



## **The Gender Dimensions of Armed Violence**

**Exploratory conference and workshop  
Geneva, 25-26 February 2013**

### **Conference report**

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Feminist activists and scholars have long argued that there is a connection between gender and war-making. The virtually universal predominance of men in fighting wars has lent credence to arguments that find the causes of war in phenomena ranging from male hormones and evolution to patriarchal war systems and hegemonic, militarist forms of masculinity. Scholars exploring the link between democracy and the tendency of countries to engage in war have provided quantitative evidence linking gender inequality and the likelihood of armed conflict, seemingly lending support to these feminist arguments.

On February 25-26, 2013, the Graduate Institute's Programme on Gender and Global Change (PGGC) hosted an international workshop "The Gender Dimensions of Armed Violence". This event sought to instigate a conversation between feminist scholars and scholars in the area of peace and conflict studies who have identified gender as a relevant variable in explaining armed conflict and gender relations as a significant dimension of armed conflict. The purpose of the workshop was to identify promising avenues for further research by drawing on these separate streams of scholarship. Feminist researchers, scholars specializing in peace and conflict studies, practitioners, and students assembled in Geneva to discuss the gender dimensions of violence prevention and peacekeeping, transitional justice, civilian victimization, sexual violence, gendered power relations before, during and after violent conflict, peacebuilding and local ownership. Participants interrogated the state of academic research on gender and armed conflict as well as policy-relevant lessons learned from implementing Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. The workshop was organized by Dr. Jana Krause, Research Associate at the PGC, in collaboration with the Small Arms Survey and the Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP).

Three questions guided the debates: 1) How is gender (equality) linked to armed conflict? 2) How and why is violence against civilians gendered? 3) What role does gender play in processes of violence prevention and peacebuilding? Participants recounted studies and stories from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Liberia, Nepal, Burundi, Germany, Indonesia, Nigeria and Haiti. Despite changing contexts and different foci, certain overlapping themes emerged from the discussions and panels.

First, presenters addressed dilemmas and paradoxes arising from the representation of women as victims and men as perpetrators, during and after violent conflict. They agreed that such dichotomous constructions are highly problematic in that they contradict realities, unnecessarily reproduce gender stereotypes, and contribute to justifying the conduct of war. At the same time, such representations make visible highly gendered patterns of wartime violence.

Looking at this issue through the lens of transitional justice, Susanne Buckley-Zistel, from the University of Marburg, highlighted that women's victim status is imbued with multiple and, to some extent, paradoxical meanings. Being recognized as a victim can provide a platform for empowerment, an avenue through which entitlements and rights can be pursued and received, and a way that allows grievances to be acknowledged and claims to be expressed. On the other hand, victim status can signal passivity and in this way may reinforce a disempowering understanding of girls and women as helpless and needing male protection.

Extrapolating to the macro-level, Laura Sjoberg, from the University of Florida, linked the stereotypical framing of women as potential victims who need to be protected by men to justifications for war. She argued that civilian immunity principles, which are supposed to protect women, also reinforce stereotypes about women as the biological and cultural producers of state and nation. Sjoberg suggested that Soviet mass rapes in Eastern Germany, during the Second World War, were part of a policy to conquer German men through the rape of women they could not protect. In this way, stereotypical constructions of women as vulnerable actually contribute to fuelling attacks on civilians.

These explanations of the link between gender, sexual violence, and violence against civilians stood in strong contrast to explanations contributed by peace researchers. Thus, drawing on a paper co-authored with Dara Cohen, Ragnhild Nordås, of the Peace Research Institute Oslo, left behind the analytical focus on the perpetrator/victim and male/female binaries. In examining sexual violence by different African militias against civilians, she and her co-author found instead that low state capacity and the recruitment of children strongly predicted sexual violence.

Maria Stern, of the University of Gothenburg, shifted the focus to men and presented the perspective of male soldiers implicated in rape in the DRC. She problematized the dehumanizing discourse of rapists as bestial that is implied in the sexed and gendered construction of the masculine villain/perpetrator opposed to the feminine victim/survivor. Listening to rapists, Stern sought to recover the humanity of the men involved in despicable acts and provide a better, albeit uncomfortable, understanding of their perception of themselves as victims of suffering, poverty and injustice. In her narrative, the notion of the woman victim was no longer a source of empowerment and disempowerment, but part of a discursive formation that produces a dehumanized and racialised other.

A second discussion centred on the concepts of gender and gender equality. Research in the area of peace and conflict studies has treated gender inequality as a cause of war and violence. In contrast, some feminists have argued that gender itself is a cause, i.e. particular constructions of masculinity and femininity make war thinkable and in this way are constitutively causal. At the conference, different presenters, including Carol Cohn and

Cynthia Cockburn, warned against the conflation of gender with women. They argued that reference to gender equality tends to obscure gendered relations of power and homogenize the categories of women and men. Furthermore, reducing gender equality to numbers (e.g. percentage of women in the labour force or in parliament; number of women who are victims of sexual violence) can obscure more than it reveals. Åshild Kolås, from the Peace Research Institute Oslo, agreed, asking how the focus on bringing women into politics could effectively integrate the notion of intersectionality, i.e. the fact that gender intersects with other status positions such as ethnicity.

It was evident that the way in which scholars defined the terms gender, women, and gender equality and which dimensions they deemed important structured their investigative pathways. This was also the case for conceptualizations of various aspects of violence and distinctions between direct or indirect means, inter-group or individual levels as well as intensities of escalation and de-escalation. Furthermore, stages of conflict seemed to matter. Thus, Meghan Foster Lynch, from Temple University, found in her research of the Burundian civil war that levels of violence against civilians shifted over time and women and children were targeted during the later stages. And focusing on peacebuilding in Liberia, Theodora-Ismene Gizelis, from the University of Essex, highlighted how foreign actors failed to comprehend the expectations of various women's organizations, misunderstanding the importance of local knowledge, networks, and ownership.

Third, masculinity was central point of discussion. The feminist focus on gender often amounts to an analytical emphasis on constructions of masculinities and femininities. Cohn suggested that such constructions encompass ideas, practices, and values, and she joined Cockburn in additionally arguing that these take form in political and economic institutions. The many ways in which particular masculinities are reproduced and challenged was the topic of various papers presented. Marsha Henry, who discussed peacekeeping missions in Haiti, suggested that they could be a site for challenging "militarized masculinities," and later underlined the importance of the concept of fatherhood in relation to peace studies. Buckley-Zistel connected violence against women with the performance of "hegemonic masculinity".

Although masculinity was a common point of reference, this concept did not seamlessly bridge different strands of conversation. Some participants argued that the broad definition of masculinity as encompassing ideological values, embodied characteristics and behaviours, as well as collective and individual perceptions may threaten its conceptual purchase. In the empirical literature, meanings of masculinity have become increasingly scattered. There is, however, scholarly agreement relating to the fact that masculinity is not tantamount to men, and that it is context-specific and malleable. Thus, constructions of masculinity vary by locality, and they intersect with class, caste, age, race, and other status distinctions. Accordingly, what is the methodological or empirical value of such a fluid concept in explaining war and armed violence?

Finally, in trying to push the research agenda ahead, there were discussions about the state of current scholarship and which issues need to be more comprehensively explored. For instance, some participants noted scholars' heavy emphasis on the subject of sexual violence and called for the foregrounding of other issues and more nuanced analyses. Cohn encouraged additional research on issues relating to the gendered dimensions of the

militarization of humanitarian assistance and development aid. Sjoberg suggested that civilian victimization should be further investigated from a gender perspective. Donna Pankhurst highlighted that empirical work on men, especially on non-violent groups, has been rather scarce. In this vein, she proposed working much more closely with men. These discussions were also emblematic of the fact that there is a need for more dialogue within and between practitioners as well as scholars from different fields.

Adriella Gauthier and Elisabeth Prügl  
May 7, 2013

## Recommended readings

- Baaz, Maria Eriksson and Maria Stern. *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War? Perceptions, Prescriptions, Problems in the Congo and Beyond*. London: Zed Books, 2013.
- Buckley-Zistel, Susanne and Ruth Stanley, eds. *Gender in Transitional Justice*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011.
- Caprioli, Mary. "Primed for Violence: The Role of Gender Inequality in Predicting Internal Conflict." *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no 2 (2005): 161-178.
- Cockburn, Cynthia. "Gender Relations as Causal in Militarization and War." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12, no 2 (2010): 139-157.
- Cohn, Carol, ed. *Women and Wars*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.
- Gizelis, Theodora-Ismene. "A Country of their Own: Women and Peacebuilding." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 28, no 5 (2011): 522–542.
- Henry, Marsha and Paul Higate. *Insecure Spaces: Peacekeeping, Power and Performance in Haiti, Liberia and Kosovo*. London and New York: Zed Press, 2009.
- Kolås, Åshild. "Naga Militancy and Violent Politics in the Shadow of Ceasefire." *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no 6 (2011): 781–792.
- Lynch, Meghan Foster, Patrick Ball, Tamy Guberek, Daniel Guzmán, and Amelia Hoover. "Assessing Claims of Declining Lethal Violence in Colombia." Published online as a Human Rights Data Analysis Group Working Paper, 2007.
- Nordås, Ragnhild. "The Devil in the Demography? Religion, Identity, and War in Cote d'Ivoire." In *Political Demography: How Population Changes Are Reshaping International Security and National Politics*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2011.
- Pankhurst, Donna, ed. *Gendered Peace: Women's Struggles for Post-War Justice and Reconciliation*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Sjoberg, Laura and Sandra Via, eds. *Gender, War, and Militarism: Feminist Perspectives*. California: Praeger Security International, 2010.

**Conference programme**  
**25 February 2013, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies**

- 9:15           **Welcome**  
Elisabeth Prügl, The Graduate Institute, Director, Programme on Gender and Global Change  
Jana Krause, The Graduate Institute/German Institute of Global and Area Studies
- 9:45-11:45   **Panel 1: Gender Equality and Armed Conflict**  
Chair: Rahel Kunz, Université de Lausanne
- Cynthia Cockburn, City University London
  - Theodora-Ismene Gizelis, University of Essex
  - Marsha Henry, London School of Economics and Political Science
  - Åshild Kolås, Peace Research Institute Oslo
- Discussants: Daisy Onyge, Port Harcourt University; Elisabeth Prügl, The Graduate Institute
- 12:00           Lunch
- 13:30-15:30   **Panel 2: The Gender Dimensions of Violence against Civilians**  
Chair: Kristin Valasek, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces
- Maria Stern, University of Gothenburg
  - Ragnhild Nordaas, Peace Research Institute Oslo
  - Meghan Foster Lynch, Temple University
  - Laura Sjoberg, University of Florida
- Discussants: Keith Krause, The Graduate Institute/Small Arms Survey; Arifah Rahmawati, Gadjah Mada University Yogyakarta
- 15:30           Coffee Break
- 16:00-18:00   **Panel 3: The Gender Dimensions of Violence Prevention and Peacebuilding**  
Chair: Anna Alvazzi del Frate, Small Arms Survey
- Carol Cohn, University of Massachusetts
  - Susanne Buckley-Zistel, Marburg University
  - Donna Pankhurst, University of Bradford
- Discussants: Wening Udasmoro, Gadjah Mada University; Mimidoo Achakpa, WREP Abuja.