Wars and Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa/The Middle East and North Africa (MENA): A Gender-Relational Perspective

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Abstract

By applying a gender-relational perspective, I explore how gendered arrangements shape women and men's experiences of wars and conflicts and examine the similarities, as well as the vulnerabilities that connect their experiences across the national boundaries of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Some of these nations have had a long history of wars and conflicts that have undermined the fabric of their societies, destroyed their socio-economic and political institutions, and exacerbated gender-based violence. Drawing on ethnographic data from my fieldwork in Sub-Saharan Africa, and on secondary research on zones of conflict, I argue that conflicts have significant impacts on gender relations. I articulate how conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa and the MENA region lead to changing responsibilities for women and men, which further stipulates shifting notions of femininities and masculinities and necessitates major alterations in policies and strategies adopted in post-conflict construction processes and nation-building initiatives.

Keywords: gender relations; war and conflict; post conflict; Sub-Saharan Africa/MENA region.

1. Victims or Perpetrators: Gender and Conflict Situations?

War is not a uniform phenomenon, nor its gendered consequences. In this piece, I adopt a gender-relational perspective, which highlights a distinct form of un-equal gender roles and gender relationships between women and men during times of war and peace. These power relations are not only limited to our conventional interrogation of male dominance and patriarchy but also highlights the unequal relationships between women and men in terms of their gendered roles, gendered relationships, gendered activities, and their access to decision-making processes during militarized conflict and post conflict situations. A gender-relational approach illuminates how women and men interact, as well as experience war atrocities and violence, particularly gender-based violence in distinct ways.

Scholars such as Abdelzaher (2019), Cohn (2013), Hitman (2018), and Straus (1979) articulate gender as a system of structural power relations, which categorizes and orders people upon a central set of distinctions and organizes their access to resources and authority accordingly. In particular, Cohn (2013) identified three key aspects of this system: gendered identities, gendered meanings, and gendered social structures, which work together to structure hierarchal gender relations. Power differentials exist not only between categories of people, but also within those categories. These complex, gendered power relations parallel and cut across the structural imbalances of power that lead to armed conflicts. This article examines how gendered relations, gendered identities and gendered institutions shape the lives of women and men affected by wars and conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Current scholarship on gender and conflict in Africa/MENA region has advanced our knowledge and highlighted the problems and inaccuracies that arise when women and men's roles in war are strictly dichotomized into passive (victims) and active (perpetrators), respectively.

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In wartime, considerable emphasis is placed on stereotypical depiction of women as passive wives and mothers who are solely responsible for reproducing and socializing the next generation of soldiers. As long as women perform these socially accepted gender roles within their societies, they are praised for carrying out a valuable function for the national cause (Enloe, 2000). However, men's power and masculinity during armed conflict is often positively associatedwith weapons; a man without a gun in some African war zones is often not considered "a real man." For example, the gendered nature of Rwandan society became evident when some Tutsi women were considered "less" Tutsi than their male counterparts during the genocide. As Jones recounts, in Kigali one of the "killers … told a woman that she was safe because sex has no ethnic group" (Jones, 2002, p. 75). Similarly, in my 2001 interview with a senior officer in the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in Nairobi, Kenya, he stated that in conflict zones "women are passive victims in a game, which they understand to be a game of men" (El Jack, 2001, p. 54). Such phenomena rely on a familiar discourse that stresses masculinity in terms of encouraging men to defend their nation while having control over "their women," and emphasizes femininity in terms of "raising warriors" and "needing protection."

During the recent Arab uprisings (which began in 2011 in the North African nations of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya), conspicuous and gallant images of Arab women in the front lines of protests contested stereotypical Western perceptions of Arab/African women as passive victims of their cultures (Abdelzaher & Abdelzaher, 2019; Johansson-Nogués 2013). Historically, women have been actively engaged in militarized conflicts and liberation struggles in the region. They have performed various instrumental roles to survive, and in some instances, to sustain these conflicts. However, in the MENA region, it is crucial to examine the ways in which armed conflict stirs up tensions based on sectarian, ethnic and tribal lines, which renders women's lived experiences more complex. Like men, women are not a monolithic entity. On some occasions, during these popular uprisings, (some) women have used their privileged position in society to further oppress women of lower socio-economic, cultural and political status. Therefore, the analysis of gender relations intersects with other power relations such as race, culture, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, sectarianism and tribalism, which are still present in societies affected by armed conflicts in the region.

From a gender lens, it becomes evident that the stereotypical assumptions about war are intricately linked to war being symbolically and practically linked to the production of masculinity: War is a time when officials promise to make men out of boys and being a good solider is synonymous to being a "real man" (Cohn, 2013). However, women act as combatants and at times commit violent atrocities. And, with men themselves being subject to victimization and violence, including sexualized violence, gendered stereotypes of men as perpetrators and women as victims become inaccurate and unreliable. As such, a nuanced gender-relational perspective is crucial in better understanding how war impacts women and men. Gendered analysis does not only highlight differences based on gendered perceptions and ideals, but more importantly addresses the inequalities between women and men and between girls and boys (El Jack, 2003). As Cockburn points out, gender analysis means "uncovering the differentiation and asymmetry of masculine and feminine as governing principles, as idealized qualities, as practices, as symbols" (Cockburn 2004). This mode of analysis underscores the various interlocking systems and processes within which the unique, unequal complexities of women and men's roles and relations in war zones have been shaped (Carol, 2013).

Despite the debates surrounding the meaning of gender, feminists have challenged the so-called peaceful nature of women by examining their direct involvement as war fighters in African/MENA nations such as Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Tunisia (Abdelzaher, 2019; Barth, 2002; Buregaya, Garling, Craig & Harrell-Bond, 2001; El Jack, 2003; Hitman, 2018), as well as in popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.[2] Women and men are actors in wars and revolts, through their direct or indirect support of mass resistance and armed conflicts. Across conflicts and revolts in Sub-Saharan Africa and the MENA region, women have participated as active combatants and as co-revolutionaries (Johansson-Nogués, 2013). Scholars estimate that in many armed forces in Africa, women constitute a significant number of the fighters. For instance, in Sierra Leone an estimated 30% of child soldiers in oppositional forces were girls (Denov, Maclure, & Richard, 2006). In South Sudan, women have been active and powerful agents of war in their capacities as recruited combatants in the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), as well in their association with armed groups and forces (El Jack, 2001).

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[2] For instance, in the context of the Arab Springs, Hitman (2018) argues that Tunisian women's active engagement in the uprisings, as well as their collective organizing afterward, led to legislative changes, which were supported by the long history of women's presence in the Tunisian public sphere.

Research in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone shows that during and after conflict women participated as combatants and activists (Freedman, 2015; Coulter, 2008). Moreover, in the MENA region, overwhelming numbers of women marched shoulder to shoulder with men during the 2011 Arab Springs; women and men from various political and religious backgrounds protested against repressive governments in the region (Debuysere, 2016).

Women who took on the roles of "combatant," "protector." and "resistor" in Sierra Leone were branded as "rebel women," "monsters," and "barbarians" (Coulter, 2008). In contrast, male fighters are often hailed as "heroes," even if they have been the prime perpetrators of atrocious violence against opposing military forces, as well as civilians. In Egypt and Libya, pro-regime forces labeled women demonstrators as "drunkards" and "prostitutes," subjecting them to virginity tests (Johansson-Nogués, 2013). Such gendered and violent treatments of women stem from a view of women as inherently peaceful and passive victims in the face of conflict. Hence, when female fighters defy such gendered notions, they are perceived as becoming like men.

In the same vein, men who reject violence and fighting are ridiculed as "womanly," "cowards," and at times jailed, tortured, or killed for their "lack of manliness" (ibid.). Furthermore, Johansson-Nogués (2013) applies Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) notions of emphasized femininity versus devalued femininity to examine the effect of women's mass participation in the North African uprisings. Emphasized femininity is created by dominant masculinity and upholds the submissive view of womanhood as the ideal type for all women. In contrast, devalued femininity constitutes all those women who resist hegemonic masculinity.[3] However, the staggering numbers of female protestors challenged not only notions of appropriate womanhood, but also threatened masculinized view of the state as "legitimate protector" (Johansson-Nogués, 2013; Shash & Forden, 2016). In the Arab uprisings, so-called "protectee" women gathered with men to reclaim their nations' honor and resist the oppression of the masculinized protector state. In doing so, women and men who were both victims of political suppression reclaimed their dignity as protectors of their nations. Since 2011, great change has occurred in the MENA region with an increase in sectarian violence, civil war and unprecedented displacement and insecurity. The destabilisation of prevailing dictatorships caused the weakening of social and political institutions in countries like Libya, Sudan, Syria and Iraq, which opened space for negotiating gender roles and relationships.

Women also have participated in militarized conflicts by engaging in economic activities, to provide sustenance to their own families and to support the war economy (Mama & Okazawa-Rey, 2013). Examples of active and strategic engagement with conflict situations have been noted in the Arab uprisings in the MENA region, where women utilized all possible platforms to protect themselves from harm, including online activism, art, and theater (LeVine, 2015). This shows that depending on available resources and the particular realities of the conflict, women employ diverse strategies to fulfill their needs, survive war, and pursue their specific conflict-related interests. Many of these strategies are often depicted as men's gendered roles. In some cases, women's participation in traditional men's roles is a matter of survival, while in many other situations women choose to benefit from the openings available to them as a result of conflict or war (Fuest, 2008; Manea, 2014). Nevertheless, war and social upheavals do open up opportunities for women to directly engage in perceived men's roles, and therefore destabilize essentialized notions of femininity and masculinity.

The diversity of women's experiences in conflict is not limited to the numerous gender roles that women play during periods of war and peace. In fact, feminist scholarship on militarized conflicts shows that distinct factors push women to engage in armed struggles as fighters or in supporting roles. While some women are often abducted and forcefully conscripted, other women voluntary join armed struggle, especially when the conflict is about national liberation or as a survival strategy. In Liberia, after they had experienced rape, the killing of relatives, the burning of homes, and the destruction of their future aspirations, some Liberian women and girls armed themselves not just for protection, but also to take revenge (Specht, 2006). Similarly, in the recent Arab uprisings, studies indicate that during the initial phase, women did not partake in the revolts for any gender-specific reasons. Instead, women protested political suppression and economic corruption just like their male counterparts. However, seeing an opportunity for equal rights in the popular uprisings, some women hoped that the uprisings would open the space to speak out against gender discrimination and fight for women's equality and empowerment (Manea, 2014).

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[3]The termhegemonic masculinity is also articulated by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005).

Throughout the African continent and MENA region, in the Arab Spring's wake women have sought to address pervasive gender discrimination in their respective nations. Women have also organized and pushed for gender reforms and supported nation building initiatives intended to account for the experiences and needs of women and men.

The analysis thus far has examined the gendered experiences of women and men caught in armed conflicts in Africa and the MENA regions. It has located women's agency in their varied experiences and struggles to illustrate that the gendering of the binary concepts of victim and perpetrator as feminine and masculine is inaccurate. Fuest (2008) and Utas (2005) caution us against dichotomizing women's conflict roles into rigid opposing categories of "mere victims" or "active actors." Dichotomized images of the protector (often males) and the protected (females) mask the manifold, energetic roles women play during armed conflicts. Women are not merely victims, nor men always actors. Women and men can be victims and perpetrators. Furthermore, their war experiences and strategies fluctuate with varying degrees of agency, which are dependent on numerous conflict-specific factors. In particular, Utas (2005) shows how women navigate war zones by employing complex tactics with different degrees of agency. In navigating the uncertainty of war zones, women may self-stage as victims, may choose to become girlfriends of influential military officials, or become soldiers. This multiplicity of choice further obscures the strict actor/victim divide, showing how women (and men) barter varying degrees of agency/victimhood in order to survive and engage in conflict situations.

Much of the feminist scholarship on gender and armed conflicts also highlights the lack of opportunity for women in the military. This is partly due to the aforementioned masculinized view of soldierly behavior. Soldiers are considered heroes who protect victims that are typically identified as women and children. In my previous work on armed conflicts in the Horn of Africa, I have argued that militarized institutions such as the army, police, and prison systems are both hierarchal and patriarchal in their relationship to women. These institutions also discriminate against homosexuals and minority men who are not perceived to be "manly" enough (El Jack, 2002). Rose Feinman (1999) further argues that scholars must broaden their analysis of militaries to consider the ways that gender, culture, race, and class relations are part of these patriarchal state apparatus. Furthermore, we must address the masculinism of both the military and the state "in order to understand how women soldiers affect and are affected by the military" (Feinman, 1999, p. 907). As Cockburn puts it, "One thing you can say about militaries is: they are not feminine cultures" (2004, p. 29).

Cohn (2000) has analyzed the discourses through which American military men frame their opposition to women in the military. She further argues that some men expressed anger over women taking "men's" jobs, while others protested that women's presence in the military increased sexual tensions and negatively impacted military effectiveness and cohesion. Pro-regime supporters made similar denunciations of women's participation in the 2011 Arab uprisings in the MENA region: Women demonstrators were called out as 'corrupting' public spaces by mixing with men in some of these conservative Muslim societies (Manea, 2014). This highlights how military institutions, public spaces and political activism, continue to be gendered as men's spaces. When women are found in the military, or demonstrating in public spaces, they are often viewed as invading men's domains. Hence, masculinity and femininity, whether in the context of public activism or military institutions, are defined to suit and strengthen patriarchal structures while restricting and subordinating women's contributions. Armed conflicts also reinforce gender stereotypes that further the subordination of women based on ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, age and cultural and religious differences.

2. Masculinized Gender-Based Violence

Physical and sexual violence, particularly against women and girls, remains a well-documented feature of militarized conflicts. Generally, violence exists across a continuum from the battlefield to the household. However, it is also specific to place and time, and to various stages of conflicts in Africa and the MENA region. Gender-based violence can be defined as physical, sexual, and psychological violence committed against women or men as a result of their gender (McAlpine, Hossain & Zimmerman, 2016). Armed conflicts tend to aggravate sexual abuse, and in various conflict zones rape has been extensively used as a weapon of war. Research on armed conflicts in Africa and the MENA regions documents brutal sexual violence inflicted on women and girls, which has been described as systematic and epidemic (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008).

In Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, women were targeted and sexually violated in an attempt to deter them from joining the uprisings (Johansson-Nogués, 2013).[4] In this context rape is viewed not only as violence against women, but also as an act of aggression against the men who fail to protect 'their women' (Coulter, Persson & Utas, 2008). Occurrences of rape in Libya have led to the killing of rape victims by family members to restore family honor (Johansson-Nogués, 2013).

Patterns of gender-based violence reinforce how deeply the social construction of masculine identity is embedded in the stereotypical perception of dominant men as the protectors of women and children. To support this ideology, femininity and feminine identities are constructed under the premise that females are vulnerable, dependent, and unable to protect themselves, and therefore need male protection. The dichotomy of protected/protector is created and then used to justify the reliance on weapons as a significant means to uphold such identities (El Jack, 2002). For instance, throughout the Rwandan genocide, widespread sexual violence, directed predominantly against Tutsi women (and young men), occurred in public and private spaces. Nowrojee describes how "every part of the Rwandan environment was a location for rape, often multiple gang-rapes" (2005, p.5). In Darfur, the DRC, and South Africa, gendered sexual crimes disproportionately affecting women have been carried out in the full view of family and community; victims are rendered "tainted" casualties of war (Thomas, & Tiessen, 2010). Furthermore, women are often physically and sexually abused by their husbands who themselves have been demeaned by the conflict and crippled by guilt and anger at having failed in their perceived "duty" of protecting women and children.

Sexual violence against women is particularly prevalent during armed conflict and its after math. It takes many forms, including rape, forced marriage, forced impregnation, and forced prostitution. Conflict worsens existing patterns of sexual violence against women in two main ways. First, the incidence of everyday violence, particularly domestic violence, increases as communities break down during and after conflicts. Second, forced sexual relationships, forced marriages, and sexualized violence against women and girls, escalate in the context of masculine and militarized conflict situations. For example, sexual services are often provided (in outposts some refer to as "rape camps") to occupying armed forces in exchange for necessary goods and services needed by women such as food and protection (Goldenberg, Muzaaya, Akello, Nguyen, Birungi, & Shannon, 2016).

These gendered patterns of abuse have distinct consequences for women and girls, including sexual mutilation and sterility, chronic reproductive/gynecological health problems, and marginalization from their family and community given the stigma associated with sexual abuse. However, the severe impact that war and violence have on women and girls should not be confused with a perception that men and boys are privileged in war zones. Men are often targeted in armed conflicts, and they make up the majority of casualties. The fact that women-headed households dominate refugee populations in Africa is illustrate men's vulnerability in such situations. In sub-Saharan Africa both women and men may be victims and subject to rape. Like women, men often suffer increased rates of HIV infection and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), damage to their physical and psychological health, disruption of their lives, and loss of self-confidence and self-esteem (Jacobs, Jacobson, & Marchbank, 2000). Men's experiences of rape in this region represent a gendered act of aggression aimed at shattering men's perception of their masculinity and power. Freedman (2015) cautions that a singular focus on women as victims of rape renders male victims invisible and decontextualizes sexual violence from its broader gendered socio-political context. Indeed, women and men experience gender-based violence in distinct ways. Nevertheless, the marginalization women associated with armed groups and revolutionary forces experience during wartime is often consolidated during the post-conflict reconstruction phases, as I describe below.

3. Gendering Post-Conflict Reconstruction Processes

Women and men's experiences of conflicts are multifaceted, complex, and dynamic. Therefore, the strategies for managing and resolving wars and conflicts in Africa and MENA region should be gender-aware and multidimensional. This can be achieved by utilizing gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming is a strategy through which the gendered experiences of women and men are assessed, then their specific concerns and needs are adopted as integral parts of reconstruction policies and programs across social, economic, political, and legal spheres.

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[4]A case in point is that of the Libyan woman activist, Iman Al-Obeidi, who shocked the world when she burst into a Tripoli hotel to tell foreign journalists that she had been raped by president Muammar Gaddafi's troops.

Mainstreaming gender allows those involved in nation building to look beyond victim/actor characterizations of women, and instead focus on their context-specific experiences and concerns. One important aspect of reconstruction, especially after armed conflicts and wars have ended, is the process of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR). The United Nations stresses that those assisting with DDR must understand the gendered dimensions of armed conflict and post-conflict reconstruction to ensure lasting peace. This is illustrated in Point 13 of UN Security Council Resolution 1325,[5] which calls for "all those involved in the planning for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration to consider the different needs of female and male ex-combatants and to take into account the needs of their dependents" (UNIFEM, 2004).

Yet, preference is often given to male combatants in DDR programs. This practice results from the popular perception that men who have been soldiers or aggressors constitute a major threat to security after the end of militarized conflicts. However, women are not merely wives, mothers, nurses, social workers and sex-workers during wartime; they also constitute a significant number of combatants. When associated with armed groups they too commit violent acts and require reintegration services. Therefore, they must also be an integral focus of DDR. Their specific vulnerabilities must accounted for, as well as their responsibilities as perpetrators. Concurrently, counseling programs and other services for victims of sexual violence need to take into consideration that men too are victims of rape. Policies and programs also need to recognize that many women and girls continue to experience post-conflict violence, often at the hands of their own relatives (Abdelzaher, Latheef & Abdelzaher, 2017; El Jack, 2003).

Cultural pressures on women and increased gender-based violence in post-war and conflict situations further impede their effective participation in post-conflict reconstruction processes. The UN Committee for the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee) attests that women's equal and meaningful participation in political and public life is circumscribed by escalated gender-based violence (including family and sexual violence) in post-conflict situations. This phenomenon of women actively participating in wars and revolutions, only to be later sidelined by their male counterparts in post-construction processes, has been observed in many African conflicts and in the aftermath of the Arab Springs (Abdelzaher & Abdelzaher, 2019).

Nevertheless, there are three important dimensions of post-conflict reconstruction processes; each should be prioritized by governmental and non-governmental actors to achieve effective and sustainable empowerment of women. The first aspect is socio-economic and political reconstruction focused on strengthening local institutions, improving technical skills, and promoting gender-sensitive policies. Second, post-conflict reconstruction should entail developing effective national and global policies for essential social services such as education and health systems. Doing so enables women and men, through education, to regain control of their lives and to offer their children and communities a brighter future. Moreover, given the extent of sexual violence during militarized conflicts, health services are crucial to address major dilemmas associated with sexual violence. Third, promoting a political culture of tolerance and cooperation would foster peace, security, and stability in post-conflict situations, and would create a conducive environment, which would enable women to collectively organize and articulate gender sensitive agendas for sustainable peace and development without fear and insecurity.

4. Conclusions

When the term gender is used, the focus still tends to be on women and girls as opposed to the ways gender inequality creates a power imbalance between women and men. I have utilized a gender-relational approach and argued that women and men's experiences of wars, conflicts, and post-conflict situationsin Africa and the MENA region are complex and varied. Highlighting the different ways women and men engage in these processes is necessary to understand gendered interconnections between conflict and post-conflict situations. This piece emphasizes that gender and gender sensitive analysis are imperative and should therefore be incorporated into the analysis and policies of both conflicts and post-conflict processes. Furthermore, peace dialogues and nation building initiatives should surpass the over-simplified notions of women as victims and men as perpetrators.

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[5]In October of 2000, the UN Security Council held a debate on Women, Peace and Security, which led to the passage of Security Council Resolution 1325 on 31 October 2000. The Resolution recognizes that better understanding the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, along with effective institutional arrangements to guarantee their protection and full participation in the peace process, can contribute significantly to international peace and security. The UN calls on all parties involved in conflict and peace processes to adopt a gender perspective. This includes supporting local women's peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution. United Nations, *Security Council Resolution 1325* (Geneva: UN, 2000).

Given the complexity of women and men's lived experiences in conflict situations, to be effective for their intended beneficiaries post-conflict programs cannot be based on stereotypical gendered assumptions of women and men roles and relationships. Scholars and policy makers must further consider the changing, multidimensional roles of both women and men to develop effective post-conflict strategies, which would drive sustainable positive change and lasting peace.

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