# Beyond the Helpless Victim: Media Representation of Women in Conflict Zones

*Prominent media outlets represent the scale of a conflict's violence through the injury and death of women, but otherwise neglect them.*

**By Carolina Marques de Mesquita**



*A Syrian Kurdish woman crosses the border between Syria and Turkey at the southeastern town of Suruc in Sanliurfa province on September 23rd, 2014. (Photo: Bulent Kilic/AFP/Getty Images)*

Under the May 2016 *Wall Street Journal* headline "Islamic State Bombings Kill Dozens in Baghdad," we read the following: "The first bomb struck a crowded market in the predominantly Shiite Muslim neighborhood of Sadr City, killing at least 62 people and wounding 86, mostly women and children." In April, under the *Washington Post* headline "U.S.-Russia Cooperation Frays as Syria Truce Falls Apart," we learn that "at least 90 people, including more than two dozen women and children, have been killed over the last four days in shelling and airstrikes by the Russian-backed Syrian government on rebel-held zones in the strategic city of Aleppo." In both of these articles, women appear as an afterthought: while their presence is certainly emotionally powerful, they remain a parenthetical note to the "real" story.
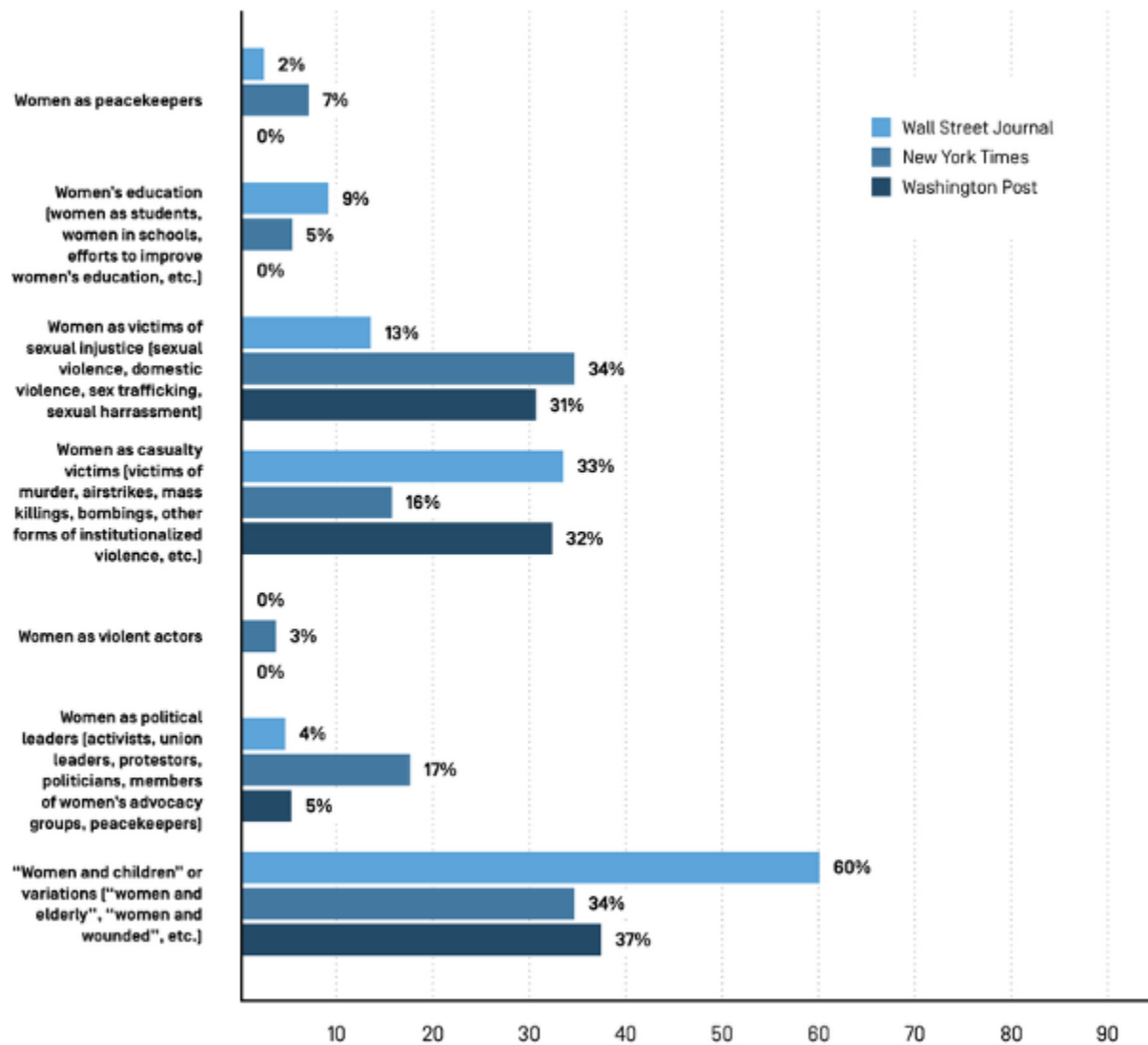
The examples I've provided above represent the extent of women's representation across much of the journalism that I have examined in an ongoing media analysis

through New America's Better Life Lab. Since September, I've catalogued search results for terms such as "Iraq + women" or "Afghanistan + women + peace" in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* to discover patterns in their 2016 reporting on women in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and South Sudan.
*They expose a common construction of women as perpetual victims—individuals who, like children, must be protected and defended because of their innocence and distance from the conflict at hand.*


Through this research, I've discovered that women continue to be underrepresented as political actors in journalism that focuses on international conflict in these regions. What's more, they are most often represented as casualties or victims of sexual violence, calling into question the success of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda (WPS), which was introduced by the United Nations in 2000, marking a commitment to elevating women's roles in peacekeeping and negotiation in the future. Given the results of this analysis, I'm inclined to ask: Has WPS truly reframed women's roles within peace and security?

**Figure 1** | Gender and National Security Media Analysis



**Women as peacekeepers**
- Wall Street Journal: 2%
- New York Times: 7%
- Washington Post: 0%

**Women's education [women as students, women in schools, efforts to improve women's education, etc.]**
- Wall Street Journal: 9%
- New York Times: 5%
- Washington Post: 0%

**Women as victims of sexual injustice [sexual violence, domestic violence, sex trafficking, sexual harrassment]**
- Wall Street Journal: 13%
- New York Times: 34%
- Washington Post: 31%

**Women as casualty victims [victims of murder, airstrikes, mass killings, bombings, other forms of institutionalized violence, etc.]**
- Wall Street Journal: 33%
- New York Times: 16%
- Washington Post: 32%

**Women as violent actors**
- Wall Street Journal: 0%
- New York Times: 3%
- Washington Post: 0%

**Women as political leaders [activists, union leaders, protestors, politicians, members of women's advocacy groups, peacekeepers]**
- Wall Street Journal: 4%
- New York Times: 17%
- Washington Post: 5%

**"Women and children" or variations ["women and elderly", "women and wounded", etc.]**
- Wall Street Journal: 60%
- New York Times: 34%
- Washington Post: 37%

Legend: Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Washington Post

For example, across all publications in our sample, South Sudanese women were represented almost exclusively as victims of sexual violence. The use of mass rape as a weapon of war in South Sudan is an essential component to any analysis of these women's experiences; however, little attention is given to the other challenges these women face: illiteracy, difficulty accessing essential resources, and so on. Even more troublingly, we discovered that South Sudanese women rarely speak for themselves

within these publications; instead, journalists, politicians, and U.N. personnel speak on their behalf.

Highlighting the prevalence of sexual violence in conflict zones certainly seems a step forward in shedding light on the gendered effects of war and conflict. Nonetheless, journalists, foreign policy experts, and researchers may be inclined to give outsize attention to this issue, making it difficult to move toward a more multifaceted approach to understanding gender and conflict. In ignoring the variety of gendered experiences relevant to international peace and security, we risk forever limiting women's roles in these contexts to that of victims, instead of elevating their critical presence in contexts that may promote peace and conflict resolution.

In fact, women's perceived helplessness appears to dominate their representation in journalism. For example, women's representation often fails to move beyond casualty and incident reporting that pairs them with children. As much as 60 percent of our sampling of the *Wall Street Journal* includes the phrase "women and children" or equivalents (e.g., "women and elderly"). Such a pairing may simply speak to the alarming number of civilian casualties that regions in conflict suffer. Nonetheless, they also expose a common construction of women as perpetual victims—individuals who, like children, must be protected and defended because of their innocence and distance from the conflict at hand.

Women's notable absence as political leaders in our research also testifies to this construction of women as victims rather than actors. It is certainly the case that women in the regions I have researched are often barred from political processes that would otherwise shed light on their unique experiences during times of conflict. Yet women's roles in politics go beyond representation in state institutions: Their informal political participation as activists and protesters are not only critical, but ubiquitous. Regardless, my research indicates that even this informal participation goes unrecognized: Only 5 percent of articles in our sampling of the *Washington Post*, for example, featured women as activists, union leaders, protesters, politicians, or members of women's advocacy groups, and none of the articles in this sampling featured women in peacekeeping roles. Even within other publications that featured women in these roles, their representation as peace-builders was hollow and often failed to move beyond name-dropping.

In our sampling of the *New York Times*, for example, the most significant instance of a woman in a peacekeeping role concerned Syrian peace talks in January of 2016. The article quotes Mouna Ghanem, a Syrian politician and coordinator for the Syrian Women Forum for Peace. Ironically, her inclusion in the article is limited to a critique of women's "shallow" and "insignificant" participation in peace negotiations. What might Ghanem's input have been on women's formal participation in Syrian politics and government? What insight could she have provided on women's significance to peace building and

conflict resolution in Syria? These questions, if answered, would certainly have made Ghanem's inclusion in the article anything but insignificant.

From these findings we notice that, despite women's frequent formal and informal participation in politics and peace efforts, their most significant contribution to conflict reporting is that of the helpless victim: We measure the scale of a conflict's violence through the injury and death of these women, but otherwise neglect them. The consequences of such reporting are manifold: In constructing women as perpetual victims of violence and conflict, we forget about the many insights that they may otherwise bring to the process of promoting peace and negotiation. Perhaps even more critical, however, is that, in limiting women's narratives, we not only restrict women's ability to fully integrate into foreign policy contexts, but we also put effective policy on the line.