

Empowerment or Backsliding? Female Rebel Combatants and the Status of Women Post-Conflict

by

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Defense Date: July 26, 2024

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in the Department of Political Science in The Graduate School of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between women's participation in armed rebellion and post-conflict gendered outcomes. Particularly, it probes whether the employment of female combatants on the frontlines of armed opposition campaigns generates gains in the status of women upon a conflict's conclusion. It utilizes novel cross-sectional data from the Women's Activities in Armed Rebellion (WAAR) project, a dataset spanning 372 rebel organizations that disaggregates women's participation into 22 activity types. It primarily relies on a measurement indicating the degree to which organizations employ female combatants as well as indices from Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) to examine whether variation in the prevalence of female combatants impacts the status of women in post-conflict societies. Ultimately, it finds no meaningful relationship between women's proximity to violence and their standing in post-conflict society utilizing the current data. However, it highlights the necessity for further methodological focus on women's diverse experiences within armed rebellion and proposes avenues through which to advance this aim.

Dedication

To my Uncle Rob, my Papa Mike, my Grandma Lynne, my sweet Marlo, her very good friends, Papa Rob and Grandma Bridget, and my Uncle Mike, the only person who could somehow turn conversations about calculus, econometrics, the Cold War, and reality television (sometimes all at once!) into memories that stop and embrace me every time the sun shines.

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1. Women, Militarization & Post-Conflict Implications

Though peaceful movements have overtaken violent uprisings as the protest method of choice across the globe, many remain subject to the societal conditions of armed rebellion (Marks and Chenoweth 2020). Coined *militarization*, the term denotes an insidious, all-encompassing process that does not operate within delineated segments of time: both the “anticipation” of armed conflict along with its destructive byproducts stretch through temporal space incalculably (Webster, Chen, and Beardsley 2019, 255). The consequences it entails, while never perfectly identical across affected societies, converge upon gendered grounds: as Cohn and Jacobson (2013) assert, “what remains true in every [militarized] context we know of is that the symbolic and material inextricability of gender and war is an inescapable presence shaping the meanings of women’s political actions—and inactions—in the face of war” (104). That is, in any and every instance, armed conflict operates as a force of change within the bounds of established gendered constructs. Accordingly, it holds the power to reinforce preexisting gendered norms all while situating women and men into a novel sociopolitical context.

Consider, for example, the conceptualization of violence as a man’s game. As the men go about their playing, women sit on the sidelines and spectate, never venturing onto the field themselves but equipped with aid for players if requested. In fact, the women are prepared to provide whatever assistance the players may need, from nursing injuries incurred on the field to recruiting new talent for the team’s lineup. Moreover, through their presence on the bleachers alone, women perform a distinct service: they symbolize their team’s reason for participating. As such, women both encourage as well as signify

success within the game, and the oft-told tale goes that they somehow accomplish this all mindlessly from the sidelines.

Nonsensical as it may sound, belief in this gender dynamic pervades armed conflict contexts. To paraphrase Enloe (2013), stereotype dictates that it is men who proclaim the necessity of a violent offensive, who draft their combat strategies, who march into battle, and who ultimately protect the women, children, and elders who cannot defend themselves. Victorious or not, it is once again men who negotiate a conflict's resolution and construct the post-conflict society that follows. Simultaneously, women honor their natural propensities for peacemaking and caretaking. They shy away from violence but nurture the men who must engage, for how else would women survive if not for their valiant soldiers (1)? Aware of this dependent relationship, men on both sides weaponize violence against women as an effective combat strategy, understanding that an attack against the enemy's women asserts dominance over the enemy entirely. From this perspective, women in armed conflict zones are uniquely vulnerable because they do not actually participate in conflict: rather, they support those involved in an inherently limited capacity from removed, sheltered hiding places.

However, the true experiences of women in armed resistance are far less uniform. While women, as a collective, face distinct threats of violence, their wartime roles fall somewhere on a spectrum. Indeed, women do not solely perform auxiliary duties. As seen in El Salvador and Türkiye under the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), respectively, some rebel organizations rely on women's participation in violent combat alongside men (Vásquez 1997; Marcus

2007). Probing why some groups deploy women as combatants while others uphold stereotypical norms, Thomas and Wood (2018) determine societies with higher indicators of gender equality pre-conflict are more likely to see women among the combat ranks of rebel forces once fighting unfolds. Still, the “social origins” of female combatants are not one-size-fits-all, and—just like men—women sometimes aspire to personally engage in violent combat.

Within the context of insurgency, women may posit frontline fighting as retribution against egregious state leadership. After interviewing female military commanders from 18 rebel organizations, Mazurana (2013) reports several sought out rebel forces upon their release from state imprisonment (148). Outside of individual vendettas, women may also enlist in rebel operations due to promises of, “equality, worth, of being taken seriously, of operating within an elite, respected force, of redeeming oneself for past (usually gendered) transgressions, and liberation” (167). Of course, not all women on the frontline exist there by choice. Some organizations forcibly recruit women to their combat ranks, and women may join others simply for lack of a viable alternative.

Though undoubtedly important, I do not analyze the various paths women (willingly or unwillingly) take to the frontlines of armed rebellion in this paper. Instead, I build upon Thomas and Wood’s (2018) examination of the pre-conflict societal conditions encouraging women’s frontline involvement and investigate the post-conflict conditions of societies wherein women fought on the frontlines of armed rebellion.

Particularly, I explore whether the increased employment of female combatants generates greater gains in the status of women following periods of intrastate conflict.

1.1 Theory and Hypothesis

Researching the effects of women's participation in rebellion, Marks and Chenoweth (2020) find that, when women actively participate in failed *non-violent* campaigns, they experience a "substantial predicted backslide in women's empowerment." However, this conclusion does not transfer to their violent counterparts: instead, "there is significantly less risk of women's disempowerment after violent campaigns," regardless of campaign success or failure (5). The authors suspect this distinction stems from the comparatively greater level of international attention violent conflict garners (6), but I propose another source: the insertion of women into traditionally male spaces of violent combat requires an overhaul of stereotypical gender ideologies. After all, if women are truly defenseless creatures of peace, no justification could ever prove sufficient for their employment on the frontlines. Once women do infiltrate the male sphere of violence, however, their alleged gender-based limitations unravel further, for what was once deemed impossible occurs all around.¹ The more women enter, the less stable stereotypes remain, and the primary witnesses of women's

¹ By "gender-based limitations," I mean to describe the restrictions gendered stereotypes impose upon both women and men in the context of armed conflict. For example, if subscribing to gendered stereotypes, it seems impossible for women to engage in violence as they are deemed naturally peaceful creatures. This natural peacefulness is inseparable from womanhood, and it reduces women to a monolith with a limited set of societal opportunities. Through serving in combat, women participate in an activity outside of this set and thereby defy the alleged gender-based limitations of womanhood.

integration into violence and security are those who comprised its previous monopoly: men.

I theorize that, when women of armed rebellion move from their fixed, distant positions of support into those of frontline esteem, men fulfilling the same roles observe—willingly or not—that women are both capable and efficient at activities thought beyond their scope.² When this happens during armed rebellion, a time ripe for societal transformation, once intractable beliefs lose rigidity. As conflict upends physical society, previous ideological structures give way to emerging ideas, and change becomes as great a possibility as it may ever be. For women, opportunities on the battlefield may manifest into opportunities in the society to follow, and thus increased participation in combat may provide the ideological foundations needed for the conflict's gender dynamic—one in which women engage in the male sport of violence *alongside* men—to flourish post-conflict.

In other words, the implementation of a gender-inclusive combat force ensures male soldiers see with their own eyes women performing highly-regarded, masculinized roles. Within such a force, women are unchained from the confines of background support roles, and they may thereby assess violent combat as a source of empowerment: women's inclusion on the frontline represents a transcendence of previous gender-based barriers to participation. Accordingly, the post-conflict society they find themselves in

² The distance of women's support positions noted here is relative to militant combat in the traditional sense—not the rebel campaign itself, as women are integral to successful outcomes and endure violence whether fighting on the frontline or not.

will consist of men who have seen female combatants step outside circumscribed gender roles and women who have firsthand experienced what the outside feels like, and they will unlikely retreat back indoors without resistance (Ingiriis and Hoehne 2013). The more female combatants involved in a rebel organization, the more pronounced their frontline presence becomes and the more women's voices there are to express discontent post-conflict. In this way, the conditions of armed rebellion may be conducive to the elevation of women's status post-conflict or, at the very least, the avoidance of a backsliding of women's rights as occurs after non-violent campaign failure (Marks and Chenoweth 2020, 5).

Overall, then, the key distinction between violent and non-violent rebel campaigns with high levels of women's participation lies in the former's requirement that women merge into the masculinized realms of violence, power, and sacrifice, thereby showcasing the deception of gender-based limitations long wielded to justify women's disempowerment. Non-violent campaigns are more prone to gendered backlash if unsuccessful as they do not require such a drastic role shift that, in turn, kickstarts further role shifts post-conflict with the power to elevate women's status. With this in mind, I hypothesize that, as women's participation on the frontline of armed rebellion increases, so does the status of women in post-conflict society.

This paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 details my data, measures, and empirical strategy employed to investigate the relationship between the presence of female combatants in armed rebellion and the status of women post-conflict. Section 3 then presents the results of an Ordinary Least Squares Regression (OLS) performed to

test my hypothesis and discusses their implications for women in armed conflict. Finally, Section 4 offers brief concluding remarks, overall limitations, and suggestions for relevant future research.

2. Data, Measures & Empirical Strategy

To execute my analysis using the method of OLS, I draw on existing sources and generate a comprehensive dataset spanning 155 rebel campaigns throughout six world regions (classified following the World Bank's analytical groupings): East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The unit of analysis is the intrastate conflict-dyad, meaning each observation encompasses two parties engaged in armed conflict: a state military force and an opposing rebel group (Kreutz 2010). As such, periods of fighting between actor pairs delineate specific instances of armed conflict that may have otherwise fallen under the umbrella of larger opposition movements. This isolates women's participation into individual organizations, enabling insight into the varying compositions of rebel groups and their subsequent impacts on conflict outcomes.

2.1 Independent Variables and Associated Data: The WAAR Project

To capture the degree to which women engage in violent combat, I utilize novel cross-sectional data from the Women's Activities in Armed Rebellion (WAAR) project, also measured at the intrastate conflict-dyad level (Loken and Matfess 2024). As its name suggests, the WAAR project disaggregates women's activities in armed rebellion into 22 measures, each categorized as one of three participation types: violent frontline combat, non-combat auxiliary work, or leadership positions. It adopts the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) Dyadic Dataset's conceptualization of armed conflict, setting the violence threshold for qualifying conflict-dyads at 25 casualties per year (Themnér 2015,

2). Once an intrastate conflict produces less than 25 deaths in a calendar year, it is no longer coded as active.

Nevertheless, this does not necessarily imply a rebel group's extinction: though sometimes inactivity coincides with disbandment, at other points it only denotes a break in concerted, targeted efforts. Later, the group may return to combat, and—if its fight against the state incurs greater than 25 casualties—it will again meet UCDP's criteria for active armed conflict. However, the WAAR project diverges from the UCDP dataset's coding in that it does not specify individual conflict episodes for organizations that underwent periods of inactivity. Due to a lack of reliable time-series data, the WAAR project instead follows a “static, holistic” approach and assesses women's participation over each organization's entire existence (Loken and Matfess 2024, 493). Therefore, the participatory measures associated with a conflict-dyad represent the cumulative experience of that conflict-dyad rather than a specific conflict episode between its actor pairs.

The WAAR project covers 372 conflict-dyads over the period 1946 to 2015 and, pending data availability, codes qualifying cases through 2020. It complements previous endeavors to capture the experience of women in rebel campaigns, and its many participatory measures elucidate that women's contributions permeate throughout all aspects of armed rebellion. To quantify the magnitude of women's presence, it refines Wood and Thomas' (2017) *Women in Armed Rebellion Dataset* (WARD) and employs a four-point ordinal scale estimating the “prevalence” of women's participation for each participation type, as illustrated in Table I (Loken and Matfess 2024, 492). To meet the

standards of a High (4) prevalence ranking, women only need account for 20 percent of an organization's frontline combatants, reflecting the reality that—for all the seemingly irreconcilable differences between warring parties—the traditional marriage of women to auxiliary work unites the global landscape of armed conflict.

Despite this gendered status quo, the WAAR project makes clear women have indeed seen the frontlines of armed rebellion. Pertinent to the current study, WAAR defines “frontline” roles as those, “involving participation in armed combat (including but not limited to the use of guns, grenades, bombs, and other weapons) and/or combat training; the perpetration of violence; or otherwise in the front-line environment in support of the group” (Loken and Matfess 2024). It additionally distinguishes between military and non-military manifestations of women's leadership, thus enabling the examination of women's proximity to violence across the ranks of rebel forces. As is the case with women's general combat participation, I consider women's service as military leaders a potential catalyst of gains for the status of women post-conflict. Following my theory, the employment of female military leaders should be an even more powerful source of upward change as it requires men to view women in positions of both authority and violence, two historically masculinized concepts wielded to justify women's lack of access to socioeconomic and political worlds.

Table 1: WAAR’s Participation Prevalence Scale

<i>Participation prevalence</i>	<i>Coding criteria</i>
Not verified (0)	Women’s participation not verified
Occasional (1)	Women participated occasionally <ul style="list-style-type: none">– Reflects cases where organizations appear not to regularly recruit women, but women’s occasional participation is verified:– Qualitatively described as, but not limited to, ‘occasional’, ‘infrequent’ and ‘rare’ and/or– Quantitatively estimated to comprise fewer than 5% of participants
Low (2)	Women participated at low levels <ul style="list-style-type: none">– Reflects cases where organizations appear to involve women with some regularity, but where women’s participation appears comparatively low– Qualitatively described as, but not limited to, ‘in low numbers’, ‘small’, ‘few’ and/or– Quantitatively estimated to comprise between 5% and 9% of participants
Moderate (3)	Women participated at moderate levels <ul style="list-style-type: none">– Reflects cases where organizations appear to consistently recruit women at modest, but not the highest, proportions– Qualitatively described as, but not limited to, ‘moderately’, ‘large minority’ and ‘prominent’ and/or– Quantitatively estimated to comprise between 10% and 19% of participants
High (4)	Women participated at high levels <ul style="list-style-type: none">– Reflects cases where organizations appear to substantially involve women at, comparatively, the highest proportions– Qualitatively described as, but not limited to, ‘at high levels’, ‘widespread’, ‘substantial’, ‘significant’ ‘major’ and/or– Quantitatively estimated to comprise at least 20% of participants

Source: Loken and Matfess (2024, p. 492)

2.1.1 A Note on Data Cleaning

Before specifying this study’s independent variables, my data cleaning procedures warrant mention. Out of the WAAR project’s 372 conflict-dyads, my analysis examined 155 after several considerations. First, I removed groups belonging to a single coalition to limit redundancy. I dropped all but one rebel group from each coalition and kept the case which exhibited the highest level of women’s prevalence on the frontline.¹ The reason underlying this course of action centers around my hypothesis and unit of

¹ I discuss the variable utilized to determine this in the following sub-section.

analysis: I hypothesize a positive relationship between women's increased prevalence on the frontline and the status of women post-conflict at the conflict-dyad level, meaning, the more a rebel organization employs women in combat, the greater women's societal status should grow in their post-conflict state. This empirical strategy does not address the imperfect reality that, in times of armed rebellion, there can be multiple (non-coitional) opposition groups fighting under the same overarching insurgency. Within this context, which organization should set the relationship between the prevalence of female combatants and societal conditions for women post-conflict, if any?

While this question is worthy of empirical investigation, I lack the ability to do so in this paper and instead move forward with the logic that, when considering multiple rebel groups engaging at the same time against the same state government, the organization boasting the greatest prevalence of women on the frontline should influence group outcomes. In other words, I theorize that the presence of women on the frontline within an individual organization should improve conditions for all women (not just those involved with the organization) upon the conflict's conclusion. In terms of coalitions, this translates to the idea that, if one coalition member qualifies as a High (4) on the WAAR project's scale, the coalition (and society) collectively should enjoy the benefits this high score generates. Thus, it follows that—if faced with a related group of conflict-dyads—my analysis reflects the highest recorded value of frontline prevalence.

Of course, this paper may benefit from alternative approaches. Perhaps the organization with the most members should have remained in the data as it represents the greatest slice of a coalition. Or, perhaps an aggregate measure of coalition members'

frontline prevalence scores would yield increased precision as this strategy eliminates the need for data removal. Moreover, it may have been appropriate to examine every case as an individual and disregard coalitional status. Given all these circumstances, it is possible my operationalization induces systematic error in the form of measurement bias.² However, for lack of more complex methods, I proceed with the knowledge of my strategy's theoretical and empirical limitations.

As I am solely concerned with variation in the number of female combatants as this relates to post-conflict outcomes, I additionally excluded conflict-dyads without verified women's frontline involvement.³ Simply put, I do not wish to probe the comparative implications of violent versus nonviolent campaigns; rather, building off of Marks and Chenoweth (2020), I seek to investigate variation amongst violent campaigns exclusively, with the ultimate goal of uncovering whether a feature of violent campaigns contributes to their avoidance of the backsliding of women's rights as occurs following nonviolent campaign failure.

Next, I dropped a subset of cases based upon the coding of my dependent variable, and I discuss this process further in an upcoming subsection. Last, I excluded the conflict-dyad consisting of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Government of Myanmar (Burma) because I discovered its end date

² Particularly, my theory may not accurately reflect population conditions and thus produce biased slope estimators.

³ I determined this using a binary measure called *frontline*, where 0 = unverified women's involvement and 1 = women's involvement verified. I dropped the cases coded as 0—these cases are also coded as 0 on the Participation Prevalence scale (see Table 1).

coincided with the beginning of the Myanmar Civil War in 2021.⁴ To capture the post-conflict environment I intend to, the state of an included conflict-dyad cannot find itself in another conflict upon one conflict-dyad's termination as this leaves no time for post-conflict conditions to manifest. I suspect other cases within this study pose the same analytical problem, and I would ideally remove them as well. However, the MNDAA-Government of Myanmar (Burma) case is the only that clearly stood out in the data, so I opted to remove it exclusively.

2.1.2 Primary Independent Variable of Interest: The Prevalence of Women's Frontline Participation

To capture the degree to which women engage in violent frontline combat, I utilize the variable *frontline_prev_best*. Quantified along the scale in Table 1, *frontline_prev_best* supplies the fairest estimate of the extent to which women participate on the frontlines as compared to the high and low estimates the WAAR project also calculates. This measure demonstrates variation in the magnitude of women's presence on the frontline, suggesting binary measures of women's combat insufficiently portray the uniqueness of women's armed rebellion experiences across the globe.

Figure 1 displays the global distribution of the frontline prevalence of female combatants (*frontline_prev_best*) for the 155 rebel organizations included in this study. The histogram excludes 32 conflict-dyads due to data unavailability, so the total cases

⁴ A subsequent sub-section discusses my method of determining a conflict's termination. Termination dates are critical as they allow for the "post-conflict" component of my study—without them, I could not operationalize a "post-conflict" period.

shown amounts to 123. From the data visualization, it is clear most organizations employ low levels of women on the frontlines, though 43 exhibit moderate to high levels of female combatant prevalence. Figure 2 illustrates the same distribution using percentages, thereby displaying the greater than 20 percent of cases without enough data to determine prevalence levels. Importantly, these cases are still coded as employing female combatants (1) under a binary measure labeled *frontline*, where 0 signifies coders could not verify women’s involvement and 1 represents verified women’s involvement. Thus, it seems there is limited available information on these particular cases, and they may warrant increased scholarly attention for inclusion in future studies.

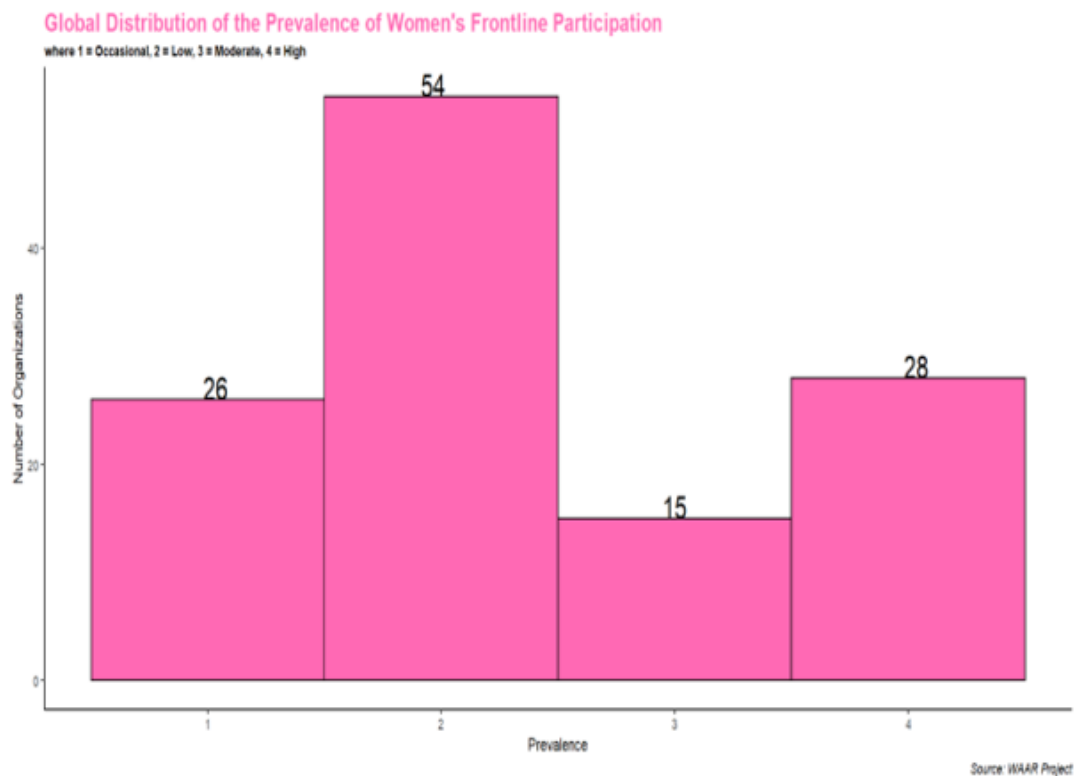


Figure 1: Number of Organizations at Each Prevalence Level

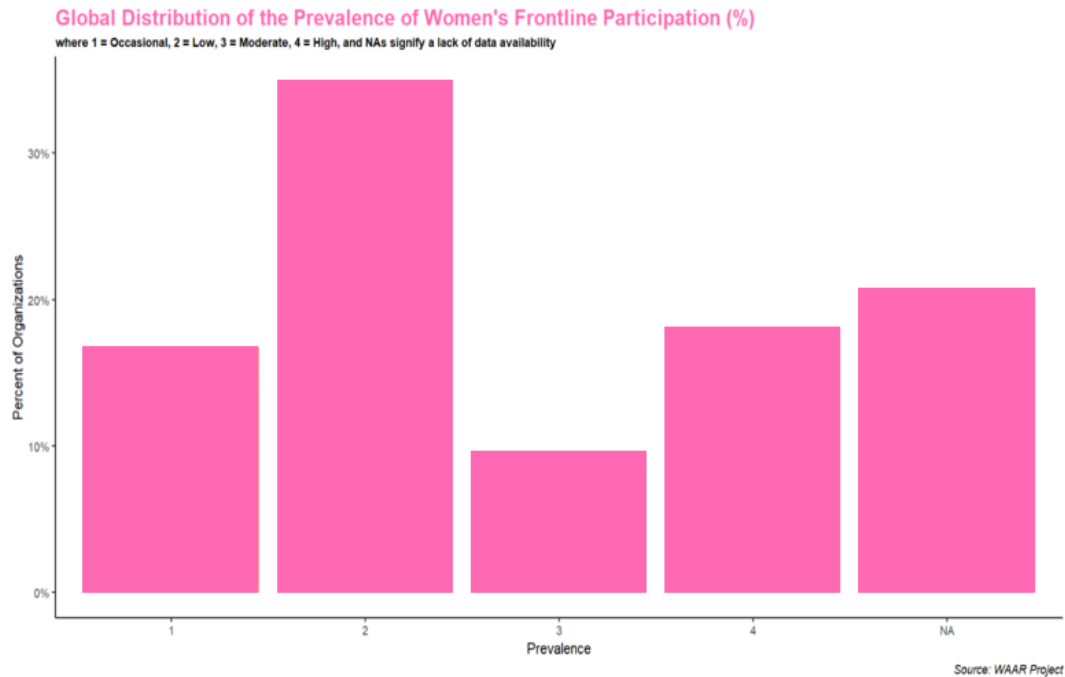


Figure 2: Percent of Organizations at Each Prevalence Level

Finally, Figure 3 reveals the geographic spread of the conflict-dyads according to women’s participation in frontline combat. Latin America and the Caribbean boast the greatest number of organizations who meet the criteria of a High (4) prevalence level on the WAAR project’s scale, though Loken and Matfess (2024) propose the comparatively large level of scholarship afforded to left-wing rebellions in the region may skew the true global population spread: since there is plentiful information available on Latin American cases, coders can readily verify the degree of women’s participation within each (493).⁵

⁵ Given the region’s many regime transitions accompanied by its history of political violence, gender and armed resistance scholarship has found rich examples in Latin America for over three decades. For a few examples across time, refer to the following: Jelin, Zammit, and Thompson (1990); Stephen (1997); Shayne (1999); Dietrich and Luisa (2011); Viterna (2013); and Gutiérrez, F. Franco, and F.C. Franco (2017).

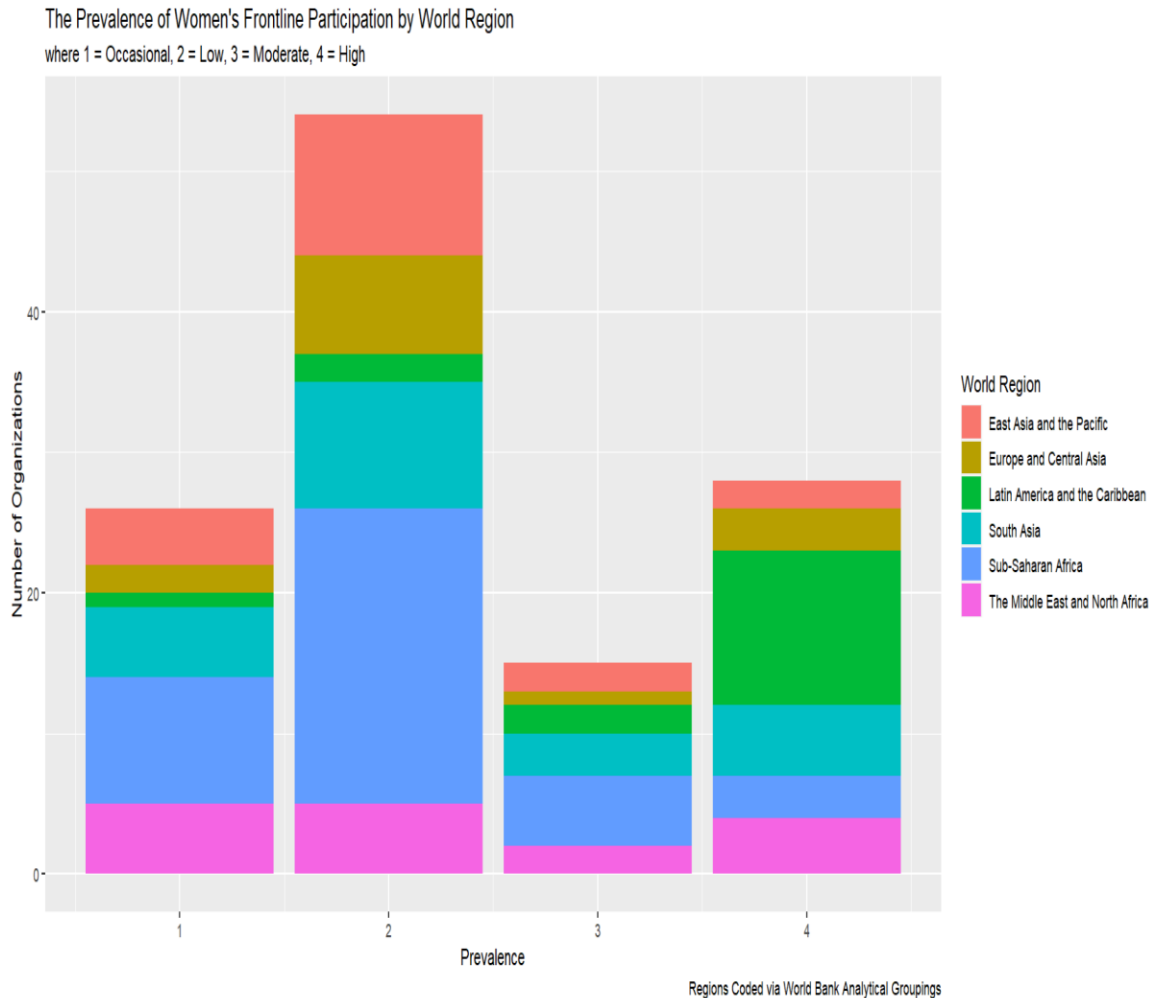


Figure 3: Geographic Spread of World Regions Across Prevalence Levels

However, the same is not necessarily true for other regions, so it is probable some cases are erroneously coded (or, not coded at all) because of a lack of data availability. Thus, the focus on Latin American opposition groups may inflate their positioning within the upper levels of Figure 3's scale. At the other end of the spectrum, no North American cases are present in the data, and the Middle East and North Africa is the most evenly spread region across all levels.

2.1.3 Secondary Independent Variable of Interest: Women in Military Leadership

To fully encapsulate my target concept, I employ a second WAAR project measure as a proxy of women's closeness to violence within rebel organizations. The binary variable *lead_military* communicates whether women occupied military-related positions of leadership, with a value of 1 indicating women's presence in these roles and 0 their absence. While this binary indicator offers less information than *frontline_prev_best*, it captures a dimension of leadership the former cannot sufficiently cover. Plus, the idea of male combatants not only serving with women on the frontline but also listening to their commands while doing so bolsters my theory of a positive relationship between the magnitude of women's frontline involvement and the status of women post-conflict.

Still, this measure struggles in that it does not support a core subject of this analysis: variation in the extent of women's frontline involvement. As a binary measure, it instead reflects simply whether a campaign employs women in positions of military leadership (1) or does not (0), relaying nothing about the degree to which women fulfill leadership roles in organizations coded as "1." If using this variable alone, I would thus fail to accurately assess my hypothesis. Accordingly, an aggregate measure of women's frontline involvement including cases of military leadership may be ideal. As the data does not offer this, I proceed with the variables as they were originally coded but first check for collinearity. Using the Pearson correlation coefficient, I find $r = .425$. While

there is no standard metric defining the bounds of permissible linear correlation, I conclude this value does not inhibit my analysis and continue on with my operationalization of women's frontline involvement using the two explanatory variables discussed.

2.2 Dependent Variables

To capture the status of women within post-conflict societies, no clear operationalization path emerges. Indeed, measurement of the status of women follows no standard guidelines, and past scholarship addresses this challenge through a variety of methods (Baxter and Taylor 2014; Hanmer and Klugman 2016; Liebowitz and Zwingel 2014; Klasen 2006; Pospieszna 2015). Analyzing the status of women within pre-conflict zones, Thomas and Wood (2018) look towards a woman's ability to integrate into her state's "social and economic institutions," considering a state's fertility rate, secondary education ratio, and female labor force participation appropriate proxies (222). On the other hand, Alkire et al. (2013) rely on survey data from Bangladesh, Guatemala and Uganda to estimate women's empowerment in agricultural development. To assess warfare-driven changes in women's empowerment, Webster, Chen, and Beardsley (2019) look to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project's, "Women's Political Empowerment Index," an aggregate measure containing information regarding political power as well as civil liberties and social roles (264). Given V-Dem's widespread use and the similarities between our two research questions, I utilize V-Dem data for my

outcome variables as well (Coppedge et al. 2024).⁶ Ultimately, I generate two models that each operationalize the social status of women from unique perspectives.

2.2.1 Model 1 Dependent Variable: Egalitarian Democracy

During their examination of nonviolent and violent rebel movements, Marks and Chenoweth (2020) operationalized women’s empowerment in two ways, the first relying on a state’s level of egalitarian democracy. While not directly related to gains in the status of women, egalitarian democracy may be most likely form of governance for women’s empowerment to flourish as it generates a sociopolitical environment conducive to inclusivity and equality.⁷ Interestingly, Marks and Chenoweth (2020) explain that, though at a “modest” level, women’s participation in violent campaigns corresponded with an increase in egalitarian democracy five years post-conflict as compared to violent campaigns without women employed on the frontlines (5).⁸ Moreover, regardless of a campaign’s outcome, evidence suggests violent campaigns with high levels of women’s participation are associated with “modest” post-conflict gains in egalitarian democracy. This entails important societal implications as a regime type associated with gender

⁶ Similar to Webster, Chen, and Beardsley’s (2019) assessment of the relations between wartime characteristics and women’s empowerment, I examine a feature of armed intrastate conflict episodes—the degree to which women participate in combat—as it relates to the status of women post-conflict.

⁷ Sigman and Lindberg (2018) define egalitarian democracy as, “a type of governance in which citizens across all social groups are equally capable of exercising their political rights and freedoms, and of influencing political and governing processes” and then break this conceptualization down into three dimensions: equal protection of rights and freedoms, equal distribution of resources, and equal access to power. While Marks and Chenoweth (2020) do not define egalitarian democracy themselves, my discussion assumes their understanding aligns with Sigman and Lindberg’s (2020).

⁸ Effect size is not reported, so I use the same terminology as the authors.

equality is also likely to also secure gains in socioeconomic developments all together (Klasen 2005; Gopinath 2022; McKinnon et al. 2016).

In this paper, I consider the possible mechanism driving the violent campaign outcomes Marks and Chenoweth (2020) identify and assess whether variation in the level of women’s frontline participation influences those related to egalitarian democracy. Being that Marks and Chenoweth (2020) emphasized women’s participation as a motivating factor, I hypothesize that, as the level of women’s participation increases on the frontline of violent campaigns, so does the degree of egalitarian democracy their post-conflict societies enjoy.

I utilize V-Dem’s Egalitarian Democracy Index ($v2x_egaldem$) to assess the gains, or losses, in egalitarian principles of democracy a conflict-dyad experiences five years post-conflict. Accordingly, my first model’s outcome variable conveys the difference in V-Dem’s Egalitarian Democracy Index between a conflict’s termination and five years after—I set my post-conflict period at five years to replicate Marks and Chenoweth (2020).⁹ V-Dem indices are measured on an interval scale, with 0 the lowest point and 1 the highest.

V-Dem recognizes egalitarian democracy in states where, “rights and freedoms of individuals are protected equally across all social groups, resources are distributed equally across all social groups, and groups and individuals enjoy equal access to power” (Coppedge et al. 2024). While this definition does not exclusively discuss women, it

⁹ I will explain my determination of a conflict’s end date in a subsequent section.

surely necessitates equality for women (as a social group) for an egalitarian democracy to function properly. Empirical evidence supports this, Paudel and Araujo (2017) documenting evidence from Nepal that “the arrival of democracy” ushered in with it significant increases in “women’s say in decision making” (325). Therefore, I consider gains in a conflict-dyad’s Egalitarian Democracy Index five years at the outset of a conflict as a proxy for an increased status of women post-conflict.

2.2.2 Dependent Variable 2: Civil Liberties

I construct a second model with a dependent variable exclusively focused on women’s status to ensure I capture my intended outcome variable’s concept. This variable, called Gender Equality in Respect to Civil Liberties (v2c1gencl), is measured on a 0 to 1 scale as well. To obtain index values, V-Dem asks, “Do women enjoy the same level of civil liberties as men?” It considers women’s “access to justice, private property rights, freedom of movement, and freedom from forced labor” all manifestations of civil liberties with the power of elevating women’s social status. (Coppedge et al. 2024)

While civil liberties do not represent the totality of components affecting women’s status in societies, they account for the increased social opportunity I expect women’s participation in armed conflict to inspire. For the purposes of this analysis, the magnitude of change in women’s civil liberties five years post-conflict (measured as the difference in a state’s “Gender Equality in Respect to Civil Liberties” score between five years post-conflict and the conflict’s termination) matters more than the discrete value of women’s civil liberties post-conflict (i.e., a state’s score on the “Gender Equality in Respect to Civil Liberties” in the fifth year after a conflict’s termination).

2.2.3 Conflict Termination Measurement

To determine the magnitude of change in women's social statuses, I utilize data from UCDP's Conflict Termination Dataset (Kreutz 2010) to pinpoint a conflict's end date. Some conflict-dyads in my dataset are not included in UCDP's dataset and, if this was the case, I researched their end dates independently. If I could not verify their end dates, I removed them as they were now ineligible for assessment through my outcome variables. The most recent year of measurement for my outcome variables' V-Dem scores is 2023, so I additionally eliminated conflict-dyads either a) ending after 2018 or b) ongoing. As the WAAR data for my independent variables is holistic and does not specify years of conflict associated with its rankings, if an organization underwent several hiatuses (and thus had several listed termination dates), I use the most recent termination year as I suspect data availability to increase with time, meaning WAAR's rankings are more likely to reflect information closer to the current date than farther away.

As stated previously, UCDP equates a conflict episode's end to when it produces fewer than 25 deaths in a calendar year. I utilized the variable "ependdate" to determine the specific year a conflict-dyad met that condition. For each conflict-dyad's outcome variable measurements, I subtracted the V-Dem scores they received the year of conflict termination from their scores five years out. Negative values indicate a decrease in index scores—or, a reduction the status of women—while positives denote an increase: gains in the status of women. Ultimately, I suspect that the cases with the largest positive values

also measured high on the WAAR project's participation prevalence scale regarding women's frontline combat.

2.3 Control Variables

To address potential omitted variable bias, this analysis controls for two variables linked to both my independent and dependent variables of interest.

2.3.1 Economic Development

First, I control for the economic development of each state within a conflict-dyad actor pair. To do so, I utilize the natural log of each state's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita at the five-year post-conflict mark. Scholars have long linked economic development to the advancement of gender equality as well as democratization (Duflo 2011; Rodrik 1999; Bhagwati 2002; Klasen 2005). Additionally, Thomas and Wood (2018) find societies who possess greater levels of gender equality prior to armed rebellion are more likely to engender greater levels of women's frontline participation once conflict begins. Since economic development and gender equality are correlated, higher pre-conflict GDPs per capita may drive both women's integration into socioeconomic activities (Thomas and Wood's proxy for gender equality) and the combat wings of opposition groups, and I thus must hold GDP values constant in my models.

2.3.2 Religiosity, Fundamentalism & Politics

Next, I seek to control for a measure capturing the extent to which political leaders indoctrinate religion into state governance. Typically, states that govern based on a religious code exhibit worse societal conditions for women than their secular

counterparts. Often, fundamentalist doctrine dictates women marry young and undertake the traditional role of motherhood, devoting themselves to caring for their families and honoring their husbands without any regard for personal dreams or aspirations (Forman-Rabinovici 2018; Shachar 2005). Fundamentalism demands women strictly adhere to the guidelines men impose upon their lives and, within such societies, men's control of women remains an everlasting top priority as it embodies the structural power force: male dominance over the feminine (Yuval-Davis 1991). Accordingly, gender equality is comparatively less attainable in such societies, and leaders of these states maintain a vested interest in the upkeep of an oppressive status quo. Due to this emphasis on unequal social conditions, non-secular states tend to perform poorly on measures of democracy as well.

Regarding my independent variable of women's frontline participation in armed conflict, Wood and Thomas (2017) provide evidence that societies governed via religious political legitimacy are less likely to employ women in combat roles during armed rebellion, underscoring the importance of controlling for the force of religion in the political world. As I cannot locate an existing dataset capturing the degree of (non)secularization of a state, I instead construct a binary variable indicating whether a conflict-dyad's state government has declared an official state religion. I gather this information from a Pew Research Center (2017) report listing countries where leaders officially ruled under religious code.

Of course, this binary measure suffers in that it groups all countries with state religions into a single theoretical category and does not account for the year in which a

state declared an official religion: it simply states whether, in contemporary society, the state government of a conflict-dyad actor pair possesses one. Consequently, this measure may misrepresent a conflict-dyad's true post-conflict environment regarding the ruling style of those in political power.

Still, most states who currently mandate religion have historically integrated fundamentalism into their governance. After all, fundamentalists justify their practices on the basis of ideological tradition. Furthermore, I am more concerned with the general non-secular ruling patterns of states that integrate religious thinking into their sociopolitical systems rather than the legality of proclaiming an official state religion. Therefore, this binary measurement's ability to accurately capture its intended concept should remain relatively unaffected regardless of when qualifying states legally declared religions.

2.4 Models

The variables detailed in this section form the following two models, where "PC" = post-conflict:

$$PC_{egal\text{dem}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{combatprevalence} + \beta_2 \text{militaryleadership} + \beta_3 \ln GDP_{pc} + \beta_4 \text{statereligion} + u$$

$$PC_{civillib} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{combatprevalence} + \beta_2 \text{militaryleadership} + \beta_3 \ln GDP_{pc} + \beta_4 \text{statereligion} + u$$

Both models assess the relationship between women's participation on the frontlines of armed rebellion and the status of women post-conflict. However, the first conceptualizes the latter through the governance lens of egalitarian democracy, while the

second directly taps into women's societal opportunities as dictated by an assessment of civil liberties.

3. Results

I perform OLS regression to test my main hypothesis that increased levels of women’s participation on the frontlines of armed rebellion promote gains in the status of women post-conflict. Due to NA values signifying missing information, the regressions utilize data from 119 observations rather than my dataset’s full 155. The following subsections present regression outputs for each model as well as their substantive implications.

3.1 Model 1

Table 2: Regressing Egalitarian Democracy on Female Combat Prevalence

Egalitarian Democracy				
<i>Predictors</i>	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>std. Error</i>	<i>CI</i>	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	0.13	0.04	0.04 – 0.22	0.004
Combat Prevalence	-0.01	0.01	-0.03 – 0.00	0.118
Military Leadership	0.02	0.02	-0.02 – 0.06	0.380
State Religion	-0.03	0.01	-0.05 – -0.01	0.012
<u>GDPpc</u> (logged)	-0.01	0.00	-0.01 – -0.00	0.032
Observations	119			
R ² / R ² adjusted	0.075 / 0.042			

Table 2 shows the results of regressing Egalitarian Democracy on my model's explanatory variables. Robust standard errors are reported. Overall, it is clear I must fail to reject the null hypothesis as my primary independent variable of interest—Women's Combat Prevalence—is both statistically insignificant with a small effect size in an unexpected direction. Its slope estimate indicates that, holding all other independent variables fixed, moving up a rank on the WAAR project's participation prevalence scale coincides with a .01 decrease in a conflict-dyad's Egalitarian Democracy score five years after its termination date. Though very much statistically insignificant ($p = .380$), the coefficient on Military Leadership substantively communicates that, all else constant, conflict-dyads that employ women in positions of military leadership should experience a .02 increase in Egalitarian Democracy five years post-conflict. The directional differences between my two independent variables of interest suggest that, while the presence of women in armed combat may benefit outcomes for women post-conflict, these outcomes do not improve as women's participation increases.

The negative relationship between women's frontline participation and egalitarian democracy post-conflict may originate from the regional compositions of those highest on the WAAR project's prevalence scale. Shown in Figure 3, Latin America and the Caribbean cases easily dominate level 4. This may unduly influence the directional relationship of Model 1's independent and dependent variables as Latin America possesses a long, tenuous history with democracy (Ellner 2002) and—while regional gains have accrued over the past few decades—periods of democratic backsliding have no doubt accompanied them, situating the regional consolidation of democracy as

“wobbly” at best (Bahar et al. 2022). Highlighting the similarities between Latin America’s troubled past with democracy and the struggles of contemporary democratic states, Levitsky (2018) explains, “while Latin American democracies may be surviving, few are thriving” (102). As such, the concentration of Latin American cases at high levels of the WAAR project’s scale may drive the association between increased women’s frontline participation and decreased scores of Egalitarian Democracy.

Turning to my control variables, both appear statistically significant, though only the interpretation of State Religion ($p = .012$) makes theoretical sense. Its coefficient suggests that, holding all other variables fixed, conflict-dyads originating in countries that have legally adopted a state religion experience a loss of .03 points on the Egalitarian Democracy Index five years post-conflict. This is unsurprising as these states are less likely to practice democracy of any kind to begin. However, the coefficient on logged GDP per capita posits that a 1% increase in a state’s GDP per capita results in a $.01/100 = .0001$ decrease in Egalitarian Democracy. Though the effect size is almost negligible, the negative direction is puzzling: richer states tend to perform better democratically.

3.1.1 Model 1 Robustness Check

To investigate a possible source of unexpected findings, I perform several model robustness checks. To examine collinearity amongst Model 1’s independent variables, I first calculate Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) scores for each. Shown in Table 3, all appear unproblematic. Next, I assess potential heteroskedasticity through a Residuals versus Fitted Values plot illustrated in Figure 4.

Table 3: Collinearity of Independent Variables

Variable Name	VIF Score
Female Combat Prevalence	1.22
Women in Military Leadership	1.25
State Religion	1.1
GDP per capita (logged)	1.06

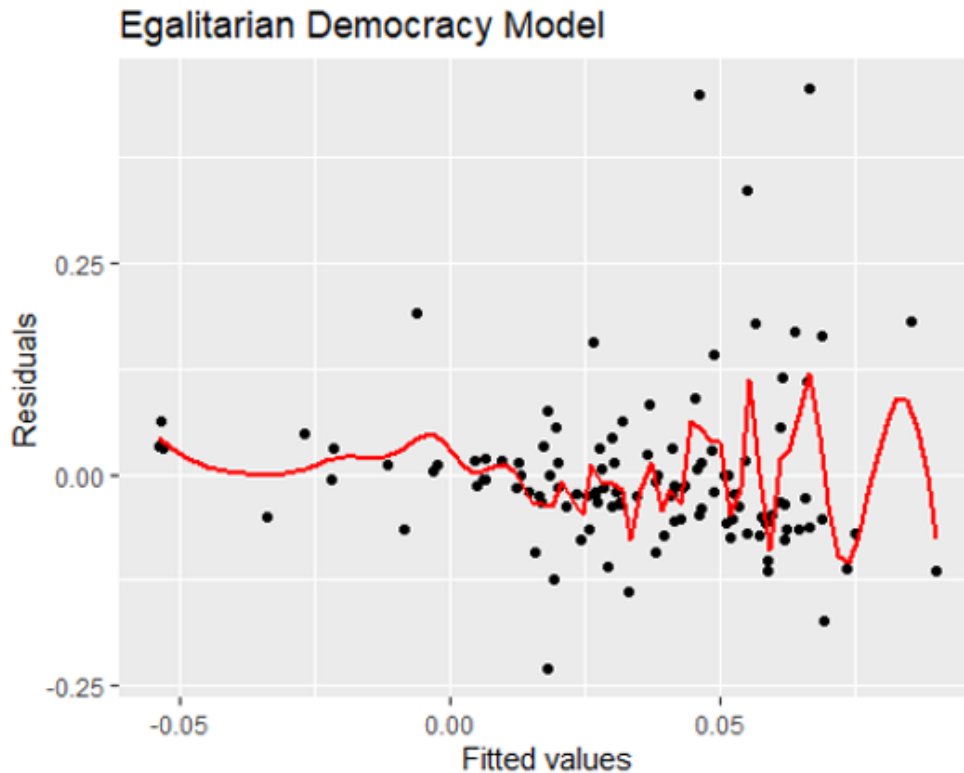


Figure 4: Egalitarian Democracy Residuals versus Fitted

The plot's red line is a functional smoother and shows the average value of residuals at each fitted value. If the assumption of homoskedasticity is true, it presents as a flat line as the error term would not vary across values of the independent variables. However, it is clear there is nonconstant error variance transpiring, apparent as well due to the fanning-out appearance of plotted points. While this does not bias the model's slope estimators, it does produce unreliable results due to the t-statistic's reliance on an accurate standard error. Since the t-statistic determines the p-value, and the p-value helps determine model generalizability, heteroskedasticity prohibits the drawing of statistical

inference. To adjust for its presence, I utilize robust standard errors listed in Table 2, and the p-values also listed (and previously reported) reflect this adjustment.

3.2 Model 2

Table 4: Regressing Women’s Civil Liberties on Female Combat Prevalence

<i>Predictors</i>	Women’s Civil Liberties			
	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>std. Error</i>	<i>CI</i>	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	0.26	0.07	0.12 – 0.39	<0.001
Combat Prevalence	0.00	0.01	-0.03 – 0.03	0.938
Military Leadership	0.03	0.03	-0.03 – 0.09	0.290
State Religion	-0.04	0.02	-0.08 – -0.01	0.018
<u>GDPpc (logged)</u>	-0.02	0.00	-0.03 – -0.01	<0.001
Observations	119			
R ² / R ² adjusted	0.153 / 0.124			

Table 4 displays the results of regressing Women’s Civil Liberties on Model 2’s explanatory variables using robust standard errors. Interestingly, results are quite similar to those for Model 1. Again, I must fail to reject the null hypothesis as, holding all else equal, Combat Prevalence is extremely insignificant: $p = .938$. This essentially means that, if using this model, one would be incorrect to reject the null hypothesis nearly 94 percent of the time it appears rejectable. Additionally, the effect size on this variable is

zero, indicating a complete lack of linear relationship between the participation of women on the frontlines of armed conflict and Women's Civil Liberties five years after a conflict's end. Military Leadership has much the same interpretation for both models: holding all else fixed, conflict-dyads employing female military leaders should experience a .03 increase in Women's Civil Liberties five years post-conflict. However, the effect is statistically insignificant ($p = .290$) as in Model 1 as well.

Moving on, both control variables are statistically significant and follow the same direction as in Model 1: holding all else equal, a conflict-dyad within a state that possesses a state religion is estimated to experience a .04 decrease in Women's Civil Liberties five years post-conflict, while a 1% increase in a state's GDP per capita corresponds with a $.02/100 = .0002$ decrease. While the former meets theoretical expectations, the latter is again nonsensical.

3.2.1 Model 2 Robustness Check

Due to the similarity of results between Models 1 and 2, I suspect heteroskedasticity may be present within the latter as well, so I construct a Residuals versus Fitted plot displayed in Figure 5. The non-flat red smoother, in conjunction with the fanning out of plotted points, confirms heteroskedasticity, so I utilize robust standard errors in my regression analysis (shown in Table 4). While I could potentially drop outlier observations and/or points of high leverage because of their potential to skew model results, I find no theoretical justification for their removal. Thus, I opt to keep them and maintain the integrity of my findings.

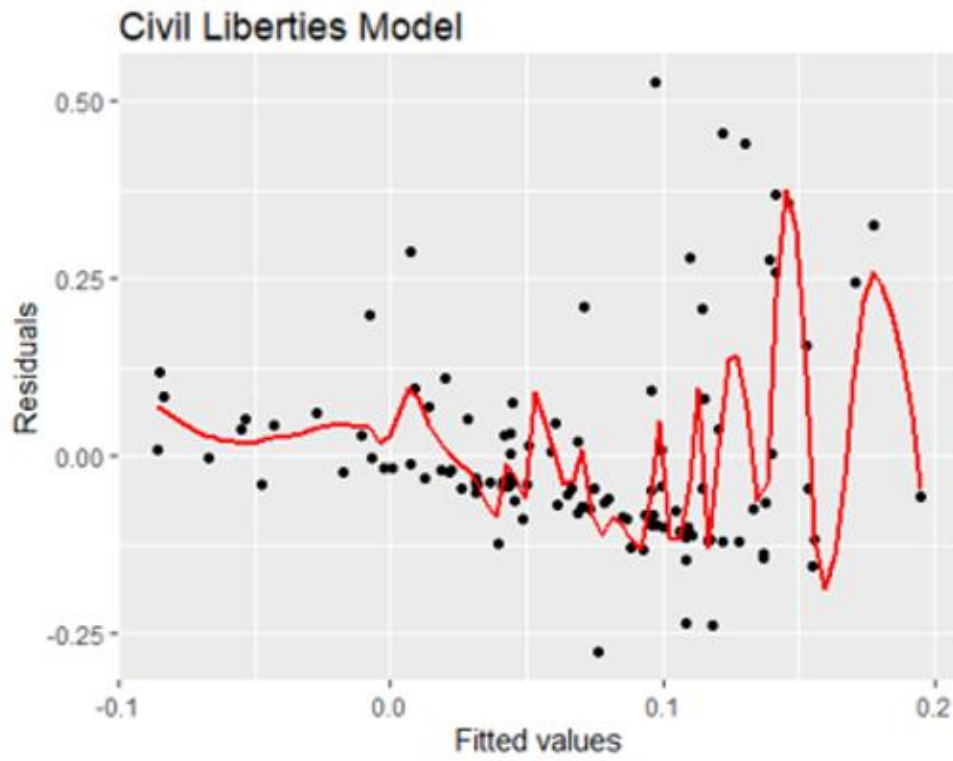


Figure 5: Civil Liberties Residuals versus Fitted

4. Discussion & Concluding Remarks

Does women's participation on the frontlines of armed rebellion spearhead women's empowerment post-conflict, or does it instead instigate a backsliding of women's rights? Ultimately, the answer remains unclear. I investigated this question using two models meant to capture distinct aspects of the status of women. Model 1 operationalized women's standing in society from a distinctly political perspective, presenting egalitarian democracy as a vehicle towards gender equality, while Model 2 directly examined women's access to civil liberties. After performing OLS, it seems neither offers evidence of a meaningful relationship between women's frontline participation and the status of women post-conflict. Though these results may simply reflect faulty theoretical linkages, alternative considerations may also be at play.¹

4.1 Limitations

First and foremost, as Loken and Matfess (2024) point out themselves, the data source of my main independent variables of interest—the WAAR project—is a product of “desk research” (493). Aptly titled, desk research refers to data obtained “without direct contact between researchers and [...] victims, perpetrators, and witnesses of political violence,” in turn deriving “very rough measures of complex phenomena” (Hoover Green and Cohen 2021, 8). In other words, the desk research data collection

¹ For examples of competing theoretical ideas, see Caprioli (2004) and Popoola, Egharevba, and Fayomi (2021) for arguments against Model 1's assumption that egalitarian democracy acts as a vehicle towards gender equality.

process allows researchers to probe sensitive areas of study without engaging (and potentially harming) victims. At the same time, however, desk research's greatest benefit necessitates a tradeoff: in relying on secondary sources, desk research cannot paint a saturated picture of a subject matter due to its inherent degree of information loss. Though this degree is incomputable, it is no doubt present, and a reliance on desk research thus poses a risk of measurement error that—if present—affects the entirety of an analysis. Loken and Matfess (2024) attempt to rectify this by offering a qualitative assessment of each conflict-dyad along with the WAAR project dataset, and I referred to the former when in need of contextual information. Still, it must be noted that my quantitative data may suffer from the inherent pitfalls of desk research.

Next, a glaring theoretical limitation of my analysis relates to the specific tasks women perform on the frontline. My model assumes all of women's frontline work sees them strategizing and fighting alongside (or, in the case of leadership roles, above) men. From this assumption, it follows that, regardless of the combat role a woman performs, her performance should exert the same societal impact. For example, this paper proposed the presence of female combatants—in any capacity—should elucidate to men the deception of gendered stereotypes and concurrently grant women the space to organize and express power in spaces previously inaccessible to them: this was the mechanism by which the increased presence of female combatants could elevate the status of women post-conflict. However, it is possible that the type of work women perform on the frontline affects gender-related outcomes, and my models do not account for this.

The tactic of suicide bombing illustrates this idea most clearly. As Preesman (2021) asserts, “female participation [in armed conflict] does not necessarily lead to emancipation; instead, suicide attacks can reinforce women’s inferior positions.” Considering the context of “Palestinian terrorism” specifically, she elaborates, “women who were unsuccessful in perpetrating their suicide attacks are not only forced back into their traditional roles; their positions are even worse than before they joined the fighting.” Interestingly, the scenario she presents supports my model’s substantive results, even though, of course, the findings are not generalizable.²

Exemplifying the complexity of women’s frontline contributions, Mazurana (2013) highlights the other side of the suicide bombing coin, explaining, “paradoxically, suicide bombing may be seen as a path to gender equality and being valued as a woman. Just as male suicide bombers are exalted and hailed for their heroic contributions to the cause, so too are women and girls rewarded...in some cases, a woman’s suicide attack is even seen as more impressive than a man’s, precisely because of the traditional view of females as marginalized and subordinate” (161). Therefore, even when considering the same task, it is clear perceptions of women’s participation are context-dependent. Because my models aggregate all of women’s frontline contributions into one group, they may unintentionally echo a longstanding problem in the literature: the reduction of women and their varied experiences into a monolith.

² See Tables 2 and 4 for very large p-values.

Finally, as both models are heteroskedastic and present unexpected results, they may suffer from functional form misspecification and/or omitted variable bias (OVB). The latter is unsurprising due to the models' simplicity in the face of a particularly complex topic. While I attempted to control for potential sources of OVB identified in the literature,³ there are surely others I missed, and these may bias the slope estimators shown in Tables 2 and 4.

4.2 Suggestions for Future Research

Though statistically insignificant, this paper's findings provide several pathways for future research:

- 1.) Considering the uniqueness of women's experiences at the frontlines of armed conflict, future studies may find it useful to disaggregate the participation types the WAAR project lays out even further. While a formidable task, this holds the potential to bring the field closer to modeling the true landscape of women's participation in armed rebellion around the world.
- 2.) Looking to the "social origins of female combatants" rather than the effects of employing them, researchers may replicate Thomas and Wood's (2018) study with different operationalizations of women's empowerment.⁴ Instead of

³ For example, while they operationalize the concept differently, Thomas and Wood (2018) also control for governments that systematically incorporate fundamentalist religiosity. More precise than my conceptualization, their version looks for, "a system of government based on Sharia law or the establishment of a theocratic state based on Islamic principles as one of its primary objectives" (223).

⁴ Thomas and Wood's (2018) paper concludes that societies with higher levels of gender equality pre-conflict are more likely to employ women on the frontlines of armed rebellion.

looking at fertility rates, education trends, and women's labor force participation as has been previously done, scholars may opt to utilize V-Dem indicators to conceptualize that status of women in pre-conflict societies. Many of my study's conflict dyad's that measure 4 on the WAAR project's frontline prevalence scale do not possess the best track record for women's rights, so it may be worthy to research whether Thomas and Wood's findings still hold when using V-Dems comprehensive measurements as proxies for the status of women.

- 3.) Last, this paper originated from Marks and Chenoweth's (2020) research brief presenting a puzzle for studies of rebellion and women's empowerment. To summarize, they found that non-violent campaign failure involving high levels of women's participation stimulates a backsliding of women's rights, while no such effect is apparent among violent campaigns with high levels of women's participation. I investigated whether this stemmed specifically from women's proximity to violence within armed rebel organizations and found no meaningful relationship. Thus, Mark's and Chenoweth's proposition that the distinction may originate from the increased international attention (and thereby aid) violent campaigns draw in comparison to their nonviolent counterparts may better represent the true mechanism driving their findings. Accordingly, future studies may benefit from probing the relationship between international attention and post-conflict outcomes for the status of women within both nonviolent and violent campaigns.

Above all else, the WAAR project introduces investigative pathways not previously open for exploration. Scholars of war, peace, gender, and security should take advantage of this opportunity to understand the diversity of women's experiences across the globe and unravel the mechanisms through which women may secure empowerment.

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