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Familial Ties as a Gendered Relationality in Civil War: Militarisation, Violence and Politics

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ABSTRACT

In what ways is family militarised in civil war? How to understand familial ties as configured in relation to violence? This article develops a theoretical understanding of familial ties as a distinct form of gendered relationality in civil war. I illustrate first, how family as a social institution is entangled with military and political aims in ways that sustain and legitimise war, and second, how familial ties are not merely militarised but also emergent from and profoundly transformed by violence. My argument advances the theorisation of social ties in civil wars by offering a feminist rethinking of the familial domain.

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Introduction

Family as a social institution and realm of gendered power relations is indispensable to the conduct of war. It is family that generates the gendered distributions of labour and care that sustain war (Hyde 2016, Hedström 2020). The family is also a crucial domain of social and cultural reproduction, which makes it central for justifying and legitimating war's violence (Enloe 2000, Elshtain, 1987). This takes myriad forms but includes the symbolic construction of the family variously as a site to be protected and preserved (from the violence and influence of the enemy others) or indeed radically reconfigured to attain a specific vision of the future that legitimises the fighting in the present (Cohn 2013, Baines 2014). As such, there is immense value in centering family as an analytical concept in the study of civil wars.

The aim of this article is to develop a theoretical understanding of familial ties as a distinct form of gendered relationality in the context of civil war. How to understand the role and evolvement of familial ties in the course of civil wars? In what ways is family militarised – entangled with military and political aims, and what do these entanglements enable? And how to think of familial ties in civil war

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as configured in relation to violence – as emerging from and transformed by war? In addressing these questions, I contribute to the vibrant feminist scholarship that builds connections between the study of civil wars and feminist theories of war, militarism and violence (e.g., Cockburn 2004, Viterna 2013, Berry 2018, Lake 2018, Cronin-Furman and Krystalli, 2021, Marks 2019, Matfess 2020). A nuanced literature explores marriage and conjugal relations (MacKenzie 2012, Marks 2013, Baines 2014, Zharkevich 2019) and there now exists a well-developed feminist theorisation of the role of social reproduction in civil wars (Hedström 2017, 2020, Rai, True and Tanyag 2020). Further, an emerging literature theorises motherhood and fatherhood in contexts of non-state armed groups and post-war processes (Tamang 2017, Madhani and Baines, 2020, Matarazzo and Baines 2020, Suarez and Baines 2022, Jude 2023).

Building on these feminist contributions, I direct my intervention specifically at the Civil War Studies scholarship on social ties that I hold currently under-theorises the notion of family and familial ties. For example, meso-level approaches that examine how pre-existing social networks structure the social bases of armed groups do integrate the domain of the 'familial' but merely as an additional layer of informal ties (Weinstein 2007, Staniland 2014). There is also a nuanced scholarship that examines the 'quotidian' as a distinct domain of social ties and interactions, showing how this domain is central to understanding social processes of civil war (Parkinson 2013, Shesterinina 2021). However, even within this literature, the familial emerges primarily as one component of the broader quotidian ties that encompass everyday social ties, including, for example, friendships.

I argue that what goes missing is the key feminist insight that these are not just any social or quotidian ties but ties that are constructed and enacted in *familial* terms. That is, these are ties that are constituted in relation to family *as* a social institution and thus militarised in specific, gendered ways. This first aspect of my argument builds on feminist theories of militarisation as a social process that is geared towards normalising war and is enacted in the everyday (Enloe 2000, Henry and Natanel 2016). I conceptualise family as a gendered social institution and then use this conceptualisation to illuminate the 'entanglements'[1] between family and military and political aims to show how such entanglements are key to legitimisation and sustaining of civil wars.

Yet, civil wars do not merely produce *militarised* ties, but profoundly transform ties in ways that cannot be necessarily 'managed' by the actors involved – whether states, leaders of armed groups, or indeed the people who participate in different capacities (Wood 2003, 2008, Viterna 2019, Zharkevich 2019, Shesterinina 2021). To extend from this crucial insight, the second aspect of my argument examines familial ties as emergent from and transformed by war's violence. I move away from conceptualising ties primarily as 'networks' and instead theorise familial ties as affective attachments and bonds, building on what I call feminist theories of relationality of

violence (Butler 2019, Das 2007, Baines 2016).[2] These accounts examine processes of subject formation in relation to violence by foregrounding the vulnerability of bodies and the ways in which violence can both generate and undo our attachments to others (Butler 2019, Baines 2016). It is this move that allows me to conceptualise the generative and transformative relationship between war's violence and familial ties in novel ways.

Bringing the two aspects of my argument together, I show how understanding the long-term legacies of civil wars requires exploring both: the everyday practices through which affective ties emerge and are cultivated *and* the broader transformations in familial norms that civil wars set in motion – including through processes of militarisation. Whilst this article is primarily intended as a theory development piece, I illustrate my claims in relation to specific examples drawn from secondary literature throughout the text. In addition, to illustrate my discussion of the 'emergence' and 'transformation' of familial ties, I use examples drawn from my field-based research conducted with women activists in the context of post-war Nepal.[3]

The rest of the article proceeds in three main sections. The first section brings the notion of 'social ties' together with the concept of 'militarisation', to demonstrate the value of engaging with feminist understandings of family as militarised. The second and third sections are dedicated to building my theoretical framing of familial ties as a distinct gendered relationality of war. I first detail the ways in which family as a social institution becomes entangled with military and political aims in the course of civil wars. I then turn to feminist theories of the relationality of violence to construct an understanding of familial ties as affective bonds that evolve through war's violence. I conclude by bringing these two aspects together, detailing my contribution to the broader civil war studiesscholarship that explores the social processes of civil war.

Social Ties and Militarisation in Civil War

This section situates the concepts of social ties and militarisation in relation to prominent strands of the literature in the field of Civil war Studies. In the field of Civil War Studies, social ties are understood as central to the emergence and sustaining of armed groups and foregrounded as a key analytical concept in examining various processes of civil war, such as mobilisation or socialisation. Thus, beyond approaches that focus exclusively on macro-foundations of civil war, the importance of theorising ties, often conceptualised either as social ties or social networks, is well established. The concept of militarisation in contrast is less prominently theorised. In bringing militarisation and social ties together, this section seeks to identify gaps and to show how engaging with feminist understanding of militarisation can offer new insights,

specifically to accounts that examine the overlap between 'quotidian' ties and military structures.

In seeking to explain the emergence of armed groups, Staniland (2014) builds a nuanced framework that captures ties as the meso layer that structures the social bases of insurgency. It is by identifying the 'vertical ties' between organisers and communities, and 'horizontal ties' across organisers, *and* the specific ways in which these ties *combine* that he argues a social base of an insurgency can be examined (Staniland 2014, p. 9). Vertical and horizontal ties constitute the 'social terrain upon which politics is conducted' (Staniland 2014, p. 9), placing constraints on insurgent leaders who seek to repurpose pre-war networks for rebellion, as they condition the form that the insurgent organisation takes. Staniland's reading of the role of ties is one where path-dependent dynamics are strongly foregrounded.[4] Whilst I agree that organisational origins matter, a focus on path-dependent effects alone does not address the underlying question of how are the vertical and horizontal ties that Staniland discusses generated, sustained, reconfigured, or perhaps even rejected in the course of the war's unfolding. To capture this, we need to develop a deeper understanding of the micro-processes through which people living through war become invested in these ties, relating to one another and to the evolving realm of politico-military practice in new ways.

In examining these micro-processes, specifically militarisation, my argument builds on a literature in civil war studies that focuses on the role of 'quotidian ties'. This literature insightfully rethinks the structuring roles of ties (as in Staniland) in civil war through an explicit emphasis on the importance of quotidian interactions. The literature on quotidian ties posits the role of everyday social ties, specifically, kinship, family and friendship ties, as central to understanding how armed groups form and sustain, and more broadly how civil wars emerge and unfold (Parkinson 2013, Viterna 2019, Shesterinina 2021). In this literature, the focus of the quotidian realm of interactions is connected to a broader theoretical engagement with 'social processes of civil war' (Wood 2008). Rather than merely focusing on how 'social resources' condition the emergence and organisation of armed groups (Weinstein 2007, Staniland 2014), there is a deeper commitment to trace 'the transformation of social actors, structures, norms, and practices – that sometimes leave enduring legacies for the post-war period' (Wood 2008, p. 539).

In my reading then, the scholarship on quotidian ties and practices does not merely add another 'layer' of ties to the analysis – for instance, a layer of 'informal ties' such as kinship ties. Rather, it offers a key shift in perspective, where ties that in the broader civil war studies literature tend to be relegated to the domain of the 'private', 'domestic' or 'informal' – such as marital ties, conjugal relations, friendships – are shown to be in crucial ways intertwined with and have an effect on military and political aims and practices (Brenner 2019, Hedström 2020, Ong and Steinmüller 2021). For example, Parkinson

argues that to explain how insurgencies sustain and survive under crisis it is not enough to merely identify the presence of ties between armed groups and communities, instead, we need to understand the exact configurations 'of the overlap between militant hierarchies and quotidian social structures' (Parkinson 2013, p. 427).

The kinds of entanglements between the quotidian and the military that these accounts reveal are at the crux of feminist understandings of militarism. What the feminist scholarship captures is how militarisation as a process is sustained, negotiated and resisted through everyday gendered relations of power (Henry and Natanel 2016). Yet the Civil War Studies scholarship on ties (whether quotidian or otherwise) rarely engages with militarism or militarisation as theoretical concepts, this producing a striking disconnect. I argue that the feminist scholarship on militarism is crucial as it offers new insights into the role of ties in civil war, that is, to the question of what do social ties do in relation to the broader processes of civil war? Specifically, their conceptualisation of militarisation captures the underpinning, gendered, processes that generate entanglements between the quotidian and the military. It is from this angle that the feminist scholarship gets to the question of *how* ties are militarised and to what ends.

The feminist curiosity around militarism reveals how locations that are not readily associated with overt conflicts, such as households, families or intimate relations, become organised around military aims and preparations for war (Enloe 2000, Cockburn 2004, Hyde 2016). To follow Enloe: 'militarisation does not occur simply in the obvious places but can transform the meanings and uses of people, things, and ideas located far from bombs or camouflaged fatigues' (Enloe 2000, p. 289). I understand militarism here as an underpinning set of logics that posits military aims, means, or military service as valuable and desirable (Chisholm and Ketola 2020). Militarisation in turn is the broader social and cultural process through which the logics of militarism become embedded and, importantly, *normalised* in a society and in people's lives (Åhäll 2019, p. 158). It is a closely managed process 'by which something becomes controlled by, dependent on or derives its value from the military as an institution or militaristic criteria' (Enloe 2000, p. 291). This characterisation of militarisation as a process that has 'normalising effects' (Hedström 2020, p. 3) immediately points to the power exercised in processes of militarisation – how the specific, gendered, entanglements between the quotidian and the military do not simply occur but rather are made to *appear* natural and closely managed by the state, military or para-state actors (Chisholm and Stachowitsch 2016, Hedström 2020).

The feminist framings of militarisation as a gendered social process differ significantly from understandings of militarisation in the broader civil war studies literature. When militarisation is developed as a theoretical concept in Civil War Studies, it is predominantly framed as a 'mechanism' and employed

to explain processes of civil war's onset and/or escalation (Della Porta 2013, Florea 2017, Della Porta *et al*. 2018). For instance, Della Porta (2013) offers a sophisticated conceptualisation of the mechanism of 'action militarisation'. Action militarisation in her framework 'implies a shift towards increasingly cruel actions as well as a focus of the target selection towards organisational survival' (Della Porta 2013, p.176). This is a nuanced formulation as it implies that what is militarised is not the actor (clandestine organisation, armed group) per se, but the *forms* of action, or more specifically, the logic behind these actions (Della Porta 2013, p. 178). However, what her analysis does not stretch to is examining whether and how these militarised logics might permeate the broader society. As such, a significant part of the question of what militarisation does – what does it do to structures, norms, and indeed, ties – falls out of the picture. To capture this, it is necessary to conceptualise militarisation foremost as a social process.

This is precisely the move that Elizabeth Wood pre-empts with her highly influential account of 'social processes of civil war', where 'militarisation of local authority' is conceptualised as one key process. Wood's conceptualisation is important for my argument for two reasons. First, she unties militarisation from the temporality of war's onset, and instead, examines it as a process that is also endogenous to war. Second, unlike Florea and Della Porta, her account widens the conceptualisation of militarisation to concern not only the armed group (or state) but rather the wider society. I read Wood's account of militarisation as setting the stage for examining not only how forms of local governance become 'supplanted' with new forms of governance that 'reflect the influence of armed actors' (Wood 2008, p. 550) but also how this very process relies on and enables the permeation of militarised logics in the wider social realm, including quotidian ties. As Wood argues, social processes of civil war 'reconfigure social networks in various ways, creating new networks, dissolving some, and changing the structure of others' (Wood 2008, p. 540). And it is precisely *these* effects of militarisation, as they pertain to familial ties, that my conceptualisation of family as 'militarised' seeks to further unravel.

Family as Militarised Entanglements

Family as a Social Institution

This section substantiates my conceptualisation of familial ties as a gendered relationality in civil war by exploring gendered entanglements between family and military aims and objectives. As a social institution family is indispensable for the conduct of war. In feminist understandings family is a realm of power relations that is organised around and contributes to sustaining a specific gender order, and therefore cannot be addressed as a realm that is separate from the state, economy or international politics

(Peterson 2019). The distinction between 'public' and 'private' is understood as a gendered boundary, the delineation of which is a moment of political contestation (Mouffe 1992). Thus, in examining family as 'militarised' feminist scholars are not merely pointing at porous boundaries between the familial and the military but asking questions about what these entanglements (these specific ways of delineating boundaries) *do* politically (Åhäll 2019, p. 162). For example, this special issue powerfully sheds light on how gendered labour – including through the institution of family – is deployed to make wars work, to both legitimise and sustain armed conflict.

It is crucial to acknowledge that as a concept 'family' is heavily contested. It is underpinned by assumptions and contestations around what forms of families are privileged as 'normal', and who can and cannot have a family (Friedman and Ketola 2022). As postcolonial feminist- and feminist-critical race studies scholarship has demonstrated, the construct of nuclear family and its institutionalisation as a normative benchmark of Western 'modernity' has and continues to generate and reinforce exclusions and gendered and racialised violence (McClintock 1993, Hill Collins 1998). As Spike Peterson argues, in the processes of modern state/nation formation, '"family" figures powerfully . . . , not only as a nexus of sexual and racial inequalities but also as a requisite foundation for reproducing racial states' (Peterson 2019, p. 181).

Is it possible then to think of family – as an ideological construct – as not already touched by militarised logics? Is there 'before militarisation' (Howell 2018, p. 118) when we think of family? To be clear, my argument here is not aimed at tracing familial ties 'before' and 'after' militarisation. This could perhaps be suggested as a task if we were to understand militarisation in the narrower sense as a key 'mechanism' conditioning war's onset (Florea 2017), rather than a social process that is ongoing. What I am interested in is to trace how familial ties become entangled with the conduct of war, specifically civil war, and militarisation as one lens through which to capture this dynamic. I use the notion of family as a social institution not to make universalising claims of the form family takes across contexts, but rather to highlight some key ways in which family may be called upon to prepare for and sustain war. This is the basis upon which I examine entanglements.

Entanglements with Military and Political Aims

One crucial set of entanglements emerges when we think about how it is the family that generates gendered distributions of labour and care, needed to sustain and legitimate war (Basham and Catignani 2018, Hedström 2020). The domain of the family is called upon to secure the gendered labour necessary to legitimate and sustain armed insurgency, and this generates various forms of entanglements between familial ties and specific strategic military aims. Tackling this set of entanglements in

the context of civil wars, feminist political economy analysis has shown, for example, how the sustaining of non-state armed groups is reliant on women's everyday gendered labour, both emotional and material, that is performed within the household or the army (Parashar 2013, Hedström 2017, Rai *et al*. 2020). Jenny Hedström (2020) conceptualises such labour as 'militarised social reproduction', one aspect of which is women's role in the material and physical reproduction of the armed force, ranging from provisioning, nursing, conscription, and the physical reproduction of new soldiers through childbirth (Hedström 2020, p. 6).

When related back to the notion of family, we can see how seeking to variously utilise, strengthen, or reconfigure existing gender norms around familial roles and responsibilities becomes central to the strategy of non-state armed groups (Viterna 2019). For example, in the context of El Salvador, Viterna highlights how FMLN's practices of recruitment were cognisant of, strategically utilised and sought to transform existing societal gender roles, including around women's gendered labour (Viterna 2019, pp. 51–52). She argues that the FMLN created a congruence between an individual's existing skills and resources and the movement's specific participation identity through two main moves. First, by diversifying their activist roles by including more feminine guerilla tasks – such as making tortillas or nursing the wounded so as to match the existing norms around gendered labour. And second, by actively seeking to redefine the skills and resources attached to individuals existing roles – for example, redefining the rural El Salvadoran women's long-standing roles in caring for sick and injured family members (especially given the limited access to formal healthcare in ways that made it more feasible for women to collaborate as medics (Viterna 2019, p. 52).

Another set of crucial entanglements emerges if we consider the domain of the family in relation to the political aims of non-state armed groups in civil war. Not only is the targeting and regulation of familial bonds and intimate relations central to war as a form of military strategy but can also be a means towards realising a specific *political* vision[5] (Ni Aolain 1992, Baines 2014, Zharkevich 2019). One entry point to think about this is to examine the entanglements between family and processes of military socialisation, a key dynamic of civil war geared towards both shattering, establishing, and reconfiguring multiple forms of ties, including familial ties. Writing in the context of the LRA in Uganda, Erin Baines shows how the violent erasure of prior family ties was central to the socialisation of new and forced recruits, and how this erasure was combined with the organising of the LRA in family-like units, at the centre of which was the institutionalisation of forced marriage (Baines 2014: p. 409). Importantly, Baines argues that to understand how these practices emerged and to attend to their role in the conduct of war we need to consider them as central also to the broader political project of the LRA. She writes:

> The institutionalization of marriage and the regulation of sexual relations became a central means through which the nation was both imagined and governed, and in turn through which the political project of the new Acholi was evoked into being. (Baines 2014, p. 415)

Family then emerges as a social institution that is to be violently reconfigured (for instance through institutionalising forced marriage) not only to support strategic military aims in the present but also in relation to a specific vision of the future – here the new Acholi.

The notion of 'futurity' (Matarazzo and Baines 2019) is crucial especially if we think of the ways in which people participating in the war as fighters (whether through forced recruitment or otherwise) may become positioned as the vanguard of the new society. This aspect is relevant, for example, in the context of the Maoist People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Nepal, where the Maoist movement produced an elaborated set of policies to regulate and organise marital and sexual relations within the PLA, referred to in the Maoist circles as the issue of 'love-marriage-sex' (Gayer 2017). This involved, for instance, prohibiting extramarital affairs and having to solicit the consent of the party for 'revolutionary marriages', including an encouragement to contract marriages that crossed caste boundaries (Zharkevich 2019, p. 142, Giri 2021). The PLA was in the official Maoist discourses positioned as the 'true social engineer' (Yami 2007, p. 46) and was to function as a catalyst for the restructuring of the institution of marriage and family within the society more broadly (Yadav 2016a, Riley 2022).

It would be perhaps tempting to posit 'militarisation' as the primary lens to approach the role of familial ties in civil wars. This could entail exploring how entanglements between family as a social institution and the military translate to specific bonds and attachments, generated at the level of everyday practices and interactions, as well as the myriad ways in which processes of militarisation are negotiated and resisted from within the familial (Hyde 2016, Chisholm and Ketola 2020, Gray 2022). I think such analysis has immense value. Yet, what the scholarship that engages social processes of civil war powerfully demonstrates is that war does not merely produce *militarised* ties but profoundly transforms ties in ways that cannot be necessarily 'managed' by the actors involved – whether states, leaders of armed groups, or indeed the people who participate in different capacities (Wood 2003, Viterna 2019, Zharkevich 2019, Shesterinina 2021, Riley 2022).

Building on this crucial insight, I argue that militarisation as a lens is not enough alone to trace the formation and transformation of familial ties through war.[6] What it allows us to do brilliantly is to unravel the ongoing processes via which ties are militarised and the work this militarisation does in legitimising and sustaining war. To extend from this, I turn to now explore familial ties as emergent from and transformed through war.

Familial Ties: Configured in Relation to Violence

What keeps haunting me is the idea that we need to account for how familial ties in contexts of war are not just 'any familial ties' but specifically ties formed in relation to violence. I was struck by this again when reading Anastasia Shesterinina's (2021) insightful analysis of the role of familial ties in mobilisation in the war in Abkhazia. What she points to is not only how ordinary people made mobilisation decisions within their quotidian networks but how the familial ties that they drew on were *already* infused with pre-war experiences of violent or conflictual politics (Shesterinina 2021, 48). And how it was partly this dimension of the familial ties – their prior configuration in relation to violence – that made these ties meaningful in the decision-making around whether or not to mobilise and how (Shesterinina 2021, pp. 154–155).

Ties as Affective Bonds: Feminist Theories of Relationality of Violence

To extend from this, I turn to what I have framed as feminist theories of relationality of violence. This literature explores the connections between subjectivity, victimhood and violence, straddling the disciplines of anthropology, political theory and IR (Butler 2004, Das 2007, De Alwis 2009, Roy 2012, Baines 2016, O'reilly 2018). What this scholarship does, is to highlight how violence shatters, generates and transforms ties, and then poses these processes as central to understanding politics during and in the aftermath of war (Sylvester 2012, Butler 2004, Krystalli and Schulz 2022). To be clear, I do not frame ties primarily as connections between individuals or communities or as 'networks' – an understanding that would be perhaps more prominent in the Civil War Studies scholarship on social ties (e.g., Staniland 2014, Shesterinina 2021). Instead, I explore ties as attachments and bonds, and it is the relationship between these bonds and violence that I shed light on.

In doing this, I build on feminist relational understandings of subjectivity that centre bodily vulnerability. The vulnerability of 'bodily life' (Butler 2004) means that as 'socially constituted bodies' we are always already attached to others as well as at risk of losing those attachments. That is, as subjects we are exposed to others and by the virtue of that exposure, we are also at risk of violence (Butler 2004, 20). Such relational theorisation of subjectivity has a long tradition in feminist philosophy, including in feminist care ethics, but it is the literature that explicitly addresses the contexts of war and violence that I engage with here.[7] One way to think about the centrality of the body is to frame war, as Christine Sylvester suggests, as a politics of 'injury': 'a politics that endeavours to safeguard some bodies by injuring other bodies' (Sylvester 2012, pp. 492–493). The physical and feeling body then is not peripheral to war but rather is understood as the

main target of violence as well as endowed with various capacities for action (Ketola 2020). Connecting this back to familial ties, ties do not merely exist but need to be constantly crafted and cultivated, and the physical and feeling body is central to this process of making and remaking ties under conditions of war's violence (Mahmood 2005, De Alwis 2009, Vaittinen et al. 2019, Matarazzo and Baines 2019).

I have found Baines (2016) intricate work on 'complex victims' and political agency particularly helpful for thinking through how to understand familial ties as evolving *in relation* to violence. At the centre of Baines' argument about 'complex victims' (those implicated in the same violence they endure) is the insistence that victims are 'subjects formed in relation to violence' (Baines 2016, p. 6). What Baines asks us to consider carefully is how in conflict 'some are not only targets of violent events, but are transformed by it in relation to others' (Baines 2016, p. 16). There are several layers to her argument, but most prominently for the discussion here, it invites us to understand politics as intricately interwoven with intimate ties – with the attachments and bonds we have to others (Baines 2016: pp. 13–14). By engaging with stories of women who had been abducted as children by the LRA she offers glimpses into how the women negotiated and reasserted themselves as subjects in the face of violence as well as in its aftermath, by insisting upon, by remaking, remembering and retelling about their relations and attachments to others.

Baines writes:

> They never forgot their loved ones, and that they were loved by them. They cared for and protected their children, to ensure that their familial bloodline continued in good health. The silent, embodied and overt contestation of forced marriage and the rape that took place within that institution convey the limits of complicity and survival . . . through their stories, the women reclaim the sense of self the LRA sought to deny them, and a place of belonging in a community that refuses to acknowledge them as human beings. (Baines 2016: p. 125).

The insight that violence does not only target but also transforms subjects *in their relations to others* is crucial for understanding the role of familial ties in civil war. First, it points to a generative relationship between war's violence and familial ties that is not easy to capture otherwise: familial ties are not only shattered by but also *emergent from* and *transformed* by war.[8] And second, when this intertwining of ties and war's violence is conceptually captured, it becomes possible to ask different kinds of questions about the aftermaths of civil wars, or indeed the long-term legacies of violence and of ties. I will illustrate each of these points in turn.

Emergence and Transformation of Ties: Illustrations from the Victims' Movement in Nepal

The two interrelated themes – 'emergence' and 'transformation' of familial ties – have slowly emerged from research encounters that I had with women activists engaged in the victims' movement in Nepal when doing my PhD research in 2013. The husbands of the women I met had been disappeared during the People's War' in Nepal (1996–2006), and the women were engaged in a collective movement – a victim's struggle – to find out what had happened to their loved ones and to get justice[9]. What struck me in various meetings and interviews was the kind of affective ties that the women appeared to have crafted through their activism and how these ties were expressed in familial terms (Walker 2012, Ketola 2017). As Devika told me about her involvement in the movement:

> It feels like we have found a family. Our own family and siblings will not understand our problems as they have not gone through or experienced what we did.[10]

What was striking about these reflections was how the kinds of ties the women described became attached to specific responsibilities towards others, enacted in the everyday. Aayushma described the 'strong bonds' that she had formed through her activism in this way:

> Because of this trust that has been built, the relationship is not just an organisational one, but rather has become a very personal relationship. It is very nice. It is like if I have any kind of festivities, and birthday celebration of my children, I invite them and I also go to their place and they visit me. If we have any kinds of problems, then we share with each other. … There are about three or four friends who love me and each other like they would their own siblings. The bond is very strong, it is like blood relation and I am very happy with them. I stay with them. One of them … she is quite old, so in that sense also she treats us like her daughters in every way. Even when my children are ill, she supports me by sometimes sending money or fruits.[11]

To me Aayushma's and Devika's reflections point to the ways in which familial ties may not only be shattered by but also emergent from war. These kinds of affective ties were intimately connected to what the women often referred to as 'victims' work'.[12] This work consisted of various practices of meeting, sharing experiences of loss and advocating for others (e.g., in government offices, and in interactions with researchers and NGO actors). And as Aayushma describes in the quote above, it also involved various everyday practices through which the women invested in the intimate lives of others, this aspect resonating particularly closely with Krystalli's and Schulz's discussion of the role of practices of 'love and care' in the aftermath of violence, including in victim/survivor struggles (Krystalli and Schulz 2022, pp. 12–13).

Reading Aayushma's interview I am also reminded of Maria O'Reilly's insightful reflections on the narratives of women activists in Bosnia-Herzegovina whose family members had been disappeared. O'Reilly highlights the significance of familial ties – a form of relationality – in the emergence of the agency the women activists deploy. She writes:

> The agency that these women deploy appears to be driven by a sense of commitment (perhaps obligation) to close relatives, both missing and alive, to actively engage in the issue of missing persons. Their identities as mothers, sisters, wives, and widows of missing relatives can be understood as both enabling and constraining––these identities are productive of motivation, but also a sense of burden and responsibility, to undertake work which requires significant affective labour. (O'reilly 2018, p. 283)

Building on O'Reilly and others what I am seeking to capture here is the *generative* relationship between war's violence and familial ties. That is, how the victim's work that Aayushma described and enacted *brings into being* – generates – new affective ties that are expressed in familial terms. At the same time, the specific practices attached to these ties – such as advocating for others and investing in the lives of others (the affective labour that also O'Reilly highlights) – are a crucial part of *how* the women mobilised and sustained their struggle.

Extending from this, it is important to consider the wider post-war context in which the kinds of affective ties I have described emerge, including *transformations* in other familial ties or more broadly in societal norms around the institution of family. Relating back to the example of the women engaged in the victims' struggle in Nepal, enforced disappearances can be understood as a form of militarised violence that targets intimate bonds, setting in motion complex transformations in familial ties (De Alwis 2009). For the women engaged in the victims' struggle the disappearance of a husband effected a change in the social status as the women no longer 'had a husband' but were also 'not widows', or single women.[13]

As Prem Kumari, whose husband had been disappeared by the police, reflected upon in our meeting:

> Well when we look at the current situation, we are single women as we do not have our husband. So yes we are single women. We haven't even found the bodies of our husbands. So we do not know how to define ourselves. Hence we find ourselves in a situation of dilemma as to whether or not we call ourselves single women. And when people ask about my husband, I have to say I don't have one.[14]

This ambiguity in social status exposed the women to potential gendered violence and stigmatisation within and beyond the familial domain, generating various experiences of bodily vulnerability (Robins 2013, Yadav 2016b, Bhandari et al. 2018). For instance, many of the women I met recalled how

they had been blamed for the disappearance of their husbands and many of them, including Prem Kumari, were currently living separately from their in-laws, having left the joint family (Robins 2013). This specific transformation of familial ties – a reconfiguration of the customary joint family – meant that the new ties generated through activism took on crucial importance as they became also a means for negotiating the social (and economic) impacts of the loss. The shared experiences of the social impacts of the loss allowed women active in the movement to negotiate on behalf of 'other sisters' as Sushila described, narrating her journey into the movement after her husband had been disappeared by the Maoists.

> Forget other sisters. During that time, even I was also not able to come out of my family. My family used to comment about me saying "you have eaten your husband and now you are going outside home and becoming a leader". I could not leave home and move outside … Then, we conducted different programmes … We went to different wards, villages, met their parents, sisters, brothers, including their elder peoples and village leaders. We explained them "conflict victims are those who are made such neither by their works nor by their fate. We are in this situation because of the war … Now here is peace. We might not face conflict here again" … We conducted awareness programmes calling for mothers, brothers, sisters not to harm them. Then after that we got lots of support. They got opportunities to understand. Then "oh, my son's, my brother's death was not due to daughter-in-law".[15]

The ambiguous social status of the women whose husbands had disappeared, *and* the kind of collective activism the women were engaged in, generated various negotiations of societal gender norms and allowed also other women to push boundaries around what was acceptable or expected of widows (Yadav 2016a, 2016b). Thus, in my framing, the 'emergence' and 'transformation' of ties is not understood as a linear process (first ties emerge and then they transform), but rather these two processes co-exist and are connected in crucial ways. And as I offered glimpses to here, the embodied processes of crafting and cultivating ties are intricately connected to the broader societal norms that constitute 'family' – norms that may also be reconfigured through militarised violence, in this context through enforced disappearances.

Legacies of Ties and of Violence

I argue that by centring such a generative relationship between war's violence and familial ties, we get more nuanced nights into long-term legacies of civil war – specifically to the legacies of ties and of violence. To me Veena Das's framing of the possibility of 're-inhabiting' and 'remaking worlds' in the aftermath of atrocity (Das 2007) offers a powerful framing to capture such legacies. She writes about how the 'tentacles' of violence (Das 2007, p. 7) become interwoven into everyday relationships, including familial ties and asks:

> Are there other paths on which self-creation may take place, through occupying the same place of devastation yet again, by embracing the signs of injury and turning them into ways of becoming subjects. (Das 2007, p. 215)

What I find so powerful about Das's question is the way the emergence of the subject becomes directly connected with 'reinhabiting' again the same scene of violence and devastation – but in a way that 'embraces the signs of injury' that war has affected (Das 2007, p. 215).

The affective ties that are central to the 'victims' work' could be understood as a one way of 'reinhabiting' the same place of violence (Das 2007, p. 217). This reinhabiting can take many forms, but what Das illustrates is how it may involve a 'descent to the ordinary' rather than only overt forms of political action (Das 2007, pp. 7, 77). One way to interpret Das's insights is to explore how embracing the very practices that have been shattered or reconfigured in relation to militarised violence, for example, practices of social reproduction such as caring for others, cooking, and celebrations, may become re-inhabited again in different ways in the war's aftermath (De Alwis 2009, Zharkevich 2019). Cherishing the 'strong bonds' through celebrations or by simply being together, as Aayushma described, or negotiating on behalf of others in exchanges with their family members, as Sushila narrated, are manifestations of such 'descent into the ordinary'.

This is not to propose that the affective ties generated through the 'victims' work' would somehow replace the familial ties that have been shattered or reconfigured in the course of war. Rather what I am tentatively suggesting is that these ties may offer new ways of being a subject in relation to others, ways that are intimately linked to the violence lived through.

Yet, it is crucial to consider not only the specificity of ties (familial ties as a distinct form of relationality) but also the specificity of violence. A reoccurring theme in the encounters I had with the women activists was an emphasis on being approached as 'family of disappeared' or a 'wife of disappeared' – rather than as 'conflict affected' or as 'widows' or 'single women'. As Sita, who was active in the movement, stated in response to my question about her thoughts on these categories:

> All that we are, we prefer to be addressed as the disappeared family. We focus more on making the government realise their responsibility and make the status of our people public. We pressurise the government in providing us with their bodies, and if not deceased then our people.[16]

Here Sita – expressing some annoyance about my leading question – stressed the distinctiveness of the struggle of the families of disappeared in relation to the government, foregrounding the specificity of their demands (See also Bhandari et al. 2018). This example prompts, however, also a broader

question about how to capture the specificity of disappearances as a form of violence when thinking about affective ties emergent from war.

Building on Das, Malathi de Alwis prompts us to pause and try and understand the particular 'affectual burdens' of disappearances on those who mourn their loved ones whilst their status continues to remain uncertain (De Alwis 2009, p. 381). She asks:

> Could the uncertainty and anxiety, often even a glimmer of hope, that is produced by "disappearance", and its concomitant evocation of the temporariness of loss and revocability of absence, structure the re-inhabiting of worlds differently? (De Alwis 2009 p. 381)

De Alwis's question and Sita's assertion remind us that understanding *how* familial ties emerge and transform through war requires engaging deeply with a specific context, and specific experiences of violence. For example, this section could have been built around examining how familial ties emerge through and within armed groups, highlighting how affective ties are crafted both through enduring and participating in violence – and then linking these insights to broader processes of militarisation of family in rebel warfare (e.g., Matarazzo and Baines 2019, Madhani and Baines 2020, Suarez and Baines 2022). Within that exploration, the answers to the question of *how* familial ties evolve through violence would then vary not only depending on the specific context (e.g., armed group, notions of family) but on whose narratives are centred.

What I have sought to do in this article, is to strengthen the theoretical ground upon which we explore such questions of familial ties. To do so, I have focused on building connections between the Civil War Studies scholarship on social ties *and* the strands of feminist literature that I argue are absolutely central for understanding the role of familial ties – feminist theorisation of family as militarised, and feminist understandings of violence that centre subjects in their relations to others.

Conclusion

The insight that family matters for understanding the emergence, conduct and legacies of civil wars has not gone unnoticed in the diverse field that constitutes Civil War Studies. In this article I have offered a feminist theorisation of the role and evolvement of familial ties. I have done this to strengthen the existing nuanced scholarship that examines the role of social ties in civil wars. My central contribution is two-fold. First, I have offered theoretical means to examine the distinct, gendered, character of familial ties in civil wars. I have done this by building on feminist theories of family as 'militarised', demonstrating how family as a domain becomes in specific ways entangled with the processes of militarisation and how

these entanglements underpin and enable the conduct of civil wars. Thus, I have shown why it matters for our understanding of civil wars that these are not just any social or quotidian ties, but ties constructed and enacted in familial terms.

Second, I have developed a framing of familial ties as affective bonds and attachments that are emergent from and transformed through war's violence. That is, I have explored the insight that these are not just in familial ties, but ties formed in relation to violence. To do this I have built on feminist theories that conceptualise violence as transformative of subjects in their relations to others (Baines 2016). Such a formulation offers new avenues to explore the well-established insight that civil wars set in motion complex processes of transformation in social structures and norms, including societal gender norms, which have long legacies (Wood 2003, 2008, Viterna 2019, Shesterinina 2021). What I do, is to shift the focus on the inter-subjective relations and embodied attachments that are emergent from and transformed through violence and then illuminate the legacies of civil wars through that lens. I argue that to understand the legacies of civil wars, we need to explore both – the everyday practices through which embodied and affective attachments emerge and are cultivated (such as the victims' work) *and* the broader transformations in social norms around family that civil wars set in motion (including through processes of militarisation) that condition the evolvement of these affective bonds.

Extending from these contributions, I propose that the theorisation of familial ties I have advanced here has the potential to generate vital insights into modes of politics that emerge during and in the aftermath of civil wars. As I have illustrated, the political aims of non-state armed groups (as well as the state) become deeply entangled with the domain of the familial in the course of civil wars. These entanglements do not simply unravel when the fighting stops. As such, theorising family as a militarised social institution *and* paying attention to the transformation of familial ties through violence may offer new insights into post-war politics, including for instance processes of demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (see, e.g., Suarez and Baines 2022) or rebel-to-party transitions. Further, my discussion of the 'victim's work' that the women activists in Nepal pursue shows how affective ties generated through exposure to militarised violence both underpinned and enabled the collective struggle. As such, the lens of familial ties as affective bonds that I develop here has the potential to offer new insights into specific forms of politics that emerge in the aftermath of civil wars, including into victims' movements.

Notes

1. I use the term 'entanglements' to capture how family and military structures are intertwined in ways that are not easily undone. The term is intended to highlight not merely the overlap between the domains of family and military structures but how these supposedly separate domains become entwined in ways that are transformative of both.
2. I understand familial ties as bonds that are enacted in familial terms (not reducible to blood relations) and always reproduced and enacted through social interactions, this shifting the focus on the process of 'becoming a family' (Matarazzo and Baines 2019). Connecting back to my framing of family as a social institution, any process of 'becoming a family' is underpinned by gendered social norms and responsibilities, the construction of which varies across and also within specific cultural contexts.
3. The bulk of the qualitative interviews that I draw on in this paper were conducted in 2013 in the districts of Banke, Bardiya, Nawalparasi and Kavre, over a period six months. As part of the wider research, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews with women activists engaged in the victims' movement. Whilst the research was focused on women's political agency, the interview material offered crucial insights into the role of familial ties, and it is this aspect that I draw on this paper. All the participants gave their informed consent to being interviewed. My fieldwork was reviewed by the War Studies Group Research Ethics Panel and was granted full approval (Application REP (WSG)/12/13–18).
4. Whilst the form of an organisation can evolve over time, for instance, from 'vanguard' to 'integrated', it is the organisational origins that constitute the basis in relation to which change over time is understood (Staniland 2014, p. 17).
5. By political vision I denote the vision of the future state, society, or more broadly future way of life, that is the stated aim of an armed insurgency.
6. To clarify, feminist understandings of militarism would not be in disagreement with this insight, and do not claim to offer all-encompassing explanations of familial ties in contexts of war.
7. For a recent deconstructive overview of care debates in feminist philosophy and, specifically, for an insightful commentary about the relationship between the body, practices of care and violence see Vaittinen (2022).
8. In my conceptualisation this includes but is not limited to familial ties that are generated within and through armed groups and comprises what is often termed in the literature as 'fictional ties' (Zharkevich 2019). This conceptualisation is intentionally broad, as it is the generative and transformative relationship between war's violence and familial ties that I am aiming to primarily capture here.
9. For a discussion of the multiple meanings of 'justice' pursued as part of the victims' movement in Nepal see Robins (2013) and Bhandari et al. (2018).
10. Interview, Devika, Kavre, 27th July 2013.
11. Interview, Aayushma, Banke, 27th May, 2013.
12. Crafting and sustaining a collective struggle from the margins of power takes a lot of work, and the women I met expressed that taking part in the meetings and interviews with me was indeed 'work' (Ketola 2017, see also Krystalli and Schulz 2022: p. 14).

13. The term 'single women' is now widely used in Nepal instead of the term 'widows' that in Nepali has highly negative connotations. The term 'single women' encompasses unmarried women as well as widows. See (Yadav 2016b). The use of the term with reference to women whose husbands have been disappeared is contested (Ketola 2017: 179).
14. Interview, Prem Kumari, Bardiya, 3rd December 2013.
15. Interview, Sushila, Bardiya, 30th July 2013.
16. Interview, Sita, Bardiya, 1st December, 2013.

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Data Availability Statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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