

Masculinity and Civil Wars in Africa – New Approaches to Overcoming Sexual Violence in War

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An analysis of the different roles that men and women can play as a conflict unfolds offers new perspectives to help understand wars and restore peace in post-war societies. Sustainable peace building requires, among other things, contravening the behavioral logic of violent actors and preventing reestablishment of the old discordant social order. The importance of innovative interventions is illustrated by the frequent occurrence of gender-specific violence and HIV/AIDS. Also the great propensity of ex-combatants to violence and the reintegration problems of former female combatants work against attempts to develop post-war societies. Therefore, care must be taken that violent warlike activity and the related ideas of masculinity and femininity are not simply carried over into post-war daily life.



Gender as Key to Understanding Wars in Africa

African civil wars confront the international community and development cooperation with great challenges. Local, national, and transnational conflict constellations frequently overlap. In many places, the political and economic causes of war are tightly interwoven with structural social problems, including, in particular, gender and generational conflicts, which often intensify hostilities. In order to recognize their local and time-bound characteristics, conflict analyses must take gender hierarchies into account as the core of wide-ranging power relationships.

This requires that gender be understood in a comprehensive sense: as socially formed behavioral patterns and norms that determine the behavior of individuals and social groups. Various behavioral possibilities and boundaries not only characterize the relationship between women and men, but also point to fundamental inequalities between women and between men. Thus, differences between men and between women are based on age and status; family background, ethnicity, religion, economic and social position are also often involved. The interdependencies among these factors influence access to and control over resources. Furthermore, these relationships characterize and reflect political power at the local and national levels. Nevertheless, these structures are not static, but changeable – which entails the danger of conflict escalation, but also presents opportunities for interventions and counter-strategies, for example, through development cooperation.

Gender Conflicts before the Outbreak of War

Gender differences influence the escalation of violence before the “actual” outbreak of war, the acts of war, and the post-war situations. Thus, belligerents – including governments willing to go to war, guerilla groups, and warlords – choose available gender stereotypes and use them for their own interests. These include the glorification of women as icons of national or ethnic unity and of the symbolically loaded “purity of the nation” and women as guardians of culture and tradition. Such selective interpretations constrict the variety of role models for and self-images of women in pre-war societies. Their range of activity is greatly limited and reduced to that of idealized mothers in need of protection.

At the same time, warmongers manipulate masculinity by interpreting culturally anchored notions of caring family fathers for their own purposes. They put pressure on men to protect their female family members and to resort to weapons in order to defend their own honor. Such mobilization of combat readiness and the simultaneous limitation of diverse gender concepts in pre-war societies have been documented in Sudan, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and in the countries in the Horn of Africa.

In several countries, including Sudan and Uganda, warlords were able to draw on the fact that the British colonial rulers had, for decades, systematically conscripted men of selected nomadic tribes into the colonial army - creating regional conflicts, which were not adequately resolved after independence. Given the lack of alternatives, the colonial legacy of militarized masculinity found expression in persistent patterns of violence. In other societies, young men first had to be trained to kill, whereby commanders refused to accept other models of masculinity and ridiculed non-violent conflict resolution or negotiating skills as typically feminine characteristics and upheld militarism as the standard for masculinity.

In the West African civil wars that convulsed Sierra Leone and Liberia in the 1990s, various warmongers were hugely successful. Young fighters in these countries took up weapons in order to remove corrupt political elites who had ruined their countries and robbed them of any future, despite rich mineral resources. In addition, the young fighters targeted powerful old men in the villages who had demanded extremely high bride prices when they married off their daughters. However, marriage, land use rights, and political participation were prerequisites for recognition as full men. This was systematically denied to young, low-ranking men, which is why they joined the guerilla groups.

Manipulation of gender stereotypes: mobilizing men to fight

Masculinity and Violence in Civil Wars

Such social conflicts were exploited by unscrupulous warlords in West Africa – above all, Charles Taylor – when they mobilized the young men’s willingness to fight lawlessness and exploitation and used it for their own purposes. They established new hierarchies between young and older men, when they trained young men to be commanders who brutally disempowered old authorities. On the orders of their backers, the commanders systematically employed (mass) rape of the women and girls of their respective opponents as a war tactic. They thus derided the male family members as failures and undermined the social cohesion of their respective enemies. Many young men were coerced into violence against their own family members and then forcibly recruited. This made it almost impossible for them to return to their family of origin. Many women and girls were abducted as sex slaves or “bush wives,” whereby young militiamen and soldiers usurped the control over their sexuality and fertility – a privilege previously reserved only for older, high-ranking men.

Some young girls joined the militias more or less voluntarily in order to escape forced marriages, among other things. In fact, they had to take on numerous different tasks, such as participation in combat missions and raids, weapon and munitions transport, intelligence services, torture, robbery and plundering, provision of basic daily supplies, care of the wounded, and sexual services. On the one hand, their tasks were tied to female role models; on the other hand, they thwarted these. Only in exceptional cases did young women take over leadership positions and command male fighters. In many guerilla units, new hierarchies developed among the women, for example, between the lovers of commanders and sex slaves, who were degraded to the status of available objects and were raped after failed combat missions.

The systematic use of sexual violence here, as in other civil wars, corresponded to the calculation of the warmongers and the rationality of commanders and combatants. Thus, the raping combatants or government soldiers are not pathological sex offenders, but rather young men guided by war-formed models of masculinity.

The United Nations (UN) Security Council has recognized the central importance of sexual violence as a war strategy and the complex resulting problems for post-war societies. UN Resolution 1820, adopted mid-June 2008, condemns these acts of violence as war crimes and crimes against humanity. Since then, the international community has been called upon to put an end to rape, protect women and girls, and prosecute offenders. There must be no more general amnesties, not even in order to stabilize a fragile peace.



Problems with Peace Negotiations and Demobilization Programs

UN Resolution 1325 of October 2000 calls for greater involvement of women in peace talks and the integration of gender dimensions into peace processes. Nevertheless, many peace negotiations are still carried out only by male representatives of the respective warring parties. Even if individual women sit at the negotiating tables, there is no guarantee that they will champion gender equality. The decisive factor is the role they assume and which interest groups they represent. In southern Sudan, women were discredited, because they were partisan and in no way had the well-being of fellow women in mind. Thus, the fact that a person belongs to the female sex is by no means a guarantee that she is prepared to represent gender equality or impartiality in peace talks. Almost everywhere, independent women's organizations and female human rights activists are denied access to negotiating rooms, although they often promote comprehensive peace concepts and medium- and long-term de-escalation. The networks of independent women's rights organizations in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo are a clear example of this.

Also in many demobilization programs (for example, those of UN organizations), the international guidelines for gender mainstreaming are not followed at all systematically. Commanders refuse to allow their female fighters to surrender their weapons themselves. They confiscate the women's weapons and often degrade the female fighters to the status of "passive refugees," while those who are responsible for the demobilization programs do nothing to oppose this. The commanders fear damage to their image as heroic leaders of militant warriors if it becomes apparent that they sent women and children to war. After all, surrendering their status-laden weapons implies a loss of power and prestige for the former male fighters themselves, in short, a curtailment of their masculinity. Many demobilization camps are today still not equipped to take in female combatants; rather, they categorize women and children, at best, as members of male fighters' families. Former female fighters frequently face physical and sexual violence, although the camp authorities are in fact obligated to protect them against it. Therefore, many women fighters leave the camps early, especially because the provision of basic supplies is also not always guaranteed.

Making matters even worse, soldiers assigned to the UN or African Union Peace Missions appear on the scene and pay for sexual services with food and essential goods or with money. They thus violate the UN code of conduct and contribute to escalation of local conflicts. Many men – ex-combatants and civilians – view these staged demonstration of virility as an affront. In Sierra Leone, the soldiers were accused of being "beach-keepers" instead of "peacekeepers," because they were found, above all, in the beachfront bars of the capital city. In the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, Blue Berets were discredited because they behaved like sex tourists, abused children, and were blatantly racist. This is alarming, because gender departments and gender training actually prepare members of peacekeeping missions for their tasks and their responsibilities; it appears that improvements are needed with respect to dealing with sexuality. The high rate of HIV infections among Blue Berets

The involvement of women in peace negotiations amounts to 4% worldwide

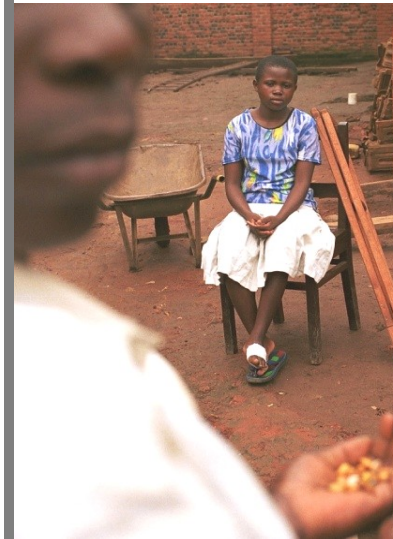
also points to the urgency of this problem, whereby it is unclear when the infections occurred: already in the countries of origin or in the countries where they were deployed.

Reintegration Problems and Challenges for Post-war Societies

Reintegration programs are confronted with complex challenges. If ex-combatants are paid reintegration money and receive, for example, training as craftsmen that is denied the civil population, this is viewed in many places as a reward for killers and a huge injustice – although the reintegration programs are often limited to certain economic sectors and the ex-combatants compete against each other after successfully completing the program, for example, as car mechanics or carpenters. Furthermore, if land ownership patterns are not changed and the ex-fighters gain no access to land, their newly acquired agricultural expertise brings them no benefit.

Especially former female combatants have massive difficulties accessing land. To the extent that there are any programs at all for them, these are usually limited to traditional areas of activity, for example, tailoring or soap production, where the competition in pre-war societies was often already so great that ex-fighters have no chance of gaining a foothold. The fact that they crossed established gender boundaries during the war and took on martial behavioral patterns makes their reintegration into civilian business more difficult. They frequently encounter hostility from their former male comrades, who interpret their behavior as too assertive and view the role changes during the war as a temporary emergency situation. Former male fighters often forcibly demand the reestablishment of marriage hierarchies, which they interpret as a sign that the old order has been restored. Their own mothers contribute to this, as a mother's position of power in the family is based on subservient daughters-in-law. The resulting conflicts are widespread in Eritrea and Ethiopia, among other places.

The difficulty of countering such processes at the local level with legal reforms and reorientation of national policies is illustrated by the current situation in Liberia. While the new president, Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson, who became a renowned expert on gender and war problems through her international work, has introduced numerous new laws and gender-mainstreaming measures, the lived reality of many women is far removed from these. Even in the capital city, many female ex-combatants who joined the combat units in the hope of education and an economic future eke out a miserable existence. Many are frustrated and would take up weapons again to secure their livelihood. Outside the capital city, old male and female elites are using all means at their disposal to undermine the new national guidelines. As recently as September 2008, there were again female genital cuttings/mutilations of girls as part of initiation ceremonies. Even local female politicians defend these operations as an important cultural heritage.



**Establishing the “old”
social regime after the
war**

Also in neighboring Sierra Leone, female circumcisers, who are highly regarded and powerful, interpret selective female genital mutilation as a way to help reestablish the social order. They even receive expense allowances from the wives of high-ranking politicians. Given this political support by elite local women, women’s rights organizations that have worked tirelessly for the abolition of female genital mutilation have a difficult position.

In most post-war societies, there is little assistance available for raped women, because many traditionalists ignore the complex related problems, such as HIV infections or unwanted pregnancies. Counseling centers and shelters for victims of violence that are based on a women’s rights approach are concentrated in the cities, due to their limited capacities. Keeping silent about the experienced violence becomes a wide-spread strategy with which the victims of violence attempt to avoid stigmatization. This is particularly the case when truth and reconciliation commissions or war crimes tribunals do not offer a forum in which to address sexual violence.

Consequences for the Concept of Governance

Gender analyses of pre-war, war, and post-war societies can contribute to the recognition of specific national and local conflict constellations and to measures that counter the escalation of violence. This requires cross-sectoral approaches and cooperation between government institutions and nongovernmental organizations. Good governance practices, such as anchoring democratic and transparent political decision-making processes at all levels, curbing the misuse of power and corruption, freedom of the press and of expression, and the realization of women’s and human rights, are critically important. Protecting women and girls from sexual and domestic violence is crucial. National gender strategies and comprehensive programs to systematically anchor gender equality in all policy areas and sectors can also help prevent belligerents from using reductionist gender stereotypes to divide a society.

Challenges for Development Cooperation

In order to prevent the escalation of violence and war, it is important to strengthen democratic structures and avenues for political participation on all decision-making levels. Also the promotion of pluralistic, extra-parliamentary participatory processes as well as freedom of the press and of expression can help contain nationalistic, ethnic, or racist radicalization, the often sexist glorification of violence, and an increasing propensity to use violence, for example, against minorities. However, governmental and nongovernmental forces that promote non-violent conflict resolution must proceed in a coordinated manner. Depending on how democratically a government acts, cooperation between government institutions and civil society interest groups can be useful. Networking women and non-governmental organizations that promote gender equality and social justice is effective. Recognition of women's rights, protection of women and children against sexual and domestic violence, and punishment of offenders can counteract sexist and proprietorial models of masculinity. This requires that sexism and organized crimes such as trafficking in human beings and forced prostitution be condemned by the society. In cases of authoritarian and militaristic governments, ways should be sought to strengthen the human-rights-based control functions of nongovernmental organizations vis-à-vis the respective ruling powers.

Demobilization measures require not only integrated gender programs that take into account the fact that female and male ex-combatants had to take on a variety of tasks during the wars and often were both perpetrators and victims. Innovative approaches designed to limit violence and provide re-orientation are also necessary, particularly for male ex-combatants who were socialized with martial masculinity. Otherwise, there is the danger that they will continue patterns of violence under different auspices in the post-war societies. The importance of overcoming militaristic masculinity is illustrated by the rapidly rising HIV/AIDS rates during and after civil wars. In many places, domestic violence and sexual attacks are daily events. Building sustainable peace is only possible if the many-layered repercussions of war on men are systematically addressed.

Potential Approaches and Practical Instruments

Reorientation can serve to strengthen and network men who, as “change agents,” reject violent conflict resolution and define their masculinity by way of criteria such as commitment to human dignity, human rights, justice, social fatherhood, and partnership. Depending on the respective social context, such change agents can be religious authorities, for example, church representatives and imams, socially recognized local authorities, heads of family groups, or representatives of civil society groups. However, they can also be individual young men who courageously stand up against the brutality of their contemporaries and take the part of women or girls. Such everyday heroes need support and a network, as they are often harassed by other young men as “effeminate” and marginalized. It is all the more remarkable that quite a few committed young men in violent societies like South Africa, Uganda, and Rwanda demand an end to sexual violence

Gender justice as prevention of violence escalation and peacekeeping

“Real men do not rape”

and irresponsible sexual behavior from their contemporaries. Individual activists form alliances with women’s organizations and assert that “real men do not rape.” It would be important to link such initiatives to the often economically oriented programs for ex-combatants. These men must be offered culturally appropriate forums in which to discuss violent models of masculinity, socialization to violence, and new life patterns.

Such processes cannot occur in isolation; rather, experiences with violence and exploitative relationships between men must be examined. When structural socio-economic inequalities between men, for example, with respect to control over resources, are not overcome, there remains the potential for conflict, which can be quickly laden with nationalistic and ethnic propaganda or with promises of salvation of all kinds. Care must therefore be exercised with respect to powerful actors or groups of actors who, out of self-interest, equate reestablishment of social order with a return to the pre-war system. Ultimately, structural inequalities and marginalization processes played a central role in the escalation of violent conflicts in many pre-war societies. Therefore, comprehensive social, economic, political, and legal processes of change must prevent post-war situations from reverting to pre-war situations.

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