

Number of women involved in mass murders much larger than has been assumed

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In a context of collective mass violence, such as a war, women can be just as cruel as men, commit crimes against humanity, and act with the same motives. Still many more men are involved in mass violence than women, but the number of women is much larger than has been assumed so far. That is one of the main conclusions of new research by Alette Smeulers, Professor of International Criminology at Tilburg University and the University of Groningen.

Until the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 it was generally assumed that [women](#) tend to play a very limited role in periods of mass violence. The research by Alette Smeulers shows however that there seems to be no role women haven't played in the past. Moreover, many more women than so far assumed have been involved in mass atrocities. In *Female perpetrators: Ordinary or extra-ordinary women?*, published in *International Criminal Law Review* nr. 15 (2015), Smeulers presents evidence for the involvement of women not only in for instance Nazi Germany, but also in more contemporary conflicts in Sierra Leone, Sudan, Colombia and Iraq to name but a few.

Most women are indirectly involved by supporting the regime and the criminal policies or behavior of their husbands. Many women have an administrative or supporting role but still quite a few are physically involved as traitors, thieves, prison and camp guards or combatants. Women can even be involved in [sexual violence](#) – sometimes in a supporting capacity (holding the victim) but in some cases also as the main physical perpetrator.

The gathered evidence shows that women too can commit horrendous crimes and physically or sexually abuse, maltreat or kill other people in a context of collective mass atrocities. The reason why so many more men are involved is not because they are more evil but simply because militarized units which are the main organizations responsible for the physical perpetration of international crimes are still male dominated. How many women are and have been involved exactly is impossible to tell but it is clear that there are many more women involved than we would expect.

Smeulers also shows that the women who are involved in mass violence are not mentally disturbed sadists or being forced into it as media reports tend to suggest. Some might have been forced and others might indeed have been disturbed but so many women have been involved in mass atrocities that it is simply impossible to qualify all of them as such.

"It is time to accept that many female perpetrators are ordinary women and that ordinary women just like ordinary men can become involved in mass atrocities", says Smeulers. "Women can be just as ruthless and cruel as men."

Provided by Tilburg University

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