**Jihadi Brides and Female Volunteers: Reading the Islamic State’s War to See Gender and Agency in Conflict Dynamics**[[1]](#footnote-1)

Almost thirty years ago, Cynthia Enloe (1989) asked the simple question ‘where are the women?’ when looking both at global politics and at International Relations (IR) research. At the time, Enloe was recognizing *both* women’s literal invisibility and the (related) neglect of the places and positions where women were likely to be. As Enloe (1989, 3) lamented: “rare is the professional commentator on international politics who takes women’s experiences seriously” in a world where “only men, not women or children, have been imagined capable of the sort of public decisiveness international politics is presumed to require.”

If we are to look at contemporary news stories, policy analysis, and even scholarly research foci, it appears to be no longer necessary to ask where women are.[[2]](#footnote-2) In 2015, one could barely read or listen to the news without regular mention of women migrating to, participating in, fighting against, or being victimized by the Islamic State (IS).[[3]](#footnote-3) Many analyses of IS and its opponents center around tales of women. For example, *Fox News* reported:

The second class of the all-female Syriac Christians Brigade proudly took its place earlier this month on the front lines of the front lines in the fight against ISIS, whose own increasing use of women as suicide bombers offers as sharp contrast between the two sides’ visions (McKay 2016).

The story goes on to characterize anti-IS women as “fighting to protect their families” and IS as using *their* women for a “bleak and barbarous cause” (McKay 2016). There are two important parts of this story for thinking about gender, war, and conflict. First, women are no longer invisible in *all* the coverage of global politics – quite the contrary in this case, where women are central. Second, the characterization of the women who are seen as with ‘the good guys’ is very different than the characterization of the women who are seen as with ‘the bad guys.’ The differences in those characterizations extend beyond coverage markers that signify friend and enemy – they also say something about women’s capabilities and positionalities in war and conflict.

This article analyzes the *hypervisibility* of women in the conflict in Syria and Iraq, looking for lessons about sex, gender, and conflict. The first section discusses visibility, sex, gender, and conflict theoretically. The article then turns to discourse analysis of the representation of women in a sample of news stories. It finds that agency is removed from both female victims and female IS partisans, while it is exaggerated in women who combat IS. This corresponds with emphasis on different gendered traits for differently positioned women. After tracing these gendered representations, the article applies theories of gender and conflict to understand how women have become central to the fighting *and coverage* of the conflict in Syria and Iraq.  It concludes that paying attention *both* to the empirical presence of women and to the co-constitution of gender, war, and conflict augment understanding of this war, and across conflicts.

**Gender, War, Conflict, and Visibility**

Cynthia Enloe’s request to make women *visible* is rooted in the argument that women play a wide variety of roles in wars and conflicts. Women have advocated for peace in times of conflict (e.g., Confortini 2012; Harris and King 1989). Women suffered disproportionate civilian losses in most conflicts (Sjoberg and Peet 2011; Hynes 2004). Recognizing these roles, however, does not disrupt “inherited perceptions of women as maternal, emotional, and peace-loving” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 1). Jean Elshtain (1985) argued that war theorists and war practitioners cast women as the ‘beautiful souls’ of war – innocent of the cause of war and uninvolved in the fighting, yet in need of protection provided by soldiers. ‘Beautiful soul’ women are victims in need of protection, and therefore by definition neither attackers nor protectors (Elshtain 1985; Young 2003; Sjoberg 2006). Even feminist work sometimes unwittingly associates women, femininity, and peace, characterizing women as victims of ‘masculine violence’ in global politics.

Enloe knew, though, that women also participate in and perpetrate political violence. Though this has been true throughout history (e.g., Sjoberg and Gentry 2007), for a long time, women’s active involvement in violence was downplayed or ignored in media outlets, by policymakers, and in scholarship. Scholars looking for women in political violence found female perpetrators either totally ignored or sensationalized (making women’s violence appear singular, abnormal, and outside of the capacity of normal women) (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; 2008; MacKenzie 2009; Parashar 2011; McEvoy 2009). Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry (2007; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015) have argued that the sensationalism fit into three standard narratives: the mother narratives, emphasizing that maternal instincts of protection and/or vengeance cause women’s violence; the monster narratives, suggesting that psychologically disturbed women are the most violent of people; and the whore narratives, suggesting that women’s violence and women’s sexual dysfunction (particularly hypersexuality) are paired. Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) urged attention to the fact that that female participants in war and conflict, like male participants, are agents with choices, even within very gendered social structures. Ahall (2012) and Auchter (2012) pushed the argument further – problematizing the gendered aspects of the very idea of political agency.

This study builds on that work. It looks at the narratives around the hypervisible women in, of, and around IS, asking to whom agency is attributed, and what that attribution of agency says about what those women are, and what IS is. Calling women around IS *hypervisible* means that they are an object of irregular gaze or fascination. In some ways, hypervisibility is the opposite of invisibility – hypervisible subjects receive disproportionately high attention while invisible subjects receive disproportionately low attention. In other ways, hypervisibility has some of the same effect of invisibility – distorting the subject.

This article analyzes how characterizations of (hypervisible) women in, around, and opposed to IS line up with previous findings about (invisible) women in political violence. If this conflict mirrors others, we would expect silence or sensationalism around women combatants and gender-stereotypical language around female victims. Relatedly, we would expect the stories around both female combatants and female victims to de-emphasize agency and emphasize manipulation and/or helplessness.

**Reading Women in and around IS**

An informal survey of stories of women in, around, victimized by, and opposing IS suggests that these expectations are being met. Many stories can be found where female victims are characterized as helpless and in need of protection facing terrible abuse from IS. A CBS (2016) report echoes many others in that vein:

ISIS is believed to currently be holding approximately 3,500 people captive as slaves. “Those being held are predominantly women and children and come primarily from the Yezidi community . . .” said the report.

News.com.au (2015) reports that “Islamic State theologians” have ruled “on when ‘owners’ of women enslaved by the extremist group can have sex with them” following a “sickening list of 27 tips for raping . . . sex slaves.”

Also, many accounts of women who have joined IS frame them as manipulated, controlled, or otherwise lacking choices. A recent *Telegraph* article on a British female ‘jihadi bride’ named Khadija (born Grace Dare) quoted her father as saying “she has been brainwashed” and discussed at length her intellectual capacity to choose to join IS, which is characterized as ‘preying’ on British girls (Shute 2016). A News.com.au (2016) story about the deaths of Austrian teenagers Samra Kesinovic and Sabina Selimovic describes “IS poster girls who ran away to join Islamists” but who lost control of their lives immediately. It details that “when they joined up with the group, the teenagers were forced to marry IS fighters and were snapped in burqas” then treated as a “sexual present for new fighters” (News.com.au 2016). The story characterized these (and by extension other) girls as held against their will: “. . . she wanted to leave, but couldn’t” (News.com.au 2016). Piling on, a *New York Post* editorial goes further, blaming IS for the girls’ migration, as they were “just two of dozens of European girls seduced into ISIS’ clutches, victims of the terrorists’ skill in selling their message” (Post Editorial Board 2015).

At first glance, these texts seem to characterize both female victims of IS and female *members* ofIS as lacking agency. Female victims cannot escape and change their circumstances, while female members are themselves victims, manipulated by the evil IS. In fact, many of the news stories of female victims contain gender-stereotypical assumptions about women’s helplessness, even as those victims have taken part in fighting (see, e.g., discussion in Sjoberg 2010). Many of the news stories about female fighters, jihadi brides, or female members of IS more broadly tell stories of women that fit well with the mother, monster, and whore narratives – effectively removing choice from female perpetrators, instead treating them as victims of both IS and flaws in their own femininity.

These findings are, of course, as expected. But an informal survey of stories about women and IS finds different stories told of different women as well. There are a number of stories not about the women who join or are victimized by IS, but about the women who fight *against* IS. These stories about women combatants, however, do *not* minimize their agency or treat them as manipulated. The *Fox News* story from above is an exemplar (McKay 2016). It treats female combatants *against* ISIS both positively and agentially, emphasizing their choice to fight, and connoting it as honorable. A *Guardian* editorial praises female fighters in the Kurdish Peshmerga: “to the delight of true feminists everywhere, Kurdish women fight in the Peshmerga. In Iraq, an Isis misogynist will no find 72 virgins but armed and exceptionally dangerous women” (Cohen 2016). An *American Prospect* article provides instructions on “how to defeat ISIS” that include empowering Kurdish female fighters (Linetsky 2015). An Associated Press story about Ivana Hoffman, a German woman who died fighting ISIS with the Kurdish YPG (People’s Protection Units), discusses her choice to fight and die *as a choice*, and as a noble one (Lucas 2015).

Rarely has media coverage of women fighting been positive or agential; such coverage is even rarer when those women fight for non-state groups.[[4]](#footnote-4) Stories that attribute agency to women who fight against IS have not abandoned gender-stereotypical assumptions, but they have packaged them very differently. It has presented an image of female fighters making the brave choice to defend something good. If this third image of women fighting *against* IS is more than simply anecdotal, then existing theorization on how women who engage in violence are understood, presented, and represented needs to be more complicated than it has been. The argument in the literature that politically violent women are *always* slighted or sensationalized negatively would need to be augmented to understand *when* politically violent women are *praised*, and why. Before thinking about those theoretical implications, though, it is important to do more systematic analysis of the women in, around, and opposed to IS, and the images presented of them in media, scholarly, and policy work.

Characterizations of Women In, Around, and Against IS

In looking at how the women in, around, and against IS are characterized, this study is not directly interested in how *true* those characterizations are. It is not the primary purpose of this article to determine how many women are positioned as members of IS, victims of IS, or fighters opposing IS, or how each woman came to be positioned where she is. The absolute truth of news stories about women in/around IS would be hard to discern given the limited information coming out of the area (see Sjoberg and Wood 2015).

Instead, this project evaluates how women in and around IS are described relative to each other, and relative to traits associated with femininity. The informal survey of top news stories about women in and around IS above identified three types of accounts: accounts of manipulated and agency-less women who were members of IS without having legitimately chosen to join; accounts of helpless female victims; and accounts of brave and honorable women battling IS. This section explores whether those characterizations actually dominate news accounts of the women in, around, and against IS, and looks more closely at the elements of those characterizations.

To do so, I explore the predication of women in stories in, around, or against IS. Predication is “labelling social actors more or less positively or negatively, deprecatorily or appreciatively” with “stereotypical, evaluative attributions of negative and positive traits” and “implicit and explicit predicates” (Wodak 2001, 73). Predications, then, are descriptions, metaphor, similes, and sentence/voice structures which engage in the assignment of traits to those who are discussed (Wodak 2001, 73-74). Predications allocate traits to, or make implications about, subjects in sentences. For example, in the sentence “women are helpless,” the predication “helpless” modifies the subject “women,” attributing helplessness to women. Most predications are more grammatically complicated, but have similar attributive results. By looking at those attributions, we can explore the content of descriptions systematically.

This article analyzes predications about women in, around, and against IS in two newspapers, one in the US (the *New York Times*) and one in Great Britain (*The Times*). This brought the sample size of articles with sex-specific descriptions of women in, around, and against IS from an estimated 30 million to a manageable 245. I chose the two newspapers on a combination of popular circulation (the *New York Times* is the most-read newspaper in the US, and the *Times* is the fourth most-read newspaper in Britain), time and subject-searchability. I chose one newspaper from the US and one from the UK in order to be able to compare the framings in each of them. I realize that choices of media outlets from outside ‘the West’ or more from the prospective of IS partisans would have produced different contrasts, and different framings. The point of this piece is *not* to argue that the framings found are generalizable or overall dominant; different choices would have needed to be made. But those choices would not have gained as much leverage on the questions that this piece has prioritized: about whether or not particular, Western framings of women around *this war* correspond with previous framings in similar outlets observed in other studies. Accordingly, my search language, “women and ISIS,” is intended to minimize sensationalism. While a search like “jihadi brides” might have brought more results that conformed to the expectation with gender-stereotypical language than a sample brought by using less sensationalistic wording, I was looking for the ‘hard case’ – if these stories were where they were least likely to be. I limited the search to calendar-year 2015.

The initial search found 266 articles in the *New York Times* and 451 in *The Times.* Going through those articles for sex-specific discussions of women (rather than use of the phrase ‘men and women,’ incidental use of the word women in links on the page, or discussion of women who are not around IS) narrowed it to 96 articles in the *New York Times* and 145 in *The Times.* I then coded each article for whether it discussed women victimized by IS, women *in* IS, or women fighting against IS. An article could be about more than one of those sorts of women. The majority of articles addressed female victims, followed by female members of IS, then women fighting against IS (see table 1).

**Table 1. Distribution of Categories of Women Discussed**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Women IS Victims | Women IS Members | Women Fighting Against IS |
| *New York Times*\* | 64 (66%) | 26 (27%) | 10 (11%) |
| *The Times* | 96 (66%) | 55 (38%) | 10 (7%) |

\*two *New York Times* article had sex-specific references not categorizable above

After establishing these three categories, I recorded the predications of women in the stories. In the stories about victims, the following simple predications were read as ones that fit with the ‘beautiful soul’ agentless picture of female victims: innocence, youth, need for protection, and association with children or the elderly. The following complex predications were also read as fitting with that narrative: the violation of women being a primary reason the perpetrator is cast as evil, the description of the perpetrator *by* what s/he does to women, commodification, praise to men who take care of abused women, and shaming for sex-specific violations because of how ‘they’ treat ‘their’ women. The *same* simple and complex predications were read as agency-denying for female members of IS, with additions of simple predications of lure, seduction, runaway, manipulation, fantasy, insanity, and kidnapping and the complex predications of those who migrated voluntarily and were kept involuntarily. Simple predications of bravery, decision-making power, authority, and military leadership are treated as fitting with the agential narrative of women who fight *against* IS, along with complex predications of opponent superiority to IS being attributable to the comparative situation of women. Articles with no predication (simply the sex-specific mention of women) are coded as such, and articles with counter-narratives (discussing the agency of women IS members, or the evil of women fighting against IS, for example) are coded as such.

These three images of women in, around, and against IS, then, are present in the overwhelming majority of articles in the sample (see table 2). Stories about female victims discuss “the heartless killing of innocent individuals, especially women” (Coghlan 2015). The articles predicate the women as apolitical and helpless facing abuse. Stories about female members of IS emphasize their youth (e.g., Shane 2015) and characterize them as wooed (Ali 2015), vulnerable (Simpson 2015), lured (Hamilton 2015), and now begging for rescue (Jaber 2015b). The articles predicate women members of IS as susceptible to manipulation in joining, and controlled and in need of rescue while members. Stories about women fighting against IS emphasize their bravery (Amoore 2015) and discuss how being attacked by women causes IS humiliation (Jaber 2015b; Bannerman 2015). This trope’s relative infrequency correlates with the relative infrequency of discussion of IS’ non-Western opponents more generally. The remainder of this article argues that those narratives say something about how gender, war, and conflict – in Iraq/Syria and elsewhere – are related.

**Table 2. Narrative Frequency in Discussions of Women In, Around, and Against IS**

*New York Times*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Predications Found | No Predication | Counternarrative |
| Victim/Beautiful Souls | 52/64 (81%) | 12 (19%) | 0 (0%) |
| Members/Lack Agency | 17/26 (65%) | 7 (27%) | 2 (8%) |
| Opponents/Agents | 8/10 (80%) | 1 (10%) | 1 (10%) |

*The Times*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Predications Found | No Predication | Counternarrative |
| Victim/Beautiful Souls | 73/96 (76%) | 23 (24%) | 0 (0%) |
| Members/Lack Agency | 40/55 (72%) | 13 (24%) | 2 (3%) |
| Opponents/Agents | 7/10 (70%) | 2 (20%) | 1 (10%) |

*Total*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Predications Found | No Predication | Counternarrative |
| Victim/Beautiful Souls | 127/159 (80%) | 32 (20%) | 0 (0%) |
| Members/Lack Agency | 65/83 (78%) | 14 (17%) | 4 (5%) |
| Opponents/Agents | 15/20 (75%) | 3 (15%) | 2 (10%) |

**Thinking about Gender, Conflict, and Women in and around IS**

Feminist theorizing about gender, war, and conflict that reflects on the co-constitution of sex, gender, and conflict can help think about what these predications mean. For example, In characterizations of female members of IS as helpless, manipulated, and tricked, one can find arguments about what women are *and* connotations about the group alleged to have manipulated the women. One clear observation is that these accounts support the understanding that women are, as stereotypically expected, non-violent and apolitical. Women would not join a radical organization *because* of its radical politics – instead, their motivations must be both personal and misguided. Therefore, women who have joined IS are framed as manipulated by recruiters, and susceptible to that manipulation. This connotation is reinforced by stories about how men lure women into IS through a combination of romance, religious teachings, and discussions of expectations of appropriate femininity. This leads to another connotation of what women are: *feminine.* Women’s fit with traditional(ized) femininity is overdetermined in these narratives – women are not only apolitical, non-violent, and submissive, but easily lured by things ‘women want’ like clothes or household goods. This suggest that women’s femininity is a *way in* to manipulating them.

The connotation of female members of IS as passive, manipulated, and tricked says as much about those accused of the trickery as it does the trickery’s imputed victims. Stories, especially from the West, of the ‘luring’ of women by IS frame those doing the luring as predators. If IS has female members, and if those female members *by definition* did not have a full understanding of their choice to join, then there is by definition a male predator who misled the women and robbed them of their (apolitical) innocence. In Western coverage, there is often the additional predication of IS as barbarians, attracting ‘good’ women from the ‘civilized’ West – reminiscent of the clash of civilizations logic (Huntington 1996). This logic labels as uncivilized those who would manipulate women *away* from civilization to their barbarian causes.

These connotations about IS are even stronger in the stories about IS’ treatment of female civilians. Recently, a number of scholars (e.g., Hudson et al 2009; 2012) have suggested that states that treat their women better are less violent, and states that have poor records on women’s rights are more likely to be aggressive. This connotation is not only in the academic literature; George W. Bush (2002), in a speech discussing his motivation for invading Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, suggested that “violence against women is always and everywhere wrong” and that it was America’s responsibility to “call evil by its name.” Many of the stories of the victimization of female civilians by IS carry these connotations – that how it treats women reveals IS as evil, and that only the evil *could* treat their women in those ways.

The women who are being treated poorly are described in ways that have implications for what men and women are as well. These women are innocent of the conflict, yet at risk because of it, and therefore need protection (Elshtain 1985). Each characterization of women as peaceful and needing protection implies that there is a man or men responsible for providing the protection they. The man or men who ought to provide protection are then set up as opposite of the man or men who are seen as a threat to the ‘beautiful soul’ women. In other words, ‘we’ are the ‘enemies’ of IS because ‘they’ threaten women and ‘we’ need to protect them. This relationship, which Gatayri Spivak (1988) calls “white men saving brown women from brown men,” can be seen, for example, in the George W. Bush speech mentioned above, where America’s responsibility to “call evil by its name” directly comes from the evil that the potential enemy does to women. If the female victims of IS are helpless in the face of the barbarism of male perpetrators of violence, those discourses create a third category of male protectors tasked with saving women from that abuse.

Still, as discussed above, the images of women in the accounts of their relationship with IS are not limited to characterizations of women as without agency either in their membership in a violent political organization or in their victimization by that organization. Instead, there are stories of women bravely combatting the injustices perpetrated by IS. These stories emphasize women’s agency, their resourcefulness, their bravery, and their defiance of inherited expectations of women’s limitations in conflict. They characterize female fighters *against* IS as inherently honorable, where women’s rebel violence against an unjust cause is “defying deeply traditional, male dominated social norms” (Wong 2011). These characterizations of women as brave and honorable fighters are not necessarily *degendered* or gender-neutral – they feature very centrally the sex of, and gender-based characteristics of, the women that they are discussing. Language of maternalism (Wong 2011), lady-like fighting (Sealey 2012), and how out of character women’s violence is (Hammer 2011) recurs across these stories. The accounts also *normalize* men’s roles as protectors and fighters while they frame women’s playing those same roles as exceptional. This has two main implications. First, it suggests that any cause women fight *for* is so dire that *even the women* need to fight. In other words, the cause is *so important* that the society *needs* women to move outside of their traditional and natural gender roles to bravely join the fight. Second, it suggests that conflict brings about disorder in traditional gender roles, where women play roles otherwise reserved for men.

Across all three of these gendered framings, there is a relationship between gender, agency, and political legitimacy. IS’ political illegitmacy is identifiable in their willingness to manipulate women into joining, since women cannot make that choice. Relatedly, women’s joining IS is *not* a legitimate demonstration of political agency, given women could not or would not engage the political cause of IS intentionally. IS’ abuse of female civilian victims is connoted as an act of political illegitimacy, where IS is framed as violating innocent, pure, helpless women who cannot and will not fight back. Brave women breaking out of traditional femininity and exercising political agency to combat IS signifies the political legitimacy of their cause. Relatedly, a normatively valuable and urgent cause justifies women transgressing traditional gender norms. The level of agency attributed to women can be read as indicating how the belligerents are understood, and the relationships between belligerents can predict some of the readings of gender roles and gender expectations.

Some might ask about the importance of these gendered framings of women, IS, and IS’ opponents, if it is to be assumed that the basic details of the stories are accurate portrayals. I argue that women themselves *and* how they are portrayed are not only a part of the stories of the war around IS, but also weapons in the war. Stories of the ways that IS preys on women in recruiting them to join the organization are weapons against IS; against transgressions of the associations between women, femininity, and peacefulness; and against the ideologies for which IS is understood to stand. Stories of the ways that IS victimizes civilian women are weapons used to show the inhumanity of IS through its willingness to violate women; to identify IS as on the wrong side of international humanitarian law; to build a coalition of (actual or potential) protectors for the victimized women; and to suggest the appeal of settled, traditional notions of gender roles. Stories of the ways that women bravely rise above traditional femininity for the cause of fighting against IS are weapons to mobilize IS’ opponents; to emphasize the cause’s importance and purity. These framings are not just stories about the conflict but *parts of* the conflict. As Nancy Huston (1983) argued, plots of war narratives include “the good guys” fighting “the bad guys” for valorous reasons and, after overcoming incredible odds, winning “the good fight.” The characterizations of women’s roles in, around, and against IS set the terms of who “the good guys” and “the bad guys” are, as well as the stakes of victory and the support that each side has.

These war narratives, however, do not only play a role in understandings of or distributions of resources in the war and/or conflict. They also matter in *what* the conflict is, and *who* participates in it. As feminist scholar Annick Wibben (2011, 39) explains, “a security narrative orders social relations, it positions people, and it has effects on life and death” making the telling of war stories “profoundly political,” where gendered security narratives are “a primary way that we make sense of the world around us.” The comparison of IS and its Western/American critics can be understood as one between “*that which states defend –* femininity, purity, and their capacities as masculine protectors; … *that which states must be to defend* … tough, protecting, militaristic” and those whom they must defend *against*, the bad guys(Sjoberg 2013, 145). In the conflict around IS, understandings of what women are have been wielded in descriptions of what IS is and why it is seen as evil by its opponents. Expectations of what women are and what they do are, in turn, differentiated on the basis of different positions within the conflict.

**Relating Gender, War, and Conflict**

Feminist theorizing suggests that there are broader lessons to be learned for theorizing the relationship between gender, war, and conflict. The remainder of this article will focus on two: that it remains important to pay attention to the empirical presence of women, and that there is theoretical leverage to be gained from understanding the co-constitution of gender, war, and conflict.

First, paying attention to where women are still matters. Even though women are more visible than they were decades ago when Cynthia Enloe had to reveal their invisibility, the gaze on women now is nowhere near gender-neutral. Sometimes, women remain invisible. Where women receive attention, sometimes (like around IS), that attention rises to the level of *hypervisibility* and sensationalism. Attention directed at women in conflict is frequently gendered, where the gender stereotypes litter stories told about those women and their political contexts. In this sense, data about what women do in war and conflict is useful, whether it is data about women in militaries (e.g., Goldstein 2001; Cohen 2013), in terrorism (e.g., O’Rourke 2009; Dalton and Asal 2011), in government (e.g., Krook and O’Brien 2012; Croco and Gartner 2014), or participating in or victimized by war and conflict (e.g., Nordas and Rustad 2013; Drury and Peksen 2014).

At the same time, data about where women are alone explains very little about what’s going on in global politics. Seeing that women join IS, are captives and victims of IS, and fight against IS is empirically important, but the meaning of their presence is not straightforward. Some scholars who collect data about where women are make *gender essentialist* assumptions about how men and women differ to impute meaning to the data. For example, if a research project compares the likelihood that male or female leaders will start wars, it can have two distinct paths to meaning. One path is the assumption that women are different than men – that women are naturally feminine and men are naturally masculine – and that any empirical finding of behavioral difference stems from these natural differences. Another path is reading expectations of masculinity and expectations of femininity as social behavior expectations – where behavioral differences between men and women can and should be attributed to the social power of gender-role expectations, and the sex-differential distribution of resources and position that come from the dominance of gender-based expectations in global social and political life. In other words, if men and women behave differently, this reading suggests that it’s not because they *are* different but because they are positioned differently socially.

This social reading matters because it changes *what it means* to look for women. Looking for women in global politics understanding that the idea of a ‘woman’ is a social construct (in Laura Shepherd’s [2010] words, “gender is a noun, a verb, and a logic”) means looking not only for women but for femininity, and for the ways that gender is used to describe and position people, places, and events in conflicts. Stories of women in, around, and against IS *do* provide leverage on the question of where women are. They show us that women are partisans of IS, victims, and opponents. But the ways that those women are seen and discussed also show how gender dynamics operate in positioning women and reading their positions. Gender-based assumptions and expectations are everywhere in the actual positions of those women: IS has expectations of *women as women*, both female members (who are state-builders by being home-makers and supporters) and female captives or non-believers (whose abuse is sex-specific) (Sjoberg and Wood 2015). IS’ opponents have clear expectations of *women as women* as well – innocent, protected, not violated, not manipulated, not taken advantage of, and fought *for.* These gender-based expectations do not only affect where women are, positionally, but also how their locations and experiences are read and understood.

This leads to the second implication of exploring portrayals of women in IS – the utility of understanding gender as a part of how war and conflicts are fought. While there is not space here to fully discuss a theory of the co-constitution of gender and war, it is possible to theorize the portrayals of women in, around, and against IS in the terms of feminist war theorizing. If we take as evidenced in the body of this article that there *are* women in/around IS, and that those women’s hypervisibility in the media carries with it assumptions *both* about women and about war, it is useful to ask how assumptions about women and assumptions about war might be linked.

To think about this, feminist theorizing supplies the ideas of gendered organizations (Acker 1990) and gender orders (Sjoberg 2014). I argue that the gendered security narratives (in Wibben’s [2011] terms) about women in, around, and against IS are maps of gender orders, much like the gendered security narratives about where women are in war and conflict globally.

By “gender order,” I mean social organizations and hierarchies based on association with values linked to masculinities and femininities that structure gendered social and political relations. What the stories that deny women’s agency in politically violent choices or make women unidimensional in their victimization *and* stories that celebrate women’s (unusual) participation in brave fighting against evil *share* is a notion that some baseline of normal gender relations *exists* and is altered by conflict. This baseline normal gender order is what men *as men* and women *as women* are expected to do in times of peace. Different social contexts at different times and in different places in global politics have different baseline gender orders, but they all have *a* baseline gender order – an expectation of where men are and where women are.

Those expectations change during conflict. Whether it is expecting women to work in factory jobs male soldiers had left (e.g., Braybon 2012), turning a blind eye to sexually abusive relationships for soldier morale (e.g., Moon 1997), or making exceptions to traditional femininity to ‘let’ women fight (e.g., Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; MacKenzie 2012), what is expected of and around women changes in conflict. Though expectations change, the pinning of expectations to sex and gender does not. Therefore, as a foil to normal gender order, there is conflict gender *disorder* – that is, a change or flux in expected gender roles related to the conflict. There is, with gender *disorder*, an assumption that the end of conflict and general disorder will remedy the gender disorder as well. Thus, the disordering of normal gender relations is a response to (and therefore a signification of) conflict, and the restoration of gender order is a response to (and therefore a signification of) peace. Relatedly, social and political organizations that can claim the stability and moral defensibility of their gender orders (as George W. Bush did above) can also claim political order and political superiority while criticizing the instability and moral inferiority of their opponents’ disordered gender roles and expectations. In other words, how gender roles are allocated tells us something about the organization in which they are allocated. But, perhaps more importantly, how others read the allocation of gender roles in a given organization tells us both about how those others understand the organization in question and how they understand themselves relative to that organization.

In the case of IS, where women are in it and how women are treated is crucially important. But understanding what that means both to IS and to its opponents requires an in-depth gender analysis of what is expected of people understood to be men and women, and how those expectations are wielded to order relations both inside and with IS. Gender is at the core of not only fighting IS’ war (as women fight on both sides, and are many of the victims of the war), but also of *telling* IS’ war (as how women are treated has become stand-in language for understanding the ‘good guys’ and the ‘bad guys’). Whether women are IS’ ‘jihadi brides’ or its opponents ‘volunteers,’ their position *as women* is constitutive of the conflict in important ways. As such, it is crucial to understand the war in Iraq/Syria (with all conflict) as gendered, whether women are invisible or hypervisible.

These sorts of insights can be more broadly useful in conflict studies. For example, Thomas and Wood’s article in this issue, “The Social Origins of Female Combatants,” finds that women are more likely to participate in political violence in places and on behalf of groups where women *also* have more social and political rights.. Feminist narrative analysis suggests that this may be causal, but it may also be significatory: the treatment of women can be instrumentalized as a measure of the superiority of a group over its opponents (e.g., Sjoberg 2013). Chu and Braithwaite’s article in this issue, “The Effect of Sexual Violence on Negotiated Outcomes in Civil Conflicts,” finds that the prevalence of wartime sexual violence increases the likelihood that governments negotiate settlements to civil conflicts. I would argue that their analysis would benefit from thinking about the *gendered* messages that conflict sexual violence communicates (e.g., Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013), in addition to the general messages of desperation that come with intentional civilian victimization (e.g., Downes 2006). Such an analysis might suggest that the *emasculation* of the enemy through the feminization of its women signifies a particular sort of desperation – one closely rooted to actor identity. This might help to explain some of Chu and Braithwaite’s mixed results – while similar levels of sexual violence might show that a conflict is at a stage ripe for settlement, they may *also* show alienation and animosity that make such settlements difficult.

Tir and Bailey’s article in this issue, “Painting too ‘Rosie’ a Picture: The Impact of External Threat on Women’s Economic Welfare,” finds that women suffer economically in states facing territorial threats. Feminist scholars (e.g., Enloe 1989; Moon 1997; Cohn 2012) have long argued that gendered political economies change with changes in expected gender norms in conflict. Tir and Bailey’s empirical evidence for this supposition could be paired with feminist theorizing *both* to explore gendered, militarized political economies and to engage with my supposition above that states pair *gender order* with *political order* in times of political uncertainty. Huber and Karim’s article in this issue, “The Internationalization of Security Sector Reform in Post-Conflict Countries,” explores the relationship between gender-balancing Security Sector Reform (SSR) and peacekeeping missions, finding that states where there have been peacekeeping missions are more likely to have gender-balancing SSR measures. Feminist theorizing might ask what genders are being balanced and how the genders being balanced are read – are the balancing measures for men and women? What is assumed about each in order to make the policies make sense? Is there a place for queer people or other gender minorities in the balancing measures? Megan MacKenzie (2009; 2012) demonstrates that sex-segregated assumptions about women in post-conflict processes can sometimes have negative effects *both* for conflict resolution *and* for women – is this something that could be detected in Huber and Karim’s data and analysis? Or would it remain invisible?

Similar questions can be asked of Hagland and Richard’s article in this issue, “Enforcement of Sexual Violence Law in Post-Conflict Civil Societies,” in its analysis of the effectiveness of strong legal frameworks in combatting sexual violence post-conflict. What are the grounds for assuming conflict sexual violence is something biological *men* do to biological *women*? What about the gendered nature of conflict sexual violence is missed when that assumption is made (e.g., Sjoberg 2016)? What is it about this particular form of *gendered* violence that suggests it will interact with law differently than other forms of violence? As I mentioned at the outset of this article, a key question that feminist analysis asks is what assumptions about sex, gender, race, class, and sexuality are *necessary* to make particular political situations *possible*, and what assumptions about those things are *necessary* to perform certain forms of analysis? Many pieces of research on sex and gender in conflict (in this special issue and elsewhere) assume that gender is something discernable (and therefore calculable). I have made a (necessarily short and incomplete) case that different gender tropes are influential in different contexts, and understanding their nuances is key to understanding the particular political situation in which they are situated. In IS’ war, gender is not influential in just one direction or in just one way – it has varied, and multiple, effects. A view of sex and gender that understands this – asking not only where women are but where gender is – has a lot to say about conflict, both for scholars (who could analyze these issues with more complexities) and for policy makers (who might see mixed results without understanding the multi-dimensional impacts of gender).

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1. The dataset used to produce this article can be accessed via a supplementary data file hosted on Sage's CMPS website. The author objects to the application of DA-RT and to DA-RT compliance, but has complied with CMPS rules here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is not to discount the places women remain invisible – just to say that their visibility has increased significantly. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In the midst of debate calling the group ISIS/ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/the Levant), IS (the Islamic State), or Daesh, I chose IS consistent with the group’s self-identification. See discussion in Bennett (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.g., Sjoberg (2007) and Enloe (2010) for discussion of women in state militaries. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)