

Preface

Listening to Mariam¹ and Fikru's² love story while sitting around their kitchen table in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital city, I was reminded of all the times before that I have heard happily and long-wed couples describe how they met. There is a degree of mythmaking and a rhythm to their back-and-forth. At times I felt like an audience member taking in a well-rehearsed play; captivated, I watched Mariam and Fikru recite familiar lines to their latest audience. His eyes sparkled and he looked at her with clear and genuine adoration as he described to me the promises that he made to her during their wartime courtship as members of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and his predictions of what their life together would be like after victory. She, pragmatic and witty as ever, parried his romanticism, while clearly relishing her role as the object of his affection.

While their repartee and obvious affection for one another reminded me of many married couples, I grasped the exceptional nature of their relationship when I toured the Martyrs' Memorial Museum in Mekelle, Tigray. The museum is dedicated to documenting the TPLF's fight against the military dictatorship, a struggle that stretched from the mid-1970s to 1991, when a coalition of rebel groups led by the TPLF marched into Addis Ababa. As I wandered through an exhibit of photos of the rebels during the war, I suddenly found myself in front of a large portrait of Mariam and Fikru. In the photo, they are side by side, with his arm around her, beaming. Their faces were smoother and their hair darker, but they were instantly recognizable. From our conversation, I knew they fell in love during the war, but seeing this photo in a museum dedicated to the heroes of the struggle gave a new sense of importance and historical weight to their story. I snapped a photo of the portrait with my cellphone, so that I could share it with Mariam later. As I continued to meander through the exhibit hall, I thought about how incredible it was that their dedication to one another had persisted through the war, the transitional period, party schisms, several decades of TPLF rule, and parenthood. I thought about what it meant to be in love while at war.

That spontaneous conversation at a kitchen table in Addis Ababa sparked an interest in how marriage shapes rebels' experiences during and after war – and convinced me that a thorough examination of rebels' marriage practices can provide us with a more holistic understanding of how rebel groups operate, the dynamics of women's contributions to rebellion, and the contours of women's lives after war. So many of the discussions about marriage in war that I encountered early in this project focused on forced marriage and centered experiences of coercion, abuse, and sexual violence. While these are important

¹ A pseudonym (which also means 'Beloved' in Tigrinya).

² A pseudonym (which also means 'His Love' in Tigrinya).

experiences to document and understand, these accounts did not capture the experiences of Mariam and Fikru, for whom marriage was a source of comfort and affection, during and after war.

While this Element is an academic attempt to position women's lives and feminine subjects like marriage seriously in the study of political violence, it would border on dishonesty to ignore the ways in which this project is informed by my own experience of getting married just one week after I submitted my dissertation.³ Getting married meant navigating formal requirements imposed by the state and informal expectations levied by family and friends. Sorting through the traditions and norms associated with marriage to decide what suits me and my partner is an exhausting, illuminating, and ongoing process; as someone who identifies as a feminist, it can feel like walking on eggshells through a minefield.⁴

Though the insecurity and militarization that characterize rebel marriages are not present in most civilian marriages (including my own), the institution of marriage itself carries with it questions about gender roles and norms and, in the case of heterosexual marriage in particular, women's role in society. As much as we might like to think of the home as a refuge from politics, the relationships, expectations, and routines that we experience in the home *are* deeply political. As Celello and Kholoussy (2016) note, "Marriage frequently becomes a vehicle for critiquing larger socioeconomic and political changes, for shaping public policy and for endeavoring to eradicate perceived social ills" (p. 2). The truism that 'the personal is political' remains relevant in rebel groups and times of war.

Introduction

At face value, love and war seem to be incongruous areas of study, tethered most famously by the aphorism that all is fair under both conditions. Yet, just as there are laws of war, the ways in which love is practiced are also subject to regulation. Marriage is perhaps the most universal and durable way in which love has been institutionalized and regulated. Fineman (2001) is worth quoting at length regarding how marriage has significance for both the spouses it binds and society writ large; she writes:

Marriage can be experienced as: a legal tie, a symbol of commitment, a privileged sexual affiliation, a relationship of hierarchy and subordination, a means of self-fulfillment, a societal construct, a cultural phenomenon,

³ It was a joyful and exhausting week that I am happy is now in the rearview mirror.

⁴ I grappled, for example, with the question of whether to have my father walk me down the aisle. I was not keen on the connotations of property transfer that it seemed to imply, but my father is my best friend and I wanted to honor our bond. In the end, I decided to have my father walk me down the aisle and we laughed the whole way.

a religious mandate, an economic relationship, a preferred reproductive unit, a way to ensure against poverty and dependency, a romantic ideal, a natural or divined connection, a stand-in for morality, a status, or a contractual relationship. (p. 239)

Fineman (2001) goes on to unpack the implications that marriage has for the community writ large, noting that:

From the state's perspective, marriage may mean the imposition of order necessary for record-keeping purposes (e.g., to facilitate property transfers at death) . . . It has been argued that marriage is the preferred method of containing and harnessing [male] sexuality in the interests of the larger society. Marriage can reflect the moral or religious convention of a society – a symbolic function. Marriage can also be the site where essential reproductive tasks are preformed for society . . . Finally, marriage can be the mechanism through which society distributes and delivers social goods to its citizens. (p. 239)

Thus, marriage, whether governed by the terms of the state, colonial governments, religious or traditional authorities, or non-state armed groups, is an institution between individuals that reflects broader power dynamics and whose implications reverberate beyond the household. Exercising influence over who can be married and under what conditions is thus a powerful authority – and contestation may arise over who can legitimately claim jurisdiction over marital regulations and proceedings.

In conflict-affected contexts, controlling marriage can be another way in which rebels assert their legitimacy vis-à-vis the existing authorities – whether religious, political, or social. Rebel groups' approaches to marriage underline that the institution is a "part of the symbolic struggle between rebels and incumbents in the realm of morality, under the critical gaze of broader society" (Gayer, 2013: 357). Rebels' marriage policies are thus a way in which the politics of the home have implications for the rebels' broader campaign.

This Element demonstrates that whether rebels wed themselves to the idea of marriage, bar it entirely, or reinterpret the ceremonies and practices associated with marriage, their decision has implications at both the organizational and the individual levels. At the organizational level, marriage regulations affect recruitment, retention, logistical capabilities, and relations with the civilian population. At the individual level, a rebel organization's approach to marriage shapes how women join the organization, their experiences as members, and their post-conflict economic and social prospects. Furthermore, I consider the ways in which marriages in rebel groups – whether coerced or voluntary – can become the site of affection, care, and even love among spouses (Matfess, in press).

This Element contributes to the literature on gender and politics in four key ways. Firstly, it provides an analytical framework (the Strategies and Tactics of

Rebel Marriage, or STORM) for understanding how and why rebel marriage systems vary between and within groups over time, as well as the implications of these changes for women's lives. I suggest that the relationship between traditional heterosexual marriage dynamics and the rebels' broader political project, the anticipated effect of marriage on rebel cohesion and retention, and whether marriage will be considered a boon or drain on rebels' resources and logistical capabilities determine the rebels' approach to marriage. I use accounts from five different rebel groups, TPLF in Ethiopia, the Communist Party of Nepal – Maoists (CPN-M), the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, al-Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, to underscore the utility of this framework for explaining differences in policies towards marriage between rebel groups and within the same group over time.

Secondly, I also introduce the concept of 'the other DDR', which can emerge alongside the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs in the postwar period, intended to smooth former combatants' transition to civilian life. 'The other DDR' refers to the narratives of depoliticization, distrust, and reclamation (DDR) that emerge in response to rebel marriages and rebel wives after war. I detail how these narratives affect women's experiences and opportunities after war. In providing these frameworks, I contribute to the literature on rebel group dynamics and the burgeoning literature on women's lives within rebel groups and after war. I unpack how the STORM framework can help us understand how wartime practices and identities will shape the manifestation of this 'other DDR'. In so doing, I connect the decisions made at the organizational level to the individual experiences of women after war.

Thirdly, this Element furthers the call to consider the dynamics of "love and care" that emerge during times of war (Krystalli and Schulz, 2022; Manivannan et al., 2023).⁵ Much of the research on marriage in rebel groups centers on understanding instances of forced marriage (Donnelly and Myers, 2023). Recent research, for example, has sought to differentiate between forced marriage and sexual slavery; such work emphasizes the myriad non-sexual functions of marriage but still centers coercion and violence as a central aspect of rebel marriage systems.⁶ In this Element, I further Giri's assertion

⁵ A point also raised by Giri, K. (2023). Rebel Governance of Marriage and Sexuality: An Intersectional Approach. *International Studies Quarterly*, 67(2). <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqad028>.

⁶ The authors note that

What distinguishes the two is that in forced marriage, the nonstate armed group deems the forced relationship a marriage, deems its participants spouses, or officiates the relationship with a marital ceremony or documentation. This distinction between forced marriage and sexual slavery is not just semantic. While survivors of forced marriage are likely to have been forced to perform sexual acts, and survivors of sexual

that “to gain a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between marriage and sexuality and rebel governance, we need to go beyond violence/coercion . . . Hence, the study of marriage and sexuality in rebel governance should not only examine remunerative and coercive aspects but also include noncoercive normative structures and practices”.⁷ Without underplaying the extent to which rebel marriages can be a form of violence and may be arranged and enforced through tremendous coercion, we must also recognize the ways in which these unions can be arenas of “love and care” (Krystalli and Schulz, 2022).

At the organizational level, “as a forum for horizontal socialization, marriage among rebels can spur renewed devotion to the organization and its cause or detract from revolutionary zeal; it may represent an actualization of rebel ideology or an uncomfortable compromise between ideology and practicality” (Matfess, in press). As previously discussed, rebel marriage can also be a symbolic feature of the rebels’ struggle against the prevailing authorities. At the individual level, rebel spouses can become a source of comfort and affection, helping one another to weather the trials of conflict and to understand their place in the rebellion. Marriages among rebels can be, at once, the site of profound harm and sincere affection for the spouses involved.

Fourthly and relatedly, this Element is inspired by feminist scholars’ efforts to take seriously women’s lives and experiences, to question why ‘feminine’ subjects have been relegated to the margins of security studies, to consider how love and joy still manifest in times of war (Krystalli and Schulz, 2022), and to demonstrate how more inclusive approaches can provide a better understanding of conflict and post-conflict dynamics (Donnelly, 2018). As Cynthia Enloe, a foundational thinker in the field of feminist security studies, once stated:

To be doing feminist work everyday, to live like a feminist, you have to take women’s lives seriously. It doesn’t mean that you have to think that every woman is an angel or every woman is politically astute – that is not what feminists believe. They believe that you have got to take all kinds of women seriously or you’ll never understand women’s relationships to men, men’s relationships to each other, or men’s relationships to different forms of activism and to governments. (quoted in Van Hook, 2012)

slavery might have been forced to perform “wifely” duties, forced marriage encompasses more than a sexual relationship. (Donnelly and Myers, 2023)

⁷ See also Loken (in press) on the relationship between women’s participation in rebel groups and rebel governance.

As such, we do not have to see ourselves in these rebel women or their marriages for them to be an important wartime dynamic that merits attention from academics and policymakers.

In sum, the Element provides a lens to understand marriages among rebels beyond the instances in which these unions are a form of sexual violence and coercion. Additionally, it offers a better understanding of the sources of variation in rebels' policies on marriage both between and within rebel groups. Furthermore, it provides a framework to understand the connections between organizational decisions about marriage in rebel groups and the experiences of individual rebels during and after war. Throughout, I endeavor to center women's experiences and to underscore what is lost when we marginalize 'feminized' subjects in the study of war.

Before delving into the heart of this Element, a few points regarding terminology and project motivation are necessary. It is important to recognize that many of the unions that I discuss are instances of forced marriage, in which one or both of the partners is not in a position to refuse the arrangement.⁸ In some academic studies of forced marriage, the authors use quotation marks to discuss such arrangements (i.e. stylizing it as 'marriage') (see Denov and Drumbl, 2020). I have not adopted that convention in this Element for both substantive and stylistic reasons. Without undermining the grave human rights violation that forced marriages constitute, it is important to recognize that these unions can be regarded as being 'legitimate' marriages by the husband, the wife, and other members of the community. Reflecting on a marriage between an abducted woman and an officer (Amito and Onen, respectively) that began as a forced marriage within the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), Dubal noted that "if Amito and Onen's marriage had indeed been a 'crime against humanity,' it was not a crime that Amito or either of their families cared to recognise given how it had developed over time" (Dubal, 2016: 28). Similarly, 80 percent of the individuals subjected to forced marriage by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia regarded their marriages as legitimate, according to interviews conducted by LeVine (2010).⁹ Her account also underscores the linguistic differentiation her respondents made when describing their experiences under the Khmer Rouge; she writes: "in the context of that time, respondents used the word 'forced' to describe work conditions, no one used the same word to describe their marriages" (LeVine, 2010: 175). Hers and other research suggest that people (including women) can exercise limited agency under conditions of forced

⁸ For a history on the rise of forced marriage as a crime under international law, see Bunting, Tasker, and Lockhart (2021).

⁹ LeVine's (2010) study also notes a perhaps surprising degree of continuity in these relationships, even after the fall of the Khmer Rouge.

marriage and that affection can develop even in the context of a forced marriage (see Bunting, Tasker, and Lockhart, 2021).¹⁰ Pinpointing the moment at which a forced marriage becomes a union that both husband and wife want to maintain, moving their relationship from a ‘marriage’ to a marriage, is a near impossible task in the context of this Element.

The Element proceeds as follows. In the following section, I briefly summarize the academic literature on marriage in war, considering what can be gleaned from the study of military marriage and describing the threads of commonality that emerge from the extant literature on the dynamics of rebel marriage at the organizational and individual levels. The next section introduces the STORM framework to understand variation in how non-state armed groups approach marriage during war and why rebels change their approach over time. I then connect the STORM framework to the study of former rebel women’s lives, discussing how the forms of rebel marriage practiced influence which of the narratives in ‘the other DDR’ may be most prevalent. In so doing, I illustrate the legacies of rebel marriage, particularly for women. The final section summarizes the arguments in this Element and discusses areas for future research on non-state armed groups’ approach to marriage and the legacies of these unions.

Marriage in War: A Crisis? A Complement? A Conundrum

After all, what is messier than marriage? And who on the world stage is more trivial – worthy of trivialization – than a mere wife?

(Enloe, 2016: 321)

As discussed in the Introduction, marriage has implications for the individuals involved in the union, the organizations that are responsible for regulating and sanctifying these unions, as well as society writ large. These functions are just as relevant in times of war as in times of peace. In the first part of this section, I briefly review the literature on how state-affiliated militaries have grappled with marriage in their ranks. In doing so, I draw out the implications of wartime marriage for the military as an organization and for women’s lives during and after war. I use this discussion to contextualize and motivate

¹⁰ Bunting, Tasker, and Lockhart (2021) write:

The small rebels were considered unable to provide the same protection as commanders or higher-ranking soldiers, and therefore were less preferred by women, even in these confined circumstances. This is captured by the following quote: “One of the rebels, a lower ranked asked me that he wanted me to come and live with him just like a wife and a husband, I told him that no, I do not want to be his wife because he was also a new abductee and with lower rank, I thought this would create problems between the commanders because he had not lived there for long just like me” (Interview 2, Uganda). (p. 624)

a deeper study of rebel marriage. Though there are myriad differences between state and non-state armed groups, Enloe notes that there are surprising commonalities between how these two types of armed groups integrate women; she writes that though “the ideological rationales behind women’s recruitment in liberation armies are indeed different from statist rationales, actual practices of liberation militaries and state militaries frequently look strikingly similar” (Enloe, 1980: 49). Thus, we can anticipate some degree of similarity between militaries’ and rebels’ concern with the management of marriage and the implications it has for women in the organization.

In the second part of the section, I draw out the literature on rebel marriages specifically, synthesizing and summarizing the state of scholarship on the subject. In line with the scope conditions of this Element, I consider the relevance of marriage both for rebel organizations and for the individual wives in these marriages.¹¹ In doing so, I highlight the contributions of this Element to this burgeoning – but often siloed – area of study.

What It Means to Make a Military Man: Masculinity and Marriage in the Armed Forces

Many militaries have explicitly or implicitly benefited from the connections between military service, masculinity, and marriageability. Writing on the British military in the 1700s, Hurl-Eamon observes that soldiers could be enticed both by the military’s reputation for swashbuckling womanizing (noting “the words of an early nineteenth-century ballad refrain: ‘storm the trenches court the wenches’” expressed “key elements of the soldiering life”) and because marriage may have been easier as a soldier than as an apprentice (Hurl-Eamon, 2014: 105). Such associations between access to women and military service remain relevant hundreds of years later. Reflecting on Bolivia, Gill writes that men serve “to earn respect from women (mothers, wives, sisters, and girlfriends) and male peers, both as defenders of the nation and, more broadly, as strong, responsible male citizens who can make decisions and lead” (Gill, 1997: 527). Similarly, one American veteran recalled:

Like so many other veterans, I joined the military at least in part to get girls – something my recruiter, drill instructors, and all of 1980s American popular culture assured me was a wise investment of my time and energy. The contract I signed had explicit terms of service, but it also contained an implicit cultural codicil: those who use violence to defend the nation receive something special in return – a manly prestige that brings with it sexual opportunities, if not sexual privileges. (O’Connell, 2016: 152)

¹¹ As I note in the Conclusion, marriage of course has implications for the men in the unions. However, this is beyond the scope of this Element.

The link between military service, masculinity, and marriage is not merely used to entice recruits – in many cases, marriage becomes an important part of the way the military regulates soldiers’ lives. Studies of military management of marriage underscore how the measures taken to regulate soldiers’ sexual activity include the creation of systems of sexual slavery (Soh, 2008), tolerating and regulating prostitution (Lie, 1997; Brathwaite, 2017; Roblin, 2018), and dictating whom soldiers can marry and the services provided to those partners (Branstetter, 1983; Zimmerman, 2020). Thus, the regulation of soldiers’ sexual and romantic lives is often a way to bolster the ranks of the organization, as well as to maintain order within the group and cultivate loyalty to it. The prospect of maintaining military order by way of regulations on marriage relies on the idea that there are ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ forms of marriage and masculinity – and the notion that the organization offers a path to the former.

Reform regarding military marriage regulations often came about not only because of shifting social or political mores but also because of assessments by military and political leaders that the benefits outweigh the costs for the military as an organization (Parsons, 2017).¹² Reflecting on the British Army in the Victorian era, Trustram (1984) notes that

discussions on the desirability of increasing the married establishment and improving married provisions centered around three themes: firstly, the possibility of using the offer of improved marriage facilities as an incentive to recruitment and re-enlistment; secondly, the improvement to health, morale and morality which could be derived from what were seen as the steadying influences of marriage upon the licentious soldiery; and, thirdly, the use to which wives could be put as a cheap, well-disciplined labour for the regiment. (p. 39)

Lest we historicize state efforts to regulate the sexual and marital lives of soldiers, it is worth underscoring that modern militaries extend considerable effort managing marriages among soldiers. For example, the US military has reportedly provided more than a quarter of a million marital and relationship counseling sessions in recent years, representing a significant expenditure of time and resources (Kime, 2020). While some military organizations embrace marriage, others see it as incompatible with the military lifestyle and rely on single recruits. The French Foreign Legion’s website, as of June 2023, states that the “lifestyle” of legionnaires “corresponds to that of a **single person**” (emphasis in original).¹³

¹² For a discussion of marriage, sexuality, and colonial regulations generally, see Voss (2008).

¹³ The Foreign Legion’s website further notes that members

Furthermore, as a venue for peer socialization, marriage can contribute to or detract from a military member's commitment to service.¹⁴ Zimmerman notes that "West African administrators lauded mesdames tirailleurs," West African women who actively contributed to the colonial conquest through their relationships with West African men within the colonial branch of the French military, "as essential to troop retention and stabilization on colonial campaigns" (Zimmerman, 2020: 64). In the modern US Army, Family Readiness Groups (FRGs) are a form of support to military families that depends upon the uncompensated time and emotional labor of army spouses (generally the wives of servicemen). Gassman (2010) underscores that "Family members influence soldiers' decisions to enter and stay in the Army, and Family Readiness Groups became increasingly standardized as the Army sought, also increasingly, to protect its investment in soldiers willing and able to continue to serve" (p. 249). While designed to support military families, involvement in FRGs is also a way of socializing army spouses and of making service a family affair, with the objective of retaining soldiers. Failing to effectively engage military spouses can be detrimental to retention, as demonstrated by a study of the partners of British reservists and their spouses who were frustrated with "picking up the slack" at home during their partners' service (Basham and Catignani, 2018: 155). Thus, both formal marriage regulations and informal socialization processes shape the lives of military spouses, and especially military wives.

In short, we have compelling evidence that marriage has been and continues to be an important aspect of soldiers' lives that is subject to regulation by military higher-ups. These accounts suggest a cost-benefit analysis undergirding militaries' approach to marriage – an approach we will apply to rebel groups in the section on the STORM framework.

Military Wife, Military Life

Militaries' efforts to manage marriage have profound implications for the nonmilitary spouse in these unions (who is often, though certainly not universally, female), both in times of war and in times of peace. Feminist security scholars have identified how the concept of a "military wife" has been a way of

will only be allowed to marry after being in good standing with the following conditions:

- To serve under his true identity (thus to be regularized of military situation);
- having informed the command;

If he has less than 5 years of service he must obtain the authorization of the Minister of the Armed Forces. (Ministere des Armées, n.d.)

¹⁴ For an interesting discussion of the ways in which both families and the military are 'greedy institutions', see Segal (1986).