



The gendered dimension of violence and the role played by masculinities during the Second Congo War

Wiriranai Brilliant Masara¹

¹Institute of Peace and Security Studies, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Global and European Studies Institute, Leipzig University, Leipzig, Germany.

¹billymasara@gmail.com; <https://twitter.com/billywmasara>

¹Wiriranai Brilliant Masara is a PhD Candidate in Global and Area Studies: with a special emphasis on peace and security in Africa. He is enrolled in a joint programme between the Institute for Peace and Security Studies under Addis Ababa University and the Global and European Studies Institute of Leipzig University.

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the gendered dimension of violence in violent conflicts. It examines the theoretical position that violence in conflict is more likely to affect women more than men. This argument is emphasised by examining previous conflict contexts around Africa but primarily referring to Kivu in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. The paper underscores the role played by masculinity in spearheading violence towards women during and after conflict. However, the paper also discusses how men are victims of violence in conflict, albeit at a lower rate than women.

Keywords: Gender Inequality; Gendered Dimension; Masculinity; Violent Conflicts; Eastern DRC; Africa.

I. INTRODUCTION

Violence is a widespread global phenomenon affecting all social sectors, ideologies, religious beliefs and ethnic backgrounds worldwide. Its far-reaching effects affect everyone directly or indirectly. Combaz (2013) argues that men are the most perpetrators of violence as compared to women. Therefore, since perpetrators are primarily male, they tend to distribute their violence more towards the opposite sex. The roles played by society through its complex institutions of masculinity are both manifest and latent.

Patriarchal dominance subjects women to being second after men. The historical and cultural disadvantages expose women to more violence as no gender-sensitive system cushion them from masculinity. Multiple masculine identities are shaped and formed according to the intersection of masculinity with religion, nationality and ethnicity. According to Boas and Dunn (2013), the rate of sexual violence in the Congo exceeds other violent conflicts in Africa such as Sierra Leone, Mali, Mozambique, et cetera while dwarfing the reported prevalence in the West Bank and Gaza. Hence, gender approaches to the violent conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have predominantly focused on women. Wakabi (2008) posit that there have been cases of extensive sexual violence committed against girls and women in eastern DRC.

1.1 Problem Statement

Gender issues have a crucial role in perpetrating violence against women during violent conflicts. Male and females experience extremely varied encounters. As a consequence, they are vulnerable in different ways. The evidence that the violent conflicts and masculinity structure generate an atmosphere that normalises violence is based on years of continuous research conducted through a feminist lens. It suggests that girls and women are the most victims of violence during a violent conflict. Also, sexuality and gender restrictions imposed by society have been shown to result in violence against women during conflict.

Therefore, the paper contextualises the debates surrounding the gender dimensions of violence during the DRC second civil war – and beyond – and outlines how violence during conflicts can result from cultural and structural violence against women. It is structured in sections that briefly conceptualise violence, discuss the gendered dimension of violence in conflict and post-conflict and how gender violence is also, to some extent, a part of an extensive pattern of generalised violence against both women and men.



1.2 Research Objective

The paper discusses how violence has a strong gender dimension in violent conflicts. It examines the role played by masculinities in perpetrating violence against women and girls during violent conflicts.

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a desk review of extant literature. It qualitatively looks at the relevant literature on the subject under investigation. Primary and secondary sources of data were consulted.

III. DISCUSSION

3.1 Conceptualising Violence

Violence can be defined as any behaviour involving physical force with the intent to hurt or kill someone. To understand the strong gender dimension of violence, it is essential to conceptualise violence. Johan Galtung (1990) offers two concepts, structural and cultural violence, that help tolerance to violence form and diffuse through society. Structural violence has four characteristics which are exploitation, control, fragmentation and marginalisation. The concordance between the four attributes of structural violence and the gender dimension of inequality and how it is 'typically maintained in human societies is clear' (Hudson et al., 2009). Galtung (1990) posits that structural violence arises from cultural violence through the day to day use of force as a means to an end.

Cultural violence diffuses within religious ideology and other forms of culture to yield norms of masculinities. Therefore, violent patriarchy becomes the primary basis of cultural violence in human collectives. Gendered hierarchies explain the violence associated with nationalism since the latter, according to Evolutionary theory, is almost exclusively male-defined. Therefore, patriarchal nationalism becomes legitimised by gendered cultural and structural violence and justifies advancing state interests through the use of force. In light of the above, Hunt and Posa (2001) argue that there will not be a meaningful decree in gendered violence nor a sustainable peace among human society without a decrease in gender inequality.

While violence and conflict affect both men and women, there are significant differences in how the latter are affected. The subordination and marginalisation of women through a patriarchal system further marginalise women during violent conflicts. Therefore, questions arise on the role played by masculinity in violence. Masculinity can be understood as a configuration of practices or qualities attributed to men within a system of gender relations. Gender violence and masculinity are two sides of the same coin. One cannot fully elucidate the gender dimension of violence without examining the role played by masculinity.

Hudson et al. (2009) posit that religious and cultural traditions justify masculinity by offering rewards for the perpetrator's aggression. This results in social diffusion and the continuance of cycles of gendered violence. Masculinity cannot be understood in isolation from other factors that shape identity. In eastern DRC, gender relations may have been altered and exacerbated in some way by conflict. This line of reasoning is supported by Barker and Ricardo (2005), who states that versions of manhood in Africa are socially constructed, plural and fluid over time and in different settings.

3.2 Gender Dimensions of Violence in Conflict

According to Wright (2014), violence has a strong gender dimension considering how men are the primary perpetrators of violence, making up 95 per cent of people convicted of homicide and being the majority of combatants in violent conflicts. The gendered dimension of violence is catalysed by men seeking to protect their masculinities essentially. Bjorkhaug & Boas (2014) opine that in eastern DRC, men have faced many threats and insecurities from substantial underemployment to protect their families. This brings ontological uncertainties to men and their ability to fulfil the traditional role of the husband as the breadwinner and protector of the family resulting in alienation, bitterness, frustration and social angst. According to Bjorkhaug



& Boas (2014), this does not automatically lead to violence against women in eastern DRC, but it points to the crisis of the notions of masculinity.

Wright (2014) adds that in most cultures, violence is associated with men and boys in a way that it is not associated with women and girls. In Somalia and South Sudan, militarised notions of masculinity motivate men to participate in violence. In Kosovo, military and political actors valorised violent masculinities to recruit and build support for the war. Accounts from Colombia and Uganda shows that violence is used to attain symbols of manhood. Hence, socially constructed notions of masculinity play a decisive role in gendered violence.

Available evidence demonstrates the role of gender in violent conflicts. According to Herbert (2014), evidence points to a correlation between gender and conflict rather than causation. Gender plays a crucial role in encouraging men to participate in the conflict. Such participation act as a discourse to invoke, perpetuate and fuel violence against women. Feminists posit that during the war, rape is used to negate the victim and destroy their equality. While gender and gender alone cannot be the sole cause of violence with a strong gender dimension, it has to be pointed out that other factors come to play.

Gender is a social construct; hence its standing is intertwined with social institutions extending to and harbouring cultural, economic and political factors. Herbert (2014) comprehensively reviews the link between violent conflicts and gender. He states that there is a clear correlation between violence and gender. In support, Wright (2014) adds strong evidence based on the role played by values and beliefs towards unequal power relations and gender roles in building support for and perpetuating violence. Denis Mukwege, a renowned Congolese human rights advocate, physician and nominee of the Nobel Peace Prize, performed more than 30 000 surgeries through his Panzi Hospital to address complications stemming from rape (International Crisis Group, 2009). During his speech at Brookings, he stressed that the roots of wartime rape are in the inequalities that characterise societies. These inequalities are not limited to DRC or Africa as they exist around the world. Violent conflict merely amplifies these pre-existing inequalities.

Masculinity plays a part in the strong gender dimension of violence if one looks at drivers of conflict such as natural resources, land rights, food security, internal displacement and poor governance. The rampant sexual and gender-based violence resulted in the displacement of 2.7 million Congolese (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2010). According to Cockburn (2010), patriarchal gender relations intersect with economic and ethnic-power relations in perpetuating a tendency to violence. The cultural and institutional features of the gender dimension of violence make the gendered nature visible. Feminists perceive gender relations as one of the root causes of violent conflict. Thus, when such violence breaks out, women become the most affected and recipients of violence.

Inspired by Marx and Gramsci, the feminist standpoint is that material life structures limit understanding society and its relations. Framing the gendered dimensions of violent conflict calls for a generously holistic conceptualisation of power. Cockburn (2010) argues that those who inflict violence on women are phallogocentric capitalists war-makers located advantageously in systems of political, social, cultural and religious power. In eastern DRC, rape was used as psychological warfare to attack communities and provide sexual gratification to armed male soldiers. In many cases, gender and ethnicity were factors in the choice of victims (Boas & Dunn, 2013).

To understand the strong gender dimension of violence, one has to look at the role played by masculinities as forms of patriarchal gender relations. While wars are not fought for gender issues, in the same way they are fought for ethnic-nationalist issues, resources and autonomy, violence is eroticised in masculine fantasy. The indirect causal relationship between violence and gender has provoked mainstream feminists like Cockburn (2010) to perceive gender relations as the root cause of violence through conflict, militarism and war. The intersectionality of masculine institutions, through patriarchal gender power, therefore subject women to inferiority, exploitation and exposes them to more violence.

When one looks at war sociologically as a form of violent conflict, it reveals cultures and the gendered nature of its effects, such as rape. There is evidence that some armed male soldiers in eastern DRC were forced to rape women and girls (Wakabi, 2008) as there are recorded testimonies of how armed militias were 'expected' to rape by their commanders. Cockburn (2010) argues that masculinities are a patriarchal gender



regime that now only serves violence very well but seeks and needs violence through militarisation and war for its fulfilment. A gendered dimension of violence produces gender identities where armed masculinities, through demoralised and angry men, victimise femininities. Masculinity, therefore, ensures the spiralling continuum of violence against women by further subjugating the latter to phallographic institutions.

According to Combaz (2013), while there is a large body of literature examining conflict drivers, very few adopt a gender approach. Reducing violent conflict to sexual and gender-based violence limits any more profound understanding of what causes and drives violent conflict. The beliefs and values behind unequal gendered roles and power relations are instrumental in perpetuating violence. According to Wright (2014), patriarchal notions of masculinities fuel violence, conflict and insecurities.

When institutionalised masculinities are militarised during violent conflicts like war, they can motivate men to participate and extend violence against women. The same militarised institutions will also allow military and political actors to purposely promote violent masculinities to build support for war and recruit participants. The use of violence against women will be used as a rite and ceremony to attain symbols of manhood. Hence, men who feel unable to live up to societal expectations of masculinity will be encouraged to join armed groups. Thus, in violent conflicts such as civil wars, rebel group ideologies and command structures shape notions of masculinity and femininity and demand, encourage, tolerate or prohibit specific acts of violence.

In most literature, what makes violence have a strong gender dimension is sexual violence against women. Sexual violence has been used as a weapon of war in two ways. Firstly, it shapes the masculinity of male combatants and combat culture. Secondly, the gendered effects of sexual terror are sometimes sought instrumentally by armed military groups to influence and control local and international actors. According to Wakabi (2008), during the civil war in DRC, it became clear that rape was used to devastate victims, families and communities. Hence, it was used as a tactical weapon of war by all armed groups to punish communities for supporting their enemies, to instil fear and demonstrate control. Wakabi adds that rape victims were as young as toddlers and as old as 80-year-olds.

Gendered violence has been used as an instrument to destroy communities psychologically and socially to thwart all forms of resistance. Women and girls are the vast majority of victims, although men and boys have also been victims (International Crisis Group, 2009). Gender-based violence has had social effects of shaping conflict, replacing traditional authorities with violent ones, thereby creating a militarised form of social order. Therefore, sexual violence has become one way to determine power relations (Combaz, 2013) as the social effect of sexual and gender-based violence contributes to shaping conflict dynamics. However, it has to be pointed out that violence against women goes beyond wartime.

Societal roles and norms around femininity are implicated in violence and conflict. Discourses of women as defenceless and weak are used to prop up and perpetuate masculinities that perceive men as protectors. Cohn (2012) argues that these discourses encourage men to act according to how they are envisioned using violence if necessary. While masculinity plays a significant role to enforce these values and norms, some women enable the same values and norms by playing a role that supports these discourses.

While it remains challenging to measure how gender values and norms correlate with the propensity of violence, undeniably, there is evidence of influential roles played by values and norms around masculinity and femininity. Using a case of war as a form of violent conflict, Theidon (2009, p. 3) argues that 'Militarism requires a standing gender ideology as much as it needs guns and bullets.' The attempt by feminists to address the strong gender dimension of violence should be seen not only as an attempt to address gender norms and values which drive insecurity and violence but also as an effort to change how society thinks about gender identities by questioning institutionalised structures that uphold and promote the disparity.

Violence has a strong gender dimension if one broadly reviews the evidence base for the links between violent conflict, gender equality and gender norms. The existential inequality between men and women is linked and is a crucial factor in how women are treated in times of conflict and or peace. Institutionalised gender norms act as enablers by formalising social expectations on how women behave as subjects to men. According to Birchall (2019), traditional patriarchal gender identities lead to violent conflict, while gender equality can increase peace and stability. In support, Herbert (2014) emphasises that countries with high levels



of structuralised violence against women and girls are more likely to experience violent conflict than those that do not.

A study by Hudson et al. (2009) demonstrated that the more significant the gender gap in a country, the higher the chances of use of violence during inter and intrastate conflicts; high levels of women's representation in parliament may have a pacifying effect on state behaviour and; the higher the level of violence against women, the more likely a country is to behave less peacefully and be non-compliant with international norms and systems.

3.3 Gendered Dimension of Violence Post-Conflict

For women, an end to violent conflicts does not equate to an end to violence. While most studies look at the violence women face during a conflict like war, they fail to transcend beyond war. Feminists have long noted how the gendered dimension of violence rarely conforms to ceasefire and peace treaties but endures past them. According to Bradley (2018), post violent conflict communities experience higher rates of violence against women. Aoláin et al. (2011) argue that when traumatised and hyper-masculinised male combatants leave the battlefield for home, for a myriad of reasons, their homes become new stages for violence. In support, Cockburn (2013) adds that when men who have been brutalised by fighting return home, they are liable to turn their home into a battleground.

In eastern DRC, women and girls face gendered violence (OMCT & SFVS, 2013). In a patriarchal system, the violence against women is supported by gender values and norms that condone women's victimisation and fail to criminalise its perpetrators. Gender violence victims and survivors in eastern DRC stigmatised are stigmatised, shamed and or even get expelled from home and community while perpetrators are not prosecuted (OMCT & SFVS, 2013). In the context of post-conflict, mainstream feminists argue that men essentially direct peacekeeping and state-building agendas to the exclusion of women (Krause, Krause, & Bränfors, 2018).

Post-conflict and peacebuilding moments may also see communities idealising a return to traditional gender norms (Bradley, 2018) that promoted masculine dominance and its use of violence against women. The result of a post-violent conflict phase where gendered violence is used against women is gendered peace. Pankhurst (2008) opines that the number of domestic abusers may increase after a war at the hands of partners returning from war and those who remained at home. In support, Bradley (2018) argues that conflict and post-conflict communities consistently experience high rates of violence against women. Hence, women will be at a greater risk of institutionalised violence.

Haider (2012) states that international actors in peacebuilding now acknowledge the significance of gender towards successful action on stabilisation and peace. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1889 of 2009 brought attention to the importance of integrating women and gender issues in peacebuilding. Thus, from a feminist standpoint, the key to mitigating conflict and substantiating peacebuilding lies in changing gender relations. Feminists argue that profound change in gender relations is possible (Duncanson, 2015). However, for it to be achieved, hegemonic masculinity must be dismantled to such an extent that masculinity incorporates feminine traits and negotiate masculine identity based on notions of equality and empathy towards both men and women.

3.4 Men as Victims

On the other hand, it has to be pointed out that many scholars reject the fundamental feminist approach on many grounds. Gender violence is part of an extensive pattern of generalised violence against both women and men. Hence, sexual and other forms of violence are gendered not only when they target women but also men. Therefore, the strong gender dimension must not only be limited to women but men as well. The feminist standpoint is devoid of evidence not to include men in the cycles of gendered violence as victims. Between 1998 and 2008 alone, cases of violence against men were reported in twenty-five conflict-affected areas. According to Bjorkhaug & Boas (2014), gender-based violence, sexual violence and various forms of torture were used in eastern DRC by some combatants to target and kill men and boys.

In contemporary times, cases have been reported in the Central African Republic, Libya, Syria, et



cetera (Hennessey & Gerry, 2010), leading the UN Security Council to recognise that men were also victims of sexual violence in conflict in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2106 of June 2013. SIDA (2015) cautions that men and boys are also exposed to sexual violence in war and risk experiencing the same in refugee camps. Undeniably, women and girls are the main targets for conflict-related sexual violence but positioning them and them alone as victims of violence with a strong gender dimension will be a miscarriage of facts.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusion

The paper has examined the feminist notion that violence has a strong gender dimension while looking at the role played by masculinity. To materialise, the paper was contextualised within the Second Congo War of 1998 to 2003 and extending to 2008. Analysing the gender dimension of violence during and after the war was conducted to examine and trace the intersection of political, economic, social and cultural factors in gendered violence vis-à-vis masculinity. The theoretical position on violence having a strong gender dimension is plausible. However, caution should be practised since men are also victims of 'gendered violence' and the expectations of masculinity.

4.2 Recommendations

It is necessary for violence prevention and response activities to incorporate a gender-transformative strategy in order to remain effective. In other words, one that seeks to identify and address the root causes of the gender dimensions of violence while also working to reform harmful gender power imbalances, roles and norms.

REFERENCES

- Aoláin, F., Haynes, D., & Cahn, N. (2011). *On the frontlines: Gender, war, and the post-conflict process*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barker, G., & Ricardo, C. (2005). *Young men and the Construction of Masculinity in Sub-Saharan Africa: Implications for HIV/AIDS, Conflict and Violence*. Social Development Papers, Paper No.26.
- Birchall, J. (2019). *Gender as a causal factor in conflict*. London: DFID.
- Bjorkhaug, I., & Boas, M. (2014). *Men, women and gender-based violence in North Kivu, DRC*. Oslo: Fafo.
- Boas, M., & Dunn, K. (2013). *The Politics of Origin in Africa: Autochthony, Citizenship, Conflict*. London: Zed Books.
- Bradley, S. (2018). Domestic and Family Violence in Post-Conflict Communities. *Health Human Rights*, 20 (2), 123-136.
- Cockburn, C. (2010). Gender Relations as Causal in Militarization and War. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 12 (2), 139-157.
- Cockburn, C. (2013). Against all odds: Sustaining feminist momentum in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 37 (1), 28-29.
- Cohn, C. (2012). *Women and Wars*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Combaz, E. (2013). *Gender dimensions of conflict drivers and stabilisation in eastern DRC*. Birmingham: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.
- Duncanson, C. (2015). Hegemonic masculinity and the possibility of change in gender relations. *Men and Masculinities*, 18 (2), 231-248.
- El-Bushra, J. (2017). How Should We Explain the Recurrence of Violent Conflict, and What Might Gender Have to Do with It? In N. Aolain, N. Cahn, D. Haynes, & N. Valji, *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Conflict* (pp. 48-63). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural Violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, 27 (3), 291-305.
- Haider, H. (2012). *Topic Guide Supplement on Statebuilding and Peacebuilding in Situations of Conflict*. Birmingham: GSDRC.



- Harvard Humanitarian Initiative. (2010). *Now the World is Without ME: an Investigation of Sexual Violence in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo*. Cambridge: HHI.
- Hennessey, T., & Gerry, F. (2010). International Human Rights Law and Sexual Violence Against Men in Conflict Zones. *Halsbury's Law Exchange*, 1 (6), 12-32.
- Herbert, S. (2014). *Links between gender-based violence and outbreaks of violent conflict*. University of Birmingham: GSDRC.
- Hudson, V., Caprioli, M., Ballif-Spanvil, B., McDermott, R., & Emmett, C. (2009). The security of women and the security of states. *International Security*, 33 (3), 7-45.
- Hunt, S., & Posa, C. (2001). Women Waging Peace. *Foreign Policy*, 1 (124), 38-47.
- International Crisis Group. (2009). *Congo: Five Priorities for a Peacebuilding Strategy*. International Crisis Group.
- Krause, J., Krause, W., & Bränfors, P. (2018). Women's Participation in peace negotiations and the durability of peace. *International Interactions*, 44 (6), 985-1016.
- OMCT & SFVS. (2013). *Report on violence against women in North and South Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. Kinshasa: OMCT.
- Pankhurst, D. (2008). *Gendered Peace: Women's struggles for post-war justice and reconciliation*. New York: Routledge.
- SIDA. (2015). *Preventing and Responding to Gender-Based Violence: Expressions and Strategies*. SIDA.
- Theidon, K. (2009). Reconstructing masculinities: The disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of former combatants in Colombia. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 31 (1), 1-34.
- Wakabi, W. (2008). Sexual violence increasing in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Mass rape: time for remedies. *The Lancet*, 371 (9606), 16-26.
- Wood, E. (2008). The social process of civil war: the wartime transformation of social networks. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11, 539-561.
- Wright, H. (2014). *Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding: Perspectives of men through a gender lens*. London: Saferworld.