

Mothers, bombs, and a whole lot of gender clichés

After the US dropped one of the biggest explosives ever used in Afghanistan earlier this year, critics objected to the use of the name ‘mother of all bombs.’ In this blog post, Jennifer Philippa Eggert analyses the gendered assumptions underlying the criticisms of the bomb’s name, before critically discussing the roles of mothers in violent political movements and counterextremism strategies.



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One of the biggest non-nuclear explosives

When the **US army dropped an 11-ton bomb**, one of the biggest non-nuclear explosives ever used, on a tunnel complex used by IS militants in eastern Afghanistan in mid-April, which **killed around 100 IS fighters** according to Afghan officials, protests followed promptly. Critics claimed that the use of the **bomb was ineffective** as it is likely to exacerbate tensions rather than bring peace. Some pointed out it was **unlikely the bomb would stop the fighting** in the area which has been afflicted by violent conflict for decades.

A name that causes offense

In addition to the bombing itself, the name of the bomb, which was nicknamed ‘mother of all bombs’, caused offense. Protesters expressed their disapproval of the name, as it allegedly stood in contrast with what mothers are and stand for. For example, the president of a US-based human rights organisation posted on **social media**: “Stop saying ‘mother of all bombs.’ Motherhood is about giving life, not taking it away.” The same sentiment was reflected in some of the media reporting on the dropping of the bomb, such as this article in the Guardian, in which the authors claims that the

naming of the bomb was misogynic as “no mother loves bombs.” In early May, even the Pope entered the debate, stating that he was “ashamed” when he heard the name, as a “mother gives life and this one gives death, and we call this device a mother. What is going on?”

Women’s involvement in violent conflicts

As a researcher focusing on female perpetrators of political violence, such as terrorists, insurgents, rebels and militia fighters, I found these reactions to the name of the bomb intriguing. I currently work on female fighters involved in the Lebanese civil war. For my research, I travelled to Lebanon where I conducted interviews with dozens of former fighters, both men and women. While most of the fighters were young, some were old enough to be married and have children. Lebanon is no exception in this context. Women are actively involved in violent conflicts all over the world, and many of these women are mothers.

Stereotypes of the relation between women and political violence

The assumption that motherhood and violence are conflicting notions is a widespread stereotype of the relation between women and political violence. Women are often assumed to be more prone to peace than men and inherently less violent. Women tend to be seen and presented as victims of political violence and oppression, but also by state and their militaries who deliberately use this discourse to justify military intervention. However, these stereotypes stand in clear contrast to the fact that women do participate in violent political acts worldwide. Women are members of violent extremist groups, they commit terrorist attacks, conduct guerrilla operations and participate in rebellions and insurgencies. They rape and commit genocide. Simplistic and generalising statements about mothers “giving life and not death” are misleading and do not reflect the realities of many violent conflicts worldwide, in which women are by no means victims only.

Motherhood as a motivator for female political violence?

While in the current debate, the focus was on the alleged dichotomy between motherhood and political violence, sometimes a different, but related, assumption is made about the roles of women in violent conflict. Publications about women’s involvement in political violence often contain the claim that women’s identity as mothers constitutes a key motivational factor for their engagement with violent movements. The case of female Chechen militants is a pertinent example in this case. Dubbed the ‘black widows’, their participation in the conflict is often seen as a result of the loss of a close relative. As pointed out by Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, by explaining women’s violence with their identity as mothers, we do not have to understand the wider political context behind their engagement nor the ideology and socio-political grievances that often motivate both men and women to resort to violence.

Extremist organisations exploit gendered assumptions

While we keep on repeating uncritical stereotypes about women’s roles in violent conflict, many extremist organisations intendedly exploit these gendered assumptions about female involvement in political violence. In the Middle East, Islamist groups work with female suicide bombers because they know that at checkpoints women are often less likely to be fully body-searched than men. In Europe, it is often women who legitimize the cause right-wing extremist organizations and stress the supposedly non-threatening and harmless nature of their movements. Extremist organisations worldwide actively use gender clichés such as the notion of women being essentially peaceful and non-violent. That is why reiterating, and thus reproducing, problematic stereotypes about mothers as angel-like creatures is not only problematic on an analytic level but, indeed, dangerous.

No universal remedy in the fight against extremism

Lastly, a word on the use of mother narratives in counterextremism discourses. Every now and again, well-meaning but often uninformed individuals or organisations **call for the inclusion of mothers** in counterextremism strategies. While much can be said for comprehensive counterextremism approaches including a variety of different societal actors, the belief that the involvement of mothers is some sort of a universal remedy in the fight against extremism is misleading and, indeed, naïve. First, **family networks often play an important role** in individuals' involvement in violent extremism. In many cases mothers are very much part of the problem. Second, while it is worth trying to get as many members of society as possible on board in the fight against extremism, I would caution against overestimating the potential impact any specific group can have. In my work as a counterextremism workshop leader, the women I have worked with often agreed that mothers could potentially play a role in helping to spot **early warning signs for extremism**, "but our sons don't listen to us". If you have teenage children yourself, this might not sound too unfamiliar to you. Moreover, this discourse is problematic as it focuses on the women and puts blame on families as bearers of 'extremist culture' rather than seeing radicalization and extremism as the multi-causal phenomenon they are in reality. It would be fantastic if bringing mothers on board would solve the problem. Unfortunately, tackling extremism is a tad more complicated than that.

Neither angelic creatures nor monsters or the one-stop solution in the fight against extremism

Mothers are neither angelic creatures nor monsters who will inevitably resort to violence if their families are threatened. They cannot provide us with a one-stop solution to end political violence and extremism (but that does not mean they should not be included in counterextremism strategies). Reiterating and reproducing simplistic gender stereotypes is problematic and might ultimately play into the hands of perpetrators of political violence who are using these very gender clichés to conduct even more effective attacks. If our aim is to help stop violence, we cannot afford muddled analyses. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to counter a phenomenon without having fully understood it first. That is why it is so important to critically question how we think about violence.



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