage than male terrorists, since extreme violence coming from a woman or a young girl goes against the established social norms and the gendered expectations, and thus, arouses much more curiosity (Speckhard, 2015). For instance, in Palestine many terrorist organizations choose attractive women as their suicide bombers, because they know that a beautiful young girl detonating herself has a powerful impact, attracts more attention and raises many more questions (Bloom, 2011). Furthermore, terrorist attacks perpetrated by women attract more attention to the terrorist organization, because they demonstrate that the group have penetrated deeply the society, erasing the difference between civilians and combatants (Bloom, 2011). In addition to that, the inclusion of women sends the message that the terrorist organization is powerful and able to develop to large numbers (Bloom, 2011). It has also been evident that women’s involvement in several terrorist attacks has been used to shame men into enlisting and taking action (Bloom, 2011).

It has been argued that women’s enlistment can help a group include better fighters, soldiers of higher quality and more ideologically committed soldiers (Darden et al., 2019). This is because the inclusion of women means that the organization is able to recruit from all the available fighting age population, and thus, it is able to be more selective and choose the recruits that are the most dedicated to the group’s cause (Darden et al., 2019). Furthermore, female terrorists have a “fearsome reputation” and are considered to be the most brutal (Alison, 2004, p. 457), which can be explained by the fact that women need to be particularly resilient when operating in a male-dominated field, where they have to prove themselves (De Silva, 1995). For example, Bloom (2011) emphasizes that the women of the PIRA were often more ruthless than the men, since they needed to prove they could fight and hate as much as men. Additionally, it has been found that female terrorists “have stronger characters, more power, more energy and are far more pragmatic” (Bloom, 2011, p. 34). Finally, regression analysis has revealed that armed groups that include female combatants are more likely to achieve victory against the government forces (Braithwaite & Ruiz, 2018).
Women's Rights and Feminist Ideology

Women's participation has consequences for the organization, its allies and the society itself (Darden et al., 2019). The increased women’s involvement can result in a greater ideological focus on women’s rights, but at the same time, organizations that support women’s rights in the first place are more likely to attract and enlist large numbers of women (Darden et al., 2019). More specifically, Henshaw (2017) argues that a group’s feminist consciousness can be the result of the women’s involvement.

In the case of the PIRA for instance, women were disappointed by their secondary role in the organization, so they demanded to be fully integrated and eventually achieved to be military trained on an equal basis with the men (Alison, 2004; Bloom, 2011). As a result of their persistence, the women of the PIRA were equal with the men inside the organization, and the positions and roles of the group’s members depended on their commitment to the cause, rather than their gender (Bloom, 2011). However, even in groups with large numbers of female participation, women do not always enjoy equality and they face sexism, while men often object to the women’s military integration (Alison, 2004; Darden et al., 2019).

It has been suggested that women who join armed groups seeking personal liberation may sometimes be less ideologically motivated than other members enlisted for clearly political reasons (Darden et al., 2019). However, it is evident that the female guerrilla fighters tend to consider their struggle for women’s liberation as a component of the broader political objectives articulated by the terrorist organization (Cragin & Daly, 2009). Hence, for the women fighters their personal liberation gets intertwined with the women’s emancipation agenda, which then gets interconnected with the political struggle. Several terrorist groups that include large numbers of women have drawn a strong connection between the idea of the women’s emancipation and the national liberation, with the most prominent cases being the LTTE, the PKK and the PIRA (Alison, 2004; Bloom, 2011; Darden et al., 2019). For instance, the women fighters of the PIRA argued that their struggle was both against the government forces and the men of their own community (Bloom, 2011).

The fight for women’s rights is usually dependent on the political struggle, meaning that the focus is on the national struggle and thus, women’s emancipation is conditional on its success, as illustrated in the case of the PIRA (Alison, 2004; Bloom, 2011). Even though, women’s issues were secondary to the struggle, it is shown that the PIRA female members were equally devoted to both women’s rights and the national goals (Alison, 2003; Bloom, 2011). The women of the PIRA claimed that they could put an end to their oppression as women, only if they first put an end to the oppression of their nation (Bloom, 2011). However, the they did not identify themselves as feminists, since they did not prioritize the fight for gender equality before the national struggle (Bloom, 2011). Mairéad Farrell, a leader to many PIRA women, said: “Everyone tells me I’m a feminist. All I know is that I’m just as good as others, and that especially means men.” (Bloom, 2011, p. 85). In addition, female Palestinian terrorists have claimed that the reason for their actions is to fight the occupation, but also to prove that they can do exactly what men can (Victor, 2004). Darine Adu Aisha, who detonated herself in a Hamas attack, said that she did not intend to get married because she did not want to become her husband’s slave and believed that men and women are equals (Victor, 2004).

Concluding, the research on female terrorists and especially on female combatants in terrorist organizations is still on early stages and much more need to be done. Additionally, the misconceptions about politically violent women prevail much of the literature and the women’s agency in armed groups, insurgencies and terrorist organizations is neglected or misinterpreted. Moreover, very few studies touch on the issue of the female terrorists’ struggle for women’s rights and women’s emancipation, and this is one of the results of the limited attention that is given to women’s political aspirations and perceptions regarding political and social change. This study aims to address some of these issues and contributes...
towards a better understanding by focusing on women’s agency and on the way that women terrorists’ political aspirations affect their course of action.

**Methodology**

Comparative case study analysis will be used in this study in order to investigate how female terrorists fight for women’s rights and the way that they achieve to do so. This method of analysis provides the opportunity for important insights, in-depth analysis and a thorough understanding of the phenomenon in question. Since there is not a well-established theory for female terrorists fighting for women’s rights that we can test, this research is concerned with theory development using inductive reasoning. This means that we will look for relationships between phenomena and then examine if these relationships are causal and whether they are examples of more general causal relationships (Van Evera, 1997). The comparative analysis will take place between two cases with the same dependent variable, meaning cases of terrorist groups that support women’s rights, and some common independent variables and characteristics. In this way, we will be able to examine the independent variables that account for the similar outcome (George & Bennett, 2004).

The two cases that will be analysed in this research are the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The case selection process focused on cases of terrorist organizations that include high rates of women’s participation and an ideological agenda embracing women’s rights and empowerment and gender equality. Since this study concerns the way that female terrorists fight for women’s liberation, it was important that the chosen cases involved large numbers of women in combat roles, rather than supportive ones, and their continuous and long-standing engagement in battle was crucial. Women's enlistment as combatants challenges the traditional gender-based roles of women and therefore, it can be an indicator that women overcome their gendered positioning and achieve emancipation and equality. Following the same logic, for the purpose of this study it was considered essential to choose cases of terrorist groups that do not only use women as suicide bombers, but they also allow for women to take active roles in the battle, as well as authoritative roles in the military and politics. Even though both the LTTE and the PKK employed women as suicide bombers, this research will not focus on those women. It is worth noting here that Cragin and Daly (2009) argue that female guerrilla fighters are more likely to place emphasis on the fight for women’s liberation than suicide bombers. Finally, it is obvious that cases of terrorist groups that enlist large numbers of women as the result of their coercive practices are not suitable for this research design, since the focus is on women who are passionate about fighting and highly motivated. Generally, the two chosen groups are not known for coercive recruitment. However, there have been reports supporting that the LTTE had imposed forced conscription since 2002, asking for one child from every family to enlist (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2004), even though the organization, the members and many Tamil civilians denied that ever happened (Alison, 2009).

The chosen cases present the same outcome, meaning that both the PKK and the LTTE support women’s rights, along with the fight for their political objectives and national liberation. The cases also offer the opportunity to control for some common characteristics, apart from the fact that both groups advocate women’s emancipation and promote gender equality. Both the LTTE and the PKK are egalitarian movements with about 30 to 40 per cent of their members being women (Alison, 2009; Darden et al., 2019), while these women are also enlisted in their military wings and assume combat, leadership and operational roles. Furthermore, even though the religion of the members of the two groups is not the same, what they have in common is that they both are secular movements, so that their religious beliefs do not play a central
role in their struggle or their political goals. In addition to that, we can control for the type of the group and their ideological basis, in the sense that both groups are Marxist-Leninist, liberatory, anti-state nationalist movements with a leftist ideology and a socialistic political philosophy. Both the LTTE and the PKK are secessionist movements that were created to fight for their people’s independence and ethnic rights, so they aspire a political as well as a social change. They are separatists that aim to create an independent Tamil and Kurdish nation respectively. Finally, both groups stemmed from conservative societies, where women have an inferior social status and gendered expectations explicitly define women’s position.

In the theory building process, it is necessary to look through the cases for associations between phenomena and for testimonies by people who directly experienced the case (Van Evera, 1997). Secondary sources will be used in this research, as well as interviews that researchers have achieved to do with the women combatants. The interviews of the women fighters will focus on the reasons for their participation in the groups and for their enlistment in combat positions, their feminist views, their status as women fighters and their efforts to promote women’s empowerment and gender equality. In the case of the PKK, finding interviews has been particularly difficult. In contrast to the LTTE women that were open and encouraged to talk (Stack-O'Connor, 2007), the PKK women have received inadequate attention and have hardly ever given in-depth interviews (Haner et al., 2019).

Even though it is often challenging to draw a clear distinction between combatants and non-combatants, or to differentiate between combat and supportive roles (see Henshaw, 2017), for the purpose of this research we will define as combatants the women who are members of the terrorist organization, are enlisted in its military wing, have received military training and have fought in battle. Furthermore, when referring to women’s rights, we mean to focus on issues of gender equality and equal opportunities, women’s emancipation, upgrade of women’s social status from second-class citizens, improvement of women’s education, as well as the efforts to end gender discrimination, gender-based violence, domestic and sexual violence, sexual mutilations, and forced or child marriage.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam - Background: The Sri Lankan Civil War

Sri Lanka’s civil war is one of the deadliest ethnic conflicts in history, counting more than 80,000 casualties (Bloom, 2011). According to the international human rights community, during the conflict, Sri Lanka committed the worst violations of human rights and the most disappearances of any country in the world (Bloom, 2011). Tamils were one of the western world’s largest groups of asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2003b) and one of the world’s largest internally displaced populations (UNHCR, 2004), with more than 1.5 million people having been displaced in total (UNHCR, 2003a). The civil war in Sri Lanka is a very good case to illustrate the way that a state’s oppressive policies can lead to the creation of one of the deadliest terrorist organizations ever existed (Bloom, 2011).

Throughout history, the ethnic boundaries between the Sinhalese and the Tamil people were unclear, but the colonizers made those boundaries specific by forcing people to choose their identity for bureaucratic purposes (Bloom, 2011). Additionally, the Portuguese and the Dutch colonizers created rivalries between the populations by showing favouritism towards the one group or the other (Bloom, 2011). Sri Lanka became independent from the British colonizers in 1948, and instantly the xenophobic nationalist ideology prevailed, rejecting any ethnic minority rights (Bloom, 2011). In this way, during the 1950s, Sinhalese nationalism took control of the island and aimed to take back the benefits that the Tamil people had received from the British rule, while making the Sinhalese the only official language of the state (Bloom, 2011). In the 1960s, discrimination against the Tamil people intensified and they were removed...
from government and authority positions, and the number of Tamils allowed to attend university became limited (Bloom, 2011).

At first, the Tamils’ response was peaceful political mobilization through the Federal Party and nonviolent protests, but by the 1970s the demand for separation and militancy started to rise and communal violence spread across Sri Lanka (Bloom, 2011). The demand for secession and creation of an independent Tamil Eelam generated much debate about the appropriate way to pursue independence, which then led to the formation of five main organizations, the Tamil Five (Bloom, 2011). One of them was the radical Tamil National Tigers (TNT) founded in 1973 by Velupillai Prabhakaran. In May 1976, Prabhakaran changed the name of the TNT to Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE aimed to become “an elite, ruthlessly efficient, and highly professional fighting force”, and to achieve secession through violent action (Hoffman, 2006, p. 139). The LTTE was a secular, ethno-nationalist organization fighting for an independent Tamil state in the north and east of Sri Lanka (Alison, 2009). The LTTE members were at first foot soldiers, but shortly after they turned to terrorism (Bloom, 2011). The government’s response was the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which abolished the freedom of speech and allowed the army and the police to detain people and hold them for months without trial or communication (Tambiah, 1986). The Act led to a rapid increase of violence (Tambiah, 1986).

In July 1983, the Sri Lankan government declared martial law in the Tamil areas, where then extensive and violent riots followed (Bloom, 2011). The government displayed publicly the bodies of soldiers that allegedly had been mutilated by the Tamils, which resulted in a three-day wave of anti-Tamil violence, including vandalisms, rapes and killings (Bloom, 2011). The events of the July 1983 signal the beginning of the civil war in Sri Lanka. The army continued to torture and kill hundreds of civilians, while the Sri Lankan government introduced the Emergency Regulation 15A, giving the right to the security forces to bury or cremate the people they killed without ever disclosing their identities (Tambiah, 1986). The Sri Lankan president at the time blamed the victims for the violence they suffered, and proceeded to remove the Tamil United Liberation Front from the parliament and to outlaw any political party that argued for an independent Tamil homeland (Bloom, 2011). As expected, since the Tamil people could no longer fight politically, the support for violent action and for the Tamil Tigers increased dramatically, and the group’s members rose from 600 up to more than 10,000 (Bloom, 2011). The LTTE received much support from the Tamil diaspora and considered itself to be a rightful insurgency fighting for freedom, rather than a terrorist organization (Bloom, 2011). Because of its capabilities and success, the LTTE grew to be one of the most ruthless and one of the foremost terrorist groups in the world, with its forces being almost equal to those of the government, and many terrorist organizations asked them to share their lethal technologies (Bloom, 2011).

In 1987, the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord was signed, and the Indian Peace Keeping Forces attempted an intervention that would find a political solution to the civil conflict (Bloom, 2011). However, due to the massive Indian casualties that the LTTE caused and the increasing fears of India that its intervention could be interpreted as a support for secessionism, the Indian forces turned against the Tamils, killing and raping civilians (Bloom, 2011). The Indian Forces withdrew in 1989, but the conflict continued in all its severity (Bloom, 2011). The government launched brutal campaigns against the Tamils, which included open military engagement, harassment and abuse of the civilian population, and systematic campaigns of rape and disappearances (Bloom, 2011). The sexual harassment perpetrated by the government troops led many women to join the Tamil Tigers (Bloom, 2011). The government and military forces routinely used sexual abuse against the Tamil women to dehumanize them (Bloom, 2011). At the same time, the LTTE was also responsible for massive human rights violations (Alison, 2009).
In 1993, the LTTE assassinated the Sri Lankan president in an attack performed by a female suicide bomber, which actually led the country to elections and peace talks in 1995 (Alison, 2009). However, the government's strategy that included a counter-insurgency campaign, efforts to re-occupy LTTE controlled areas, bombing campaigns against the Tamil areas and massive displacement of Tamils renewed the Tamil Tigers’ violent resistance (Alison, 2009). In 2002, a promising peace process was set in motion with Norway’s help, but it failed in 2006 because of the government’s extremist wing (Bloom, 2011).

However, the LTTE also used several ceasefire agreements to regroup, recruit and raise funds, and it has been reported that Prabhakaran was never truly committed to peace talks (Human Rights Watch, 2006). It was then that the Sri Lankan government launched a campaign to assassinate all the LTTE leaders and focused their attention particularly on the LTTE women (Bloom, 2011). During 2007 and 2008, the Sri Lankan government embarked on its major operations against the LTTE, and in 2009 achieved to kill Prabhakaran and finally destroy the organization (Bloom, 2011).

The LTTE Women

The LTTE has been the terrorist organization with the largest number of female suicide bombers and one of the highest rates of women guerrillas in the world (Bloom, 2011). Women's contribution in the Tamil Tigers was of great significance, especially since the 1990s (Alison, 2009). Before that, women participated in propaganda work, medical care, intelligence gathering, fundraising and recruitment, and were involved in the political wings, but were rejected from the military wings (Alison, 2009). The decisive point was the events of 1983, which led the Tamil women to pursue and make demands for their inclusion in more active roles in the fight, and by 1984 the Freedom Birds, the women’s combat unit, was created and started to offer military training to women (Stack-O'Connor, 2007). Tamil feminists advocated the women’s right to military and combat roles and may have helped the recruitment of the first female soldiers (Alison, 2009). In this way, the LTTE military roles became gradually gender-neutral and women constituted a large part of the organization’s military leadership, while they also had their own combat divisions engaging in every level of the fight (Bloom, 2011). Since 1989, all leadership of the Women’s Military Wing and the women’s camps and units consisted of women (Alison, 2009; de Soyza, 2011). The LTTE women had their own tank battalions and they were snipers, trackers, combatants, spies and assassins, just like the LTTE men (Bloom, 2011). The exact number of the female combatants is unknown as it constituted a military secret. Some estimates place the number at around 20 per cent (Alison, 2009), others support that women comprised between 30 and 40 per cent of the LTTE military wing (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 2008), while it was also reported that the number of women militants was almost 50 per cent of the total capacity, although this was probably an exaggeration (Schalk, 1994).

Alison (2004) found gender-specific insecurity and women’s emancipation to be among the most prominent reasons for the women’s participation in the LTTE. Joining the Tamil Tigers was a way for women to protect and provide security for themselves and thus, empower themselves (Bloom, 2011). Niromi de Soyza describes in her book that the more the conflict intensified, the more she wanted to become a Tigress, and joining the military wing to fight the injustice against the Tamils became her dream and purpose in life (de Soyza, 2011). Notwithstanding the strategic reasons the LTTE had to enlist large numbers of women, the group’s female fighters were highly motivated and driven by their dual aspirations to fight for the rights of the Tamil people and for women’s liberation (Alexander, 2014). Interviews with LTTE women reveal that many of them enlisted so that they could fight for women’s emancipation, along with the national freedom: “Through our struggle for liberation we are fighting for the women’s liberation also” (Alison, 2009, p. 138-9). Furthermore, Bose (1994) argues that part of the reason why many women enlisted in the LTTE was because they felt that in this way, they would be able to break taboos and to free themselves from the conformity and subservience imposed by the patriarchal society. Schalk (1994) also
supports that the main reason for women’s increased participation in the Tamil Tigers was the fact that they believed their participation would offer them benefits as women in the future.

In the case of the LTTE, the independence struggle and the fight for women’s emancipation were intertwined, and women could achieve their liberation if the Tamil nation achieved its freedom (Alison, 2004; Schalk, 1994). The LTTE female members were reported to be equally devoted to both the nationalistic goals and women’s emancipation (Alison, 2003).

Tamil Tigers supported this powerful double-liberation ideology of the Tamil nation and the Tamil womanhood, and it has been supported that an exploitation of feminist ideas and terminology was used to attract women to the group (Subramaniam, 1997). However, even if the feminist agenda was exploited, it does not necessarily mean that women did not seek to fight for women’s empowerment and that women’s political aspirations did not include a feminist perspective. This could even indicate that the group used the feminist ideology to attract women because they had shown such interest in the first place.

Indeed, it is evident that some of the LTTE women had recognized the gender discrimination in their culture and aspired to fight for equality before enlisting, such as one female soldier who stated clearly: “I had these ideas before” (Alison, 2009, p. 139). Many women had acknowledged women’s inferior position and, despite the social expectations, they questioned their gender-based roles: “if they [men] can, why we can’t do these things?” (Alison, 2009, p. 139). Adele Ann asserted that women’s participation in the Tamil Tigers “tells society that they are not satisfied with the status quo; it means they are young women capable of defying authority; it means they are women with independent thoughts; young women prepared to lift up their heads.” (Alison, 2009, p. 139). Niromi de Soyza (2011) explains in her book how she felt that it was unfair for women not to be able to take part in the fight. She states that “Female university students were becoming part of the political movement, but they were not enlisted to be combatants. It didn’t seem fair to me that, once again, women were denied equality when they were just as capable. […] I dislike this hypocrisy […]” (de Soyza, 2011, p. 36). Hence, joining the organization was also a matter of equality. Alison (2009) also found that even if not all LTTE women were familiar with issues of women’s rights and empowerment before joining the organization, they all obtained consciousness after becoming a member.

The decision of the Tamil women to join the LTTE military wing was without their parents’ consent and against the socially acceptable behaviour, which constitutes a break from the gendered cultural norms and reveals their aspirations for emancipation (Jordan & Denov, 2007). For example, Niromi describes that she was not intimidated by the social restraints and she was determined not to allow the gendered expectations to define her course of action, while she stressed that the national struggle was everyone’s responsibility, not just the men’s. She says: “I was not about to give up on my social responsibility, just because of the possibility of small-minded accusations. […] You couldn’t wait in hope that someone else was going to save you – it was up to every one of us to make a difference.” (de Soyza, 2011, p. 66).

The research concerning the increasing number of women’s participation in the Tamil Tigers and enlistment in the military wing reveals that the phenomenon was in part the result of the Tamil women’s demand for participation and equal opportunities to fight (Alison, 2009). At first, women who asked for their enlistment were rejected by the LTTE. However, they were eventually accepted due to their own persistence, as they kept insisting and pressuring for a policy change (Alison, 2009). Interviews with the LTTE women have shown that “much of the impetus for women’s combat role came from Tamil women themselves” (Alison, 2009, p. 125). One LTTE female soldier said: “The emergent aspirations of Tamil women to join the armed struggle brought increased pressure on the LTTE leadership to step up its policy of inducting women into the armed struggle. Young women demanded their right to self-defence and their right to exercise their patriotic sentiments.” (Alison, 2009, p. 125). Alison (2009) stresses that the
strategic need for women due to the decimation of the men cannot provide alone enough explanation for the cultural shift regarding female soldiers. Interestingly, the tactical benefits of women’s participation were recognized after women had proven themselves in combat (Stack-O’Connor, 2007). Niromi, who was one of the first women to receive military training, describes how she had to fight for a place in the military wing, how she tried again and again to get enlisted, and how she actually had to convince her recruiters (de Soya, 2011).

Furthermore, it is evident that the establishment of the LTTE women’s wing helped to diminish the idea of raped women as shameful and impure (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 2008), which is essential for the promotion of women’s rights.

It is evident that the LTTE women could achieve liberation from the oppression and the restraints of gender roles and expectations through their participation in active combat (Trawick, 1997). Accounts from the Tamil Tigers suggest that women proved themselves and earned respect through their achievements in battle (Alison, 2004). Sita, a LTTE woman soldier, explained that a woman can earn her liberation “with a gun in her hands” and that it is not unnatural to prefer to fight a historical battle, rather being restricted to reproduction (Trawick, 1997, p. 169). Additionally, Sita stated: “I am just exactly like the men. […] If we were in the house, we would be confined.” (Trawick, 1997, p. 171). When asked about marriage, Sita said that she “[does] not need to marry. It is enough to fight for the liberation and happiness of the people” (Trawick, 1997, p. 170), which is very interesting in respect to the gender-based positioning of the Tamil women. Moreover, she emphasized that she had “achieved a privileged degree of physical power and mobility; she [could] operate the machinery - motorbikes, tractors, guns - freeing her from some of the constraints of a mortal, gendered body” (Trawick, 1997, p. 169).

LTTE women’s position as combatants fighting against the oppressive state offered them the means to effectively empower themselves, and their first-hand accounts highlight the liberation and emancipation they experienced (Alexander, 2014). Many LTTE women militants described how joining the Tamil Tigers made them feel independent and gave them the power of self-determination (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 2008). It is important to recognize the personal benefits that women militants earned, and the freedom and the mobility they enjoyed (Alexander, 2014). The LTTE women soldiers succeeded to assume positions that challenged the social norms and led to the construction of new gender roles and identities (Alexander, 2014). There were women commanders that led battalions of up to 500 soldiers (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 2008). A LTTE female soldier explained that women were equals inside the organization and they did everything the men did, while the men also undertook roles they did not traditionally have, such as cleaning and cooking (Jordan & Denov, 2007). Thus, the women soldiers fight for women’s rights inside the organization by demonstrating their equality to men: “Our movement has proved that women can do any job.” (Alison, 2009, p. 176). Subramaniam (1997) argues that for the Tamil Tigers the women soldiers constituted the ultimate symbol of women’s liberation. The LTTE women were admired by the community and they were perceived as predestined to fight for women in ways that others could not (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 2008). A LTTE female leader explained that the women’s participation in the military had offered them the opportunity to make a crucial change in women’s position, but it was necessary that those changes and the new status of women should be secured in the peace negotiations and the legislation (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 2008). This is an indicator of the LTTE women’s political consciousness, their determination to bring meaningful change and their dedication to keep fighting for women’s rights.

It is important to bear in mind that women’s aspirations for emancipation were accepted by Prabhakaran, who generally supported gender equality (Alison, 2009; Stack-O’Connor, 2007). Prabhakaran became convinced that women had the equal right to take part in every aspect of the armed struggle (Bloom, 2011), and he indeed over the years drew a connection between women’s liberation and the national liberation (Cragin & Daly, 2009). Niromi describes Prabhakaran’s frequent visits to the women’s training
base and highlights how passionate he was about equality in caste and gender (de Soyza, 2011). The LTTE supported the idea of gender equality in life and in death, allowing women to participate in the battles and perform suicide attacks, and thus, women fighters who died in the battle were designated heroes, exactly like their male comrades (Subramaniam, 1997).

**The Kurdistan Workers’ Party - Background: The Kurdish-Turkish Conflict**

Between 25 and 35 million Kurds are spread across Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Armenia, making the largest ethnic group that still has not gained its own nation-state (BBC News, 2017). During the conflict between Turkey and the Kurds, more than 30,000 people have died (Bloom, 2005), and the total number of people in a situation of internal displacement exceeded 1.1 million Kurds at the end of 2017 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2018). Historically, the source of the friction between the Turkish state and the Kurds has revolved around issues of cultural autonomy, language rights, political representation and human rights abuses (Bloom, 2005). Tensions related to economic justice and the recognition of the Kurdish ethnic identity have been present in Turkey since the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Nilsson, 2018).

The Kurds started rebelling against Turkey during the 1920s and 1930s, but their several attempts were ruthlessly suppressed by Kemal Atatürk (Bloom, 2005). During his state-building efforts, Atatürk aimed for the construction of a modern nation-state based on an ethno-national Turkish identity that needed to be ethnically, linguistically and culturally homogeneous, and thus, a separate ethnic identity could not be tolerated (Darden et al., 2019; Nilsson, 2018). Turkey refused to accept the existence of a distinct Kurdish ethnic identity or to recognize any minority rights, claiming that since the Kurdish people are Muslims, they do not constitute a minority under the Islamic Law or the Lausanne Treaty (Bloom, 2005). The Turkish government tried to integrate the Kurds into the Turkish culture and eliminate the Kurdish identity by introducing policies such as the prohibition of teaching and speaking of the Kurdish language (Darden et al., 2019). However, those practices had the exact opposite result, and led to a process of reconstructing a militant Kurdish identity (Bloom, 2005).

The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, PKK) was founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan, and it is a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary, separatist organization, aiming at the liberation of the Kurds from colonialism and the creation of an independent Kurdish state in south-eastern Turkey (Mannes, 2004). The PKK developed through Marxist and Maoist debates at the universities, and it was initially dedicated to a communist revolution, but it gradually shifted its focal point from the class struggle to the Kurdish national struggle (Mannes, 2004). It is a secular organization, rather than a religious one (Darden et al., 2019). In its internal organization, the PKK is an authoritarian group (Darden et al., 2019), with a military wing officially called ARGK (Kurdistan People’s Liberation Army), it has intelligence and counter-intelligence organs and specialized terror units, as well as a satellite channel (Mannes, 2004).

At first, the PKK aimed at the creation of a pan-Kurdish state and argued a non-compromising stand against Turkey, but its goals later changed supporting the creation of Kurdish federations or even autonomy (Bloom, 2005). Its first operations were robbing and drug trafficking (Mannes, 2004). Turkey claimed that during the 1990s the PKK played a dominant role in the drug smuggling from the Middle East to the Western Europe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Furthermore, the PKK received much support from the Kurdish diaspora, and funds were also raised through forced taxation, intimidation and extortion, criminal activity including arms trade and people smuggling, and external support from Syria, Iraq and Iran (Bloom, 2005; Mannes, 2004). As the PKK gained more popularity, it adjusted its tactics to add more conventional guerrilla tactics, rather than just terrorism, and professionalized its forces (Bloom, 2005). The organization mainly reached out to the lowest social classes and the most marginal parts of the Kurdish society, and
turned against the landlords who supported the Turkish government (Bloom, 2005). The landlords responded by organizing themselves against the PKK, which resulted in community violence (Bloom, 2005). The stronger the PKK was getting, the more intense the oppression by the Turkish government became.

In 1984, the PKK launched an insurgency, embarking on a hit-and-run guerrilla war (Darden et al., 2019; Mannes, 2004). During the 1980s and 1990s, the PKK targeted both military and civilian targets using conventional tactics, as well as terrorism and suicide bombings (Darden et al., 2019). The PKK also targeted the village guards, the local militias established by the government, and started murdering women and children related to them (Darden et al., 2019; Mannes, 2004). In the mid-1990s, the Turkish government established a policy of destroying villages that were suspected to be support bases for the PKK, displacing hundreds of thousands of people (Darden et al., 2019). The government proceeded with human rights abuses, harassment, systematic disenfranchisement, censorship, forced relocation and exile, evacuation and destruction of villages, killings and torture (Bloom, 2005), while Kurdish women were often sexually abused and sexual mutilations of female PKK fighters have been reported (Nilsson, 2018). All the above led the general Kurdish public to perceive the Turkish government as their rival and thus, significantly increased the support for the PKK.

In the 1990s, the PKK started to use widely suicide terrorism and specifically women suicide bombers, which intensified the conflict (Bloom, 2005). It has been argued that the PKK used extreme violence particularly whenever Europe was focusing on Turkey’s human rights record, in order to trigger the government’s violent response and in this way, expose Turkey (Bloom, 2005). At the same time, the brutal government response instigated by the extreme violence helped to radicalize the Kurdish society and compelled the Kurds to choose sides (Barkey & Fuller, 1998). During its ruthless counter-terrorism policies, the Turkish government hardly ever distinguished between the PKK fighters and the Kurdish civilians, leading more and more Kurds to join the group (Bloom, 2005). Gradually, Turkey came to understand its counterproductive tactics and in 1996, tried to change the policy, in order to fight terrorism and separatism by winning the hearts and minds of the Kurdish civilians, and alienate them from the PKK (Bloom, 2005). However, in 1997, the Turkish government launched its largest anti-PKK operation, the Operation Steel, and succeeded to kill almost one thousand PKK operatives (Mannes, 2004).

In 1998, Turkey signed an agreement with Syria who then recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization and expelled Öcalan (Mannes, 2004). Turkish commandos arrested Öcalan in 1999, which was a crucial setback for the PKK, since the group was a highly centralized organization (Mannes, 2004). Öcalan’s arrest also resulted in an ideological evolution which in the mid-2000s led the PKK to adopt a new political model, the democratic confederalism (Darden et al., 2019). In 2000, the PKK argued that it was necessary for the war to end, but the Turkish government refused to negotiate (Mannes, 2004). Although Turkey believed that the fall of their leader meant the fall of the PKK, the organization managed to preserve its power and control over the Kurdish regions (Marcus, 2007). Despite the peace process, Turkey remained reluctant to address the Kurdish demands, which perpetuated the Kurdish problem, and by 2004 the PKK regrouped its forces and withdrew the ceasefire leading to a new wave of violence (Marcus, 2007).

Even though various peace efforts have been made –the most recent peace processes took place between 2012 and 2015– the Kurdish conflict in Turkey remains unsolved (Darden et al., 2019). After the 2015 failed peace process, another violent outburst followed (Dirik, 2017). In 2016, after the coup attempt and the imposition of a state of emergency, the Kurdish regions became highly militarized and extrajudicial actions increased under the martial law, which basically legitimizied ethnic cleansing, indiscriminate killings and systematic destruction of entire communities (Dirik, 2017). Armed classes have continued
The PKK Women

The PKK places surprising emphasis on women’s empowerment in both its political ideology and its internal policy, and gender equality is one of the main principles of the PKK’s political education (Darden et al., 2019). The role of women in the PKK has been prominent since its creation, and actually two of its founding members were women, Sakine Cansiz and Kesire Yıldırım (Bengio, 2016; Darden et al., 2019). The organization has enlisted women since its creation in 1978, and women fighters started being accepted in the group’s armed wing by the late 1980s (Darden et al., 2019). In 1993, the PKK women established their own army, which today is called YJA Star (Dirik, 2017). The PKK’s advocacy for women’s rights means the promotion of gender equality both within the organization and the society as a whole, the rejection of patriarchal gender norms, the promotion of women’s emancipation and women’s access to education, and efforts to stop domestic violence and make a change in the social attitude towards women (Darden et al., 2019). In the PKK, all political leadership positions must be held jointly by a man and a woman, and this practice also extends to the military wing (Darden et al., 2019). The co-chairing systems aim not only to ensure equal representation, but also to introduce a new way of doing politics through consensus, power-sharing and decentralization (Dirik, 2017). Furthermore, PKK women are commanders in battalions and lead attacks against their enemies (Cragin & Daly, 2009). Despite the ideological change from traditional Marxism towards a democratic confederalism in the early 2000s, the PKK’s significant emphasis on women’s rights did not change and the promotion of women’s emancipation continues to be an essential part of the organization’s ideology (Darden et al., 2019). In fact, the emphasis even increased, with some of the group’s cadres today describing the PKK as a women’s party (Dirik, 2017). The PKK is responsible for the mobilization of millions of women across Kurdistan, who succeeded to become active agents in the ethnic fights, and has influenced in great degree all the other Kurdish movements (Dirik, 2017). Today, women constitute around 40 percent of the PKK military wing (Darden et al., 2019).

During the Kurdish conflict, the violence created much insecurity to Kurdish women which soon resulted in their politicization (Diner & Toktaş, 2010). During the 1980s and 1990s, women enlisted in the PKK mainly to fight for the Kurdish ethnic rights and to resist the racist, nationalist and assimilationist attacks against the Kurdish people (Dirik, 2017). However, the feminist agenda became quickly a strong motivator and Kurdish women have reported that they enlist in the PKK in order to improve their position both as Kurds and as women (Nilsson, 2018). It has been argued that the main reason for women’s enlistment in the PKK is their pursuit of liberation and gender equality, along with the fact that the PKK offers them the chance to oppose the patriarchal oppression (Haner et al., 2019). When joining the PKK, women are able to have better life opportunities by overcoming the social constraints and have the means to earn freedom and equality (Cragin & Daly, 2009, Düzgün, 2016). One PKK fighter when asked about the reason for joining the organization, said: “I did it because of the occupation Kurdistan had been suffering under for hundreds of years but mainly because the PKK’s fight for Kurdish freedom had always incorporated the struggle for women’s emancipation, which was lacking inside my society.” (West, 2015). Today, the PKK women have indeed a strong feminist consciousness, and women’s rights and gender equality are the main reason for their enlistment (Düzgün, 2016).
Even though women’s politicization was initially concerned with the matter of the Kurdish ethnic identity, women quickly started raising issues of gender, women’s rights and oppression (Diner & Toktaş, 2010). A former PKK female militant explained: “Without the recognition of a national identity, it is not possible to focus on issues for Kurdish women. For that reason, when Kurdish women started our movement in the 1990s, the national cause was the first aim. The national cause came above everything. But after some time, we recognised that even our Kurdish male comrades, who were taking part in demonstrations with us, were also acting as representatives of authority. […] Then we decided that we needed to fight against two authorities: the state and masculine authority at the same time.” (Al-Ali & Tas, 2018, p. 464). A PKK fighter explained that: “Since female slavery is the form of human oppression with the longest history, we wanted to give women freedom first.” (West, 2015). PKK soldier, Zind Runken, who went to Syria to engage in the fight against ISIS, said: “The leadership of the PKK says that the movement starts with the empowerment of women. If women cannot free themselves, society cannot be free.” (Wall Street Journal, 2015).

The Kurdish women’s groups have pointed out that Kurdish women experience a dual exploitation by the patriarchal tribal system dominant in Kurdish culture and by the Turkish imperialist system (Diner & Toktaş, 2010). The Kurdish women face the oppression of the patriarchal nuclear family and society and the systematic state violence, and thus, they endure multiple forms of racist, gendered and socioeconomic violence (Dirik, 2017). The women of the PKK argue that they have to fight a dual oppression. Their double struggle was both against the Turkish government forces for the respect of their ethnic rights, and against the men of their own community for the respect of women’s rights (Darden et al., 2019). Furthermore, it has been argued that the double revolution of the Kurdish women in Turkey seems to actually help them in their fight for women’s emancipation, because the feminist and the nationalist agenda actually complement each other (Bengio, 2016). A female PKK fighter claimed that: “The dual violence that we face both from the male-hegemonic mentality and the state brought us to this struggle. And this gives us an immense sense of self-confidence that we’re able to express ourselves as women, do politics as women, taking part in the struggle as women.” (Darden et al., 2019, p. 43).

What is impressive and makes the PKK a unique case is the fact that its men and women combatants fight in integrated military units, in contrast to most leftist militant organizations whose female combat units are usually separate or even auxiliary (Darden et al., 2019). In addition to that, men and women do not only fight alongside, but since women’s integration also continues to the officer corps, female officers are often in charge of male soldiers (Darden et al., 2019). PKK women officers have reported that this can sometimes create frictions, as men soldiers object to having to take orders from women commanders (Darden et al., 2019). One former PKK commander related that: “They [men fighters] cannot digest a woman to be their commander, they cannot accept a woman’s authority easily. Or when they make a wrong decision and you tell them, they go on saying ‘See, she’s a woman, so she is acting with maternal emotions.’” (Darden et al., 2019, p. 43). It is interesting that a PKK male fighter explained such behaviours as a matter of lack of education, stating that many men were from villages and had received a poor or no education (Darden et al., 2019). He also added that men are often antagonistic towards women in the military (Darden et al., 2019). In recent interviews a former PKK leader stated that even though it has been hard for men to acknowledge women as their equals, it seems that this is changing over the years (Haner et al., 2019).

Kurdish women’s enlistment in combat roles serves to promote their feminist programme and at the same time, their participation in political and military activities offers them equal opportunities for social mobility (Bengio, 2016). A woman commander of 350 PKK fighters explained that even though it is particularly challenging for women to prove themselves in such a male-dominated sector as the battlefield, women’s motivation and persistence makes up for any physical disadvantages they may have (Dryaz,
Indeed, the PKK women fighters achieved to earn respect as they participated more and more in important operations, such as raids, attacks and ambushes (Haner et al., 2019). Moreover, the PKK female soldiers have achieved to break the patriarchal gender hierarchies and disrupt traditional gendered norms (Düzgün, 2016). The participation of women in the PKK army is a way for them to redefine their role and their status (Dryaz, 2011).

A PKK female soldier said that her experiences in the military and the battle have shown her that men and women are indeed equals and that gender equality can be achieved (Gurses, 2018). Hence, the PKK women have demonstrated that the military cannot be automatically perceived as a male-dominated field anymore and that women cannot be considered to be peaceful by nature (Dryaz, 2011). Interviews with male PKK fighters reveal the way that women’s participation and agency in the military have altered their perception of women and have made them question the traditional gender roles (Gurses, 2018). As a Kurdish female town mayor explained: “Kurdish female guerrillas proved that women are capable of doing everything as men; they struggled against living conditions in the mountains, male comrades and the system [the Turkish state and security forces]. These women gave us confidence and a legacy to build on.” (Sahin-Mencutek, 2016, p. 480).

It is indicated that in the case of the PKK the extensive involvement of women in the organization resulted in the group’s increased attention to women’s rights (Darden et al., 2019). Indeed, the focus on women’s liberation becomes even more explicit, as the number of women becomes larger (Darden et al., 2019). Interviews with the members confirm that: “As more women joined the PKK, there was more and more discussion of gender issues. From the beginning there were women recruits, but the PKK was a military and a male-dominant organization. It was women’s participation that changed it into a feminist organization.” (Darden et al., 2019, p. 49). Thus, the PKK women through their action and their fight for women’s rights have achieved to significantly increase the group’s emphasis on women’s issues. Moreover, women’s agency and persistence are shown to have played a significant role to the promotion of equal treatment within the PKK (Gurses, 2018). Kurdish activists have highlighted that since they are women nothing is given to them, but rather they must struggle and fight hard for every little progress they make, even within the PKK (Gurses, 2018).

The PKK women have decided that they should not depend on men for liberation, but rather that they should take the matter of the national and women’s liberation upon themselves (Dirik, 2017). The PKK women are fighting for women’s empowerment by acting autonomously inside the organization, defining their course of action and demonstrating a strong self-determination. Nuve Rashat, a PKK female soldiers, explained: “we don’t let men influence and control our choices, we decide how to educate and organize ourselves.” (West, 2015). Furthermore, the women inside the organization are constantly working on issues of women’s emancipation and they are taking actions to break the taboos and the gendered expectations through education and awareness. Rashat made clear that: “In the PKK, our main goal is to uproot from the girls’ minds all the misconceptions hailed from male-dominated societies.” (West, 2015). A former PKK female militant explained: “We fought against the prejudices of men, we made analyses of systemic inequalities. Although I conducted common political activities like the men, I tried to bring in women’s consciousness and their point of view to things I was doing.” (Sahin-Mencutek, 2016, p. 480).

The increased participation of women in the PKK and their feminist agenda has resulted in significant changes in the position of the Kurdish women generally (Gurses, 2018). It has been shown that the feminist revolution taking place inside the PKK has also spread in the Kurdish society, with many women being able to assume political and leadership roles (Bengio, 2016). Due to the PKK’s ideology about women’s empowerment, women took the opportunity to get out of their houses and enter the public sphere, the politics and the battle, and to claim their rights as women and as Kurds, which created the basis for the Kurdish women’s movement (Çaha, 2011). Moreover, Kurdish activist women have highlighted the
fact that gender equality within the PKK has resulted in an actual improvement of women’s social status in the cities, stating that “when some women joined the PKK ranks, women in cities were able to go out and join in protests” and that “when female militias wore trousers, wearing them normalised in cities” (Sahin-Mencutek, 2016, p. 480).

Interviews reveal that Kurdish women, whether they are members of the PKK or not, believe that women’s empowerment through education is needed in order to upgrade women’s social status which is necessary for a successful resolution to the conflict, meaning that women’s education is seen as the tool to fight the injustice (Nilsson, 2018).

It is important to note that Öcalan was truly passionate about gender equality and women’s empowerment because he believed that social, class and national problems could be resolved only if gender discrimination was resolved first (Haner et al., 2019). Following this principle, the PKK promotes the term jineology, which means that women’s liberation and feminist consciousness is a prerequisite for the freedom of any society (Düzgün, 2016). Hence, the success of the entire movement depends on the reconstruction of the gender relations (Gurses, 2018). The PKK has been really persistent on employing gender-inclusive policies inside and outside the organization (Haner et al., 2019). Furthermore, the group is devoted to providing women with extensive education and ideological and military training (Haner et al., 2019). A PKK male member described: “While the women were being trained at those schools, the men undertook all the chores such as cooking, washing and cleaning.” (Haner et al., 2019, p. 9).

Results

The LTTE and the PKK have been the terrorist organizations with the largest numbers of women enlisted in their military wings, as well the groups that have more extensively employed women as suicide bombers. The degree of women’s acceptance in combat roles by the two groups is impressive not only for the Middle East and Asia standards, but it is also exceptional compared to any country in the world and any type of military, state or non-state. This is even more clear especially if it is taken into consideration that the United States revoke the law that banned women from assuming combat roles in 2013, while in the United Kingdom women are still legally restricted from several combat positions (Henshaw, 2017).

Both Sri Lanka and Turkey are countries where women’s rights are very limited. The women’s social status is inferior to that of men, and women are generally second-class citizens who live under the control of a male relative. The two countries are not progressive societies where someone would expect to see women soldiers enjoying equal treatment and representing women’s empowerment. More specifically, neither the Tamil nor the Kurdish society are progressive either, but they are also culturally conservative. The Tamil Tigers and the PKK enlisted unusually high numbers of women in their military wings and placed unexpected emphasis on gender equality, even though both groups were created and became active in clearly patriarchal, religious and explicitly male-dominated societies. Therefore, the groups’ feminist agenda and the gender equality that both organizations demonstrated inside their military wings is a remarkable phenomenon.

Both the LTTE and the PKK were founded in order to protect the ethnic identity, and preserve the culture and the tradition of the Tamil and the Kurdish people respectively. However, through their feminist agenda they actually choose to challenge the social norms and change their society’s traditional gender roles, the position and the perception of women. A shift in women’s social status is a major cultural change with great implications for the society as a whole. The choice can be explained because even though such political aspirations would change aspects of their cultural identity, they would also make a clear break from the state government and the previous social status of every citizen. Since the Tamil Tigers and the PKK are separatists who fight for their recognition as independent nations, their ultimate goal is to establish a new government that differs from the one they fight against. Additionally, the feminist agenda provides
It has been argued that wartime, uprisings and social unrest can offer women the opportunity to express themselves, stand up for their rights and demand representation that they would not in normal conditions (Düzgün, 2016). As it happens in most cases, the women’s movements and the promotion of women’s liberation did not appear separately from other political actors and political agendas (Dryaz, 2011). In both the cases of the LTTE and the PKK, the national struggle offered the opportunity for issues of women’s rights and gender equality to be raised and inspired political aspirations for the improvement of women’s status. Furthermore, the women in both the Tamil Tigers and the PKK talked about the dual oppression they faced by the state government and by the patriarchal society. Women militants in both organizations saw that they had to fight a double liberation struggle for their ethnic rights and for women’s rights. In this way, they considered the ethnic fight and the fight for women’s emancipation to be interconnected. However, a noticeable difference between the two groups is the matter of prioritization. The LTTE women believed that women’s freedom depended on the success of the national struggle, thus the liberation of women will be possible if the national liberation is achieved first. On the contrary, the PKK women perceive the success of the ethnic fight to be conditional on women’s freedom, in the sense that the national liberation is possible if women liberate themselves first.

The women soldiers of the Tamil Tigers and the PKK can demonstrate the benefits of holding combat positions. Women militants break the patriarchal hierarchy and challenge directly the traditional gendered roles and expectations. Hence, they can use this as a starting point towards redefining women’s position and breaking the taboos against women’s suitability for certain roles. It is evident from the case studies that women militants can change society’s perceptions of women’s identity and abilities, demonstrate that gender equality is possible and earn respect. Additionally, the military training they receive not only offers them practical skills and physical strength, but at the same time, it makes them more confident providing them with a sense of self-determination, security and independence. Militancy provides women with the chance to be active agents and at times determine their own course of action, while it can also offer them the opportunity for social mobility and improvement of their social status. Women soldiers can assume political, operational and leadership positions, which are privileges that they would not enjoy otherwise. Moreover, acquiring higher positions can also give them a considerable degree of latitude to promote women’s rights and emancipation, raise awareness about women’s issues and educate themselves and other women. Last but not least, women soldiers constitute a powerful symbol of gender equality and women’s empowerment, which has indeed a strong impact on both the organization and the society as a whole. The equality and empowerment they enjoy affect the women outside the organization and raise a collective feminist consciousness.

Women’s integration in the LTTE and the PKK military wings and their participation in combat roles was in part the outcome of the women’s own demands for more active roles in the fight. Women fought and earned their place in the armed wings, while they also fought against the social constraints and questioned their position in the patriarchal society. Moreover, it is evident that the surprisingly significant emphasis placed on women’s rights by both organizations was in part the result of the women’s own agency, meaning that the more the women’s participation increased in the groups, the more the attention to women’s issues increased. The advocacy of women’s rights and gender equality was indeed the result of the women’s persistence and action. Women soldiers worked to eliminate the misconceptions about their abilities and their identity. However, it is important to bear in mind that in both cases the organizations’ leadership was welcome and encouraging to the feminist ideology. Although resistance to gender equality by the male members has been reported in both groups, the fact that women kept rising in number and the
emphasis on women’s emancipation increased over the years can be another indicator of women’s fight for their rights.

Inside the terrorist organizations, female militants promote women’s rights by changing the gender-based expectations, assuming positions that previously belonged only to men, demanding equality on treatment, training and roles, educating themselves, eliminating the misconceptions about women’s abilities, and drawing more attention to women’s rights in a way that has an impact on the group’s overall ideological agenda. Through the organization female terrorists send a powerful message to the women outside the group and affect the society’s perception of women becoming a symbol of women’s empowerment. Since fighting for women’s emancipation has been found to be one of the prominent reasons for women joining the groups, their enlistment itself is the first step towards advocating women’s rights. Consequently, the theory that is formed is that female terrorists fight for women’s rights by assuming positions that reject the traditional gendered roles and then use their position to redefine their identities and demonstrate gender equality which has an impact on the perceptions regarding the traditional hierarchies and sets an example for the women in their society. For this to hold, it is necessary for the terrorist organization to be a secular, egalitarian movement with a leftist ideology.

Even though the assessment of the success or the truthfulness of the terrorist groups’ feminist agenda, as well as the successful accomplishment of the women terrorists’ emancipation is beyond the scope of this research, it would be useful to note that both the Tamil Tigers and the PKK have been criticized for not being honest about believing or pursuing their feminist agendas. More specifically, the sexual segregation in the military wings and the extensive employment of female suicide bombers have been used as arguments that the LTTE’s support for women’s liberation was not genuine (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 2008). Indeed, both organizations widely used women in suicide missions, and exploited the gender-based preconceptions in order to increase the effectiveness and lethality of their attacks. Moreover, it has been argued that the Kurdish women’s emancipation has been reduced to the justification for women’s mobilization for the ethnic struggle, and that women’s liberation is meaningful only if it can be advantageous to the national fight (Balci, 2017). Although many analysts have also questioned the autonomy and self-determination of the female terrorists, it is important to remember that in a militant organization every soldier is obliged to obey orders. Finally, the literature regarding the relationship between feminism and nationalism is concentrated on what negative effects nationalism can have on women, while it neglects to focus and analyse effectively the women’s agency (O’Keefe, 2013).

**Conclusion**

This research attempted to examine how female terrorists fight for women’s rights inside and through a terrorist organization. We investigated the way that militant feminism is present in terrorist organizations and the way that women soldiers take action to promote gender equality and change traditional hierarchies. The study also looked into the way that the women militants’ feminist consciousness has affected their motivation for enlisting and their course of action. The purpose of this inquiry is to draw more attention to the agency of the female terrorists. Women's political motivations, ideas and aspirations have been much neglected in the relevant literature and the misconceptions about politically violent women are still prevalent. Thus, this is an attempt to focus on overlooked aspects of the women terrorists’ activity focusing on their ideas about women’s emancipation. It is important to note that this study is concerned with the women’s agency and aspirations, regardless of the organizations’ ulterior motives.

Comparative case study analysis was used in this research. The case selection process focused on cases of terrorist organizations that include women who were eager to enlist, have high rates of women’s participation and an increased number of women in combat positions, and embrace an ideological agenda.
that incorporates women’s rights and gender equality. Accordingly, the cases of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) were selected. Furthermore, these cases share common characteristics, namely both organizations are secular, egalitarian, anti-state nationalist movements inspired by a Marxist-Leninist ideology, and they are secessionists fighting for the creation of an independent Tamil and Kurdish nation respectively.

The emphasis that both the Tamil Tigers and the PKK have placed on women’s rights and the numbers of women militants enlisted in their armed wings are remarkable, even though the two groups stemmed from conservative, religious, patriarchal societies. The fight for their ethnic rights opened the way for the women in the LTTE and the PKK to claim their rights as women and draw a strong connection between national liberation and women’s emancipation. The agency, the demands and the persistence of the women militants in the LTTE and the PKK influenced the groups’ increased attention to women’s rights, and the women’s integration into the armed wings was in part the result of their own actions. Women soldiers challenge the established gender-based roles, prove that gender equality is possible and become the symbol of women’s empowerment. Consequently, we conclude that female terrorists fight for women’s rights by assuming positions that reject the traditional gendered roles and then use their position to redefine their identities and demonstrate gender equality which has an impact on the perceptions regarding the traditional hierarchies and sets an example for the women in their society.

This study of course has many limitations and the fact that the research regarding the way that female terrorists fight for women’s rights is still in early stages was one of them. Another limitation was the fact that since it was not possible to conduct interviews for this research, we had to use interviews that the LTTE and the PKK women had given in the past. In the case of the PKK the women soldiers have hardly ever given in-depth interviews, which also posed a serious challenge. Moreover, the generalizability of the results cannot be confirmed. For this reason, the future work on this matter should consist of a theory testing research that will assess the validity of the proposed theory. Much of the literature is concerned with the question whether the organizations’ feminist agenda was truthful or not and how nationalism affects a feminist revolution, while the agency and the political aspirations of the female militants have been neglected and not properly analysed. Future research should focus more on the women’s agency, political ideas and objectives, and should attempt to erase the misperceptions about politically violent women.
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ITCT is UK based organisation and founded in 2018. It is a non-political and non-profitable organisation and is a unique think tank in itself. There is not a single organisation around that specifically counters the narratives of Islamist terrorism by using the tools of Islamic Theology. ITCT exposes the root causes of Political Islam and works hard to eliminate it through introducing the actual concept of Islamic Theology.

ITCT conducts a comprehensive research to find out the key elements that draw the most vulnerable people of the society into the fire of religious extremism. ITCT works on three main factors in order to educate the Muslim community:

- That Islamist Terrorism is wrongly associated with Islam
- And is committed by misguided Muslims
- By manipulating religious texts to brainwash Muslims

ITCT has three pillars to stand on:

- MISSION
  Countering Islamist Terrorism
- VISION
  Educating Muslim Community
- OBJECTIVE
  Providing the Solution of Islamist Terrorism

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