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Look Deeper

“**I**n Plain Sight: The Neglected Linkage between Brideprice and Violent Conflict” by Valerie Hudson and Hilary Matfess makes the argument that ‘brideprices’ in patrilineal societies warp marriage markets. These warped marriage markets enable terrorist groups to capitalize on men’s need to pay marriage money to women’s families as a motivation to join. The authors suggest that terrorist and rebel groups, in response to warped marriage markets, provide cheaper marriage, and encourage violent behavior to obtain access to marriage (21). The article provides a lengthy theoretical discussion of the costs of marriage in patrilineal societies. It then explores three brief cases, in Nigeria, South Sudan, and Saudi Arabia, arguing for the importance of controlling brideprices and contributing to the security of women in order to reduce conflict in places where there is a real threat from terrorist or rebel groups.

This argument is at first glance appealing, because it seems to provide hard evidence for the need to eradicate multiple moral evils. Most people oppose both the abuse of women and terrorism (“violent conflict,” in the authors’ words). Thus the suggestion that they can be combatted together is attractive. Hudson and Matfess’s argument is not, however, sustainable.

Evidentiary Issues

The article opens with an anecdotal account of the confession of an arrested Pakistani criminal of his motivations for engaging in violent crime: Ajmal Kasab claims he did it so that he and his siblings could

afford to marry (7).¹ Yet a significant literature in criminology suggests that confessions are unreliable, and those confessing are likely to glorify their motives even as they are truthful about their behavior.² In other words, there are many reasons to question Kasab's testimony, yet it is presented in the introduction to this article as necessarily true. Even were it true, the same motivation cannot be attributed as it is on page 7 to other perpetrators of the same attacks. It is not that Kasab's self-confessed motivation is necessarily false (although research on extralegal violence suggests that very few motivations are simple, straightforward, or singular).³ Instead, it is that reliance on its truth simply is not warranted by the evidence presented. This is one of a number of places that "In Plain Sight" oversimplifies and relies on generalities to the detriment of the credibility of the overall argument.

Another problem with the example of Kasab is that it contradicts the argument that brideprices motivate extremist behavior. In Figure 1, the authors have coded Pakistan as a place where dowry practices exist—that is, where the bride's family pays the groom's family, rather than as a place where men pay a brideprice (9). According to the data in the article, Kasab would not have paid a cost for marriage. The way that the example is framed, there is a vague sex-neutral reference to the need for Kasab's siblings to be able to afford marriage, and it is possible that those siblings were female. At the same time, the argument in the article is explicitly about brideprices and not dowry. This confusion is potentially misleading.

Similar problems recur throughout the article, where the citations and evidence do not clearly provide support for the claim that they are modifying. For example, Hudson and Matfess explain that "the extant literature points to deprivation, identity, and socialization as primary reasons why young men take up arms" (8), but that sentence does not include a footnote to support the contention that these motivations are even mentioned in the literature, much less predominant. It is my impression that this argument indeed does *not* dominate the extant literature. The next sentence refers to "most modern analysis" about motivations, but the authors offer only a citation to Ted Gurr's 1970 *Why Men Rebel*.⁴ While I would agree that Gurr's book was an important foundational text, I do not see it as either the sum of the literature or the state of the art almost fifty years later. Martha Crenshaw, Robert Pape, Michelle Dugas and Arie Kruglanski, and Monica Duffy

¹ Vikas Bajaj and Lydia Polgreen, "Suspect Stirs Mumbai Court by Confessing," *New York Times*, 20 July 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/07/21/world/asia/21india.html. The authors of the article use another first name for Kasab, but the article they cite and a wide variety of other sources identify him as Ajmal Kasab.

² See, for example, Saul M. Kassin and Gisli H. Gudjonsson, "The Psychology of Confessions." *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 5.2 (2004): 33-67; Sara C. Appleby, Lisa E. Hasel and Saul M. Kassin. "Police-Induced Confessions: An Empirical Analysis of their Content and Impact." *Psychology, Crime, & Law* 19.2 (2013): 111-128; Eyal Peer, Alessandro Acquisti, and Shaul Shalvi, "I Cheated, but Only a Little': Partial Confessions to Unethical Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 106.2 (2014): 202-217; Dario N. Rodriguez and Deryn Strange, "False Memories for Dissonance-Inducing Events," *Memory* 23:2 (2015): 203-212.

³ See, for example, M. Crenshaw, *The Psychology of Terrorism: An Agenda for the 21st Century*. *Political Psychology* 21:2 (2000) 405-420.

⁴ Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1970).

Toft and Yuri Zhukov, among others, provide significant evidence for other (complex) motivations not mentioned in Gurr's text.⁵

Other supporting citations are also outdated, including many observations about the frequency and effects of brideprices relying on Jack Goody's 1973 study (10, 13, 17, 18), evidence about brideprice practices in the Nigeria case study that is drawn from a 1985 USAID report (24) and scholarship in the early 1960s by Ronald Cohen (25).⁶ Even if the practice of collecting brideprices remains after almost sixty years, there is no guarantee that the motivation for that collection or the impacts of it remain the same. The failure to engage with current research and analysis of these issues weakens the piece significantly.⁷

Further, the article makes several broad and unsubstantiated claims: that marriage is a transition to manhood in many societies (9, 12); that many countries are moving along a spectrum from non-patrilineality to strong patrilineality (11); that patrilineality is a security-provision mechanism (11); that the state of Somalia (by which I think the authors mean the government) is virtually non-existent (12); that the consequences of patrilineal marriage are currently detrimental (12); that patrilineality cannot exist without the subordination of women (14); that brideprice is a causal factor in the lower investment in women's health (17); that marriage-market obstruction motivates joining extremist groups (18); that the group Boko Haram arranges cheap marriages and abducts women for the purpose of making them wives (24, and with a single example on the bottom of 27); and that border disputes in South Sudan are being aggravated by ethnic violence (29).

Finally, the presentation of the article's statistical evidence leads to serious questions (22). According to the authors' codebook, paying for a wedding can be counted as brideprice for coding purposes, which raises questions of what "brideprice" signifies for both theory and empirics. Adding to potential concerns is the fact

⁵ Martha Crenshaw, "Have Motivations for Terrorism Changed?" in Jeff Victoroff, ed., *Tangled Roots: Social and Psychological Factors in the Genesis of Terrorism* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2006); Crenshaw, "The Psychology of Terrorism: An Agenda for the 21st Century," *Political Psychology* 21:2 (2000): 405-420; Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005); Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 97:3 (2003): 343-361; Michelle Dugas and Arie W. Kruglanski, "The Quest for Significance Model of Radicalization: Implications for the Management of Terrorist Detainees," *Behavioral Science & the Law* 32:3 (2014): 423-439; Monica Duffy Toft and Yuri M. Zhukov, "Islamists and Nationalists: Rebel Motivation and Counterinsurgency in Russia's North Caucasus." *American Political Science Review* 109:2 (2015): 222-238.

⁶ Jack Goody, "Bridewealth and Dowry in Africa and Eurasia," in Goody and S.J. Tambiah, *Bridewealth and Dowry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); S.P. Reyna, "Bridewealth Revisited: Socialization and the Reproduction of Labor in a Domestic African Economy," University of New Hampshire, Working Paper #80 (February 1985), 1, http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNAAX355.pdf; Ronald Cohen, "Marriage Instability among the Kanuri of Northern Nigeria," *American Anthropologist*, 63:6 (December 1961), 1231-1249.

⁷ This is *not* my area of expertise, and I make no claims to being an expert on brideprice. A quick search, however, suggested several current resources, including but not limited to: An-Magritt Jensen, "Changes in brideprice payments in Christian and Muslim villages of Kenya." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* (2015): 105-120; Alexandra Widmer, "The imbalanced sex ratio and the high bride price: Watermarks of race in demography, census, and the colonial regulation of reproduction." *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 39:4 (2014): 538-560; Nokuthula Caritus Mazibuko, "Ilobolo, the bride price that comes 'at a price' and the narratives of gender violence in Mamelodi, a South African township." *Gender and Behaviour* 14:2 (2016): 7373-7378.

that the coding was done entirely by a single person, rather than by regional or country experts.⁸ In their analysis, the authors used a single measure of brideprices and a single measure of whether states are conflict-prone, without robustness checks that employ other measures. The Global Peace index, for example, includes interstate wars fought by state militaries, a fact which is not discussed theoretically in the article. The analysis is performed for only one year (2016) and fails to include 22 (11%) of the world's countries in that year. The authors control for no other variables, but instead characterize the bivariate results as "striking" (22) given that no society with a brideprice was among the 16 most peaceful countries in the world. The correlation could be spurious or endogenous, and it could be undermined by controls, missing data, or a longitudinal analysis.

Thus, although the authors admit that these "empirical results" are "only suggestive" (23), that characterization seems generous.

Substantive Argument

While no research is immune to methodological or substantive issues (particularly the challenge of missing data), such issues add up in "In Plain Sight." The article's reliance on weak evidence severely undermines its substantive contribution to scholarly and policy debates about political violence. The argument seems rather straightforward: men need to marry to achieve social manhood, and to be able to marry they need money they do not have, so they join rebel groups to achieve this end. It follows, then, that brideprice should be controlled. Women will be better off, and there will be less extralegal violence.

Substantively, there is significant evidence that poverty is not correlated with individual decisions to join rebel or terrorist groups – that is, people do not do it for the money in large-n samples.⁹ The few large-n studies that do find a relationship between poverty and individual choices to engage in rebel violence conclude that it is *urban* poverty,¹⁰ or state-level mal-development, rather than individual economic need that drives this behavior.¹¹ "In Plain Sight" does not cite research which might contradict this work, which dominates the literature on individual motivations. A correlation between poverty and radicalization would not clearly link radicalization to brideprices; and the anecdotal evidence in article does not fill in the gaps.

Even were it the case that some men join extremist organizations in part to pay brideprices, others' motivations cannot be captured by this argument. Well-off and married men join extremist organizations, as

⁸ WomanStats Project, "Codebook," <http://www.womanstats.org/new/codebook/>.

⁹ Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, "The Quality of Terror." *American Journal of Political Science* 49:3 (2005): 515-530; Alan B Krueger and Jitka Maleckova, "Education, Poverty, Political Violence, and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" NBER Working Paper 9074 (July 2002); James A. Piazza, "Rooted in Poverty? Terrorism, Poor Economic Development, and Social Cleavages," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18:1 (2007): 159-177; Scott Atran, "Genesis of Suicide Terrorism," *Science* 299 (2003): 1534-1539.

¹⁰ Michael Mousseau, "Urban Poverty and Support for Islamist Terror," *Journal of Peace Research* 48:1 (2011): 35-47.

¹¹ Ana Bela Santos Bravo, and Carlos Manuel Mendes Dias, "An empirical analysis of terrorism: deprivation, Islamism and geopolitical factors." *Defence and Peace Economics* 17 (2006).

do women of all economic backgrounds.¹² The article attributes motivations to people who live in places where brideprices are paid, ignoring the many different types of violent extremists in places where brideprices are not paid (e.g., the Revolutionary Armed Forces [FARC] in Colombia, ‘Jihadi Brides’ from the West, the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam [LTTE] in Sri Lanka, Chechen separatists in Russia, etc). This suggests that significantly more evidence would need to be gathered to make a compelling case that there is a substantive relationship between brideprices and any sort of violent extremism (much less violent conflict as a whole as the article title suggests but does not discuss).

Normative Problems

The first normative problem with the article is the tendency to set up the United States as the constitutive other which does not practice brideprices and therefore engages in less violence: “the United States and its closest security partners do not practice brideprice” (10); “although it is possible to be unmarried and still be regarded as an adult man in, say, the United States” (12); “national security scholars and analysts in the United States and around the globe may thus unintentionally overlook ...” (38). This is problematic both because it gives a potentially misleading impression (the United States finishes 114th out of 163 countries on the Global Peace Index) and because it engages a common, colonialist theme of western superiority harkening back to the *End of History*¹³ and the *Clash of Civilizations*.¹⁴ Other references to the mitigating influence of a “strong Christian presence” (10), to the culture of masculinity in the entirety of sub-Saharan Africa singular or all the same (12), and the conflation of ‘Islamic societies’ and ‘the Middle East’ (16) seem to gloss over important differences and reify harmful stereotyping.

Beyond that, “In Plain Sight” makes an argument for the instrumentalization of women’s lives. Even were the empirical claim that men commit violence to get brideprices accurate, the securitization of women’s bodies and women’s lives is problematic on a normative level. Especially in the conclusion of the article, the authors argue that national security funding should go to the liberation of women, first quoting former United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s argument that the subjugation of women is a national security threat (37) and then arguing that investing in making marriage better for women will curb spillover threats of instability (40). Investing in women for security and with security funds has been widely criticized in the existing literature.¹⁵ The argument is this: militarization has been shown to be gendered and have gendered impacts¹⁶

¹² Stathis Kalyvas, “Is ISIS a Revolutionary Group and if Yes, What are the Implications,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:4 (2015): 42-47; Alexis Leanna Henshaw, “Where Women Rebel: Patterns of Women’s Participation in Armed Rebel Groups, 1990-2008.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 18:1 (2016): 39-60.

¹³ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 3-18.

¹⁴ Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72:3 (1993): 22-49.

¹⁵ Building off Lene Hansen, “The Little Mermaid’s Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29:2 (2000): 285-306.

¹⁶ See, for example Cynthia Enloe, *Nimo’s War, Emma’s War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Enloe, *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

and securitization necessarily involves militarization.¹⁷ Securitizing the status of women, then, can be counterproductive to the goal of making women's lives better.

The racial element present in "In Plain Sight" compounds the problem. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argued that the idea of white men saving brown women from brown men built on raced and gendered stereotypes to misunderstand significant portions of global politics and ultimately brought harm to brown women,¹⁸ an argument that Miriam Cooke, Chandra Mohanty, Smeeta Mishra, and Rochelle Terman have applied to Americans analyzing terrorism after September 11, 2001.¹⁹ The combination of securitizing gender and racializing gender subordination can do harm in the name of protecting women and improving their lives.

The literature on gender and 'national security' would be vastly improved if scholars avoided making broad-sweeping statements about those topics and adopted a decolonial feminist approach²⁰ to terrorism,²¹ political violence,²² and gender subordination on a global scale.²³

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¹⁷ David Campbell and Michael J. Shapiro, eds., Special Issue on Securitization, Militarization and Visual Culture in the Worlds of Post-9/11. *Security Dialogue* 38:2 (2007): 131-288; Marianne H. Marchand and Anne Sisson Runyan, eds., *Gender and Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites, and Resistances* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Juanita Elias. "Introduction: Feminist Security Studies and Feminist Political Economy: Crossing Divides and Rebuilding Bridges," *Politics & Gender* 11:2 (2015): 406-408; Gunhild Hoogensen and Svein Vigeland Rottem, "Gender Identity and the Subject of Security," *Security Dialogue* 35:2 (2004): 155-171.

¹⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 271-313.

¹⁹ Miriam Cooke, "Saving Brown Women," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28:1 (2002): 468-470; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "US Empire and the Project of Women's Studies: Stories of Citizenship, Complicity, and Dissent." *Gender, Place, and Culture* 13:1 (2006): 7-20; Smeeta Mishra, "Saving Muslim Women and Fighting Muslim Men: Analysis of Representations in the New York Times," *Global Media Journal* 6:11 (2007): 1-20; Rochelle Terman, "Islamophobia and Media Portrayals of Women's Rights: A Computational Text Analysis of US News Coverage," *International Studies Quarterly* 61:3 (September 2017): 489-502.

²⁰ See, for example, Maria Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25:4 (2010): 742-759.

²¹ See, for example, Caron E. Gentry, "Epistemological Failures: Everyday Terrorism in the West," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 8:3 (2015): 362-382.

²² See, for example, Ana Lucia Alonso Soriano, "Women, Political Violence, and Gendered Representations," *Postcolonial Studies* 19:4 (2016): 481-489.

²³ See, for example, C. de Lima Costa, "Gender and Equivocation: Notes on Decolonial Feminist Translations," in Wendy Harcourt, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

recently, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores* (with Caron Gentry, Zed Books, 2015) and *Women as Wartime Rapiers* (NYU Press, 2016).

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