

K O F F I n f o S h e e t

Roles of Women and Men in Violent Conflicts

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To document and understand the gender dynamics of violent conflicts, it is vital to recall the different and coinciding roles played by women and men. This article will review the most important activities, but does not pretend to be exhaustive. For the sake of structuring the following analysis, a distinction will be made between individual, community and state-level analysis.

Open violent conflict and escalating violence

Individual

The socially assigned responsibility for the care, welfare and survival of family, the wounded and the sick determine women's roles as mothers, caretakers and heads of families/households.

Individual women join peace organisations, mainly at grassroots level (track III). Women very often organise themselves into self-help groups during the «hot phase» of escalating violence.

Many women are not formally organised, but carry out «hidden» and unspectacular «everyday peace work», e.g. negotiating curfews with security forces or providing shelter for refugees or deserters.

Other women join the national army or guerrilla and liberation movements, as in Eritrea, Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka, and take directly part in violence. Cases in point are the participation of women in the genocide in Rwanda and the female LTTE suicide bombers in Sri Lanka.

In all violent conflicts, men dominate the army and politics. While it is predominately men who initiate and lead the fighting, women often directly and indirectly support the activities of their men folk.

Many women fall victim to sexual violence, humiliation, rape, forced prostitution and pregnancy. Men too are very often victims of sexual violence and humiliation amongst men, which, for example, became drastically evident with the male rape in the former Yugoslavia.

Changed family and household structures

Community

In most violent conflicts, family and household structures often change radically: In the absence of their husbands, many women take over traditional male-dominated roles and thereby break with the «old» (gender-specific) social order.

Socio-cultural liberation?

Despite devastating human tragedy and massive (gender-specific) human rights violations, women experience particular moments in a conflict as catalysts for their social and cultural «liberation» and a new political awareness. This is true mainly of women who had been subject to social and cultural oppression and discrimination before the outbreak of hostilities. Those especially concerned here are women who had experienced regular sexual abuse and/or domestic violence before the start of fighting.

Social pressure on men

Men who are not involved in the fighting come under greater psychological and social pressure. In times of economic and social hardship, they are increasingly unable properly to fulfil their socially assigned roles as breadwinners and heads of households.

Effective use of gender-stereotypes in women's peace organisations

Many women's peace organisations work expressly and tacitly with traditional gender stereotypes of «peace-loving femininity and maternity». In many conflicts, this «maternalist peace policy», for example the «Mother's Front» in Sri Lanka, has been highly effective. It has been effective mainly due to two factors:

- Women are considered «credible» when they become committed out of highly private and personal motives such as the disappearance of their men folk or the forced recruitment of their children.
- The maternal role is socially accepted and gender-specifically coded. Through this gender-coding, women are able to get their voices heard whereas other (male-dominated) social protest movements face forceful reprisals and resistance from the government or the army.

Women joining the army or liberation movements

Women's survival strategies

Women often join the army or liberation movements because they hold the promise of a secure income, a form of social protection and welfare in times of great uncertainty.

«Sexualisation of war»

Women often deliberately liaise and have sexual relations with soldiers of the opposite side in order to guarantee their daily survival and above all that of their children. As a result, they are frequently subject to discrimination and stigmatisation in their immediate social circles. In general, one can observe a «sexualisation» of war zones well and sadly reflected in the increase of the commercial sex trade (including child prostitution). This «sexualisation of war» is particularly striking during the presence of international organisations and UN peacekeeping units in post-war situations. The incidents of sexual abuse by UN peace-keepers in Mozambique and Cambodia are here illustrative examples.

Media and political decision-makers effectively use gender stereotypes

Gender-neutral army?

State

Political decision makers and national media/national propaganda make use of traditional gender stereotypes, working with various forms of «self-sacrificing femininity» versus «aggressive masculinity».

Above all, in times of war mobilisation and combat, politicians and the state media address male-dominated and male-defined institutions such as the army as «gender-neutral» and «gender-free» institutions - supposedly open to men and women on an equal footing. Praising the role and work of women for «the nation», both in the army and at home, helps to legitimise the reason to continue fighting (or to go for war in the first place) in the society as a whole.

Post-conflict situations

Gender-specific trauma

Individual

Women and men suffer from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a direct consequence of experiencing pain, violence, torture, disappearances and killings. Yet, at the same time, the concrete lived experiences are very often of a gender-specific nature: Raped women give birth to unwanted children. And female ex-combatants have different sexual and reproductive health needs than men.

New roles and tasks

Women who have survived (personal and direct) violence, human suffering, social and economic hardship, develop «new» economic and political capabilities, often assuming non-traditional roles and thereby breaking with long-held, «traditional» gender stereotypes.

Socio-political, long-term changes for women?

At the same time, the newly created or reformed state institutions and political decision-making bodies remain male-dominated for the most part. It is crucial to examine these positive socio-cultural changes in terms of their sustainability and their implications for gender relations and the society as a whole.

Socio-cultural discrimination

Community

In many post-conflict situations, the most obvious negative consequences include social exclusion and socio-cultural discrimination against women. It entails extreme poverty and distinctly limited employment opportunities, in particular for women who took part in the fighting and are now single heads of families and/or widows.

Gender-specific violence

Domestic violence, gender-specific violence and human rights violations increase rapidly in most conflicts.

The population imbalance resulting from the increased number of women heads of households radically reduces the chances of marriage for women and doubles their workload.

Male-dominated...

State

Political activity revolves around male-dominated «peace talks», in other words many separate official and unofficial «secret» track I negotiations, most often without involving tracks II-III. These talks cover the most important conflict issues and should lead to a «new» Constitution, legal and social reforms in the realm of governance and human rights, repatriation of refugees, demobilisation of soldiers, etc.

...and gendered
peace negotiations

The various experiences gathered by women and men in the course of armed conflict have considerable gender-specific implications for all forms of «peace negotiations»: They are gender-specifically coded and framed, they represent so-called «gendered deals», whereby various rights and duties for men and women are enshrined in the (newly established) political and economic institutions, constitutions and States. Illustrative examples are government-run reintegration and demobilisation programmes that address male but not female ex-combatants.

Gender-blind conflict analysis

The male-dominated decision-makers do not see a clear, political or social, need for (radically) changing the gender relations in the post-war phase. This is mainly due to a lack of gender awareness among the teams of negotiators and conflict parties. Most often, the genesis and issues of the conflict had been discussed in a «gender-blind» manner. As a result, women are not seen as direct political players and agents of war or peace. The Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Peace Accord of 1993 for example, did not address questions of gender equality – neither explicitly nor implicitly. Only one woman was amongst the negotiation team at the 1999 Rambouillet negotiations held after the NATO bombing of Kosovo. And despite their unique experiences in local grassroots-level peace efforts on track III, women had no say whatsoever in the official talk on the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe.

Summary

To summarize the above, one has to stress the unclear and complex nature of the impact of violent conflicts on gender relations and the roles of women and men:

Gross human tragedy
for women and men

Both women and men experience wars predominantly as devastating human tragedy, unbridled cruelty and massive (gender-specific) human rights violations such as sexual violence, rape and forced prostitution.

Catalyst for socio-political
empowerment of women?

Some violent conflicts can in fact become sustainable catalysts for the social and political empowerment of women. One has to be constantly mindful of the precarious tension between women's «vulnerability/victimhood» on the one hand, and their «empowerment/emancipation» on the other, without prioritising one over the other.

Women's peace work
on track III

The peace commitment of women at unofficial and informal grassroots level/track III, and the socially coded «peaceable nature of women» are very often a direct outcome of their political exclusion from any substantial power in official and formal track I decision-making bodies.

«Everyday peace work»

Far removed from any publicity and recognition whatsoever, women in many conflicts do create some normality through «peace networks» and «everyday peace work», and help people survive violence, fear and terror.

Equal participation of women and men in all levels of political decision-making

Undoubtedly, greater and equal participation of women at levels ranging from governmental to grassroots (tracks I – III) on the basis of fundamental human rights, equality, political co-determination and democracy are a political condition sine qua non that cannot be put in doubt. Yet, the fact is that there are still no detailed studies on the varying and partly contradictory roles played by women in these «deals». We have little in-depth knowledge on how the inclusion of women or their exclusion from formal peace talks affects the success or failure of peace processes. What might be different if there are more women and fewer men involved?

Recommended literature

Anyone wishing to look in greater depth at the gender dynamics of violent conflicts will find further information in the following publications:

- Kumar, Krishna (ed.) (2001), *Women and Civil War. Impact, Organizations, and Action*, London: Lynne Rienner.
- Meintjes, Sheila, Pillay, Anu and Turshen, Meredith (eds.) (2002), *The Aftermath Women in Post-conflict Transformation*. London: Zed Books.
- Moser, Caroline O.N. and Clark, Fiona. (eds.) (2001), *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender. Armed Conflict and Political Violence*, London: Zed Books.