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## ‘Fierce Tigresses’ or Cogs in the Wheel?

### An Examination of LTTE Female Suicide Terrorism

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#### Introduction

On 21 May 1991, former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was attending a campaign meeting in the southern town of Sriperumbudur in support of a Congress Party candidate in the forthcoming general elections. As he was greeted by a crowd of supporters, an unfamiliar woman presented Gandhi with a flower garland, and while bending down to touch his feet, she detonated the RDX explosive-laden belt tucked below her clothes. News of Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination shook the Indian nation to its core, subsequently turning bewildered and furious stares at the terrorist organization operating in the neighboring country of Sri Lanka - the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (hereinafter LTTE or Tamil Tigers). Although the LTTE never took responsibility of the attack, the 17-years old female assassin known as Dhanu was a member of the notorious Black Tigers, the LTTE’s elite suicide wing. Not only was the international community appalled by the sheer horrific nature of the act – the fact that a *female* could be behind such an attack seemed to perplex the international audience.

While instances of suicide tactics are evident throughout history, the Tamil Tigers were pioneers in institutionalizing the practice of female suicide bombings as a dominant tactic during their guerilla warfare against the Sri Lankan government forces between 1983 and 2009. Overall, it is estimated that 40 percent of the suicide attacks perpetrated by the group were conducted by female cadres, also known as “*Freedom Birds*”. In fact, it was this notion that the LTTE molded into its rhetoric in order to portray itself as a champion of striving towards female emancipation and gender equality. Inevitably, the question which emerges is to what extent such declarations can be considered accurate. Therewith, the objective of this article is two-fold; First, it attempts to provide a theoretical framework outlining the effectiveness of suicide terrorism as a method of communication, maintaining that an imperative aspect of the phenomenon lies in the ‘*social noise*’ generated by the ferocious act itself. Second, the article takes the LTTE’s female Black Tigers as a case study, investigating how the organization carefully adopted a narrative of advancing the feminist cause, not only presenting it to its prospective female recruits, but also to the international audience. Paradoxically, advancing this feminist cause was merely a political and propaganda ploy of the LTTE rather than an instrument meant to promote the empowerment and emancipation of women. It is important to underscore that this article does not attempt to underline what motivated Tamil women to become Black Tigers – rather, the article takes a macro approach examining the symbolic power of female suicide terrorism. Such a systemic review can therewith assist in the fabrication and adoption of future counterterrorism policies specifically targeting the phenomenon.

## Rationalizing the Irrational: Suicide Terrorism as ‘Social Noise’

An important premise is that terrorism, generally speaking, is diffused through public communication and broadcasted through mass communication. It therefore constitutes a communicative gesture which is employed in order to convey a message to whichever target audience has been identified by the organization responsible (Post, 2007). The violence and randomness of the act instills fear even in those not directly affected and direct attention to the cause – in essence, terrorism constitutes a communicative ‘act’ in which the violence is a medium itself on the direct target, and equally produces fear to a much larger audience. While there is a general consensus over this aspect of terrorism, the phenomenon of suicide terrorism continues to perplex scholars. Not only do questions over what motivates individuals to become suicide bombers remain unanswered, but the symbolic power of suicide terrorism continues to mystify academic and policy circles. Many have attempted to delineate the symbolism underlying the praise of dying or “*suffering as a hero*” – also sometimes referred to as “*martyrdom*”. At a first glance, the aphorism, “*One man willing to throw away his life is enough to terrorize a thousand*”, conceived by Wu Ch’i (440-381 BC), a military philosopher in China, can be considered particularly relevant when attempting to comprehend the communicative significance of the act.

In an attempt to highlight this significance, Stuart J. Murray (2006) uses the term ‘*biopolitics*’ to describe the manner in which the shattered body parts of the terrorist become damaging shells, literally weaponizing the human body. Similarly, Jonathan Matusitz, Associate Professor in the Nicholson School of Communication at the University of Central Florida (UCF), elaborates on this theory and argues that the specific phenomenon of suicide terrorism is used to generate ‘*social noise*’ (Simonson, 2001) – the art of being conspicuously notable through noisy or controversial acts:

*“The suicide attack is a medium in and of itself, and it is conveyed not only to the immediate target but also to multiple audiences beyond the direct target. Another key objective of suicide terrorism as social noise is to create change in the audience’s attitudes or opinions”* (Matusitz, 2014).

The ability to potentially influence the opinions and views held by the target audience is imperative in order to comprehend why organizations are keen on employing suicide bombers – as a matter of fact, the phenomenon of suicide terrorism carries symbolic meaning of life and death. It contains a powerful paradox in the self-annihilation that is simultaneously regarded as life-giving to a community. Therefore, almost inevitably, particular focus by the media will be paid to the desired outcome of the attack. For instance, the anticipated effect might be to alter policies, to galvanize support or compassion, or to freeze the audience into inertia (ibid). In the hope of ensuring strong reactions, as well as widespread coverage, the terrorist organization becomes more prone to employing unorthodox methods.

## Female Suicide Bombers as Generators of ‘Social Noise’

It is therefore comprehensible that suicide terrorism, which operates on the “*oxygen of publicity*”, becomes particularly effective in an environment in which ‘*female terrorists*’ enjoy a significantly brighter spotlight than their male counterparts – while investigative reporting on male suicide bombers is generally extensive, coverage of female suicide bombers appears to result in more widespread media exposure (Witlox, 2012). Indeed, from a strategic perspective, a female suicide bomber tends to generate a greater response from society, both domestically and internationally. Attracting more media attention is an asset in and of itself to the organization, whose particular cause and grievances will almost automatically enjoy a greater exposure.

*“Rebel groups deliberately use personal distress to recruit women because theatrical acts of female suicide bombing with overtones of martyrdom and national liberation receive immense media coverage and widespread public attention”* (Knight and Narozhna, 2016).

Similarly, Claudet (2002) argues that “[s]uicide attacks are done for effect, and the more dramatic the effect, the stronger the message: thus a potential interest on the part of some groups in recruiting women”. While the question of why women suicide bombers receive a disproportionately large interest continues to prevail, the answer can at least partly be found in the dominance of deeply rooted traditional gender stereotypes. Irrespective of whatever social and political advances may have been made, women are still overwhelmingly regarded as the gentler sex, whose innate maternal nature renders them far less likely candidates for suicide bombers. The preconceived notion that women are “*life-givers*”, rather than “*life-takers*” is inherently undermined in the instance when women become human bombs. Hence, women’s participation in acts of carnage and devastating pain generates a mixture of surprise and repulsion, thereby elevating the level of public interest.

The manner in which terrorist organizations can abuse these traditional perceptions of women vary from one another. Tactically speaking, the perception of women as ‘*passive*’ in the context of militancy becomes useful in the execution of an attack. Women arouse less suspicion and are able to gain access to some areas more easily than their male colleagues since women have an element of invisibility (Bloom, 2005). Furthermore, by employing women as suicide bombers, the organization may be exploiting the modern cry for emancipation of women, since “*proving that women are equally eligible to die alongside men for a nationalist or a religious cause ostensibly indicates an equivalency of value*” (Schweitzer, 2006, p.10). The culture of female “*martyrdom*” is thereby carefully wrapped around a narrative of progressive gender outlooks and contributions to the feminist cause. As seen in the following section, this is exactly what the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam accomplished during their violent warfare against the Sri Lankan government forces during the civil war.

## Case Study: The LTTE's Black Tigers

Historically, suicide bombing first emerged as a tactic deployed by the LTTE when several terrorist groups were competing for leadership in the Tamil community (Bloom, 2005). The Black Tigers, the LTTE's special battalion for future "*martyrs*", were chiefly recruited because they were disciplined, skilled and battle tested. Incontestably, the modern legacy of the Black Tigers lies in them having perfected the art of suicide terrorism, with Joshua Roose, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Religion, Politics and Society at the Australian Catholic University contending that:

*"The LTTE are widely credited with mainstreaming the use of the suicide vest as a force multiplier. Not only did it allow for precise targeting, but also instilled an increased sense of horror and terror among the wider population that anyone – man or woman – might be the next bomber"* (Gunia, 2019).

Initially, the LTTE was slow to integrate women into the organization, so as to not offend the conservative Tamil culture (Gunawardena, 2006). In fact, evidence suggests that traditional gender roles were largely embraced whereby women were given supportive roles as nurses, administrators and caretakers. Gradually, however, the necessity for more recruits enabled the loosening of restrictions whereby the organization began to legitimize and maintain female suicide violence. Considering the time it initially took to select and train Black Tigers, female cadres may have been selected from the early stages of the adoption of suicide terrorism, around the beginning of 1990s. That particular decade would go on to witness a myriad of suicide attacks perpetrated by female LTTE cadres; For instance, in 1998, a female Black Tiger succeeded in killing one of Sri Lanka's top military commanders, Brigadier Larry Wijeyaratne; in 1999, they targeted the head of the terrorism investigate unit; and in 2000, at least 12 people were killed when a female Tamil Tiger detonated explosives strapped to her body outside the office of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike in Colombo. While the most notorious attack was most likely the successful assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991, another memorable – albeit repelling – attack took place in 2006, when a Black Tiger disguised as a pregnant woman penetrated the Army Headquarters, in an attempt to assassinate the Sri Lankan Army Commander Lt. General Sarath Fonseka. Although the sheer idea of using a pregnant woman in a suicide mission may have generated enough revulsion within the international audience to cause adverse effects on the image of the organization, the LTTE succeeded in creating just that which terrorist organizations aspire for; Amplified '*social noise*'.

The impact of the amount of attention that the international media devoted to the aforementioned attacks cannot be underestimated – until this day, scholars continue to speculate over the unprecedented phenomenon of female Black Tiger cadres. An aspect that has received particular consideration is the rhetoric deployed by the LTTE according to which one of the central missions of female suicide terrorism was the emancipation of Tamil women.

## “Freedom Birds” or Cogs in the Wheel?

From the onset, the LTTE propagated empowerment and the uplifting of female status by tying in emancipation and national liberation as synonymous. Self-declared feminist members of the LTTE frequently argued that feminism and equality for women were core ideas for the organization, as exemplified by the 1991 manifesto of the “*Freedom Birds*”:

*“Secure the right of self-determination of the people of Tamililam and establish an independent democratic state of Tamililam ... dismantling of the caste and dowry systems, equal opportunities in employment, dispensation to control their own lives, legal protection against sexual harassment, rape and domestic violence”* (De Mel, 2001, p.208).

Indeed, it has been suggested that most women who joined the LTTE did so out of a drive for liberation from traditional Hindu/Tamil cultural restrictions, in other words, female emancipation. This was cited as the reason female LTTE cadres are referred to as “*Freedom Birds*”. In the LTTE, leaders promised that women participating in such operations would pave the way for other Tamil women to enjoy an equal status and to be emancipated. Although women were already integrated into the army, they did not earn commanding positions, and hence the promise – ultimately empty – of gender advancement for their female colleagues if they volunteered for suicide operations.

By redeeming – if not glorifying – the aberration of a female suicide bomber, the LTTE accomplished two things; It erroneously promised a glimpse of liberation from traditional gender roles for Tamil women willing to sacrifice themselves for the “*greater good*”. While these promises might have been void, the organization almost succeeded in convincing the outside world that, in fact, aspirations of gender equality were the ultimate objective of its female suicide missions. To the outside world, and especially the West, these narratives appear to have been particularly effective – after all, there is a reason to why a significant amount of literature still refers the LTTE as an egalitarian organization. The image of a woman deciding to become a human bomb out of her own willingness, in her fight to promote gender equality, conveys the erroneous message of an organization that takes brutal steps in its cry for attaining equality between the sexes.

Nevertheless, a deeper glance reveals that the LTTE largely prioritized the tactical advantage of female suicide terrorism. The fact that women were frequently employed in attacks of “*high value*” targets, including politicians and military officers, underscores the method of using women as a result of their ability to gain better access to certain areas. As a matter of fact, notions such as “*Freedom Birds*” were merely a political and propaganda ploy of the LTTE than an instrument promoting empowerment and emancipation of women (Gunawardena, 2006). Rather, some scholars argue that the LTTE indoctrinated Tamil women with ideas of abstinence, self—sacrifice, martyrdom and death (Wang, 2011). The aforementioned facts therefore reveal that female emancipation was in fact subordinate to the LTTE’s agenda of liberating Tamil Eelam. Glorifying “*martyrdom*” and disguising death with notions of emancipation and empowerment in order to generate ‘*social noise*’ in the international audience, is to the say the least, abominable.

## Conclusion

Suicide terrorism remains a complex occurrence to which scholars continue to try to find adequate theoretical explanations. What is clear, however, is that the phenomenon of women partaking in such acts is on the rise, as exemplified in the case of Boko Haram in Nigeria. Cognizant of the growing trend of female suicide terrorism in the contemporary era, a proactive approach is needed in order to reverse the phenomenon. A central element of this approach is not only acknowledging the tactical advantages of exploiting women in suicide missions, such as the female *"invisibility"*, but also the manner in which terrorist organizations exploit women in order to gain widespread media attention. Women who kill or threaten to kill, are still *"hot news"* – their media shock value is significantly higher than that of men. Moreover, public perceptions of the level of terrorism are partly determined by the level of media coverage. Yet, despite the death and devastation caused by many of the female cadres, it appears that the international audience has remained surprisingly sympathetic vis-à-vis these *"feminist martyrs"*. People around the world have endeavored to comprehend the motivations underlying such acts of barbarism, often contending that the reasons must have been valid enough considering that *'female creatures are programmed to breed and sustain life'*.

The mass utilization of females presents a great challenge to traditionalist ideas about gender roles in political violence, thereby prompting increased interest in the phenomenon, which in turn might generate the kind of *'social noise'* pursued by terrorist organizations. But more alarmingly – as exemplified by the LTTE – this may be done under the false pretext of emancipation and empowerment of women. While some find it tempting to portray female suicide terrorism perpetrated by the LTTE as an advancement for feminism, women's rights and equality, the narratives employed by the organization are highly misleading, and in fact, false. Implementing women as suicide bombers was chiefly carried out as a result of strategic and tactical necessity. This is widely exemplified by the fact that out of 23 suicide attacks conducted by LTTE that aimed for high-value targets – including politicians and top-ranking army officials – and security establishments across the nation, 15 were perpetrated by female Black Tiger cadres (Narozhna and Knight, 2016).

The international audience would do well in acknowledging that perpetrators of violence, especially in instances of suicide terrorism, should not be treated more leniently based on their sex. Understanding that there are far more various and effective ways than killing oneself in order to promote the emancipation and empowerment of women is crucial in order to begin tackling the phenomenon of female suicide terrorism.

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