

Chapter 9
Radical or Righteous?
Using Gender to Shape Public Perceptions
of Political Violence

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When describing her sympathies during the 1980s civil war, an elderly woman from rural El Salvador ascribed near deity-like qualities to the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN):

Yes, (I was) with the guerrillas, because they are the ones who defended us. Because without them, who knows, maybe we would have left fleeing and gone right where the enemy was. But they went in front of us. Yes, the guerrillas. Our guerrillas. Part of us. After God and the Virgin, they defended us. (2002 interview with author)

This woman was not alone in her reverence. I conducted 230 in-depth interviews with Salvadoran men and women, most of whom lived in rural war zones, and my respondents overwhelmingly viewed the FMLN of the 1980s as a righteous, not a radical, organization.² Intriguingly, they conveyed the righteousness of

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2 These arguments are based on research completed for *Women in War: The Micro-processes of Mobilization in El Salvador*, 2013, the Oxford University Press. The large majority of the 230 interviews were conducted between 2001 and 2002. They included

the FMLN to me through highly gendered narratives. The FMLN protected the vulnerable—defined explicitly as mothers, their children, and the elderly—while their opponents, the Salvadoran Armed Forces, slaughtered innocent women and children. The FMLN protected women's sexuality—often by recruiting young girls into their guerrilla camps—while the Salvadoran Armed Forces regularly raped young girls and cut babies out of pregnant women's bodies. Even the FMLN's practice of regularly requiring children as young as 12 to join its rebel forces did not taint its righteous image among rural Salvadorans. Respondents, many who themselves had been pressed into the guerrilla army, or who had seen their children obliged to participate in guerrilla camps, explained this practice as an unfortunate necessity of war. The FMLN could only protect "vulnerable" civilians if they required the non-vulnerable—all youth, and all men—to join their ranks. Salvadorans maintained this righteous characterization of the FMLN even when discussing wartime guerrilla actions of which they disapproved, or while noting deep dissatisfaction with the present-day actions of the FMLN political party.

The FMLN, like many violent insurgent organizations, claimed thousands of ideological supporters, both in rural El Salvador and around the globe. Some joined their ranks as combatants. Others collaborated by sharing material resources, military information, or political support. Still others sympathized with the organization's goals while abstaining from any direct supportive action, exemplifying Olson's "free riders" (1965). Yet the reasons why violent political organizations are viewed as "righteous" by varied and dispersed populations remains poorly understood.

This oversight is problematic. At present, most scholarship on political violence focuses on two key questions: Why do some groups (and their individual members) embrace violence to reach their political goals—a process often referred to as *radicalization*? And what might be done to transform a preference for violent politics into an embrace of institutional politics—or *de-radicalization*?³ These questions are of course important in their own right. Nevertheless, scholars' almost exclusive focus on the actions and ideologies of the political groups themselves leave unanswered equally important questions about how interested parties *perceive* the political groups' actions.

In this chapter, I propose three theoretical modifications to the research agenda on political violence. First, I argue that using the term "radical" as a synonym for all political violence imbues this violence with a normative element that limits scholarly advancement. Interested publics do not always *perceive* political violence as "radical." It also may be considered "righteous"—by those who engage

men and women, combatants and non-combatants, living in three different rural zones, each which had been highly contested regions during the war. See Chapter 1 and Appendix A for explanations of my data and methods.

³ For excellent reviews of theoretical causes of political violence and collective violence, see Goodwin 2006; Kalyvas 2006; and Tilly 2003. For an important analysis of the process of de-radicalization, or ideologically giving up violence, please see Bosi 2013.

in it, those who sympathize with its use, and even by those whom it victimizes. Scholars therefore cannot fully understand why people engage in or disengage from violent political groups without also studying public *perceptions* of that group's violence. When a violent group's actions are deemed "righteous" by the publics in which they are embedded, then individuals are more likely to (willingly) join in the first place, and will have a relatively easier time re-integrating into their civilian communities after disengagement. This suggests that even so-called "free riders" may play an important causal role in shaping an organization's survival by shaping the meanings attached to that organization's violent actions in the cultural context within which its participants are embedded. I further argue that violent political groups strategically attempt to control the "radicalness" with which their violent acts are judged to meet their own political goals. Those who seek to create fear among their target populations promote radical perceptions of violence, while those who seek supporters and new recruits seek a righteous public face. Studying public perceptions of political violence therefore allows scholars to better understand the form of political violence that a group may choose, and the consequences of that violence for their political power and influence in a region.

Second, I theorize that *gender* is one of the strongest tools mobilized by political leaders to mitigate the radicalness with which the public perceives their organization's violent acts. There are likely many factors that influence public perceptions of political violence over time and across groups, and I certainly do not mean to imply that gender is the only one.⁴ Nevertheless, most societies hold deeply seated cultural understandings of women as essentially peaceful human beings, while men are considered naturally prone to aggression and violence (Alison 2009, Gilligan 1982, Elshtain 1987, Mazurana and McKay 1999, Yuval-Davis 1997). Mobilizing imagery from the existing sexual order is therefore a powerful means by which almost any violent organization can shape its public face. Women's entrance into violent political acts, either as victims or perpetrators, charges those acts with emotion. If men commit political violence against women—and especially against women's sexuality—then most audiences perceive that violence as radical. If men's political violence is committed in the name of protecting women—and especially women's sexuality—it becomes righteous. If women commit violent political acts, the violence is generally seen as radical, especially if they commit those acts in response to, or in collaboration with, a male sexual partner. But if an organization can demonstrate that many women—and especially many mothers—are willing to commit political violence

⁴ For example, I anticipate that groups that engage in quantifiably more violence against civilians are seen as more radical than groups using less violence against civilians; and that some particularly brutal types of violence (beheading, cutting off limbs, etc.) are seen as much more radical than killing with traditional weapons like bombs or guns, even when the outcomes (dismemberment, death) may be relatively similar. My purpose in this chapter, however, is to note that relatively similar forms of violence committed by different groups take on different meanings when imbued with gendered narratives.

on their behalf, then that organization becomes especially righteous. Indeed, the narrative goes, no mother would risk her life or the lives of her children for a cause that was not profoundly just. In short, how groups mobilize gender norms may be critical to solidifying their reputation as either the “good guys” or the “bad guys” in any violent political conflict.

And indeed, it is the “guys” that earn the reputation of righteous or radical. As many scholars have documented, women seldom gain honor, prestige, or political power from their involvement in political violence, regardless of whether they are the victims or the perpetrators. Rather, women who participate in violent movements frequently find that promises of emancipation are abandoned with the return to politics as usual. The reason, I argue, is that women’s presence in political violence *always* mobilizes essentialist understandings of women as peacemakers—even, ironically, when women themselves are acting violently.

These insights lead to my third argument: Although gendered framing processes may facilitate the successful movement of political groups away from violent and toward peaceful tactics by facilitating individuals’ return to civilian life, these same gendered processes may ironically require a rejection of the so-called “radical” feminist agenda—and its concomitant fight for gender equality—to be successful at mobilizing peace.

In what follows, I first review both the feminist and the political literatures on violence. Next, I build from these literatures to theorize how political groups may use gendered narratives to strategically influence public perceptions of their violent acts. Finally, I apply this theory to the case of the FMLN in El Salvador—an organization that regularly utilized gender narratives to de-radicalize its violent image both as a rebel army during a civil war, and as a political party after the war had ended. I conclude that scholars of political violence—and practitioners working to de-radicalize violent groups—must pay greater attention to the gender narratives surrounding the conflict. Such narratives offer new insight into who joins a violent movement, and how likely they are to leave it. My findings also suggest how (un)likely it is for women to gain political, economic, or societal power from their participation in—and creation of—“righteous” political violence.

Why Examine Public Perceptions of Political Violence?⁵

Scholars of political violence, and especially of civil war, have documented several reasons why individuals join violent groups. Importantly, once violence

5 Like many scholars of civil war and political or collective violence, I define violence in this chapter as the physical infliction of harm on a person’s body. Other scholars have argued convincingly that violence should be defined along a continuum, noting that threats of physical violence, neglect, withholding of life’s basic necessities, among others, are often just as damaging to individual’s bodies and psyche’s as actual physical blows. I am very sympathetic to these arguments, and especially to the work of scholars like

has begun, many individuals join precisely because they lack other options. Some are forcefully abducted into violent groups, while others believe joining one of the violent parties offers their best chance for survival (McKay and Mazurana 2004; Viterna 2006; Humphreys and Weinstein 2008). Still others may join violent groups to gain material goods or political power (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008, Olson 1965); because they feel pressured to support a cause that their community supports (Taylor 1988; Humphreys and Weinstein 2008); to counter an attack—symbolic or violent—on their perceived collective community (Tilly 2003; White 1989); or because they value the pride they garner from participation (Wood 2003).⁶ In still other cases, violence may occur because individuals use warring parties to settle individual scores, without regard for the ideological leanings of either faction (Kalyvas 2006). With the exception of forced abduction, all of these proposed causal factors anticipate that individuals make judgments about the organization they are choosing to join: Will the organization successfully offer protection? Wealth? Retribution? A sense of belonging? Activities of which they can be proud?

Yet scholars struggle to answer the question of *how* individuals judge a group’s ability to provide them with participatory benefits—tangible or psychological. Individuals seldom have perfect knowledge of violent groups’ actions or ideologies. This is especially true in cases of civil war, where what little infrastructure exists is likely disrupted by violence, where schools or other public gatherings are difficult to convene, and where a climate of distrust discourages open communication about political events more generally. It is also true in cases where violent groups operate illegally in a non-warring society, and must protect their identities and activities in order to escape imprisonment.

Given the lack of full information, I argue that individuals rely on the narratives that an organization tells about itself to judge whether or not they want to join or support one group over the other, or attempt to stay neutral. Their individual-level judgments are by necessity embedded in community life. Individuals discuss the actions and narratives of the violent organizations with trusted others, and through this interaction they create shared definitions of those groups. These shared definitions in turn shape both how likely any one individual is to become an ideological adherent and participant in the first place, and how well-accepted that individual may feel by his or her community after demobilizing from violent actions.

Hume (2009), who clearly articulate how violence takes on many forms as it permeates the lives of individuals in especially violent communities. Nevertheless, in this chapter, I choose to follow Tilly (2003, p. 4) and focus specifically on physical violence, while calling for better terminology to parse out other means of inflicting harm. With greater specification, we can better understand the causes and consequences of the various manifestations of harm (physical and otherwise) and how they may or may not interact with one another.

6 For a discussion of the inadequacy of grievance-based explanations, see Goodwin 2004.

Just as individuals' must make judgments about political groups, those same political groups must also make judgments about which individuals they will recruit to support their efforts, either as internal group participants or as external supporters.⁷ Groups' recruitment strategies are varied. They can choose to forcefully abduct individuals, to offer material incentives for participation, or to motivate individuals to join by arguing that their cause is worthy of activism. Groups are thought especially keen to gain ideological adherents, as these are the people expected to stay committed to the organization over the long term. Opportunistic fighters, in contrast, are more likely to defect when material rewards are not forthcoming (Weinstein 2005).

Yet just as individuals do not have perfect knowledge of groups, groups also do not have perfect knowledge of their target audiences. Who is likely to support the cause if invited? When will violence against civilians attract supporters, and when will it repulse them?⁸ Are their ways to coerce an individual's participation while still securing their ideological commitment to the organization? In the absence of this knowledge, I suggest that political groups hedge their bets by using pre-existing, shared cultural meanings about certain identities to match potential recruitment messages to their target audiences. For example, a socialist movement might use narratives promising wealth redistribution to recruit poor individuals, while narratives promising adventure and fortune might be more effective when recruiting youth (Viterna 2013). Because gender norms—and especially gender norms surrounding violence—are remarkably consistent over time and across social categories (Alison 2009; Enloe 2000a, Goldstein 2001) recruitment messages utilizing gendered narratives may be especially useful for mobilizing recruits and supporters of otherwise unknown intentions into violent organizations.

How Perceptions of Violence are Gendered

Scholars and policy analysts make a clear, if sometimes implicit, argument that violence enacted against civilians is more radical, and more worthy of intervention, than violence enacted against other violent adversaries (Kalyvas 2006). What is

⁷ Although much research focuses on why individuals choose to join a group, the more important question may be, "Why do groups choose to recruit a particular individual?" Being recruited may be one of the most powerful predictors of who joins an organization, such that it is difficult to know if (for example) impoverished individuals join an organization because of the material incentives offered, or rather, because that organization focused on recruiting impoverished individuals (Viterna 2013).

⁸ Jasper labels this a "naughty or nice" dilemma, where a group's leaders try to decide if others are more likely to do as they want when the group is loved or when it is feared (2004:9, 2006). The answer, Jasper tells us, is dependent on the alternatives available to the group, the audiences targeted, the role of adversaries, and other aspects of the specific arena in which the activities are embedded. See also Kalyvas 2006, for discussion of the rational choices warring parties make about when to use violence against civilians.

seldom discussed, however, is how women—or more commonly, "women and children"—come to signify an even more vulnerable, more righteous category of victims, than "civilians" alone. To illustrate: When I Googled the phrase "many of them women and children," the search engine returned 250 million hits to my computer screen.⁹ The first three read as follows (emphases mine):

http://www.unicef.org/emerg/index_45197.html

NEW YORK, USA, 15 August 2008—UNICEF remains deeply concerned about the safety and well-being of civilians affected by the hostilities in and around South Ossetia, Georgia. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 100,000 people, *many of them children and women*, have been displaced as a result of the fighting.

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/may2009/afgh-m06.shtml>

US airstrikes kill scores of civilians in Afghanistan

By Bill Van Auken 6 May 2009

On the eve of a tripartite summit in Washington which the Obama administration has organized with the presidents of Afghanistan and Pakistan, reports from Afghanistan indicate that US air strikes in western Farah province have killed and wounded scores of civilians, *many of them women and children*.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8335934/Libya-protests-140-massacred-as-Gaddafi-sends-in-snipers-to-crush-dissent.html>

Libya-protests-140-massacred-as-Gaddafi-sends-in-snipers-to-crush-dissent.html

Wednesday 05 October 2011

The Telegraph

Libya protests: 140 'massacred' as Gaddafi sends in snipers to crush dissent.

Women and children leapt from bridges to their deaths as they tried to escape a ruthless crackdown by Libyan forces loyal to Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

Activists have long utilized "moral shocks" to generate support for their cause (Jasper 1997). But why is violence against "women and children" more effective than violence against "civilians," or even simply "children," in increasing the radical perception of political violence? Enloe (1993) notes that the phrase "womenandchildren" roles off the tongues of journalists around the world as if it were a single word, simultaneously providing justification for politicians' military plans and validation of soldiers' benevolent masculinity as they commit violent

⁹ Search conducted October 5, 2011. This theme continued to be salient in politics and the media as this chapter heads to press. In making the case for military action against Syria, US President Obama stated on August 30, 2013, that "We cannot accept a world where women and children and innocent civilians are gassed on a terrible scale," while CNN and multiple other news agencies reported that "Rebel officials say more than 1,300 people, including many women and children, died recently as a result of chemical weapons (in Syria)". (<http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/27/world/meast/syria-chemical-weapons-red-line/index.html>)

acts against others. But even Enloe's sharp analysis does not capture the full extent to which the phrase "women and children" is utilized rhetorically to make clear the particularly brutal nature of an episode of violence. Radical violence is not simply launched against gender-neutral civilians—it is regularly launched against female civilians, mothers, and their children.

There is of course truth to this portrayal. Men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of violence, and women are the overwhelming majority of adults living in civilian communities within conflict zones (Goldstein 2001, Kumar 2001). Women are often victimized in gender-specific ways during violent conflicts, such as when mass rapes or other forms of sexual torture take place. And women are almost always those tasked with the responsibility of maintaining the security of dependents in their families and their communities, often with few real options for protecting themselves or their loved ones from violent attack, or of providing the basic necessities of life in war-torn economies.

But there is another gendered truth that gets significantly less attention. Men are killed at greater rates than women during most political conflicts.¹⁰ And there is increasingly powerful evidence that men are also regularly sexually assaulted and raped in violent political conflicts (Wood 2009, 2012). In the course of my research in El Salvador, I talked to Catholic nuns who regularly treated sexually-brutalized men in health clinics during the war. The torture of men through rape and castration is also mentioned in war autobiographies (Clements 1984), semi-biographical accounts (Argueta 1991), and in a few scholarly studies (Hume 2009; Turshen 1998). Most recently, Leiby's (2012) analysis of Truth Commissions in El Salvador found that, while the UN-sponsored Truth Commission limited its reports of sexual violence only to acts of rape against women, the lesser studied Tutela Legal report included sexual violence against both men and women. Remarkably, the Tutela Legal study found that 53 per cent of sexual violence victims in the Salvadoran civil war were men. Extensive sexual torture of men has also been documented in the Balkan wars. The Zagreb Medical Centre for Human Rights estimates that 4,000 male Croatian prisoners were sexually tortured in Serb detention camps; 11 per cent of those were fully or partially castrated, and 20 per cent were forced to fellate other prisoners (Littlewood 1997).

Despite increasing awareness of the phenomenon, it remains unclear how often men are sexually assaulted during episodes of political violence. Feminist scholars have demonstrated that sexual violence is always underreported. Given the tremendous threat that sexual assault poses to men's masculinity, and given that men have not benefitted from a global movement calling for the recognition

10 See, for example, Viterna (2013), La Mattina (2012). War also kills people in less direct ways through malnutrition, exposure, lack of medical care, and so on. These latter deaths likely weigh much more heavily on women and the dependents for whom they care (Nordstrom 1997), yet they seldom receive media and political attention to the same extent as direct physical infliction of violence. As a result, these deaths are less central to understanding how gendered rhetoric manipulates the *portrayal* of political violence.

and support of male victims of political sexual violence as have women, it is logical to assume that men's sexual assault is underreported at much greater levels than women's. Moreover, whereas my respondents, civil society organizations, and policy makers all regularly cited women's sexual victimization as evidence that the Salvadoran Armed Forces were "radical," I have yet to come across any similar systematic and public condemnation of the Armed Forces—or any other politically violent organization—because of their sexual violence against men.

Violence against Women: Normalized or Aberrant?

Violence against women is a central theme in feminist scholarship. Above, I have argued that political violence against women, and especially against women's sexuality, is perceived by interested publics as an especially radical kind of violence. In sharp contrast, feminist scholars have long argued that violence against women is normalized, invisible, and legitimated by men and women alike (Hume 2009, Dobash and Dobash 1998). Beginning with the radical feminists of the 1970s, scholars such as Pateman (1988) and MacKinnon (1982, 1987, 1989) argued persuasively that men's control over women's sexuality is imbued with violence, and is the foundation of gender inequality more generally. Over the next three decades, feminist scholars documented the extensive violence in which many women live their daily lives. They find that women are most likely to be assaulted by men known to them, and not by strangers (Kelly 2000). The significance of the relationship between the woman and her offender therefore comes to be more relevant in evaluating a violent crime than the actual details of the attack itself (Pateman 1988). Women are thought likely to provoke attacks that are launched by men known to them, and are thought to suffer less when assaulted by a known person than a stranger (MacKinnon 1983). Women's "honor" and actions are still regularly considered as admissible evidence when courts deliberate whether a crime was committed against her (Chant and Craske 2003). And cultural understandings of men as naturally violent, and women as responsible for keeping the peace, underpin the attitudinal and legal tendency to blame women for violence committed against them in their own homes.

These themes resonate with the reality of many Latin American women. In El Salvador, men's masculinity is evaluated in part by how well they control the women in their homes—a control that is in many communities thought to require physical force and sexual virility (Hume 2009). Indeed, almost half of all women who have ever been married or in a relationship reported to a state surveyor that they had suffered some form of abuse at the hands of their partner (FESAL 2008)—a statistic that women's organizations believe reflects extreme underreporting. Some scholars posit that post-conflict societies like El Salvador may experience a surge in domestic violence because men who leave violent organizations suffer a "crisis of masculinity." Giving up their hyper-masculinized violent roles during a conflict, failing to find economic employment or other means of social success after

the conflict, and the overabundance of weapons (and familiarity with using them) are the factors thought to account for this increase (Hume 2009, Enloe 2000b). The legal system further re-enforces this normalization of violence against women. The domestic violence law in El Salvador, for example, proscribes no punishment for a man who abuses his family members,¹¹ and a female police officer that I interviewed in El Salvador readily admitted that police seldom respond to calls about domestic violence because gang violence is always present, and always takes priority, in an organization with limited resources.

This understanding of violence against women as normalized initially appears in stark contrast to my earlier argument that violence against women is seen as especially radical. However, the two phenomena both stem from the same gendered order, and therefore are actually quite compatible. *Political* violence against women may generate especially high levels of outrage precisely because it upsets normalized understandings of *masculinity*, not femininity. Raping or otherwise assaulting a woman emphasizes her subordinated status in society, and therefore emphasizes her femininity. As such, violence against women is relatively normalized in everyday life. Yet when rape and sexual torture against women are used to make political statements it upsets normalized expectations about *which* men have control over women's bodies. It also challenges men's role as protectors of society, and the gender order it encompasses. Political violence against women therefore threatens men's masculinity in much the same way that raping or castrating men themselves threatens masculinity. Whereas sexual violence against men is hidden, sexual violence against women may lead to calls for violent retribution as a way of restoring men's honor. This protective or retributive violence, I argue, is overwhelmingly seen as righteous, not radical.

Violent Women: Righteous or Fiendish?

Sjoberg and Gentry write:

... women are not supposed to be violent. This is one tenet on which various understandings of gender seem to converge. A conservative interpretation of gender sees women as peaceful and apolitical, a liberal view understands women as a pacifying influence on politics, and feminists who study global politics often critique the masculine violence of interstate relations. Women's violence falls outside of these ideal-typical understandings of what it means to be a woman. (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 2)

11 The civil code does provide punishment for domestic violence, but women's organizations report that most judges defer to the gender violence law for domestic assault cases, a law which does not specify criminal sentencing. Men seldom spend time in jail for any abuse toward women, including domestic violence, rape, and even femicide (Viterna, unpublished).

When we hear about instances of political violence, we assume that the perpetrators are male. Only when a modifier is added to the subject—female insurgents, women terrorists—do we envision violent actors as women. When women do commit violence, mainstream discourses resist assigning agency to those women (Allison 2009, p. 119–21; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). Rather, they are explained away as deviants, driven to violent acts by mental illness or irrationality, and often by an unhealthy, overly sexual commitment to a male partner.

Yet when groups of women commit violence, in contrast to individual women, that violence is often described as righteous. Precisely because women are considered peacemakers, and precisely because they are considered the subordinated sector of society, their widespread participation in violent groups adds an aura of legitimacy to the politics of the organization. Armed organizations publicize the role of women in their ranks to portray their cause as so just that *even women* are willing to risk their lives, and the lives of their children, to support it. Sharoni (1995, pp. 44–5), for example, argues that Israeli women's service in the national military is not portrayed as a step forward for women's equality, but rather as a signal that the situation is so grave that even women have to fight. Bayard de Volo (2001) notes how Sandinistas in Nicaragua circulated posters of young mothers carrying a baby in one arm and a gun in the other to promote the righteousness of their organization and shame men into participation. In my own research, FMLN leaders noted that pretty young women in uniform were especially talented at gaining new recruits and new supporters. Their femininity tugged at the heartstrings of civilians, making them more likely to share food and resources with the guerrilla army, while their willingness to fight allowed them to shame young men into participating through threats to their masculinity (Viterna 2013). If we women can fight, recruiters would imply, then surely you are man enough to fight, too.

Resolving Contradictions

Violence, Hume tells us, “is implicitly, if not explicitly, measured by the reaction it generates” (2009, 32). When political violence is committed against women (and their children), it generates outrage, and is perceived as especially “radical.” Conversely, when political violence is enacted by women against others, it may signal that the violent group is particularly just, and its violence righteous rather than radical. The symbolic significance that women's participation, as either victims or perpetrators, lends to political violence stands in sharp contrast to the invisibility of women's participation, either as victims or perpetrators, in the more personalized, apolitical violence of so-called “normal” times.

Ironically, each of these perceptions of violence is based on the same traditional gender order. In cases of political violence, both women's rape and women's resistance threaten men's cultural role as public protectors. Men's masculinity is threatened when other men rape their women, and men's masculinity is threatened

when women show bravery through participating in violent organizations. Both women's rape and women's resistance may leave men feeling ashamed for not adequately fulfilling their role as protector, and this shame has been rhetorically used by violent groups to recruit men into their ranks. Importantly, defining themselves and their actions as those of a righteous protector allows violent groups to portray themselves as *defenders of the moral social order*, rather than as *radicals seeking societal transformation*.

To recap, I have argued that scholars should pay greater attention to how interested publics perceive a group's political violence. Many violent groups gain adherents and activists by strategically portraying their violent actions as righteous, and not radical. I have further argued that gender narratives are likely to be especially effective in molding public perceptions of political violence, because women's participation in political violence—either as victims or as perpetrators—loads those violent acts with symbolic significance. In the following section, I demonstrate how these insights extend our understanding of the actions of the FMLN militant-insurgency-turned-political-party in El Salvador.

Gender and Political Violence in the FMLN

El Salvador, like most of Central America, has high levels of economic inequality and a long history of political violence. For more than two centuries, the nation was ruled by an authoritarian regime, often in conjunction with the state military. In the 1970s, a period of brief political opening led to a flourish of social movement organizing. The Catholic Church promoted a movement for social justice focused on ending poverty and human rights violations while calling for education and dignified standards of living. Simultaneously, the more traditional leftist organizations (socialist organizations, labor unions) argued for moderate improvements in labor conditions and political freedoms. This liberalization experiment came to a brutal halt at the end of the decade, when the state re-inserted its iron hand by targeting the organizers of both movements for torture, disappearance, and death (see Almeida 2008 for summary). The renewed repression forced activists underground, and, in conjunction with the political maneuverings of Castro in Cuba, facilitated the unification of five different militant factions into one insurgent army. The "*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*," called the FMLN or the "*Frente*" for short, officially declared war on the Salvadoran state in 1980. Over the next 12 years, this violent socialist organization proved to be one of the most successful insurgent armies in modern history (Bracamonte and Spencer 1995), gaining control over more than one-third of the national territory, and successfully winning the hearts and minds of thousands of civilians living in rural war zones.

The FMLN is an especially useful case for examining the relationship between gender, violence, and radicalization. First, Salvadoran women were the perpetrators as well as the victims of political violence. Women comprised

approximately one-third of FMLN guerrilla forces (Kampwirth 2002, Luciak 2001), and were also regularly victimized by the Salvadoran Armed Forces. Second, the FMLN is one of several violent insurgent organizations highlighted by scholars for its troops' restraint in *not* committing violent acts—and especially not acts of sexual violence—against civilians (Wood 2006, 2008, 2009, 2012). These factors—women's presence in guerrilla camps, women's victimization by the Armed Forces, and the FMLN's *unwillingness* to use rape as a strategy or practice of war—helped the FMLN gain and maintain a righteous reputation among rural Salvadorans in the 1980s. And third, the FMLN has continued to struggle against the label "radical" since it converted to peaceful politics in 1992, a fact that demonstrates how struggles against perceived "radicalism" may continue even after political violence ends. In the next two sections, I review how the FMLN used gender narratives to mitigate the "radical-ness" of its image, first as a militant organization, and then as a political party.

From Radical Insurgents to Righteous Protectors

The FMLN guerrilla army gained civilian supporters through a policy of "protecting," rather than brutalizing, civilians living in war zones. This is objectively measured in the UN Truth and Reconciliation study conducted after the war, through my own interviews with Salvadorans in war zones, and through hundreds of published and unpublished "testimonies," where individuals regularly reported how the Salvadoran state's Armed Forces would attack villages, while the FMLN would strive to evacuate civilians prior to the military arrival and escort them to refugee camps.

Importantly, I find that the FMLN avoided direct violence against civilians in large part through gendered, rhetorical coercion (Viterna 2013). The FMLN seldom forcefully abducted individuals into their ranks. Rather, they used narratives defining who constituted "the vulnerable" to make implicitly clear that those who were *not* defined as vulnerable were expected to join the FMLN guerrillas. This practice began in earnest in the early 1980s, when the Salvadoran Armed Forces increased its indiscriminate killings of rural civilians in what they thought to be guerrilla zones. When possible, the FMLN would warn civilians that the Armed Forces were approaching, and offer to evacuate the "most vulnerable" to a safe location, either alongside a guerrilla camp or, later in the war, to internationally sponsored refugee camps. The sweeping majority of my respondents concurred that the FMLN, as a righteous organization, actively worked to move "the most vulnerable" to refuge, and that the "most vulnerable" were defined explicitly as the very old; the very young, and the mothers of the very young. This was in direct contrast to the Armed Forces, who regularly tortured and killed "women and children."

Yet by explicitly defining who qualified as vulnerable, the FMLN also defined who was *not* vulnerable, and who therefore was expected to join the guerrilla forces. Over and over again, my respondents told me that they "had to" join the FMLN, because refugee camps were "only for the vulnerable." "Youth," defined

as girls and boys between the ages of about 12 and 18, and all “men” under the age of about 40 or 45, were *not* vulnerable, and were therefore denied passage to refugee camps. This denial effectively obligated men and youth to join the guerrillas. Ironically, respondents would report that they were “obliged” to join the FMLN while simultaneously rejecting any suggestion that the FMLN had forced them to join. “It was always one’s choice” was a statement I heard time and again. Respondents saw little contradiction in arguing that they “had to” join and that joining was “their choice,” because they believed the situation, not the FMLN, had constrained their options. As the war progressed, the FMLN began to declare certain areas to be “guerrilla zones” and required all youth and men to join their forces even without the threat of approaching violence from the Salvadoran Armed Forces. Even in these situations, respondents continued to frame FMLN actions as necessary and justified. The fact that the FMLN had moved others in their families—mothers, elderly parents, children, and younger siblings—to safety, also left many feeling indebted to the FMLN.¹²

Importantly, the FMLN regularly used narratives about gender when requiring all youth and all men to join the FMLN forces. Men and young boys regularly reported joining the FMLN because they believed it was better to be a willing joiner of the guerrillas than a forcefully conscripted soldier—or victim—of the Armed Forces. They felt that, as men, they had no choice but to fight. Young women, however, should in theory have been freed from such cultural expectations of becoming soldiers. Nevertheless, the FMLN regularly pressed young women into its ranks by embracing another gendered narrative—the expectation that women protect themselves from rape. This theme was prevalent throughout my interviews. When I asked women why they joined the FMLN, they often provided rationalizations like these:

Look ... during these war years ... the soldiers did these things---because when the soldiers would arrive to a place, they would- . I never saw it, but I heard a lot of things about other places. That they would arrive to the houses, and because of this the young girls had to flee with the men, because they would rape the young women. There were young girls that they would rape and after raping them they would kill them.

So there we were, searching for what little security we could find in the guerrillas. We felt safer there. Because, I mean, we thought that we could defend ourselves there, right. And my mom and dad, well, they were getting old, and they had

12 Of note, these narratives of who “had to” fight, and who was vulnerable and should stay in refuge, continued to mobilize individuals even late in the war when violence was more discriminate, and even when individuals were already living safely in refugee camps. Those who traveled to refugee camps as very young children, upon reaching the age of 12–15, were encouraged by FMLN recruiters to return to the war front because, as “youth,” it was their obligation to fight, and leave refugee camp life to the “vulnerable.” See Viterna 2013.

little kids, and so perhaps they would be spared, they might capture them but maybe they would just take them away if they captured them, but to us, if they were to capture us, they would do other things with us, rape and all that ... because those things happened.

I couldn’t go to the refugee camp (located in Honduras) because the Honduran soldiers would rape young girls. (But your sister went, didn’t she?) Yes but she already had a child, my niece, in her arms. The baby was about five months old, something like that. (And you thought that it was safer to join the guerrillas than to go to a refugee camp?) Yes! (with conviction). Since the very same guerrillas had taken my mother out of the house and to the refugee camp, since she could no longer live there, then I had to go to live with the guerrilla combatants. I couldn’t stay in the house or in any other area that wasn’t the guerrillas. (Who said that the Honduran soldiers would rape young girls?) Everyone said so.

Early in the war, young women routinely suggested that they joined the FMLN to protect themselves against rape. The consistency of this narrative across my respondents suggested that FMLN recruiters may have highlighted their ability to protect young women from rape as a key explanation for why young women had to join their army instead of staying in the war zone or traveling to a refugee camp. Of course, the Armed Forces *did* engage in rape and sexual violence against civilians as well as against captured FMLN guerrillas—this aspect of the narrative was most certainly based in reality. As noted above, however, there is now significant evidence that sexual violence was enacted with relatively equal frequency on both men and women. Yet only *women* were recruited with the promise of sexual protection from rape. Only *women’s* rape featured prominently in the war narratives of my respondents. Moreover, although there was a shared perception among respondents that young girls would be raped in refugee camps, I struggled to find any evidence that rape actually occurred there, suggesting that the FMLN played the “rape protection” card specifically to keep young women from traveling to refugee camps, even when refugee camps may have by many objective measures provided better protection from violence for them than joining the guerrillas.

Respondents also used gendered narratives of vulnerability to demonize the Salvadoran Armed Forces. The state military’s brutality was unquestionable. They committed mass murders against unsuspecting civilians in their homes and fields, as confirmed by forensic evidence and post-war testimonies by victims and perpetrators alike. Nevertheless, when the FMLN and their supporters denounced this violence, they often focused most heavily on the Armed Forces’ victimization of women and children. One of the most common themes in war testimonies is that the Armed Forces would cut fetuses out of pregnant women’s stomachs. See, for example, Representative Gerry Studds’ 1981 Report to the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the U.S. House of Representatives (as cited in Chomsky’s *Understanding Power*, 2003; emphases mine):

January 17–18, 1981 – Conversations with refugees from El Salvador (conducted in areas along the Honduras-El Salvador border):

The following is an outline of the statements made by refugees to the [delegation led by Representative Barbara Mikulski], as summarized on the scene by the translator accompanying the group:

Interview – Woman No. 1: “This woman fled in November 1980, and while she was then forced to flee, she was one of the last people from her village to flee. She was 9 months pregnant. She had her little baby, which she is holding in her arms right now, in the mountains on her way out to Honduras. The Army was setting up guns, heavy cannon artillery on the hills around their village, bombing the villages and forcing the people away If people were caught in the village, they would kill them. **Women and children alike. She said that with pregnant women, they would cut open the stomachs and take the babies out. She said she was very afraid because she had seen the result of what a guard had done to a friend of hers. She had been pregnant and they took the child out after they cut open her stomach.** And where she lived they did not leave one house standing. They burned all of them”

Interview – Woman No. 2: Maria: “She say that she would like to tell us the following: That many of her family were killed, so many were killed that she doesn’t even remember their names About 7 months ago they killed one of her family and the child was an infant and is now in a hospital in a nearby town close to death. The army threw the baby in the river when they found them, and they took them into the woods and later they were found. She personally saw children around the age of 8 being raped, and then they would take their bayonets and make mincemeat of them. With their guns they would shoot at their faces”

Question: “These were army troops or guards?”

Answer: “Troops. Army.”

Question: “Did the left ever do these things?”

Answer: “No. No, they haven’t done any of those kinds of things ... but the army would cut people up and put soap and coffee in their stomachs as a mocking. **They would slit the stomach of a pregnant woman and take the child out, as if they were taking eggs out of an iguana.** That is what I saw. That is what I have to say”

Interview – Woman No. 5: “[O]nce she saw [the army] kill six women. First they killed two women and then they burned their bodies with firewood. She said, **one thing she saw was a dog carrying a new born infant in its mouth. The child was dead because it had been taken from the mother’s womb after the guard slit open her stomach.**”

Ms. Mikulski: “How were the other two women killed?”

Answer: “First, they hung them and then they machinegunned them and then they threw them down to the ground. When we arrived the dogs were eating them and the birds were eating them. They didn’t have any clothes on. They had decapitated one of the women. They found the head somewhere else. Another woman’s arm was sliced off. We saw the killings from a hillside and then when we came back down we saw what had happened. While we were with the bodies we heard another series of gunshots and we fled again. ... [I]t’s the military that is doing this. Only the military. The popular organization isn’t doing any of this.”

Despite the prevalence of this act in war-survivors’ testimonies, I have found no direct evidence of cutting fetuses out of pregnant women’s bodies in my admittedly limited review of various archival documents. Forensic scientists and other investigators often listed those killed, their ages, and noted if a woman was pregnant. Yet none of the lists I came across that included the death of a pregnant woman also noted that the fetus had been cut from the mother’s stomach.

Importantly, I am *not* questioning the veracity of claims that some fetuses were cut from some pregnant women’s stomachs during the war. I have no doubt that this practice was utilized by the Armed Forces in their campaign of terror. Rather, my point is that the frequency with which this crime is utilized in narratives appears quite high compared to the likely actual frequency of the act. Logic and evidence suggest, for example, that far more men were sexually tortured in the war than were fetuses cut from their mothers’ stomachs, simply given the reality that there were far fewer visibly-pregnant women at any one time than there were men. And yet stories of slicing babies from their mothers’ bellies are relatively common in wartime narratives, while stories of men’s rape, castration, and other forms of sexual assault are almost completely absent.

In sum, wartime narratives portraying the FMLN as “the good guys” were overwhelmingly gendered. Although it is impossible to pinpoint where these narratives first gained force, it is nevertheless clear that FMLN recruiters promoted these narratives strategically when seeking new recruits and civilian supporters in the war zones (Viterna 2013). By painting a picture of a social order as so thoroughly destroyed by the state military that young women had no choice but to join the FMLN, the FMLN secured women’s support—as combatants, spies, medics, radio operators, cooks, and sexual partners—in their guerrilla camps. And by painting a picture of themselves as the protectors of the most vulnerable—women, children, and the elderly—in contrast to the Armed Forces, who brutalized pregnant women and raped young girls, the FMLN also secured their image as righteous protectors with the surrounding civilian population.

This positive image of the FMLN prevailed in rural El Salvador over other proposed narratives. The state, for example, painted the FMLN as communist agitators who kidnapped and killed civilians and forcefully recruited youth into their army—narratives that also had a foot in reality. And this positive image prevailed even late into the war, when the Armed Forces limited its use of indiscriminate violence and enacted a policy of winning the hearts and minds

of rural Salvadorans. Most centrally to this chapter, this enduring positive image helped the FMLN gain collaborators and new recruits, from both domestic and international audiences, and appears to account in large part for the success of their violent political actions in the 1980s. This positive image also appears critical to the relatively successful demobilization of FMLN combatants at the end of the conflict, as former guerrillas anticipated a warm return when they re-entered civilian life, especially in rural communities.

From Communist Rebels to Christian Politicians

In 1992, a confluence of factors led to the signing of Peace Accords between the Salvadoran state and the FMLN insurgent army. Most centrally for this chapter, the accords called for the demobilization and disarmament of all FMLN guerrillas and a significant reduction in the size of the state military. They also allowed the FMLN to become a formal, legal political party for the first time in its existence. The first truly democratic elections in the nation's history were held in 1994, and pitted the new FMLN political party against the party of the ruling establishment—ARENA. Although a relatively new party itself (formed in 1981), ARENA's leadership was closely tied to both the military and the para-military death squad activities from the civil war.

Despite tremendous enthusiasm and commitment from their supporters, the FMLN experienced a sound loss in the first elections of 1994, winning only 21 per cent of legislative seats and only 31 per cent of the popular vote for president. Following these disappointing returns, internal FMLN party discussions focused on how they could transform themselves from a militant group to an effective political organization that could maintain its base of support while broadening its overall appeal (Silber and Viterna 2009).

The ARENA party did not make this easy for the FMLN. Across the next 15 years, their campaign strategy focused on portraying the FMLN political party as radical communist insurgents in disguise, bent on turning El Salvador into "another Cuba"—or more recently, "another Venezuela." Through television commercials, radio ads, newspaper articles, and interviews on local news programs, ARENA sought to highlight both the former war exploits and present-day socialist connections of FMLN candidates. They suggested that the FMLN, if elected, would force a return to their previous radical ideologies and violent practices. For example, during one morning news program prior to the 2009 elections—fully 17 years after all insurgent activity had ended—a prominent ARENA supporter continually repeated the question, "What is the FMLN good at?" and then answered his own question by stating that "these people" are only good at blowing up bridges, at kidnaping mayors, at instigating massacres, at burning businesses and crops, at killing livestock, at arming terrorists. Other than terrorism, he concluded, the FMLN had never distinguished itself for anything ("Frente a Frente, Canal 2, 8 July 2008). Another commercial made by ARENA supporters surmised that if the FMLN were to win power, Salvadoran children would be conscripted into

war to help Chavez fight for socialism, while showing images of scared young boys being armed and forced into military formation (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plGBTupMNx0>). Another successful ARENA strategy, particularly in the 2004 elections, argued that a socialist FMLN win would compromise El Salvador's relationship with the United States, and result in the deportation of Salvadorans living abroad and an end to the substantial remittances they sent to back to the nation (Rubin 2004). A final strategy argued that socialists like the FMLN are atheists, and their anti-Christian values, if brought to power, would destroy Salvadoran families and kill innocent unborn children (Arena Propaganda). The overarching message was clear: the FMLN was not a legitimate political party, but rather a radical, violent political organization. If it were to gain political power, it would radically transform the values that good Salvadorans held dear—freedom, peace, and family.

The FMLN, in response, suffered a number of internal divisions. Party leaders argued over whether to stick to their more radical ideological roots or transform themselves into a more mainstream political party. Such divisions are perhaps not surprising given its founding as a coalition of five separate organizations each with a distinct political vision and history. Where the FMLN factions seemed to find the most consensus in rebranding itself was in its slow but consistent backtracking on earlier commitments to gender equality. Early FMLN commitments to always place a woman on the presidential ticket have been foregone. Party-level gender quotas are only loosely enforced. Women's organizations' calls for strengthening legislation against domestic violence, or for enforcing men's payment of child support, have been met with relative apathy from male FMLN legislators. But perhaps most visibly, the FMLN has moved over the past few decades from a militant organization that distributed birth control and utilized abortion in some of its guerrilla camps in the 1980s, to a political party that by 2008 publicly pledged its continuing support for one of the most extreme anti-abortion laws in the world. This move toward increasingly conservative gender values, I argue, helped the FMLN transform its image away from "radicals" intent on changing El Salvador into "another Cuba" toward a righteous, religiously-affiliated organization intent on defending the existing social order (Viterna 2012).

It was not a given that the FMLN political party would eventually adopt a pro-life stance on abortion. When the Peace Accords were signed in 1992, abortion was legal in El Salvador under three circumstances: when the life of the mother was at risk, when the pregnancy was the result of a rape, or when the fetus had abnormalities incompatible with life. In 1995, the postwar legislature began to draft a new criminal code, which initially called for modest expansions in abortion rights. In response to a powerful new pro-life movement, the ARENA party proposed an alternative code that would criminalize abortion in every circumstance. This conservative alternative quickly gained support from the smaller, centrist, Christian Democratic Party. Yet the FMLN initially rejected ARENA's proposal. Some of its representatives made public pro-choice statements (Hipsher 2001). And despite some internal dissent, the party initially voted uniformly for the

limited liberalization of abortion rights in the criminal code, and against the total abortion ban. However, the FMLN did not have enough votes to stop the total abortion ban from becoming law in 1997.¹³

The pro-life movement, in conjunction with ARENA, next proposed a constitutional amendment that would commit the Salvadoran state to protect life “from the very moment of conception.” The FMLN again voted against this amendment in the first round, but by the second round of voting, when it was clear that they would not have enough votes to block the passage of the amendment, the FMLN leadership allowed its parliamentary representatives to “vote their conscience.” The constitutional amendment passed in 1999, with all FMLN deputies either voting in favor, or abstaining.

Party members seldom discussed publicly the FMLN’s capitulation to the pro-life movement in the years following the 1999 constitutional amendment. The FMLN made no official statements in favor of or against abortion, and they maintained the official line that abortion was a personal issue that each party member should decide upon individually. However, in 2008, the pro-life movement brought a “Book of Life” to the legislature, asking all deputies to sign it in a symbolic gesture of commitment to the current legislation, making it nigh impossible for the FMLN to continue skirting the issue. In the end, all FMLN representatives signed the book, publicly confirming their commitment to support life from the moment of conception to its natural death, and the complete criminalization of abortion (Accion Mundial 2008).

Although pro-life statements were regularly used by ARENA in presidential campaigns, the FMLN continued to mostly avoid the issue in its campaigning until the 2009 presidential elections. This year, Mauricio Funes won the presidency on an FMLN ticket, marking the first time in the history of the nation that a left-leaning government controlled executive power in El Salvador. Certainly, there were a number of reasons that Funes won in 2009, including his reputation as a centrist candidate with ties to big business; Obama’s election in the US; and an increasing disillusionment with ARENA for failing to mediate the economic crisis, lower crime rates, or combat corruption among its officers. Nevertheless, I argue that one of the key ways that Funes successfully de-radicalized the FMLN image in the 2009 election was through moderating the portrayal of the party’s policies on gender.

In the 2009 election, ARENA once again utilized its proven tactics of portraying the FMLN candidate as a radical socialist. They publicized pictures of Funes standing side by side with Hugo Chavez. They highlighted the role played by

13 Salvadoran abortion laws against abortion result in doctors legally refusing surgery to Salvadoran women with ectopic pregnancies so as not to “kill” an already doomed fetus (Hitt 2006). These laws have also been used to imprison a woman for having a spontaneous miscarriage, because according to the courts, she should have done more to prevent the miscarriage and protect the unborn child in her body (United Nations Human Rights Committee 2010). See Viterna 2012 for additional information.

Funes’ wife in organizing world socialist forums in Brazil and in El Salvador. They mobilized US politicians to state that a “socialist” FMLN victory would severely damage El Salvador’s political relationship with the United States. Yet Funes seemed relatively impervious to these accusations. Why? Unlike his predecessors, Funes embraced leftist calls for “social justice”—rhetoric affiliated more with the Catholic Church’s “liberation theology” than the party’s more historic and radical calls for “social revolution.” In his campaign appearances, Funes highlighted his education in Catholic schools, his close ties to Catholic priests, and his proven record as a journalist who acted as a watchdog against bad politics by both major political parties. He framed re-distribution programs as the Christian thing to do, not as a means of revolutionizing society. In short, Funes’ embrace of the Church succeeded in making long-standing FMLN economic policies appear mainstream, and Christian, not radical and “socialist.”

In the end, ARENA’s remaining “radical” attack against Funes was that he was pro-abortion, a claim they supported by quoting Funes on the issue in prior years. Despite the FMLN’s recent history of supporting pro-life legislation, one campaign commercial asked, “If Funes and the FMLN are in favor of abortion, would you trust the future of your country to them?” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIidIw0LTOA>). The battleground had changed, but once again, the “bad guys” were framed as those who, at least figuratively, cut babies out of women’s stomachs.

In response, Funes publicly promised on the campaign trail to support the nation’s existing laws penalizing all forms of abortion, including when the life of the mother is in danger. And he has kept his promise. Salvadoran women’s organizations were initially heartened when Funes appointed a woman with clear feminist ideals to head the state women’s office. However, when this woman signed an international agreement questioning the complete criminalization of abortion in El Salvador, Funes immediately removed her from office, and stripped the organization of much of its autonomy.

In sum, although the FMLN has remained relatively consistent on its economic policies and priorities over the years, they have profoundly changed their position on a woman’s rights to control her own body and sexuality. These increasingly conservative changes were by no means inevitable. Other leftist parties in Latin America have recently moved toward the liberalization of abortion rights, and Cuba, one of the FMLN’s strongest allies, has long had some of the most liberal abortion laws in the world.

Most importantly, every instance where the FMLN moved toward an increasingly conservative position on abortion occurred in *direct response* to a concerted campaign by the opposition to paint the FMLN as too radical for democratic politics—a campaign that regularly referenced the FMLN’s violent start as an insurgent communist organization. The FMLN’s desire to succeed in institutional politics, and to counter the political opposition’s claims of FMLN radicalism, seems to have been a critical factor pushing the party to embrace increasingly conservative gender policies.

Conclusion

The word “radical” most typically refers to a deviation from what is accepted and traditional. Using violence to achieve political goals may seem radical to some observers, but to others, political violence may seem profoundly acceptable, and not remotely radical. When interested publics believe that the enactors of political violence are defending society’s most vulnerable and protecting a morally legitimated social order, then it is especially likely that the shared cultural meanings attached to this group’s political violence will include righteousness, not radicalism.

Gender is one of the most profound organizers of social life. Disruptions of the gender order not only threaten public institutions, but also threaten power relations in the most intimate parts of people’s lives—the personal relationships of family and community. Actions that threaten the gender order are by definition “radical,” whereas actions deemed to protect the vulnerable (typically women and children), and to maintain men’s control over [their own] women’s sexuality, maintain the existing social order, and resist implications of radicalization.

In this chapter, I have forwarded three arguments. First, I argue that it is inappropriately normative to categorize all political violence as “radical.” Political violence is only radical when it deviates from what is acceptable to a specified group. Understanding whether interested publics see violence as radical requires scholars to investigate both how violent organizations strategically frame their violence for certain audiences, and how those audiences in turn evaluate the organizations’ actions. Understanding whether and how key audiences understand a group’s violence will in turn improve scholars’ understandings of why those groups engage in violence in the first place, what kinds of violence they choose (for example, whether or not to engage in sexual violence), and how difficult it will be for individuals to demobilize from violent groups.

Second, I argue that gender narratives may be particularly effective at radicalizing or de-radicalizing public perceptions of political violence over time and across space, because of the extraordinary consistency in cross-cultural (and behavioral) associations between gender and violence. Political violence committed against women is generally considered an outrage, especially when it threatens men’s traditional control over their own women’s sexuality. In contrast, political violence committed in the name of defending women, and especially women’s sexuality, is viewed as righteous, even when committed by non-state groups with otherwise radical political goals. Meanwhile, women’s participation in political violence offers groups an aura of legitimacy. Women are thought to be the peacemakers in any society, so when women participate as combatants, it suggests that a cause is so just that *even women* are willing to fight for it.

In the case of the FMLN, narratives of sexual violence against women, and the presence of women combatants, were central to building a public image of the FMLN as a righteous organization. This was true within my interviews, as well as within broader media and archival reports advocating sympathy for the

FMLN cause. In contrast, sexual violence against men, which was also prevalent in the war, was never implicated in rhetorical discussions of good and bad in the Salvadoran civil war, either by my respondents, or by other public reports. Remarkably, the FMLN even used narratives of protecting women from sexual violence as a recruiting tool, suggesting to young women that guerrilla camps were the only places where they would be safe from rape in wartime El Salvador. Thus even when women were taking on radical new roles as guerrilla combatants in wartime El Salvador, the FMLN was still framing these new roles as necessary for protecting women’s sexuality from assault by strangers. By defending the “most vulnerable”—women and children—and by protecting women’s sexuality, the FMLN in essence portrayed its political violence as rational, not radical, and as a critical factor supporting, not challenging, the existing moral social order.

Third, the utility of gender narratives for mitigating the perceived radicalness of violent political organizations may have real-world implications for peace seekers and feminist activists alike. We know that when an organization’s political violence is perceived as especially radical, then the men who participated in that organization have greater difficulty re-integrating into society than those who participated in organizations where violence was perceived as less radical (Humphreys and Weinstein 2007). Because women’s participation as both victims and perpetrators in political violence can make an organization’s violence seem heroic rather than heinous, it follows that men find it easier to re-integrate into society when exiting a group that utilized gender narratives to prove its righteousness.

Yet the implications for women and feminist progress in post-conflict societies are much less rosy. Despite the symbolic significance that women’s participation, as both victims and perpetrators, lends to political violence, women themselves seldom leave political conflicts with righteous reputations. Women who are victims of sexual violence find few resources to support themselves or their children in post-conflict societies that frequently prioritize women’s sexual purity. Meanwhile, evidence suggests that women activists have greater difficulty than men re-integrating into civilian society, often because governments and civil society organizations do not pay significant attention to demobilizing women (Denov 2007). This chapter suggests these difficulties may also stem in part from the cultural artifact that women activists are not privy to the honor that men get from their service as “protectors,” and in part from the reality that women exiting “righteous” violent groups leave behind a situation where they are encouraged to defend themselves from violence—and even given the tools to do so—and enter a post-conflict situation characterized by an increasing level of private, apolitical violence, with few options for legitimately defending oneself from that violence.

These theoretical conclusions raise important questions about the compatibility of peace processes with goals of gender-egalitarianism in post-conflict societies. Many studies have documented how women who participate in violent political movements are re-subordinated, and how promises of gender equality are often abandoned, with a return to normalcy (See Alison 2009, Chapter 3, for an excellent overview). This “patriarchal backlash” is typically considered an *outcome* of the

de-mobilization process. In contrast, I suggest that a patriarchal backlash may be a central component of the *process* of de-mobilization. Formerly violent groups aiming to distance themselves from their past radical actions may be strategically inclined to eschew any "radical" agendas. Feminism, as an ideology that seeks to profoundly re-shape social relations between men and women is, by definition, profoundly radical. It is therefore to be expected that any political organization seeking to de-radicalize its public image—a task often required when trading in the use of political violence for peaceful politicking—would also support the re-installation or continuation of conservative, mainstream, normalized gender relations more broadly.

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