Women Insurgents, Rebel Organization Structure and Sustaining the Rebellion: The Case of Kurdistan Workers' Party

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Abstract

How do women insurgents affect rebel organizations' structure and survivability? Scholars acknowledge the importance of organization-level dynamics and unit composition for conflict outcomes. However, our understanding of how gender-diverse cadres impact rebel survivability remains limited. I examine the mechanisms through which women sustain the armed conflict. I analyze micro-organizational dynamics of rebellion through a qualitative case study of the Kurdish armed movement in Turkey between 1982-2015, based on the official archives of the Kurdistan Workers' Party. I show that women insurgents enable tactical diversity, aid the organization's coup-proofing strategy against factions, and mobilize domestic and international audiences. Women contribute most to their organization during crises and due to exploitation of gender inequalities. Analyzing the relationship between gender dynamics, group structure, and evolving rebel strategies, this study shows that the gender of the membership is an important factor influencing rebel survivability.

How do gender-diverse cadres affect rebel organizations' structure and survivability? When the Maoist insurgency commenced in Nepal, it had but a handful of female members. Over ten years, women participated at every level of the insurgency, "from party committee secretaries to guerrilla squad commanders to local volunteers and propagandists."[1] Top commanders recognized that "women are more committed to the movement" because they were "the most deprived."[2] Separate female units were created upon recognizing the importance of women's unique contributions to the combat force, ranging from mobilizing recruits to navigating intra-organizational disputes.[3] A large number of female recruits had played a significant role in the decade-long conflict, which ended with a Comprehensive Peace Agreement allowing the Maoists to take part in the parliament.[4] Women had similar impacts in FMLN in El Salvador, where they contributed to the organizational strength "through the skills and knowledge they brought to the war effort that men simply did not have." [5]

These examples illustrate several features of heterogeneous cadres that contribute to sustainable insurgencies. Women fighters participate in 40-60% of rebel organizations worldwide, from left-wing groups such as the Zapatistas in Mexico to ethnicity-based organizations such as the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and religious fundamentalist groups such as Al Qaeda.[6] However, our understanding of *how* gender heterogeneity in group composition impacts the structure and

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[1] Com. Parvarti, "The Question of Women's Leadership in People's War in Nepal," *The Worker,* no. 8 (2003), http://www.bannedthought.net/Nepal/Worker/Worker-08/WomensLeadershipInPW-Parvati-W08.htm (accessed March 17, 2022)

[2] Ibid

[3] Ibid

[4] Shobha Gautam, Amrita Banskota, and Rita Manchanda, "Where There Are No Men: Women in the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal," in *Women, War and Peace in South Asia*, ed. by Rita Manchanda (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 214-48.

[5] Jocely Viterna, *Women in War: The Micro-processes of Mobilization in El Salvador* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 67.

[6] Reed Wood and Jakana Thomas, "Women on the Frontline: Rebel Group Ideology and Women's Participation in Violent Rebellion," *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no.1 (2017): 31-46; Alexis Leanna Henshaw, "Why Women Rebel: Greed, Grievance, and Women in Armed Rebel Groups." *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1, no.3 (2016): 204-219.

survivability of violent organizations remains limited. This is despite a growing literature highlighting organizational factors, unit composition, and membership profile as foundational determinants shaping the conflict environment.[7]

The reasons behind women's participation in rebel organizations[8] as combatants and suicide bombers have been extensively studied.[9] Focusing on their initial participation, while important, leads us to underappreciate the diverse methods rebels use to maintain the insurgency and women's various contributions in sustaining the rebellion. Civil wars persist because rebel groups sustain themselves, and this requires more than only replenishing fighters. Navigating crises, factionalization, and constituency relations are substantive in assuring rebel group survival.[10] Moreover, rebel groups often utilize both armed and unarmed tactics to respond to the changing conflict dynamics regarding repression, citizen allegiance, and organizational capacity.[11] Focusing exclusively on fighters means neglecting the interactions between combatant and noncombatant duties and their impact on the strategies of violence. Understanding how women contribute to sustained rebellions requires assessing the interactions between women's roles, organizations' strategies, and relations with other members and their audiences.[12]

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[7] Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, "The Nature of the Beast: Organizational Structures and the Lethality of Terrorist Attacks," *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (2008):437-449; Theodore McLauchlin, "Desertion and Collective Action in Civil Wars." *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no.4 (2015): 669-679; Patrick Johnston, "The Geography of Insurgent Organization and Its Consequences for Civil Wars: Evidence from Liberia and Sierra Leone," *Security Studies* 17, no.1 (2008): 107-137.

[8] A rebel organization or group is a collective, nonstate, institutionalized entity that uses violence alongside other tactics to compete for political power.

[9] Jakana Thomas and Kanisha D. Bond, "Women's Participation in Violent Political Organizations," *American Political Science Review* 109, no.3 (2015): 488-506; Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

[10] Sarah Elizabeth Parkinson and Sherry Zaks, "Militant and Rebel Organization(s)," *Comparative Politics* 50, no.2 (2018): 271-293.

[11] Seden Akçınaroğlu and Efe Tokdemir, *Battle for Allegiance: Governments, Terrorist Groups, and Constituencies in Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020).

[12] Zoe Marks, "Gender Dynamics in Rebel Groups," in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military*, ed. Rachel Woodward and Claire Duncanson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 437-454.

This study analyzes micro-level mechanisms through which women insurgents affect rebel organizations' structure and survivability. The analysis is based on the qualitative case study of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) using the archives of its official monthly bulletin *Serxwebun* between 1982-2015, which involves over ten thousand pages of primary source material. The analysis suggests that women, both in combatant and noncombatant capacities, profoundly shaped the organizational structure, despite the challenges of maintaining group cohesion. These changes in the organizational structure enhanced the organization's survivability. Women helped sustain the rebellion through gendered mechanisms, some of which are largely underexplored, such as increasing the organization's capacity to adapt its tactics to changing circumstances, reinforcing the leadership's authority by leading the organizations' coup-proofing strategies, and building international coalitions. The analysis also provides a nuanced account for the mechanisms appreciated in the literature, such as providing increased fighting power, efficiency in covert roles, and mobilizing support through local coalitions. Moreover, it assesses the conditions shaping the effectiveness of women's duties for sustained rebellion. First, women insurgents' effectiveness increases due to the prevalence of gender inequalities. Second, women provide the most advantages at times of organizational crises.

This study contributes to several strands of research. First, it contributes to the scholarship highlighting the role of organizational components for conflict determinants,[13] particularly for sustaining insurgencies.[14] Moving beyond the unitary group assumption dominating civil war research, it documents heterogeneous unit composition as a determinant of insurgencies'

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[13] Wendy Pearlman, *Violence, Nonviolence, and The Palestinian National Movement*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations*, (Princeton: Princetion University Press, 2013).

[14] Roger D. Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Sarah Elizabeth Parkinson, "Organizing Rebellion: Rethinking High-Risk Mobilization and Social Networks in War," *American Political Science Review* 107, no.3 (2013): 418-432

organizational structure and stability, local and international networks, and the interplay between various strategies, including nonviolence, guerilla war, suicide attacks.

Second, complementing the research on gender dynamics of conflict, this study emphasizes the variation of gendered strategies targeted to different audiences and shifting with crises within the same rebel group. It demonstrates that women's contributions to sustained rebellion increase both due to the deployment of traditional gender norms (i.e., in facilitating tactical switches); and due to situating the organization against traditional gender norms (i.e., in building international support). This account underlines the dynamic and complex relationship between violence and gender equality norms, rather than associating support for gender equality with nonviolence.[15]

Third, it contributes to the scholarships on the relevance of available endowments for rebel strategies, membership loyalty, and coup-proofing strategies against factionalism[16] by documenting how gender inequality can become a critical piece of information for leaders to assess member loyalty and situate women against rival factions to strengthen central command. This account responds to the scholars' call to explore rebel strategies sustaining leaders' authority against factionalism[17] and suggests that rebel leaders' navigation of power relations among sub-units can be consequential for organizational structure, survival, and gender policies.

Women's Significance for Rebel Groups' Structure and Sustaining the Rebellion

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[15] Reed Wood and Mark D. Ramirez, "Exploring the Microfoundations of the Gender Equality Peace Hypothesis."*International Studies Review* 20, no.3 (2018): 345-367; Richard Eichenberg, "Gender Differences in Public Attitudes toward the Use of Force by the United States, 1990–2003," *International Security* 28, no.1 (2003): 110-141.

[16] McLauchlin, "Loyalty Srategies,"; Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2014); Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[17] Risa Brooks, "Integrating the Civil–Military Relations Subfield," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, no.1 (2019): 379-398.

A rebel organization's primary goal is survival. As rebels typically start weaker than the government, with low prospects of military victory, their immediate goal is to sustain the rebellion in the face of repression and lower the chances of a government victory.

Survivability refers to the organizations' ability to sustain the insurgency for longer periods. Scholars have identified several factors contributing to rebel group survival: 1) Mobilization of members to carry out fighting and to perform covert roles such as smuggling of weapons and information; 2) public support; 3) organizational control, or the leadership's ability to control the behavior of combatants to prevent defections, fractionalization or divisions among members; and 4) resilience, or ability to respond to shocks (e.g., changing counter-insurgency strategies). These are deemed the primary factors for ensuring a rebel organizations' survival.[18]

Participation of women in rebel organizations triggers a number of mechanisms that influence the four major factors mentioned above, in turn affecting the survivability of the organization. Here I outline a framework for the main mechanisms through which women can influence rebel organizations' structure and sustenance, drawing on Parkinson and Zaks' template featuring key organizational components of 1)Roles, 2)Relations, 3)Strategies (Behaviors), and 4)Goals.[19] This template is purposive for making comparisons between organizations and explaining processes linked to patterns of violence and organizational resistance, typically rooted at the organizational level. This organizational focus complements individual-level explanations behind political violence because organizations shape individuals' behavior and beliefs about the benefits of keeping fighting. Below, I explain, under each organizational component, the relevant mechanisms through which women's participation bolster the factors contributing to the rebel group's survival. Specifically, I discuss the importance of *mobilization of members* for survival under "roles"; *support of*

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[18] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, 96, 127, 163, 260.
[19] Parkinson and Zaks, "Militant and Rebel Organization(s)."

citizens and *organizational control* under "relationships"; and *resilience* under "strategies." This framework highlights the importance of organizational structure for sustained rebellions and can serve as the basis for more incisive comparisons between rebel groups for future research.

Roles

Roles are members' positions defined by the skills, practices, and tasks required to fulfill these positions' objectives.[20] Mobilization of members carrying out fighting and covert roles such as smuggling of weapons and information is a vital component of group survival.[21] Groups that can mobilize a larger number of members and replenish cadres after losses are more likely to resist government forces and sustain themselves for longer periods. Yet, sustained insurgency requires more than only replenishing fighters. Members carrying out logistical and intelligence apparatus play a substantive role in group survival.

Women can contribute to sustaining the organization, first, by undertaking combatant roles. The inclusion of women combatants means expanding the pool of potential recruits and increasing the overall size of an organization. Consequently, this can increase the number and intensity of attacks and decrease the odds of government victory.[22]

Second, women can assume covert roles such as suicide bombers, smugglers of information, weapons, and drugs (a typical financial resource), be responsible for logistics or carrying out propaganda activities. Women's effectiveness in providing extra fighting power is similar to men. However, gender norms deeming women as nonviolent give women an advantage in evading security measures, and thus, in performing covert roles.[23] Women's advantage in logistics and

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[20] Ibid.
[21] Parkinson, "Organizing Rebellion."
[22] Alex Braithwaite and Luna B. Ruiz. "Female Combatants, Forced Recruitment, and Civil Conflict Outcomes," *Research & Politics* 5, no.2 (2018): 1-7.
[23] Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry. *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*. (London: Zed Books, 2007).

informational duties is specifically important for irregular conflicts where information availability can be decisive of the conflict outcome.[24] For instance, India's Khalistan Movement deployed women predominantly as messengers and spies who provided critical information to operate timely attacks.[25]

Relations

Relations are the social linkages that define the organizations' "nature, centralization, and hierarchy," which "form the backbone of organizational structure," yet are vastly omitted from analyses.[26] Gendered linkages activated by women can shape an organization's relations with the local population, international audiences, and group members, which in turn affect public support and organizational control.

First, public support has a substantive role in survival, as the rebellion cannot flourish if it fails to receive civilian populations' sympathies and cooperation.[27] Greater public support can transform into financial assistance, potential recruits, or higher tolerance for rebel activities, providing greater maneuverability.[28] Locals can cooperate with female members easier as women are typically viewed as harmless. Women's involvement in a rebellion can also signal the public that the repression is so severe that "even women" are fighting and that the movement is more inclusive of society.[29] This can lend legitimacy to the group and attract broader public support and mobilization,

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[24] Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[25] Carol Mann, "Women in Combat: Identifying Global Trends," In *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace*, ed. Seema Shekhawat (London: Palgrave McMillan, 2015), 20-35.
[26] Parkinson and Zaks, "Militant or Rebel Organization(s)," 274.
[27] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, 163.
[28] Christopher Paul, "As a Fish Swims in the Sea: Relationships Between Factors Contributing to Support for Terrorist or Insurgent Groups," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no.6 (2010): 488-510.
[29] Jocelyn Viterna, "Radical or Righteous? Using Gender to Shape Public Perceptions of Political Violence," In *Dynamics of Political Violence: A Process-Oriented Perspective on Radicalization and the Escalation of Political Conflict,* ed. Lorenzo Bosi, Chares Demetriou, Stefan Malthaner (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing ; 2014):189-216.

which can bolster organizational longevity.[30] That said, conservative audiences may disapprove of women recruits, viewing them as having abandoned their traditional roles.[31]

Second, attracting public support and allies abroad can contribute to sustained rebellion through providing resources, expanding the mobilization opportunities, and the room to navigate clandestine operations.[32] Women recruits can signal gender equality awareness, which can be rewarded by Western NGOs and IGOs.[33] Scholars discussed women fighters' role in garnering international attention through propagating media visibility or appealing to outsiders' legitimacy images,[34] however the discernable tactics through which both combatant and noncombatant women actively build coalitions broadening their outreach and support base have yet to attract attention.

Third, organizational control, that is, the leadership's ability to shape and control member behavior to have them collectively pursue the organization's goal, is an essential component of sustaining insurgencies.[35] Group cohesion can be consequential for organizational control, as divisions among members undermine groups' capacity to act collectively.[36] Male members' refusal to integrate women in rebel organizations, deeply patriarchal structures, can disrupt cohesion and constrain rebel capacities.[37] In some cases, women perpetrate more violence to avert male pressure, suggesting that inter-member relations within heterogenous cadres can lead to divergent violent

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[30]Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Efe Tokdemir, "Reputation Building as a Strategy for Terror Group Survival." *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy & Peace* 10, no. 2 (2021): 165-182.

[31] Lindsey A. O'rourke, "What's Special about Female Suicide Terrorism?"*Security Studies* 18, no. 4 (2009): 681-718.

[32] Katherine Sawyer, Kathleen Cunningham, and William Reed, "The Role of External Support in Civil War Termination," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no.6 (2015):1174-1202.

[33] Clifford Bob, *The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[34] Devorah Manekin and Reed M. Wood, "Framing the Narrative: Female Fighters, External Audience Attitudes, and Transnational Support for Armed Rebellions," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no. 9 (2020): 1638-1665, Sjoberg, Laura. "Jihadi Brides and Female Volunteers: Reading the Islamic State's War to See Gender and Agency in Conflict Dynamics," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 35, no.3 (2018): 296-311.

[35] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, 127

[36] Scott Gates, "Recruitment and Allegiance: The Microfoundations of Rebellion," *Journal of Conflict resolution* 46, no. 1 (2002): 111-130.

[37] Thomas and Bond, "Women's Participation in Violent Political Organizations."

strategies, which might be suboptimal for the overall goal of sustaining the insurgency. Further, rebel organizations apply different policies to regulate the intimate relationships between male and female members, which can have implications for controlling member behavior. For instance, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front encouraged or forced female insurgents to "marry" male members to incentivize male mobilization and prevent defections.[38] Relations among members in gender-diverse groups can be consequential for how organizations sustain themselves, yet overlooked in conflict analyses.[39]

Strategies

Strategies or behaviors refer to the activities produced by the systems of roles and relations.[40] Armed groups typically use different strategies simultaneously or switch between strategies (i.e., suicide attacks, guerilla war, civil resistance) to inflict harm, mobilize support and adopt changing war conditions. Resilience in the face of changing government strategies is critical for rebel survivability.[41] Strategic shifts are critical in rebel resilience because they help organizations respond to shocks and adapt to changing war conditions.[42]

Asal et al. find a higher likelihood of using nonviolence or mixed strategies in armed groups embracing gender-inclusive ideologies.[43] However, we do not know the mechanism enabling this tactical diversity. Does embracing gender-inclusive values make violent organizations less violent, or is there another mechanism that can explain the link between women and nonviolent tactics of rebel groups? The link between women fighters and tactical diversification requires deeper scrutiny,

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[38] Marks, "Gender Dynamics"

[39] Ibid.

[40] Parkinson and Zaks, "Rebel and Militant Organization(s)."

[41] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, 2006.

[42] Bloomberg Brock, Khusrav Gaibulloev, and Todd Sandler, "Terrorist Group Survival: Ideology, Tactics, and Base of Operations," *Public Choice* 149, no.3-4 (2011):441; Michael C Horowitz, Evan Perkoski and Philip Potter, "Tactical Diversity in Militant Violence," *International Organization* 72, no.1 (2018):139-171.

[43] Victor Asal, Richard Legault, Ora Szekely, and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, "Gender Ideologies and Forms of Contentious Mobilization in the Middle East," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no.3 (2013): 305-318.

especially as feminist scholarship deems the traditional view associating women with nonviolence as oversimplified.[44]

Overall, scholarship revealed a variety of functions for women in armed conflicts. However, more research is needed to unpack how these gendered functions impact the group structure and stability. Recent research finds a correlation between female fighters and longer conflicts, but we do not know whether, and if so, *how* women increase group survivability or whether they simply participate in longer conflicts.[45] Studies on how strategies are shaped by member roles and relations are particularly scarce and necessitate deeper scrutiny.[46]

Another missing point is how women's lower opportunity costs of participating in rebel organizations affect organizations' structure and sustenance. Research shows that women's pursuit of gender equality and protection from sexual violence motivates their participation in rebel groups,[47] suggesting that women's demands from their organizations can differ from men's. Provision of different benefits to recruits has consequences for the type of individual attracted to the group (opportunistic vs. committed) and for the group's violence strategies.[48] Gauging member reliability is challenging because combatants have incentives to hide their true commitment levels to reap personal gains.[49] These tendencies exacerbate both the mistrust of the leader and inter-member mistrust, encouraging desertions.[50]

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[44] Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security*.(New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 59.

[45] Reed Wood and Lindsey Allemang. "Female Fighters and the Fates of Rebellions: How Mobilizing Women Influences Conflict Duration," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* (2021).

[46] Parkinson and Zaks, "Rebel and Militant Organization(s)."

[47] Güneş Murat Tezcür, "A Path Out of Patriarchy? Political Agency and Social Identity of Women Fighters," *Perspectives on Politics* 18, no. 3 (2020): 722-739; Victor Asal and Amira Jadoon. "When Women Fight: Unemployment, Territorial Control and the Prevalence Of Female Combatants in Insurgent Organizations." *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 13, no. 3 (2020): 258-281.

[48] Weinstein. *Inside Rebellion*.

[49] Ibid; Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*

[50] Theodore McLauchlin, "Desertion and Collective Action in Civil Wars." *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no.4 (2015): 669-679.

Ensuring members' loyalty is integral to organizational control, and a core determinant of organizational survival because low-commitment recruits can seek short-term gains, defect, or split, jeopardizing the long-term organizational stability. Defections and splits reduce troop size and public support.[51] Leaders' ability to control rebel behavior means a stronger monitoring mechanism to punish defectors and deter defections. Women's lower opportunity costs of participation can be vital information for the leaders to assess their types in this uncertain environment. The consequences of this information for the organizational structure and survivability have not attracted scholarly attention.

Furthermore, the literature assumes that the factors enabling women's initial participation in rebellion remain constant throughout the conflict, which limits assessing when women's duties are demanded by the organizations (demand-side conditions) and performed by women productively the most (supply-side conditions).[52] The leaders typically face trade-offs in recruiting women compared to men, as it has both advantages and disadvantages for the organization. Thus, organizational demand for women recruits, and women's effectiveness in organizations, fluctuate more frequently than the demand for men, depending on the external and internal conflict dynamics. For instance, while gender stereotypes increase women's effectiveness in suicide bombing and other covert roles, the same factors can also prevent organizations' reliance on women as leaders in traditional settings tend to disapprove of women's expansion of roles and would like to avoid backlashes from their audiences and members alike.[53] These tensions have implications for under what conditions rebel organizations demand women's unique contributions and formulate

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[51] Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*. Jonhston, "The Geography of Insurgent Organization,"; Victor Asal, Mitchell Brown, and Angela Dalton. "Why Split? Organizational Splits Among Ethnopolitical Organizations in the Middle East." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no.1 (2012):94-117.

[52] Israelsen, "Why Now?"

[53] Michael J. Soules "The Tradeoffs of Using Female Suicide Bombers," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 39, no. 1 (2022): 3-23.

their strategies. Understanding the fluctuations in demand for women recruits within the same organization is thus important to assess the conditions under which heterogenous organizations sustain themselves.

I address these gaps by analyzing women's evolving roles and their impact on organizational structure and sustained rebellion. This in-depth exploration reveals gendered mechanisms that have attracted limited or no attention, such as coup-proofing, tactical diversification, and international coalition-building, discussed below. It also provides a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms discussed in the literature, such as providing extra fighting power, performing covert roles, and building local support, by studying their interactions with organizational strategies and survivability (see Figure 1).[54]

I further evaluate the conditions under which women's contributions are most effective and most demanded by the organization. I demonstrate that women's comparative advantage over men in navigating the roles, relations, and strategies stems from the exploitation of gender inequality. By gender inequality, I particularly refer to traditional gender norms associating women with the private sphere, women insurgents' lower life prospects outside the organizations compared to men, and the inferior socioeconomic status of women in the conflict region. These factors contribute to sustaining the organization in the face of repression, while they also tend to increase reluctance to employ women to avoid backlashes from conservative audiences and male members. I argue that facing crises helps alleviate rebel organizations' reluctance to employ women, as such downturns

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[54] The boundaries between combatant and noncombatant roles are often blurred as women usually fulfill multiple roles. If combatant women are present, they almost always engage in noncombatant activities too, whereas the presence of noncombatant women does not necessarily mean that they also adopt combatant roles. That said, female combatants are, overall, pivotal in fighting power and navigating intra-organizational relations with regards to coup-proofing, while non-combatants play key roles in performing covert roles, building coalitions with local and international audiences and enabling tactical diversification.

necessitate using women to maintain the organizations' survival. I demonstrate that groups' reliance on women insurgents increases during organizational crises.
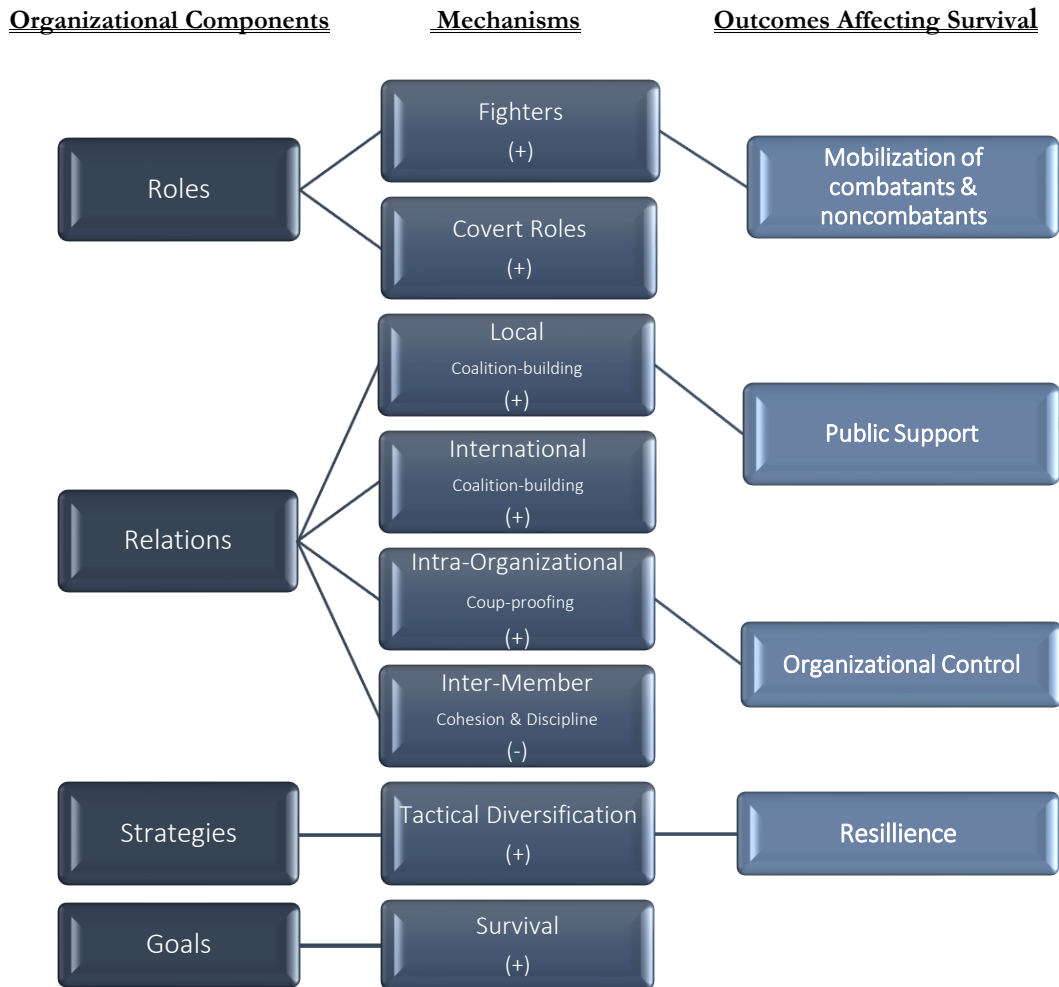
Figure 1. Mechanisms through which women insurgents impact the key components of organizational structure. The signs in parentheses denote whether women positively or negatively impact the relevant component.

Research Design, Case Selection, and Data

The analysis is based on the qualitative examination of the PKK. Active since 1978, PKK is one of the longest-lived rebel groups, offering substantial variation in resistance and how women are employed. Its longevity and tactical versatility with guerilla war, suicide bombings, and nonviolent campaigns provide a rich case to explore women's role in organizational stability.

I analyze an individual case to 1)provide a framework linking gendered dynamics to organizational structure; 2)understand the micro-level mechanisms through which women help sustain organizations; 3)determine the scope conditions of women's contributions to rebel groups. Focusing on the mechanisms through a single case allows controlling for groups' ideologies, constituencies, and state-level factors that cause variation in conflict processes. Rather than testing hypotheses through aggregate-level data, this study prioritizes understanding the micro-level evolving relationships between membership and group operation, which have implications for interpreting existing work and theoretically informing future research.[55]

 Existing scholarship suggests that groups having larger troop size, using terror attacks, embracing a leftist ideology are more likely to include women.[56] PKK - a large organization employing terror acts and embracing leftist ideology - can provide insights for other groups relying on women militants. That said, PKK can be considered an extreme-value case of other rebels recruiting women.[57] According to WARD, only 7.5% of rebel groups feature 20% or more women members, one of which is PKK. Since the late 1990s, approximately 30%-40% of PKK's members are estimated to be women.[58] Analyzing a case with extreme independent variable values is important to unravel causal pathways, sources of causal heterogeneity, and better interpret the results of cross-national analyses.[59]

PKK's use of women insurgents is similar to contemporary leftist movements aiming to mobilize a broad cross-section of the population, such as Maoists in Nepal, FARC in Colombia,

[55] Alexander George and Andrew Bennett. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005).

[56] Thomas and Bond "Women's Participation in Violent Poltical Organizations"; Thomas and Wood "The Social Origins of Female Combatants"; Wood and Thomas "Women on the Frontline."

[57] Ora Szekely, "Exceptional Inclusion: Understanding the PKK's Gender Policy," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2020):1-18.

[58] Nihat Ali Özcan, "PKK's Recruitment of Female Operatives," *Jamestown Foundation 4*, no.28. (2007).

[59] Jason Seawright, "The Case for Selecting Cases that are Deviant or Extreme on the Independent Variable," *Sociological Methods & Research* 45, no.3 (2016): 493-525.

FMLN in El Salvador, and Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity.[60] Like these insurgencies, PKK was inspired by the Chinese and Vietnamese resistances' leftist militant activism, which successfully mobilized a long-term people's war.[61] Due to its ethno-nationalist character and reliance on youth movements, PKK can also be informative for understanding women's role in insurgencies such as the Irish Republican Army and LTTE.[62]

The analysis primarily relies on the PKK's official monthly bulletin *Serxwebun* from 1982-2015, containing over ten thousand pages of primary source material in Turkish. *Serxwebun* publishes the leader's declarations, decisions taken in conventions, essays by PKK's sub-committees and militants, militants' diaries, and obituaries of fallen fighters. It provides a rich source to understand the organization's gendered strategies, featuring lengthy articles discussing challenges and regulations regarding women's mobilization, duties, and integration, societal oppression women face in the conflict region, and the appropriate lifestyle members should embody within the organization.

Serxwebun was founded by the PKK's Central Committee, the main executive organ, with the first chief editor being Mazlum Doğan, a founding member.[63] Its place of publication changed several times; it started in Sweden, has been published in Germany for a long time, and is currently moved to the Netherlands. The latest issues and the complete archive are available online, making it accessible to all sympathizers and members at large.[64]

I read each piece of writing that includes the keywords "woman," "girl/daughter," "madam/lady," recorded and analyzed the information regarding the benefits and costs women

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[60] Güneş Murat Tezcür, "Violence and Nationalist Mobilization: The Onset of the Kurdish Insurgency in Turkey," *Nationalities Papers* 43, no. 2 (2015): 248-266.

[61] PKK, Serxwebun June 1982, 7-8.

[62] Jessica Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad And the Islamic State*. (London: Rowman&Littlefield, 2017).

[63] Yeni Özgür Politika, Ulusal Dirilişin Hafızası [The Memory of the National Resurrection], December 7 2020, https://www.ozgurpolitika.com/haberi-ulusal-dirilisin-hafizasi-7875 (accessed March 17, 2022)

[64] PKK, Serxwebun http://serxwebun.org/index.php?sys=arsiv (accessed December 15, 2021).

provide in sustaining the movement.[65] I also benefited from the PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan's

books, reports, and other PKK publications, interviews with PKK members by the local media, the

books written by ex-combatants, and government reports.

Analyzing the official bulletin of a rebel organization over three decades, this study responds

to the scholars' call to delve into the archival conflict data to better understand how civil wars

persist.[66] That said, *Serxwebun* is written from the organization's perspective. The target audience is

PKK's members and sympathizers, which makes the bulletin a suitable tool for propaganda, carrying

incentives to overemphasize its influence and members' commitment. I analyzed the documents

being conscious of this bias. I relied on various other sources from PKK's opponents, such as the

books written by members who deserted the organization and the Turkish government's reports. My

analysis of the archives suggests that the organization's strength is consistently exaggerated, whereas

"disloyal" acts (commitment disruptions or desertions) are discussed occasionally, forewarning

others from committing similar actions.[67] A key aim of *Serxwebun* is to educate its audience on how

to overcome the movement's challenges. For this reason, it discusses PKK's challenges in detail, and

is blunt when explaining the inefficiencies caused both by male and female cadres, making it a

unique source to understand the micro-dynamics of the organization's operation.

Women's impact on rebel survivability depends not only on the organization's actions and

demands. Women's agential response to the organization's policies and variation in women's

experiences is, of course, important to fully grasp the gendered dynamics of resistance.[68] Similarly,

women who pledge allegiance to the insurgency's goals but are not directly involved in the

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[65] "Kadın," "kız," "bayan," in Turkish, respectively. All the quotations from the original sources are my translations.
[66] Laia Balcells and Christopher Sullivan, "New Findings from Conflict Archives," *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no.2 (2018): 137-146.
[67] For instance, women are condemned for breaking their allegiance to the leader and leaving the organization (PKK Serxwebun September 1999, 23).
[68] See Nadje Al-Ali, and Latif Tas, "Reconsidering Nationalism and Feminism: The Kurdish Political Movement in Turkey." *Nations and Nationalism* 24, no.2 (2018): 453-473; Handan Çağlayan, *Women in the Kurdish Movement: Mothers, Comrades, Goddesses* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

organization's regular operation are important in forming alliances in the traditional realm of politics.[69] That said, explaining the heterogeneity in women's response to the organization's policies or the organization's ties to party politics requires separate and comprehensive studies. Therefore, I limit this article to the study of the conditions and mechanisms through which women's overall impact affected the organization's survival. This focus highlights the conflict aspects that entailed the elevation of women's roles within the organization and complements the scholarship emphasizing women's bottom-up efforts that gained them higher positions and pushed the organization towards greater egalitarianism.

History of the PKK and the Evolution of Women's Roles

The PKK was established in 1978 as a Marxist-Leninist organization. The armed insurgency against Turkey began in 1984 to create an independent state in the Kurdish-populated areas of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. The PKK has declared women's emancipation as a goal since its establishment, yet women's integration into the organization was not linear.[70] The evolution of women's roles can be categorized into five periods, following major challenges the organization faced: 1)PKK's establishment and women's scarce mobilization (1978-1992); 2)Severe counter-insurgency, women's organized mobilization, and suicide bombings (1993-1998); 3)Ceasefire and women as nonviolent mobilizers (1999-2004); 4)Renewed insurgency and women as agents of structural transformation (2005-2013); and 5)Internationalization of the conflict and women as international coalition-builders (after 2013).

The PKK was run by men initially; however, women have taken combatant roles since the beginning, if sporadically.[71] For instance, Azime Demirtas, one of the first female combatants who

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[69] Ibid.
[70] Sözdar Avesta, "PKK'da Kadın Ordulaşması [Women's Army in PKK]" *PKK Online*, 2001 http://www.pkkonline.com/tr/index.php?sys=article&artid=301 (accessed July 1 2017).
[71] Serxwebun published obituaries of 67 women died between 1983-1993.

died in 1983, is considered "a prominent figure of the insurgency."[72] Berivan worked in mobilization activities in Europe, investigating spies, interstate logistics, and as a combatant in the field. Necla Altun worked as a squad commander between 1989-1991.[73]

The PKK peaked in military power in 1992 after gaining greater access to Iraqi territories upon Saddam Hussein's defeat in the Persian Gulf War. PKK started fighting against the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP) after allying with another Iraqi group (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan). In the mid-1990s, the PKK suffered heavy losses due to Turkey's counter-insurgency campaigns and drastically increased women's recruitment as combatants and commanders. Fighting against both Turkey and the KDP hampered PKK's military power, hampering maintaining guerilla warfare. Following this period, especially between 1996-1999, PKK relied heavily on women in suicide attacks - a new addition to its tactical repertoire. According to Öcalan, PKK's women members in 1999 stood at 3000 in Turkey and 5000 including those abroad.[74]

The Turkish government captured Öcalan in 1999, after which PKK declared a ceasefire and turned to nonviolent tactics. Women, together with the youth, were assigned as the key actors to carry out nonviolent strategies, rebuild ties with communities, and establish coalitions beyond the PKK's core constituency. However, several developments in Turkey and around the region led to an existential crisis for PKK. The rise of the current ruling party in Turkey (AKP) as a viable political alternative among the Kurdish citizens, the formation of a Kurdish autonomous region in Northern Iraq under the US protection following the Iraqi invasion, and the growing divisions within the PKK substantially limited its influence by 2004.[75]

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[72] PKK March 1986, 20.
[73] PKK January 1989, 3; March 1989, 6.
[74] PKK January 1999, 28. According to Turkish sources, PKK had around 2500 militants in Turkey and 3000-3500 militants abroad during 1998-9. See Ümit Özdağ, "Türkiye, Kuzey Irak ve PKK: Bir Gayri Nizami Savaşın Anatomisi," [Turkey, Northern Iraq and PKK: Anatomy of an Unconventional War] (Istanbul: ASAM, 1999).
[75] Güneş Murat Tezcür, "When Democratization Radicalizes: The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Turkey," Journal of Peace Research 47, no. 6 (2010): 775-789.

Trying to maintain its status as the sole representative of the Kurdish movement, the PKK resumed armed insurgency in 2005 and introduced a series of structural reforms. The organization's structure was moved from strictly hierarchical towards a decentralized network of local assemblies, aiming to realize self-governments in Kurdish-populated cities. With this renewed self-determination project, gender-emancipation was declared as *the core* principle.[76] Women's duties entrenched further and were deemed critical for executing both violent and nonviolent tactics.

The insurgency boosted international attention with the Western involvement in the Syrian War and women's active fight against ISIS. Women's Protection Units (YPJ) -an all-women army of the PKK's Syrian offshoot People's Protection Units (YPG)- received worldwide coverage and built alliances with NGOs and prominent political figures in the US and Europe. The next section discusses how women's involvement translated into greater survivability, focusing on their impact on the key components of organizations; roles, relationships, and strategies.

Mechanisms Explaining Women's Significance for PKK

Roles

An armed organization's survival depends on its members performing 1) fighting 2) covert activities such as propaganda, smuggling of information, weapons, and other resources. The effectiveness of fulfilling combatant roles is similar for men and women, yet reliance on female fighters typically increases when male recruits are scarce.[77]

Fighting Power

The analysis of PKK's fighters shows that first, women fighters substantially helped the organization survive counter-insurgency campaigns. Second, the organization consolidated female fighter cadres over time, particularly when it suffered most militarily.

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[76] PKK March 2005,4, 24.
[77] Miranda Alison, "Women as Agents of Political Violence: Gendering Security," *Security Dialogue* 35, no. 4 (2004): 447-463.

PKK's leader initially considered women "a backup" resource, and women fighters acted as substitutes to males when fighting resulted in heavy casualties.[78] Observing women's contributions on the battlefield, Öcalan dismissed men's resistance against women fighters, praised women for "bravely challenging the enemy"[79] and taking on duties that "even men were not able to do."[80] He increased the number of women and expanded their roles within the PKK and, later, within the YPJ in Syria, constituting approximately 40% of the cadre.[81]

Female combatants were demanded the most when the PKK suffered militarily from massive counter-insurgency campaigns. This is most evident in the establishment of the first women's army. By the end of 1992, Turkey's intervention in the PKK bases in Northern Iraq severely weakened the organization. As a response, and notwithstanding the male opposition, the PKK built the first women's army in 1993, to fight precisely in the regions where male casualties were high.[82] By the mid-1990s, the number of women fighters had substantially increased.[83]

Women combatants' effectiveness led Öcalan to institutionalize the women's army further.[84] Kurdistan Free Women's Association (YAJK) was officially launched in 1995, which established units composed only of women with female-only training sessions.[85] This alleviated men's dominance on women's units and helped women promote their unique ways of strengthening the organization,[86] explained further below. In 2005, resuming insurgency after a nonviolent episode, PKK fortified women's combatancy after going through a structural transformation.

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[78] PKK January 1989, 27.
[79] PKK September 1994, 11; March 1993, 31.
[80] PKK March 1989, 6.
[81] Social Charter of Rojava, Articles 47, 65, 87.https://www.peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/charter-of-the-social-contract/ (accessed March 17, 2022).
[82] Avesta, "PKK'da Kadın Ordulaşması."
[83] Tezcür, "Violence and Nationalist Mobilization."
[84] PKK September 1994, 27.
[85] Avesta, "PKK'da Kadın Ordulaşması."
[86] Esin Düzel, "Fragile Goddesses: Moral Subjectivity and Militarized Agencies in Female Guerrilla Diaries and Memoirs," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20, no.2 (2018):137-152.

Covert Roles

In line with the literature, the PKK case shows that beliefs dismissing women's agency in violence helps women fulfill covert tasks and ensure locals' cooperation more easily than men. It further shows that women's effectiveness in covert attacks helped PKK the most when guerilla fighting was no longer sustainable.

The PKK used women's effectiveness in covert activities to sustain everyday tasks and assigned them critical duties, especially in propaganda, spying, and facilitating communication between urban and rural centers.[87] For instance, a militant's diary recounts an event where she was able to trick Turkish soldiers by disguising as a bride in a local's home. The household urged soldiers not to enter the bride's room as it is traditionally inappropriate for men to intrude. Avoiding the risk of deviating from social norms, soldiers only took a cursory glance at the room and did not ask the "bride" to open her veil. Far from an isolated incident, women fighters frequently mention similar instances of using gender norms to avoid detection.[88]

This account also exemplifies women's effectiveness in navigating local networks. Locals feel more comfortable cooperating with women as they consider it less risky. This enables women to mobilize other women and youth more easily, particularly in conservative regions where men's approach to households is deemed inappropriate.

Apart from sustaining routine tasks, women's advantage in clandestine missions was most critical when PKK turned to suicide bombing upon losing power due to its fight against the government and KDP, with casualties peaking between 1994-1996.[89] When it was no longer able to pursue guerilla war, PKK's first suicide attack (of many to follow) was deployed in 1996 by a woman

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[87] PKK March 1989, 6.
[88] PKK September 2006, 28.
[89] TBMM, Human Rights Commission, "Terör ve Şiddet Olayları Kapsamında Yaşam Hakkı İhlallerinin İncelenmesi Raporu" [Report on the Violation of Right to Live regarding Terrorism and Violence], 2013.

code-named Zilan, killing six soldiers and wounding thirty-five during a military ceremony. Posing as pregnant, she could approach Turkish soldiers hiding the bomb under her clothes.[90] PKK relied heavily on female suicide bombers due to their comparative advantage; 75% of PKK's suicide attacks are estimated to be committed by women.[91]

Relations

This section examines how gendered interactions helped maintaining the organization, focusing on first, women's role in expanding local networks; second, building international coalitions; third controlling intra-organizational factions and sustaining leader's authority; and fourth, navigating inter-member relations, where encounters with male members negatively affected group cohesion and discipline.

Local Networks

PKK's women were instrumental in alleviating the alienation of the local public from PKK after intense violent episodes and in cultivating support beyond its immediate Kurdish constituency. First, gender roles associating women with peace helped female insurgents more easily communicate with the public. Second, women insurgents helped position the PKK as a women's rights defender and mobilized human rights activists. Third, women's effectiveness in mobilizing the communities proved useful mostly during organizational crises.

Women's activities maintained societal support, attracted new allies, and revitalized the Kurdish armed movement. Öcalan deliberately expanded women's role within the PKK over time, thinking that "the movement survived all attacks because women have been an important part of it."[92] He recognized women's critical role in carrying out mass propaganda activities and communicating with people who were alienated from PKK by the long-lasting violence, including

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[90] PKK November 1996, 6.
[91] O'rourke, "What's Special."
[92] PKK January 2006, 15.

civilian attacks.[93] Therefore, he tasked women with becoming "the key agents of democratic politics," "representing the moderate face of the movement," and "building bridges with the society."[94]

Women insurgents were key in defining the PKK as the defender of women's liberation, communicating this message to the public and mobilizing diverse audiences beyond the Kurdish sympathizers. To illustrate, Free Women's Democratic Movement brought hundreds of women from civil society, political parties, and local government bodies.[95] Women's Assemblies were created in dozens of cities, formed shelters for gender-based violence victims, initiated women's cooperatives, and opened academies providing training in feminism.[96] Especially with the PKK's structural transformation emphasizing gender emancipation in 2005, Kurdish women expanded their presence in the insurgency and civil resistance activism, leading to alliances between diverse audiences, heterogenous bottom-up resistances, and broader support.[97]

Women's mobilization activities helped sustaining the movement, especially during its weakest times. Öcalan's capture in 1999 brought PKK to the brink of dissolution. Unable to maintain the armed resistance, PKK shifted to nonviolence. This elevated women from a "backup" to a primary resource of PKK's power.[98] From 1999-onward, there is a marked increase in *Serxwebun's* emphasis on women's significance, so much so that in a 2001 interview, Öcalan said, "We might be over-emphasizing this, but it is very critical for women and youth to be the pioneers of the democratic peace process."[99]

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[93] PKK October 2003, 13.

[94] PKK November 2001, 23.

[95] Later renamed *Kongreya Jinen Azad (Free Women's Congress).*

[96] PKK September 2001, 31. These initiatives constitute the nonviolent branch of the Kurdish insurgency. Still, one should acknowledge the variation in Kurdish nonviolent mobilizations. See Nisa Göksel "Gendering Resistance: Multiple Faces of the Kurdish Women's Struggle," *Sociological Forum*, 34 (2019):1112-1131 emphasizing the middle ground between women's armed and unarmed resistance.

[97] Al-Ali and Tas. "Reconsidering Nationalism and Feminism."

[98] PKK November 2001, 15, 24, 26.

[99] PKK November 2001, 10.

Deciding that the execution of nonviolent strategies required a more organized women's movement, PKK established its first women's party, Women's Liberation Party (PJA), the same year with Öcalan's arrest, and decided to expand its current capacity four times in three years.[100] The PJA was assigned a pioneering role in mobilizing masses and attracting support from the broader Turkish population by appealing to concerns for gender equality.[101] Women militants sought to build grassroots alliances with Turkish leftist groups, students, environmental activists, and other marginalized groups appealing to their demand for greater sociopolitical rights for minorities.[102]

Another time women's leadership in mobilization helped the organization survive a major crisis was when the PKK's claim of being the sole representative of Kurdish people was shattered with the rise of internal factions and AKP as a viable political alternative appealing to Kurds. The PKK resumed armed insurgency in 2005 to rally supporters and, at the same time, shifted the organization's focus from state-targeted goals to build networks of local assemblies. This renewed strategy put women's leadership at *the center* of the PKK's agenda and gave women the ultimate responsibility to mobilize this initiative.[103] The same year, women organized under the umbrella of the High Women's Council (KJB) and were assigned more leading roles in guerilla warfare.[104] From establishing the first women's party to putting women's leadership as a core pillar, PKK benefited from an institutionalized women's movement in expanding its outreach.

Among all women's contributions, their role in attracting public support as mobilizers and grassroots coalition-builders is discussed most prevalently in *Serxwebun*. Members' obituaries further show that even when women worked as combatants and commanders, they were usually involved in

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[100] PKK June 2002, 1. PJA was called Kurdistan Working Women's Party (PJKK) when first established.
[101] PKK September 2001, 10; November 2001, 15.
[102] PKK November 2001, 15, 26.
[103] PKK March 2006, 4.
[104] PKK March 2005, 14.

mobilizational activities too,[105] underlining the inadequacy of the combatant-noncombatant

dichotomy in reflecting women's contributions.[106]

International Networks

 PKK offers a clear example of benefiting from women insurgents to build networks with

INGOs and IGOs, and lobby the Western political elite. I discuss, first, women militants' civil

society activities in Europe; second, their influence on the Western political environment; third, their

expanded institutionalization in Europe starting with fighting against ISIS. I demonstrate that PKK's

endorsement of gender emancipation played a critical role in opening collaboration venues with

foreign political actors.

 First, women insurgents' activities in Europe were crucial in mobilizing European public

opinion against the Turkish government's undemocratic practices during the 1990s and 2000s when

Turkey's primary foreign policy goal was to become a European Union member. [107] PKK established

its first women's association in Germany instead of Turkey, and opened multiple branches

throughout Europe, providing the organization more room to maneuver during heavy counter-

insurgency at home and build ties with European NGOs early on.[108] This association's main duty

was to form relations with European women's organizations and mobilize material and immaterial

support.[109] Fulfilling its mission, the YAJK partnered with the Women's International Democratic

Federation in Paris and secured participation even in the UN's World Conference on Women in

Beijing in 1995.[110]

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[105] Half of the women, who died between 1983-2002 and are presented with information regarding their duties, are mentioned to engage in mobilization activities, in addition to combatant responsibilities.

[106] Niall Gilmartin, "Representations of Women's Military Contributions in Non-State Armed Groups," _International Feminist Journal of Politics_ 19, no.4 (2017): 456-470.

[107] PKK November 2001, 17.

[108] KJB, "The Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement is a Universal Women's Struggle in its Essence," September, 19, 2021 https://www.kjkonline.net/en/nivis/303 (accessed March 17, 2022)

[109] Avesta, Sözdar, "PKK'da Kadın Ordulaşması."

[110] KJB, "The Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement."

Recognized as a terrorist organization by the European states, the PKK established "independent" women's NGOs pursuing democratic agendas to sustain its activities: "The organized women's movement will be the principal source of democratization.[…] We should establish new organizations abroad which should appear as independent and legal NGOs. These organizations should not appear as PKK's different versions. Otherwise, they would harm the movement's efforts to progress through democratic means."[111]

These women's NGOs participated in the UN's Human Rights Commission in 2017.[112] They gained access to the European civil society network, helping them secure grants provided to tackle gender inequality and other financial resources through donation campaigns.[113] Women members at large mobilized civil resistance campaigns in Europe, such as the annual *Zilan Women's Festival* in Germany, commemorating PKK's first suicide bomber since 2004.[114]

Kurdish female militants' international appeal has expanded since they started fighting against ISIS, with extensive media coverage and foreign support.[115] YPG and the all-women army of YPJ secured an alliance with the US and defended Kurdish-populated Syrian territories against ISIS. Notwithstanding the concerns of the NATO ally Turkey, the US Central Command tweeted YPJ militants' photos, displaying open support.[116] French President welcomed the YPJ commander Nesrin Abdullah at his palace, while the Italian government invited her to speak in the parliament.[117]

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[111] PKK November 2001, 21-22.

[112] ANF, "Kürt Kadınlarından BM'de Diplomasi Çalışması," [Diplomacy Work by Kurdish Women at the UN] 2017, https://anfturkce.com/kadin/kuert-kadinlarindan-bm-de-diplomasi-calismasi-91899

[113] PKK March 2005, 12; Enes Bayraklı, Hasan Basri Yalçın, and Murat Yeşiltaş "Avrupa'da PKK Yapılanması," [PKK Establishment in Europe], (Istanbul: SETA, 2019).

[114] PKK June 2002, 24; ANF, "Kadınlar, 15.Zilan Kadın Festivali'ne Hazırlanıyor" [Women Prepare for the 15th Zilan Women's Festival] 2019, https://anfturkce.com/kadin/kadinlar-15-zilan-kadin-festivali-ne-hazirlaniyor-125917 (accessed March 27, 2022)

[115] Sjoberg, "Jihadi Brides."

[116] US Central Command, February 28, 2017 https://twitter.com/centcom/status/836574056468082688, https://twitter.com/centcom/status/836573860669571072

[117] Fehim Tastekin, "Hollande-PYD Meeting Challenges Erdoğan," Al-Monitor, February 2015 https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/turkey-france-kurdish-guerillas-elysee.html; JINHA, "YPJ Komutanı Nesrîn Ebdullah İtalya Parlamentosu'nda," [YPJ Commander Nesrin Ebdullah is at the Italian Parliament], June 2015 http://www.jinhaber1.com/DUNYA/content/view/25268?page=85

Active lobbying by PKK's women assemblies is considered critical in the UK parliamentarians' condemnation of Turkish operations in Syria.[118] Öcalan was pleased with the Western support women attracted: "With the Kurdish resistance against ISIS, the negative perception against the PKK is destroyed in the eyes of the regional and international political actors. Especially women's courageous and moral fight against one of the most ruthless gangs [ISIS] doubled the attention towards PKK."[119]

This positive political climate expedited the institutionalization of the PKK women's movement in Europe. European Kurdish Women's Movement (TJK-E) was established in 2014 as an umbrella organization encompassing numerous women's assemblies and initiatives targeting women's mobilization at different capacities in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Switzerland, and Sweden. TJE-K recently started a petition campaign condemning the Turkish President's policies sustaining violence against women and claimed to have collected approximately 100,000 signatures as of April 2021, which will soon be sent to the UN and international human rights courts. The signatories include European parliamentarians, NGOs, academics, and writers, attesting TJE-K's influence.[120]

In sum, women insurgents had leading roles in practically navigating PKK's international affairs. Their international networking activities were crucial for boosting NGOs' support, reaching out to the UN, extracting financial resources, and attracting European political figures.

Intra-Organizational Relations

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[118] Bayraklı et al., "Avrupa'da PKK Yapılanması."
[119] PKK February 2015, 12.
[120] TJE-K, 100 Reasons, "Support from 15 Different Countries!" https://100-reasons.org/support-from-15-different-countries/ (accessed March 27, 2022).

Women were critical in shaping intra-organizational control. Like extant rebel organizations challenged by internal factions due to weak enforcement mechanisms,[121] factions within the PKK have challenged the central authority.[122] The need to control factions shaped the hierarchical structure and elevated women's position. Women's lower outside options for participating in PKK bolstered the leader's trust and led to their designation as the main actors to carry out coup-proofing strategies, helping the organization survive critical factional challenges. High-ranked male members' marginalization of women solidified women's loyalty to Öcalan, who kept women in the organization and created a female force despite contentions from men.

Öcalan calls the women's units a "panacea against plotters"[123] because women's lower life prospects outside of the organization make them more loyal to the movement:[124] "Women, who have suffered most from the current system, are the ones who can develop the most radical solutions. Women have the potential to strongly react against the reactionary forces within the struggle."[125]

He repeats similar ideas regularly: "Women need democracy and freedom the most; they are the ones who can sacrifice themselves in pursuit of them the most."[126] He considered the women's movement as an alternative to male-led factions which would carry the organization's goals forward "even if everyone else gives up fighting," increased women's influence by giving them critical roles and made women's army answerable only to himself in the command chain.[127] He deliberately

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[121] Wendy Pearlman and Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham. "Nonstate Actors, Fragmentation, and Conflict Processes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no.1 (2012): 3-15.

[122] PKK April 2002, 5.

[123] PKK October 2001, 35.

[124] PKK September 2001, 7.

[125] PKK October 2005, 19.

[126] PKK September 2006, 23.

[127] Delal Afsin Nurhak "The Kurdistan Woman's Liberation Movement," PKK (2013) www.pkkonline.com/en/index.php?sys=article&artID=180 (accessed Dec 15, 2021).

positioned the women's movement with a separate army as a shield against the competing factions to minimize their odds of seizing power.

Öcalan states that the women's units are critical for coping with plotters.[128] Women's position vis-à-vis these factions was critical for maintaining the leader's authority because factions specifically tried to gain women's support to seize power.[129] According to the PKK, the faction's efforts to have women on their side was a deliberate decision, as garnering their support would shift the power dynamics to their advantage because "they realized that women are becoming a power in and of itself."[130]

For instance, one of the highest-ranked commanders Şemdin Sakık disagreed with Öcalan in key decisions, refused to obey his orders, and sought to purge him. Through negotiations and bargaining, Sakık convinced many members to follow his lead against Öcalan in 1996. He approached the women's units as well; however, female commanders cooperated with Öcalan. Öcalan mobilized women through YAJK Congress to investigate the process, which led to Sakık's trial and exile. According to a high-ranked female commander, this was the time "when the leadership was challenged by factions the most and when the women's movement has gained utmost power."[131]

Similarly, in 1993, Öcalan was alarmed by the increasing influence of four top-level commanders, who accused him of misdirecting the organization and not using more violence.[132] Assessing that it was "dangerous to give all the power to men," and given the loyalty of women

[128] PKK October 2001, 35.
[129] PKK June 1999, 13; April 2001, 5; April 2002, 19.
[130] PKK April 2002, 5, 32; PJA 2004.
[131] Avesta, "PKK'da Kadın."
[132] Ibid, Milliyet, "Sakık'ı Med TV Yaktı" March 25, 1998, https://www.milliyet.com.tr/the-others/sakiki-med-tv-yakti-5365884 (accessed March 27, 2022).

members to his authority, he institutionalized a separate women's army and "assigned women more power in the decision-making bodies."[133]

Women responded effectively to repulse the challenges posed to the leader's authority and proved to be more active and influential than men in overcoming internal challenges.[134] The women's party PAJK immediately issued a statement declaring their commitment to Öcalan after his arrest.[135] Similarly, the women's movement was the only organized group within the PKK to protest the solitary confinement of Öcalan.[136]

PAJK's statements further clarify women's role in guarding the leader's authority: "Women's most essential duty is to protect the leadership—the leadership made us who we are today, taught us what being women means, and created women's organization. PAJK was established in 2004 against the attempts of traitors to lure women to their side."[137] Indeed, during that period, divisions within the PKK had advanced. A group of high-ranking PKK commanders left the organization and established a rival Kurdish organization (Partiya Welatparêzên Demokrat) in 2004. Women's loyalty is strong particularly for Öcalan, who formed and maintained the women's movement despite opposition from male members, discussed in detail in the next section. For instance, ex-combatants' statements reveal that women were devastated by Öcalan's capture, believing that male members would further oppress them in his absence.[138]

In sum, women had more incentives to bear the costs of fighting than men due to their lower opportunity costs of participating and remaining in the organization. This bolstered Öcalan's trust in them. Male members' marginalization of women further increased women's loyalty to

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[133] Avesta, "PKK'da Kadın."
[134] PKK September 2001, 31. There were some exceptions. Öcalan condemns some women's units for failing to repel the "internal enemies" (PKK September 1999, 23).
[135] Avesta, "PKK'da Kadın."
[136] PKK January 2006, 3.
[137] PKK June 2006, 14.
[138] Necati Alkan. *PKK'da Semboller, Aktörler, Kadınlar [Symbols, Actors and Women in PKK],* (Istanbul: Karakutu, 2012).

Öcalan, who was key in refuting male opposition to women's integration. In other words, Öcalan successfully transformed women's lower chances of living prosperous lives into a loyal army that would protect the leadership in times of turmoil.

Inter-Member Relations

Despite the benefits, recruiting women entailed costs as well. Women's integration into PKK was wrought with numerous challenges, which even resulted in women's expulsion from key units. The main challenge was coping with male members' disturbance on women's combatancy, causing incohesion. The second is about maintaining discipline in the face of emerging romantic relationships between members. These factors caused poor performance, whose costs were usually shouldered by women.

Throughout PKK's history, stereotypes about women lacking the capacity to fight have been prevalent among male militants, generating frequent controversies. Women were marginalized due to their alleged incapacity to grasp the movement's ideology.[139] Some units forced women to engage in propaganda activities instead of fighting.[140] Öcalan reveals the challenges faced during women's integration: "We managed to attract a decent number of women into our ranks[…]. However, the process has been marred with tragic events. Men cannot deny their responsibility in this; they are wretched. Men lack the capacity to comprehend the value of the women's movement […]. Women's integration into the army is still a work-in-progress and needs further attention. Women will develop their own principles under YAJK. That said, I still have my doubts over this issue."[141]

Tensions over women's roles peaked between 1993-1995 upon the expansion of women's combat duties.[142] Deciding that "women constitute an obstacle to the advancement of the war,"

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[139] PKK October 2001, 35. This view was shared by some female members too (PKK August 2001, 4).
[140] PKK December 2001, 29-30
[141] PKK January 1999, 7.
[142] PKK February 2015, 25.

PKK's Diyarbakir (Amed) unit expelled women in 1994 and recommended units from all regions follow suit.[143] According to a female fighter, "it was much more difficult to survive as a woman within the organization than fighting with the enemy. Öcalan's order to create a separate women's army was a lifesaver."[144]

However, unrest was not resolved by the women-only army and continued even after the organization explicitly adopted women's emancipation as a core principle in 2005. Women's testaments reveal cases where male commanders threatened by women's successes deliberately put women in risky situations to blame them for eventual failures.[145] Accusations of betrayal and marginalizations led some women to work harder to prove their usefulness[146] and engage in high-risk actions more frequently than men.[147]

The leader was critical in alleviating the widespread male opposition to women's integration, apart from women's bottom-up efforts. Öcalan allowed women's party and female-only units, and made structural changes supporting women's integration. He frequently intervened in men's opposition to female combatancy and criticized men's failure to grasp women's importance as the key impediment to the advancement of women's organization.[148] He urged them not to treat PKK's increased reliance on women as a temporary tactical move but as a core organizational component.[149] Öcalan's efforts to strengthen the women's positions solidified their support for his leadership, enabling Öcalan to situate women as the primary actors to protect the central authority against internal rivals, discussed above.

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[143] PKK September 1997, 21.
[144] PKK February 2015, 25.
[145] Nadje Al-Ali and Latif Tas. "Dialectics of Struggle: Challenges to the Kurdish Women's Movement," (2018) LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series, 22.
[146] Berivan Bingöl, *Bizim Gizli Bir Hikâyemiz Var: Dağdan Anneliğe Kadınlar [We Have a Secret Story: From Mountains to Motherhood]* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2016).
[147] Düzel, "Fragile Goddesses"
[148] PKK October 2006, 17; PKK January 2003, 21.
[149] PKK February 2015, 10.

The second major challenge was the management of romantic relationships. Öcalan maintains that sexual desire is a threat to the movement's success and bans intimate relationships. Feelings of love and desire should be diverted towards the party's collective goals.[150] Unsurprisingly, frequent violations of this rule seem to have occurred. Öcalan *regularly* castigates members engaging in romantic relationships for disrupting the discipline.[151] According to him, romantic relationships were among the major impediments to PKK's efficiency.[152]

It is important to note that, despite the punishments the members face in engaging in such relationships, PKK's high-ranked male members engaged in rape and sexual violence against women members.[153] These gross human rights violations cost the organization numerous defections, impacted its reputation and, potentially, performance.[154]

Strategies: Tactical Diversification

The previous sections outlined various strategies the PKK has undertaken more effectively due to women, such as sustaining the guerilla war, adopting suicide attacks, and mobilizing civil resistance. This section focuses on the interplay between these strategies. It argues that women were critical in enabling tactical shifts. They were instrumental in PKK's adoption of suicide attacks directly, and facilitating this tactical change indirectly by shaming men into high-risk attacks. Moreover, women helped switch to nonviolence by leading civil resistance activities and enhancing PKK's credibility in its commitment to nonviolence.

First, in addition to disproportionately carrying out suicide attacks, women indirectly facilitated implementing this new tactic by pressuring reluctant men to follow their example.

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[150] Abdullah Öcalan, *Kürdistan'da Kadın ve Aile [Woman and Family in Kurdistan]*, (Weşanên Serxwebûn, 1993).
[151] PKK June 1999, 24.
[152] Öcalan. *Kürdistan'da Kadın ve Aile.*
[153] Enes Bayraklı and Aslihan Alkanat, "PKK'da Kadın Teröristlerin Rolü ve Örgüt İçi Cinsel İstismar" [The Role of Female Terrorists and Sexual Abuse in the PKK]. *Güvenlik Stratejileri Dergisi* 17, no.37 (2021): 119-156; Nejdet Buldan, *PKK'de Kadın Olmak [Being a Woman in PKK]*. (Istanbul: Doz, 2014)
[154] Ibid.

Emasculating men to perform suicide bombings by exemplifying women was common. *Serxwebun* features many instances where women were used to pressure men into acts outside of PKK's typical repertoire.[155] For instance, Öcalan anoints a suicide bomber, a teenager female, a hero while belittling men for their reluctance to sacrifice themselves: "17-year old Leyla is a hero, but you, men, are ludicrous. If you do not reform yourselves [in line with the new strategies], your manhood is not worth a penny to me."[156]

   PKK's first suicide attack, committed by a woman named Zilan, became a symbol of the loyalty expected from militants. The word *"Zilanification"* became a euphemism for suicide attacks, glorifying suicide bombing as the epitome of sacrifice in service of the organization's goals. *Serxwebun* reports men mentioning their desire to follow Zilan's footsteps before suicide missions, suggesting that the strategy of emasculation could be effective.[157]

   Women were also instrumental in expanding PKK's repertoire with nonviolent tactics. Above, I highlighted women's leading role in nonviolent mobilization. Women were not only the principal actors in executing these tactics; they also represented the organization's commitment to nonviolence and increased its credibility of embracing unarmed tactics during the peace process.

   Despite PKK's success in carrying women away from their traditional roles to become fighters, women were still demarcated as natural peacemakers.[158] Öcalan notes, "Let mothers and daughters do peaceful protests. Let them become the bombs of freedom and peace. Women's nature favors peace."[159] The organization believed that women could persuade the public better and lend PKK legitimacy. According to him, women should employ nonviolent tactics because doing so

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[155] PKK 2001, 28; November 1999, 17; November 1996, 7; June 1999, 12, 24; January 1999, 7, 15.
[156] PKK November 1996, 7.
[157] PKK April 1999, 20.
[158] PKK September 2001, 1.
[159] PKK July 1999, 1.

is vital for attracting support.[160] He says, "We should pursue our legitimate struggle not through violent means damaging our legitimacy, but through nonviolent methods.[…] Specifically, women should act carefully, knowing that they have the utmost responsibility to carry out this mission.[…] *Peace Mothers'* remarkable protest shows you the vital role of women in creating peace."[161]

PKK considered women's movement "an indicator of the depth of PKK's transformation towards nonviolence" and "the strategic foundation of PKK's transformation during its most critical periods."[162] Öcalan says, "All legitimate struggles and civil resistance activities are important for us. Hence, we decided that these would be the methods of the Women's Liberation Movement."[163] He emphasizes women's role in overcoming PKK's credibility problem due to shifting between guerilla wars, unarmed strategies, and suicide bombings: "The long-lasting armed struggle had alienated us from the society. We experienced problems in communicating with people. […] We have advanced our dominance thanks to women's civil resistance activities over the last few years."[164]

Overall, women were instrumental in allowing tactical shifts, by actively implementing new strategies and enabling the conditions for organizational innovation, either by convincing the communities about PKK's commitment to nonviolence, or the male members to execute novel repertoires of action. Women's success in facilitating the organization's reliance on diverse nonviolent and violent tactics concurrently and shifting tactics credibly was instrumental in transforming the organization's long-term objectives, observed specifically in critical junctures.

Discussion: Conditions and Mechanisms Enabling Women's Effectiveness in Political Violence

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[160] PKK August 2001, 7.
[161] PKK November 1999, 25. *Peace Mothers* is a civil rights initiative founded in 1999 by the PKK militants' mothers who lost their sons/daughters in the conflict, and still active today. Their activism, including sit-ins, hunger strikes, and marches to the capital, has attracted widespread attention.
[162] PKK August 2001,12; June 2002, 18.
[163] PKK August 2001, 1.
[164] PKK 2003, 13.

The analysis shows that, despite the costs on group cohesion, women shaped the organization's roles, relations, and strategies and increased its resistance capacity through unique mechanisms. Two main conditions are borne out inductively from the case study under which women provide these contributions the most. First, gender inequality enables the effectiveness of women's contributions. Second, women are particularly sought after when the organization faces crises. I start by discussing these conditions and then turn to the mechanisms.

Conditions: Gender Inequality and Glass Cliff

Gender inequality is a core determinant underlying most of women insurgents' unique contributions. I particularly refer to three manifestations of gender inequality: Traditional gender norms associating women with the private sphere and nonviolence; women insurgents' lower life prospects outside the organization; and inferior socioeconomic status of women in the conflict region.

First, traditional gender norms associating women with the private sphere and nonviolence help women evade suspicion. This makes women more effective in covert duties and boosts international propaganda due to the media's attention to the "anomaly" of women fighters. Moreover, it facilitates tactical diversification, both by mobilizing locals for civil resistance and by making the commitment to nonviolence appear more credible. Emasculation based on gender roles further ensures the application of new methods by members at large.

Second, women's lower life prospects outside of the organization decrease the opportunity costs of remaining in the organization, strengthen women's loyalty to the organization, and motivate them to resist internal threats challenging central command. Their lower outside options were frequently mentioned regarding the elevation of women's position within the command structure: "Women's oppression leads them to search ways out of it and makes them more appreciative of the organization"[165] This is consistent with Mesquita's quality of terror model, arguing that decreased

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[165] PKK April 6-7.

economic opportunity increases the pool of high-quality recruits, referring to the high-loyalty member pool in this case.[166]

Third, women's inferior socioeconomic status in the conflict region increases Western attention to women's rebellion, broadens international lobbying opportunities, civil society networks, and support. In short, women's gendered contributions to sustaining their organization becomes stronger due to gender inequality.

Ironically, these are the same factors precluding rebel groups' reliance on women at every stage to avoid backlashes from their conservative audiences and members.[167] Facing crises helps overcome this trade-off, as such challenges necessitate using women to maintain the organization's survival. Facing crises prompts seeking solutions other than the status quo, facilitates risk-taking, and opens up new venues for women. The PKK experienced its first significant challenge in 1992 when Turkey's operation severely weakened PKK's military power, and a group of high-level commanders within the PKK was challenging the leader's authority. The women's army was established in 1993 as a response. The next instances when women proved essential were when the PKK had to switch tactics in 1996 to suicide attacks and again in 1999 to nonviolence when guerilla war was not sustainable. The first women's party, established upon Öcalan's arrest in 1999, carried out organized nonviolence and led the coup-proofing strategy while factions were fighting for leadership. Another significant downturn came in 2004 after PKK started losing its position as the sole representative of Kurdish interests due to rival factions and the rise of AKP in Kurdish regions. Again, women refuted factions and sustained central command in 2004, while gender-emancipation was declared the core principle in 2005.

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[166] Ethan Bueno Mesquita, "The Quality of Terror," *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no.3 (2005): 515-530.
[167] Soules "The tradeoffs."

PKK's heavy reliance on women during organizational downturns parallels Palestine Liberation Organization, Chechen Separatists, LTTE in Sri Lanka, LRA in Uganda, and Karen National Liberation Army in Myanmar, which recruited women to substitute male casualties upon experiencing intensified attacks.[168] This tendency is also evident in organizations at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, hinting at the generalizability of the relationship between crises and reliance on women. For instance, Hamas' leader stated that "women are like the reserve army, when necessary, we use them."[169] Unlike these groups, the PKK has recruited women since its establishment—still, experiencing crises increased its reliance on women. Apart from crises stemming from high casualties, this study documents women's heightened role in various other crises, such as the leader's capture, the threat of rival factions, and conditions requiring urgent tactical shifts.

This finding highlights the parallels between the role of women in rebel organizations, and economic and political organizations. Expansion of women's responsibilities when organizations face serious challenges is akin to the *glass cliff* phenomenon prevalent in the business and public policy literatures.[170] Glass cliff captures economic and political organizations' higher likelihood of assigning women leadership duties at times of crises. Despite the vast organizational differences regarding structures, duties, and resources, women face similar barriers in all these organizations, typically led by men. Women's potential to improve their organizations is recognized only after survival becomes the core problem in the face of crises.

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[168] Rabab Abdulhadi, "The Palestinian Women's Autonomous Movement: Emergence, Dynamics, and Challenges," Gender & Society 12, no.6 (1998): 649-673; Alisa Stack-O'Connor, "Lions, Tigers, and Freedom Birds: How and Why the LTTE Employs Women" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no.1 (2007):43-63; Israelsen, "Why Now."

[169] Debra Zedalis. *Female Suicide Bombers*. (University Press of the Pacific, 2004), 7.

[170] Michelle Ryan and Alexander Haslam, "The Glass Cliff: Evidence that Women Are Over-Represented in Precarious Leadership Positions," *British Journal of Management* 16, no.2 (2005): 81-90; Smith, Amy, and Karen Monaghan. "Some Ceilings Have More Cracks: Representative Bureaucracy in Federal Regulatory Agencies," *American Review of Public Administration* 43, no.1 (2013): 50-71.

This result can be insightful for a question in the literature about whether rebel organizations recruit women upon becoming more established to afford risking group cohesion.[171] The historical examination of women's functions within the same organization reveals that the evolution of conflict over time necessitates the organization to respond to a weakened performance, and women's integration is a solution to this problem. Increases in female recruit numbers over time and elevation of women's positions within the organization, follow organizational downturns. Taken together with existing macro-level correlations indicating a higher likelihood of women's involvement in longer-lived organizations, this result highlights women's *impact* on sustaining the rebellion, rather than considering organizations' survivability as a factor influencing women's participation.

This conclusion can be further informative for interpreting cross-national analyses concerning women's impact on rebel capacities. If relying on women increases when organizations struggle to survive crises, we would expect weaker organizations to be more likely to resort to female recruitment, at least through this mechanism. It means that when we compare the capabilities of groups with and without women at the aggregate level, the estimated effect could understate the effect of women militants. In other words, macro-level analyses can downplay the relationship between women and rebel resistance capabilities when women actually have a stronger impact.

Mechanisms: Tactical Diversity, Coup Proofing, International Support

The analysis demonstrated various mechanisms shaping key organizational components, which enabled me to induct the abovementioned conditions. Among these mechanisms, women's contributions in providing fighting power, performing covert roles, and building local networks

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[171] Thomas and Bond "Women's Participation in Violent Political Organizations"; Angela Dalton and Victor Asal, "Is It Ideology or Desperation: Why Do Organizations Deploy Women in Violent Terrorist Attacks?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no.10 (2011): 802-819.

attracted attention in the literature. Here, I focus on other mechanisms that emerged inductively out of this case, including tactical diversification, coup-proofing, and international coalition-building, which attracted limited or no attention.

First, I argued that one mechanism through which women help maintain the insurgency is enabling tactical diversification and suggested a pathway underlying this relationship. A macro-level study demonstrates that rebels embracing gender-inclusive ideology are more likely to use nonviolence,[172] implying the generalizability of this relationship I suggested between women and tactical diversity in insurgencies. I further explain why this is the case. It is the comparative advantage of women in mobilizing nonviolence that allows leaders to add this alternative to the organization's repertoire, rather than embracing feminist ideology as indicated in the literature. Women's presence triggers the "peaceful women" stereotype, which empowers women as civil resistance mobilizers. This gives rebel groups a viable option to effectively implement unarmed methods and switch to nonviolence credibly, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of adopting nonviolent strategies.

Understanding the pathways associating women with tactical diversity is crucial because strategic shifts help organizations maintain resilience against altering war conditions. Nonviolent resistance garners citizen allegiance and increases mobilization.[173] However, rebels face challenges in demonstrating commitment to nonviolence and mobilizing locals, alienated upon violent attacks. Women insurgents help overcome this inconsistency between switching tactics by making groups' commitment to nonviolence appear credible.

Second, I argued that the reasons behind women's participation in the insurgency shaped the organizational structure. Harsher conditions women face outside the organization helped the leader

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[172] Asal et.al.. "Gender Ideologies."
[173] Akçınaroğlu and Tokdemir, *Battle for Allegience*.

assess their commitment levels, which is critical where combatants can hide their preferences for short-term gains and decrease the group's effectiveness. The leader effectively positioned female cadres as a shield against competing factions as their limited outside options made women more loyal to the organization. Women's allegiance is particularly salient for the leader, who elevated women's position against the male opposition. As a result, women reinforced the leader's command, typically associated with a stronger hierarchical structure and increased monitoring of rivals that could jeopardize the long-term sustenance of the insurgency.[174]

Similar strategies have been used in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (CPNM). CPNM's official newsletter, *The Worker,* suggests that their leader Prachanda considered women more reliable than men and initiated a separate women's army "to prevent counter-revolution."[175] Prachanda recognized that deserting the organization is too costly for women due to the social stigma they face afterward. Women's higher commitment to the organization led the leader to situate women to protect the organization against internal rivals: "Women's double oppression […] keeps them on their toes to check any counter-revolution or revisionism within the organization."[176] That said, transforming women's lower opportunity costs into a coup-proofing strategy can be ambitious for many rebel groups as it entails a high number of female members and elaborate planning, presenting a caveat to generalizability.

Despite its centrality to organizational structure and survival, rebel strategies to suppress internal rivals have attracted limited scrutiny.[177] Literature on state militaries suggests that officers' familial, ethnic, religious, or ideological characteristics are critical for leaders to assess their loyalty

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[174] Weinsten, *Inside Rebellion*.
[175] The Worker, 2003
[176] Ibid.
[177] Jun Koga Sudduth, "Coup Risk, Coup-Proofing and Leader Survival," *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no.1 (2017): 3-15.

and promote loyal ones to reduce the coup threat.[178] I show that members' gender can also signal

loyalty by informing about their outside options. Future research can benefit from examining the

expansion of women's roles in the military and politics to navigate shifting loyalties.

Third, moving beyond assessing the signals brought about by gendered imagery, I

demonstrated that women's voluntary involvement helped the organization credibly situate itself as a

defender of gender emancipation and reap tangible benefits from coalitions with Western NGOs,

IGOs, and politicians, catering to their concerns of gender inequality. This aligns with the research

showing rebels' ability to secure favorable political outcomes by framing their behavior consistent

with international humanitarian standards, suggesting the generalizability of the mechanism.[179]

Some organizations might have rules conducive to generating other benefits (or costs) from

incorporating women, as their duties vary across organizations.[180] For instance, the women of the

CPNM drew their children into the conflict to exchange information and ensure the flow of

potential recruits.[181] The women in the FMLN, unlike the PKK, increased group cohesion by

creating a more familial environment, furthering FMLN's ability to maintain a committed army.[182]

These suggest that the aforementioned conditions and mechanisms through which women

contribute to insurgencies can be more likely to occur in some cases than others.

For instance, women's recruitment in religious organizations can be argued to have less

impact on mobilizing conservative audiences who disapprove of women's abandonment of

traditional roles. Nevertheless, recent findings denote a lack of such a backlash from conservative

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[178] Dan Reiter, "Avoiding the Coup-Proofing Dilemma: Consolidating Political Control while Maximizing Military Power," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 16, no.3 (2020): 312-331.

[179] Jessica A. Stanton, "Rebel Groups, International Humanitarian Law, and Civil War Outcomes in the Post-Cold War Era." *International Organization* 74, no.3 (2020): 523-559.

[180] Jessica Trisko Darden, Alexis Henshaw, and Ora Szekely. *Insurgent Women: Female Combatants in Civil Wars*. (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

[181] The Worker, "Reports from the Battlefield", no.4, May 1998

[182] Viterna, *Women in War*, 220.

audiences.[183] Research also suggests that there is little difference between secular and religious rebel groups in socially justifying women's engagement in political violence.[184] They rationalize this "anomaly" in societal roles by referring to embedded gendered roles (i.e., motherhood; "women must fight to save their children") and promising a return to "normalcy" after the conflict.[185] Further, research suggests that women participate extensively in religious or right-wing armed groups and effectively mobilize participation by shaming men into fighting.[186] For instance, women members of Shiv Sena, a right-wing rebel organization in India, drew male participation by accusing men of being unmanly and unsuitable to be fathers to their children.[187] That said, the mechanisms discussed in this case are more applicable to organizations recruiting women voluntarily, because abducted women would not necessarily have higher commitment levels than men or attract support through signaling egalitarianism.

The Importance of Understanding Women's Role in Rebel Group Structure

The consequences of armed conflicts threatening security necessitate a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to rebel group survival. A growing literature studies the organizational factors to understand conflict dynamics; however, our understanding of how gender heterogeneity in group composition impacts conflict remains limited. This research shows that despite the challenges of maintaining group cohesion and discipline in gender-mixed cadres, women shaped the organizational structure and contributed to its survivability. Besides providing extra fighting power, women helped the insurgency's maintenance by enabling coup-proofing strategies,

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[183] Manekin and Wood, "Framing the Narrative."

[184] Cindy D. Ness "In the Name of the Cause: Women's Work in Secular and Religious Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005): 353-373.

[185] Meredith Loken, "Both Needed and Threatened: Armed Mothers in Militant Visuals," *Security Dialogue* 52, no.4 (2020): 21-44

[186] Meredith Loken and Anna Zelenz. "Explaining Extremism: Western Women in Daesh," *European Journal of International Security* 3, no.1 (2018): 45.

[187] Atreyee Sen, *Shiv Sena Women: Violence and Communalism in a Bombay Slum* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

diversifying tactics, mobilizing support through international and local coalitions, and performing covert roles. Focusing on the dynamic relationship between the insurgency's sustenance and women's engagement with the insurgency over time further shows that women provided these benefits the most when their organizations were going through crises and due to the prevalence of gender inequalities. The results are based on an in-depth analysis of the official archives of one of the longest-lived rebel groups.

Providing a detailed account of how women have acted as key agents not only strengthening a violent group's stability, but also advancing gender-equal agenda that helped sustain the insurgency, this study problematizes the scholarship associating women and gender-equal attitudes with the lower support for war.[188] Showcasing an armed organization that attracts support via catering to domestic and international actors' gender equality concerns, it demonstrates that support for gender equality can actually sustain armed resistance.

Moving beyond the widespread assumption linking gender equal attitudes and nonviolence, this study calls the scholars to consider the gender of the perpetrator to assess the complex relationship between gender equality norms and political violence. The study underlines that rebel groups can excel in taking advantage of both traditional gender roles that limit women's participation in the public sphere (e.g., in tactical switches) and gender equality norms (e.g., in international and domestic coalition-building) simultaneously. Through appealing to divergent gender norms shifting with audience types and organizational demands, rebel organizations can reap tangible benefits in their fight against adversaries.

Understanding the consequences of women's participation in rebel groups can reveal

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[188] Wood and Ramirez. "Exploring the Microfoundations"; Deborah Jordan Brooks and Benjamin A. Valentino, "A War of One's Own: Understanding the Gender Gap in Support for War," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2011): 270-286. Brooks and Valentino. "A War of One's Own: Understanding the Gender Gap in Support for War," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75, no.2 (2011): 270-286; Eichenberg, "Gender Differences."

underappreciated ways to reduce overall violence. Research shows that women are more likely to participate in groups that promise gender equality,[189] when deprived of socioeconomic rights,[190] and that traditional gender roles make women more lethal suicide bombers.[191] Here, I further show that gender inequalities can increase the survivability of groups with women insurgents. Rebel groups with higher durability typically prompt governments to take harsher measures, leading to cycles of violence. Moreover, women face new vulnerabilities in these organizations, from disproportionately engaging in self-destructive acts,[192] facing sexual violence, to being marginalized for being "unfit" to fight, and being excluded from post-conflict disarmament demobilization, and reintegration programs.[193] These further the oppression, social isolation, and destabilization of conflict communities while inhibiting the success of reconciliation efforts.[194] In other words, deprivation of women's rights constitutes a security issue for which the communities pay collective costs. Understanding the detrimental consequences of women's participation in rebel organizations can encourage policymakers to address gender inequalities motivating their participation, incorporate women insurgents in post-conflict initiatives, and adopt defensive policies to mitigate violence caused by rebel groups' gendered strategies.

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[189] Wood and Thomas, "Women on the Frontline."

[190] Dalton and Asal, "Is It Ideology or Desperation."

[191] Jakana L. Thomas, "Wolves in Sheep's Clothing: Assessing the Effect of Gender Norms on the Lethality of Female Suicide Terrorism." *International organization* 75, no. 3 (2021): 769-802.

[192] O'rourke, "What's Special?".

[193] Dyan E. Mazurana, Susan A. McKay, Khristopher C. Carlson, and Janel C. Kasper, "Girls in Fighting Forces and Groups: Their Recruitment, Participation, Demobilization, and Reintegration," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 8, no.2 (2002): 97-123.

[194] Alexis L. Henshaw, "Female Combatants in Postconflict Processes: Understanding the Roots of Exclusion," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5, no.1 (2020): 63-79.

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