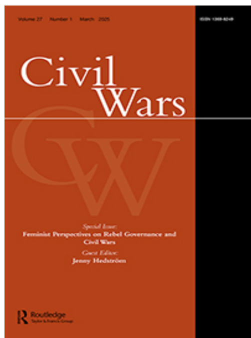

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Feminist Perspectives on Rebel Governance and Civil Wars

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ABSTRACT
What would we learn about rebel governance and civil wars if we included women and took their labour, participation and experience of wars seriously? Much literature in this field is implicitly as well as explicitly gendered, privileging male experiences and knowledge. This Special Issue therefore aims to broaden our theoretical, conceptual and empirical discussion by exploring the role of women's labour and participation in underwriting, restricting or legitimising rebel governance and civil wars. It will do so by tracing women's gendered work in and experience of rebel groups across different civil war settings, and in post-war settlements and processes.

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What would we learn about rebel governance and civil wars if we included women and took their labour, participation and experience of wars seriously? Much literature in rebel governance and civil wars are implicitly as well as explicitly gendered, privileging male experiences and knowledge (Arjona *et al*. 2015, Brenner 2019, Mampilly and Stewart 2020). A vast body of work is concerned with the tactics and strategies employed by rebel groups and other non-state actors (De La Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca 2015, Sonin *et al*. 2017, Cunningham and Loyle 2021), while the discipline of rebel governance itself often assumes rebel states and their governance projects as the referent object and focus for analysis (Huang 2016, Mampilly and Stewart 2020). Indeed, often the only actors included in analysis of rebel governance and civil wars are military groups, institutional actors, states, and possibly (male) soldiers (De Soysa 2002). Uneven theoretical and empirical attention restrict our understanding of how wars are fought, laboured, and lived through, and obscures the gendered everyday relations shaping not only involvement in wars but also post-war experiences.

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Feminist thought and approaches have had a huge impact on examining and understanding war and military institutions around the world. Pioneering research by scholars like Cynthia Enloe (1983, 1990), Kumari Jayawardena (2016), and Elshtain (1987) among others have revealed the gendered logics underpinning participation in and support of armed conflict. They have foregrounded how these relations of gender are also relations of race, sexuality and class. More recent interventions have attended to the relationship between militarised masculinities and military organisations (Moon 2005, Dietrich Ortega 2016, Riley 2022); gender diverse combatants (Thylin 2020); military propaganda and recruitment campaigns (Loken 2021, Stern and Strand 2021); military families and spouses (Baaz and Verweijen 2017, Hyde 2024); and so on, showcasing the importance of feminist analysis for facilitating a nuanced account of the variegated and dynamic forces at work in shaping armed conflict across the world.

Inspired by this scholarship, this Special Issue aims to broaden the theoretical, conceptual and empirical discussions on what is arguably the most common form of warfare in the world today by exploring the role of women's gendered labour and participation in underwriting, restricting or legitimising rebel governance and civil wars. It does so by tracing women's gendered work in and experience of rebel groups across different civil war settings, and in post-war settlements and processes. These war and post-war settings are diverse, and not often in conversation with each other, and include experiences from female farmers living in post-coup Myanmar, former girl soldiers in Liberia, and female ex-combatants in Nepal and India, as well as women administrations in rebel governance, transitional authorities and post-war governments in Nepal, the Philippines and Uganda. These women are of course not a homogenous group, making it important to pay attention to the ways in which gender intersects with age, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and rank to structure experiences of war and post-war settings.

The invisibility of women's labour in war seems somewhat puzzling given that extant research show that women are present in critical supportive and combative roles across armed movements (Tamale 1996, Viterna 2013, Vastapuu 2018, Jarymowycz 2020). Given this oversight, this Special Issue stresses women's roles and experiences, because, as Zoe Marks puts it, their experience and participation requires greater explication than men's (Marks 2017) who by default are assumed to be combatants, with a stake in the war (Kinsella 2006). This means that women, and the gendered labour they engage in, are often seen as peripheral to warfighting, and therefore to the study of war itself (Wood 2019). However, we suggest that attention to women's experience of and participation in violence are a critical – if overlooked – aspect of rebel warfare and civil wars. Attention to women, and the militarised labour they engage in, might therefore help explain how these are fought, felt and

experienced, and with what consequences for the political order in and after rebel and civil wars (see Thomas 2024).

This is particularly urgent to consider given that civil wars are often fought between smaller nonstate armed groups and superior state military forces. Indeed, wars fought between nonstate and state actors are now far more common than wars fought between countries (Pearlman and Cunningham 2012). A central feature of many of these wars is the existence of rebel governance institutions, which can include everything from well-developed military, political and administrative structures mirroring those of regular governments, to more rudimentary forms of rule. This means that rebel governance is the political order in many parts of the world where wars are fought (Florea 2020). While the size, structure and capabilities of rebel governance vary widely, the importance of women in providing critical support for the war effort is common in rebel governance institutions. In fact, *across* rebel groups and wars, from the Kachin Independence Army in Myanmar to the Mai Mai rebellion in eastern Congo and the Naxalities in India, women have nursed injured soldiers back to life, cooked for frontline troops, entered into 'revolutionary marriages', birthed new soldiers, and often provided the legitimacy and symbolic rationale needed to justify fighting (Roy 2012, Hedström 2017, Marks 2018, Hoffmann and Verweijen 2019). This suggests that women's labour is harnessed for war purposes; indeed preliminary research shows that many rebel groups organise women's participation through specific women's wings (Hedström 2020, p. 202, Loken and Matfess 2023). Meredith Loken and Hilary Matfess's discussion (in this Special Issue) highlights how these wings can be an important avenue for collective action on women's rights and women's leadership.

Thus, everyday ties and familial relations are another critical aspect of rebel wars imbued with gendered relations of power, as Hanna Ketola so powerfully writes in this Special Issue. Intimate relations, including the ties between the household, community and land, are entangled within revolutionary objectives (Hedström et al, this Special Issue) and show how practices of intimacy are a 'core political act' from which rebellions emerge and are managed (Giri, this Special Issue; also see (Matfess 2024). Centring intimate relations in analysis of civil wars and rebel warfare makes it possible to trace the relationship between military objectives and the gendered dynamics affecting everyday relations, which in turns informs why, how and where wars are fought, felt and experienced. As the articles included in this Special Issue tell us, often these everyday relations are targeted and transformed in relation to revolutionary violence – shaping the possibilities for rebel and post-war governance in the most direct sense.

As several articles in this Special Issue make clear, when rebel groups reintegrate into civilian life, women's access to power, and the broader ability of women to mobilise for political purposes, is related to their

experiences during the war, in many cases their labour in undertaking or simply living through violent and non-violent rebellion. Indeed, as Siphokazi Magadla writes about women's participation in the armed struggle against apartheid in South Africa, women's experiences of and demands for equality within armed groups greatly influenced post-Apartheid politics (Magadla 2023). But the effects of participation vary greatly across movements. As Elizabeth Brannon found, women's roles as combatants within the National Resistance Army during the Bush War of 1981–1986 in Uganda positively shaped their opportunities for post-war positions of power (Brannon, this Special Issue), while in the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, set up following the peace agreement between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), female members of MILF and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNFL) have been largely marginalised from accessing positions of authority (Cardeño, Olivius and Åkebo, this Special Issue).

The Special Issue connects insights from feminist political economy, feminist International Relations, civil wars and rebel governance studies to trace the relationship between gendered relations of power and civil and rebel warfare. Considering the prevalence of these types of war there is an urgent need to take seriously women's participation in a variety of rebel groups and in civil wars, and to understand women's labour as a political resource that generates both material and non-material rewards (Hedström 2020). Moreover, these gendered dynamics shape war-time contestations over power in important ways, informing not only who can access positions of influence and authority but also what is to be discussed and considered in the post-war order. The papers in this Special Issue do exactly this through careful attention to women's participation in and after different civil wars, combining quantitative analysis with qualitative approaches. In doing so, the authors engage with several concepts to help think about the relations of women's labour to and experience of civil wars and rebel governance, including militarisation, irregularity, and intimacy and by paying close attention to women's wings, combat and combat service support, and war and post-war governance institutions. In this way, while the recent increase in attention to rebel governance has expanded our collective understanding of wars, the contributions to this Special Issue push the field further forward by including women and taking their labour, participation and experience of wars seriously. This advances critical feminist conversations about civil wars and rebel governance, contributing insights that are theoretically novel and relevant.

Labour

Feminist political economy research has been vital for elucidating the central role played by gendered everyday labour enacted within the home in supporting both markets and militaries (Gunawardana 2013, Elfenbein 2019). Recent interventions in critical military studies and in feminist political economy suggest war efforts are made possible through the exploitation of women's paid and unpaid reproductive and productive labour, centred in the household (Parashar 2013, Hedström 2017, Basham and Catignani 2018).

As Patricia Owens argues, households are spatially organised, historically specific sites through which (gendered) power relations are (re)produced, influencing the success (or otherwise) of military campaigns (Owens 2015). Here, the household takes on a regulative function in reinforcing the distinction between unpaid and paid labour, in other words, between household labour and that is undertaken outside of the household. This renders invisible that and those usually relegated to the household, including women and their labour, even though, as Carolyn Nordstrom's work shows, women are fundamental to war economies because of their undervalued work often undertaken at a subsistence level (Nordstrom 2004). This suggests that women's social reproductive duties underpin not only the market by virtue of reproducing labour power (Federici 2004, 2019) but broader war economies, too (Peterson 2009). Indeed, recent work shows that gendered labour forms an integral part of state, or as we explore here, military organising logic (Chisholm and Eichler 2018, Chisholm 2022) by enabling participation in the armed forces and civil wars on an everyday basis. This focus renders visible how militarisation practices are camouflaged within a gendered division of labour that props up national objectives and military campaigns (Enloe 1990, 2000). In other words, replenishment of the military household is critical for military labour power, which women help realise through (cheap) gendered labour centred on the household (Hedström 2020). The household is then a gendered and militarised site both shaped by and shaping conflict and broader war economies. However, women, far from being submissive subjects, engage in actions and reactions to external structural changes that influence not just their own lives, but the lives of their communities as well (Mama and Okazawa-Rey 2012). To paraphrase Hanna Ketola (this Special Issue), processes of rebel governance and civil war sets in motion and transform intimate and familial times in ways that cannot necessarily be managed.

Militarisation

Feminist scholarship on militarisation highlights how these processes are sustained as well as resisted through everyday gendered relations of power (Henry and Natanel 2016), which collapses any supposed binaries between

military and domestic spaces. These are gendered relations of power that connects the state with the household and with the battlefront in order to realise military objectives (Enloe 2000, p. 253). In short, militarisation is what prepares and normalises war: it is 'processes in economy and society that signify preparation for war' (Cockburn 2010) 'characterised by political, economic and cultural features that are as enduring as they are gendered' (Mama and Okazawa-Rey 2012). However, as Alexandra Hyde cautions: 'militarisation is a process that is always in flux: spatially and temporally contingent, socially constricted, non-linear and negotiable, rather than fixed and absolute' (Hyde 2024, p. 5). Militarisation is then not something that appears either naturally nor determinedly, but must be understood as a multidimension and contradictory set of practices which at times maintains and other times troubles both gendered expectations and military power (Hyde 2024).

This research gives weight to the material and ideological components of militarisation as a process, showing how wars and conflicts are not only confined to the high politics of boardrooms and the messy interactions of battlefronts. Rather they are in fact dependent upon, and thus underpinned by, the loyal support 'of women as feminised workers, as respectable and loyal wives, as "civilizing influences", as sex objects, as obedient daughters, as unpaid farmers, as coffee-serving campaigners, as consumers and tourists' (Enloe 1990). These processes create (or attempt to create) a cheap and feminised labour force to be drawn upon when markets and industries need labour: a reserve army of labour, which in this analysis, is extended to include women's support of rebel warfare. Women are recruited in both invisible 'support' roles and to uniformed roles within armed forces when the armed group lacks sufficient 'manpower' to draw from (Enloe 1980). However, women's inclusion and participation in civil war is often rendered invisible by their status as irregular Other: not quite soldier, not quite civilian (Vastapuu, this Special Issue), or they act in ways which will resist or change the reach of military power (Hedström et al, this Special Issue).

Irregularity

Beyond legitimising conflict, militarisation facilitates women's participation in rebel groups and war by replicating a gendered division of labour, drawn from the household. The household is in this way operationalised to engender critical ideological, material and emotional support for the military political-economy apparatus. However, because the military is construed as a masculine institution, the inclusion of women in military spaces invariably results in tensions that have typically been addressed by linking certain positions with a certain gender, such as combat with masculinity (Fieseler *et al*. 2014, Trisko Darden 2023). The military is then not a pre-given masculine space; rather, it is a space that (re)produces notions of masculinity through

processes of militarisation, and vice versa (Chisholm and Stachowitsch 2016, p. 816). Consequently, official positions as combat soldiers and in leadership have been closed off to women in most militaries in order not to disturb the gendered *status quo*, privileging the knowledge, authority and body of the (assumed male) combat soldier (Tidy 2014, p. 3, Chisholm 2017, p. 121). Joanna Tidy deploys the trope 'boots-on-the-ground' to illustrate how militarised masculinity is grounded in the 'authenticity of [combat] experience', which ultimately reinstates gendered relations of power (Tidy 2014, p. 3). This has resulted in the reinforcement of a gendered division of labour which sees women perform primarily feminised support roles or in roles understood to be 'irregular' rather than regular soldiering: in short, it leads to a 'misrecognition of women's contribution' to insurgency warfare (Magadla 2015, p. 397). Feminist studies show that female soldiers, if seen at all, are predominantly framed as being in supportive, less valued, roles or in coerced positions, such as sex slaves or suicide bombers, rather than recognised for their political and ideological commitment to the cause (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, Coulter 2008, Magadla 2015, Darden *et al*. 2019). Indeed, descriptive statistics, available from various existing datasets and research outputs (Henshaw 2015, Thomas and Bond 2015, Wood 2017) indicate that women are present in armed groups to a larger extent than previously known. Yet dominant war narratives still tend to exclude women and their experiences from rebel governance, resulting in their expurgation from official accounts, talks and post-war initiatives.

Intimacy

Feminist research has demonstrated how the organisation of marriage and the family unit, far from being an ordinary and expected occurrence, is a system strictly regulated and controlled to support the objectives of the state (Rai 2002, Federici 2004, Das 2007). Controlling and adapting practices around conjugal relations to fit the objectives of the army may then be crucial for ensuring that individual households acclimatise to changing circumstances and produce goods, services and labour for the army regardless of local circumstances. As Cynthia Enloe argues, marriage is about power (Enloe 2017). Militarized marriages can be therefore be framed as attempts at enforcing control over women as wife-to-soldiers to ensure that these women sustain, rather than question, the militarised missions and objectives of the armed leadership to ensure that the emotional, material and strategic needs of the army are met (Howell 2015, Basham and Catignani 2018).

Indeed, research on rebel and insurgency warfare suggests that marriage is a 'key political resource' (Zharkevich 2019) through which loyalty to the cause is ensured (Goodwin 1997). Within the Lords Resistance Army in Uganda forced marriages and motherhood were central for the achievement of

nationalistic goals, as women were expected to populate the new imagined LRA nation with 'pure' children. This was understood to foster loyalty to the army as the new family units upset traditional kinship lines (Baines 2014). In Sierra Leone, 'bush marriages' between local women and soldiers were strongly encouraged, indeed institutionalised, because they were seen to increase the 'manpower, logical capacity and fighters' social well-being' (Marks 2013, p. 365). This also delegated sustainment of the soldiers and the army away from undersupplied centralised military structures to women and children who had to provide material and emotional support to individual soldiers (Marks 2013, Hedström 2017). These works illustrate how women's labour – harnessed through the institution of marriage and the household – is central to the maintenance of rebel armed organisations, ensuring that the rebel group can keep fighting. Marriage and other forms of intimate relations not only provide rebel groups with much-needed material and physical support, however. Research from across the world shows the importance of intimate ties and reproduction for emotionally and symbolically sustaining revolutionary causes, with rebel groups closely monitoring reproductive policies and relations between recruits. Rebel groups frequently recruit only childless, younger women (Viterna 2013, Darden *et al*. 2019), expecting them to retire upon pregnancy or marriage (Hedström 2018), imposing abortions or contraceptive use on women (Gutierrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017) and enforcing marriages between recruiters or between recruits and local women as a way to harness support for the cause (Marks 2017) and/or to signal - commitment (Roy 2006, Zharkevich 2019). Taken together, these studies show how intimate relationships both inform and are informed by armed conflict, enabling rebel groups to gain legitimacy, recruits and material support. Moreover, in rebel groups engaged in long-term conflict, everyday life is not experienced exclusively on the battlefield, in direct conflict, but also in the mundane rituals of household and community life (Arjona *et al*. 2015). These everyday relations and rituals form a critical dynamic of rebel governance and conflict (Hoffmann and Verweijen 2019), making intimate relations of gender essential for understanding civil war. Indeed, as Hilary Matfess argues, rebel marriages are an under-appreciated driver of both war and post-war dynamics, shaping how women join rebel groups, their experiences as members, and their post-war prospects (Matfess 2024).

Specific Contributions

The papers in this Special Issue apply and operationalise these concepts and ideas differently, but in ways that push the inquiry of civil wars and rebel warfare in new directions by developing careful nuanced analysis of the relationship(s) between gender, labour and war. For example, Elizabeth

Brannon homes in on the relationship between gendered labour during civil wars and post-war opportunities, exploring how women's military labour affect their post-war lives. Using the case of female combatants in the National Resistance Army (NRA) in Uganda, Brannon argues that women who were active primarily in support, rather than leadership roles during the war enjoyed greater political opportunities in the post-conflict period, suggesting that the increase in rebel women's political participation in Uganda was linked to their compliance with rebel order and male leadership. Adding to this argument, Emily Myers, in an in-depth analysis case study of female administrations within the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist rebellion, found that female administrators in rebel governance prioritised or were put in charge of welfare and service provisioning, because this resembled traditional women's work. She proposes that this is because female rebel administrations faced gender-specific pressure from both the armed group and the wider public, which they respond to by taking on feminised labour. Coline Esther Cardeño, Elisabeth Olivius and Malin Åkebo's article similarly shows a relationship between women's wartime mobilisation and their experiences of providing feminised support services in transitional and post-war governance institutions. Their study of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Regions in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) highlights how female members of armed groups in this areas are marginalised from high-level positions by both the (male) leadership of the armed groups and by international peacebuilding actors, yet women contribute extensively to the broader revolutionary agenda through their involvement in social welfare and religious services. Complementing these studies, Hilary Matfess and Meredith Loken delve deeper into how and where women are organised under specific women's wings to provide gendered labour in support of military objectives. By drawing on and compiling the Women's Activities in Armed Rebellion (WAAR) database, they provide evidence about not only the extent to which women's labour is officially harnessed for military purposes, but also describe how and in what ways these wings differ. Through comparative analysis, they find that some women's wings challenge gender norms and provide women forums through which they articulate demands for gender-egalitarianism, while others engage women in traditionally 'feminine', largely domestic activities. The different avenues for mobilisation affect women's opportunities for leadership and advocacy, impacting on opportunities for emancipatory agendas to emerge in the post-war.

Leena Vastapuu explores how gendered notions of irregularity and combat constrains the visibility of female soldiers employed as combat service support in civil wars in the Global South. Vastapuu cautions that this results in *de facto* combat service support officers – the majority being women and girls – being expunged from official war narratives and side-lined in the post-war phases. By learning from Oretha, a combat service support specialist, Vastapuu unpacks the varied ways in which gendered labour and symbolism affect women and

girls' incorporation in fighting forces in Liberia, demonstrating the multiple roles carried out by women and girls despite an overarching narrative deeming women's work as primarily supportive. Several of the contributions also address the importance of intimacy, marriage and 'the familial' for understanding rebel warfare. For example, Keshab Giri's study, investigates the pivotal role played by intimate relations and marriage in consolidating, legitimising and, importantly, underwriting, the rebel political agenda across India and Nepal. Hanna Ketola explores the nexus between gendered labour and intimate ties by putting feminist theories of relationality of violence in conversation with theories of militarism. Using original primary research with women activists engaged in a victim's mobilisation in Nepal, she highlights the connection between gendered labour, intimate relations, and militarism to argue that civil wars generate and transform intimate ties in ways that shape people's experiences of post-war politics. Finally, Jenny Hedström, Hilary Faxon, Zin Mar Phyo, Htoi Pan, Moe Kha Yae, Ka Yay and Mi Mi unpack the varied ways in which female farmers experience and contribute to the Myanmar's Spring Revolution. Using the concept of making meaningful life they find that women's labour, in the face of extensive violence and intimate and public insecurity, allows communities to survive an abusive state by both reclaiming ties to community and nation, and sustaining individual households and revolutionary projects writ-large. Together, these contributions trace the relationship of gendered labour to civil war and rebel governance projects, and help extend our knowledge about how gender relations of power and labour in rebel governance and rebel groups impact rebel order, both during war, in transition from war and in post-war settings.

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