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The Other Side of Gender: Including Masculinity Concerns in Conflict and Peacebuilding

Summary

- Gender is often used synonymously with the study of women. This narrow approach overlooks the relational quality of gender and fails to include masculinity issues in analysis and research, which can have important bearing on policy interventions.
- Taking a more inclusive view of gender roles in conflict, which also recognizes that these roles are dynamic, can lead to more informed research strategies and more productive policy interventions.
- To effectively combat instances of extreme gender violence, such as the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, a more nuanced understanding is needed of the actors involved.
- Instead of being passive actors during conflict, women may be combatants or direct participants in sexual violence. Examining the motivations, belief systems and internal dynamics of armed combatants can provide insight into the origins of sexual- and gender-based violence in conflict.
- Rather than representing an isolated event, sexual- and gender-based violence during conflict can perhaps best be viewed as a point along a continuum. In the postconflict period, damaged social and economic systems may contribute to the disempowerment of men seeking to return to traditional or customary roles. Coupled with the enduring impacts of trauma, the threat of emasculation can result in high levels of violence within the household environment.

“Challenging dominant assumptions and taking a more inclusive view of gender roles in conflict can lead to more informed research strategies and more productive policy interventions.”

Introduction

Gender analysis is now widely recognized in international and national arenas as an integral component of effective and sustainable peacebuilding efforts. However, the term “gender” is often used synonymously as another term for “women.” As a result, gender analysis often fails to acknowledge that men also possess gender identities. In determining what it means to be male or female, the term gender encompasses social, cultural and economic considerations and power dynamics between and among men and women. Focusing on only one side of the gender equation overlooks this relational quality and provides an incomplete understanding of gender issues in the context of conflict and peacebuilding efforts. Throughout 2010, USIP’s Gender and Peacebuilding Center held a series of public events to broaden understanding of the term gender, and to critically examine the evidence for analyzing conflict and peacebuilding through the social

and cultural roles and expectations of men and women. This analysis can inform policy shaping and policymaking in conflict and postconflict settings.

Expanding the scope of gender analysis to include masculinity issues acknowledges that gender roles are dynamic and often change during conflict. Women are not always the losers and men the winners when it comes to societal gender relationships.¹ Over the course of a conflict, for example, men may lose their traditional roles as providers, and women may become combatants in armed groups. In addition, social structures and authorities may give men power not only over women, but also over other men. Taking a more inclusive view of gender roles in conflict and challenging dominant assumptions can lead to more informed research strategies and more productive policy interventions.

Examining triggers of gender extremism

To effectively prevent extreme gender violence, such as the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, a more nuanced understanding is needed of the perpetrators and possible triggers for acts of gender extremism. Contrary to popular belief, perpetrators of sexual violence are not solely men, and victims are not only women. In addition to reports of female victims, research conducted in Sierra Leone also found reports of men being raped. The Revolutionary United Front combatant group (composed of 25 percent female combatants) was found to have committed the majority of reported gang rapes.² Victims of such rapes reported that perpetrators comprised “mixed gender groups,” suggesting that women had direct involvement and participation in acts of sexual violence.

This research highlights that simplified notions about perpetrators of sexual violence gloss over the complexity of conflicts on the ground. Relying on traditional gender roles, much of the research thus far has focused on victims of rape. Recent studies, however, are attempting to gain a better understanding of the origins of sexual- and gender-based violence in conflict by delving into the experiences and motivations of perpetrators. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, members of the Mai Mai militia were interviewed about their relationships with civilians and their views on sexual violence and women. Researchers found that soldiers often adhered to rigid gender norms about women, and viewed civilians as an exploitable resource. At the same time, soldiers held coexisting beliefs about themselves as “protectors” of the population, and drew distinctions between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” forms of sexual violence (including rape against the young or rape using instruments), which was seen as being used only by “other” groups.³

That these militia members distinguish between permissible in-group behavior and objectionable out-group behavior suggests that armed combatants struggle to define themselves within the context of their group and justify violent acts. In another example, a recent study examined the motivations of young al-Qaeda recruits, one researcher found character formation to be a compelling factor. Potential recruits often joined the group because of an unfulfilled desire to define themselves at a crucial psychological and developmental period.⁴ Recruits used the group and often the violent acts as vehicles for achieving the identity they sought but could not find elsewhere in society.

Membership in an armed group entails more than individual identity formation. The new role of combatant may come with various norms about sexual violence that are inculcated by the armed group’s commanders. Despite perceptions about the prevalence of rape by armed groups in war, sexual violence is not inevitable in conflict. That some armed groups commit high levels of sexual violence while others exercise restraint may stem from the internal dynamics and strength of the command structure of the armed group.⁵ For example, the armed group may condone, ostensibly forbid or actively punish sexual violence, or may tolerate combatants’ own preexisting

norms about violence. Therefore, the policies of the armed group, relayed through the command structure, can replace or reinforce norms about violence held by individual combatants.

Violence does not end when conflict is over

Although research on armed groups and combatants is important for understanding sexual violence in conflict, it should also be recognized that such acts are not limited to the conflict period, nor are they only committed by active duty combatants. When soldiers return home, former gender roles often face unfamiliar predicaments. In societies where masculinity must be demonstrated, social and economic systems damaged by conflict may further contribute to the disempowerment of men seeking to return to their previous role as provider. The threat of emasculation posed by the change in gender roles may result in violent responses. Such violence may stem partly from the traumatizing experiences of the soldier, whether witnessing or participating in it. This exposure can produce problematic and risky sexual behavior that continues long after the fighting ends.⁶

The enduring effects of trauma also suggest that sexual violence in conflict can be viewed as a point along a continuum rather than an isolated event. For example, women in four conflict and displacement zones were interviewed in a study using the “neighborhood method,” which asked women not only about their own experiences with sexual violence, but also about the experiences of women within their circle of family and friends. Reports indicated that husbands and boyfriends committed the majority of violence within households or in IDP camps.⁷ This finding suggests that the conflict’s culture of violence is not confined to the battlefield.

Shifting household power dynamics in the conflict and postconflict period also shed light on the connection between economic opportunity and gender-based violence. The rapid change in gender norms caused by conflict may provide women with new economic opportunities, especially as heads of household. However, once the protection of social and cultural norms is removed, particularly in displacement settings, women may also be subjected to heightened violence. The increase in women’s assets, as provided by many development programs, must also be accompanied by an increase in protection and security to account for vulnerabilities present in displacement and postconflict environments. Within the household, as well, increasing women’s access to resources is not enough without also enabling women control over these resources to account for power distributions within the household environment.⁸

Creating more effective interventions through gender inclusivity

Crafting effective policy interventions requires first broadening the scope of inquiry into gender roles along the conflict cycle. Expanding the gender lens to encompass more inclusive research and policy does not come at the expense of women. Rather, as the evidence base grows, strategies can be better tailored to reflect the reality of shifting norms and roles for men and women in conflict zones.

Within armed groups, understanding the command structure and individual actors’ motivations and beliefs can indicate possible intervention points. For example, working with commanders to operationalize the risks of sexual violence (such as the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases) so that combatants view these as security risks may help deter sexually violent acts. In addition, developing punishments that are enforced may deter the widespread impunity for these crimes. Norms against sexual violence should also be strengthened among individual combatants, such as through gender-sensitive training.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Over the past year, the United States Institute of Peace's Gender and Peacebuilding Center has hosted a series of events entitled, "The Other Side of Gender," including an experts' workshop on May 18, 2010, on the topic of how conflict changes gender roles. Kathleen Kuehnast is the director of the Gender and Peacebuilding Center of Innovation for the U.S. Institute of Peace; Nina Sudhakar is the research assistant for the Gender and Peacebuilding Center of Innovation. This series of events, which sought to broaden the gender lens and create a more nuanced research agenda, have greatly informed this PeaceBrief.

In the postconflict period, understanding gender as a social and cultural construct can help identify additional intervention points for preventing sexual- and gender-based violence. Programs that focus on women's economic empowerment must increase surrounding protections to reduce their vulnerability, including safe spaces to conduct business and the ability to exert some control over the business and income generated. Additionally, providing concrete and participatory economic opportunities for disempowered young men may bestow greater benefit on young women. This is evident in Rwanda, for example, where female adulthood (attained through marriage) is dependent first on male adulthood (attained through economic means of success).⁹

Recognizing the various roles men and women play during conflict also contributes to more inclusive policy interventions. Women combatants, for example, are often not considered in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programs that usually focus entirely on male combatants. Beyond combatants, the various roles men experience during conflict must also be addressed. For example, the experiences of male relatives witnessing sexual violence against a wife, mother or child are often ignored. And even less examined in research is the number of male victims of sexual violence. This is due in part to the social stigma of admitting such experiences. Addressing these predicaments can help better meet male mental health needs in dealing with trauma. In addition, efforts must be made to capitalize on the potential of men to assist in efforts to prevent sexual- and gender-based violence. The establishment of male leadership programs in some conflict zones, for example, may help reduce violent responses to shifting roles and create more appropriate role models for future generations of young men.

Endnotes

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