

# Masculinity and war— let's talk about it

*March 15, 2018, Humanitarian Action*

**Hugo Slim**



There is much talk about violations, cruelty and brutality in the public discussion of war, but very little talk about men. Yet, factually speaking, it is mainly men who are the practitioners of organized violence as its ideologues, planners, technical designers, and its workforce at the sharp end.

So, why don't we all talk about men, masculinity and male cultures of violence much more in the humanitarian world?

Academics have long discussed masculinity and violence in military sociology. Many others have now joined them from gender studies. The study of gang cultures in urban violence in the last few years has been explicitly focused on men and masculinity as drivers of that violence. But analysis of masculinity remains largely absent in the political, policy and media communities that come together around war.

Why the silence? Why aren't men and masculinity called out much more as the main causes of the terrible abuses and tragedy of armed conflicts—its indiscriminate attacks, inhumane detention and sexual violence?

There seems to be a genuine emotional difficulty with the subject.

But, first, we need to be clear on the facts.

## Mainly men

Is it mainly men who are responsible for the horrors of war? The answer is yes. The cultures and institutions that prepare for and deliver organized armed violence on behalf of the State or non-State armed groups are predominantly constructed by men, led by men and filled with men.

There have always been exceptions to this rule, as there are today, with women fighters at the frontline senior women military strategists and women Heads of State who take their countries into war. In an increasing number of liberal militaries today, there is a determination to enable women to serve in the armed forces, which may lead to changes in the culture of war and, equally, may not. A majority of women often support war and can become full of loathing for their enemies. But still, the evidence tells us that it is mainly men who organize and deliver violence, and it usually has been.

It seems fair, therefore, to call men out on war—just so long as we also recognize that every act of restraint, compassion and lawfulness in the planning and delivery of violence in armed conflict is also likely to be the action of men. We need to remember that male warrior culture can be kind as well as cruel.

## A difficult subject

Even if the evidence is clear, the subject seems difficult to raise. It is a painful subject for most of us because each of us—men and women—knows that although this fact of male violence is true, it is only one truth about men and only one truth about each man.

This all makes the masculinity of war difficult to talk about. Most of us do not want to paint men as predominantly violent. This would be unfair and risks stereotyping men into a corner from which they will probably fight their way out. We need a more nuanced and caring discussion—human to human. This is hard to do in the knock-about macho culture of public advocacy that is so frequently driven by the 'outrage' of both men and women in the advocacy set.

Law does not help much here. Talking about the violence and suffering of war in highly legal terms lead to public descriptions of armed conflict that can be abstract and gender neutral. Largely male behaviours are described remotely as 'violations' and 'abuses' committed by 'parties to conflict'. These legal terms are seldom attributed directly to men, when they usually should be. Legal speak often obscures rather than reveals the gendering of violence.

Suffering, on the other hand, is stereotyped as largely female today with a foregrounding of the pain of women and children. Some female focused policies of aid could verge on breaching the principle of impartiality, which is based on need alone, and not identity. But men suffer terribly in war as well, and many resist the mainly male violence of a conflict, and non-violently support the rescue and survival of their families.

## Let's talk about it—Masculinity and war

Let's break the silence about mainly male violence. We can and should talk about men and masculinity in war, or even men and masculinity as war.

We can do this by owning the problem and creating a more honest and realistic policy discussion of masculinity and war, which can be carefully informed by psychology, ethics, sociology, biology and, of course, humanity.

\*\*\*

*This article has been written in the personal capacity of the author.*

Tags: *conflict, gender, violence, war*

---

Share this article    

---

## Comments

**KASSANDRA SMITH**, 15 March 2018

Can't even count the amount of times this exact question has been on my mind. Thanx for addressing this subject! /  
Kassandra Smith, Campaign Manager, Swedish Red Cross

**NUGUSSE GHEBRESLASE**, 15 March 2018

It is not the time to think about gender difference. Every body should be equal with aout saying male or female.

**SAM MCFARLAND**, 15 March 2018

I strongly recommend David Winter's new book, *Roots of War* (Oxford, 2017). Doesn't deal directly with the men and war issue, but offers a profound psychological analysis of how and why some crises result in war while other similar crises are peacefully resolved.

**CLAUDIO GUILLERMO MORASSUTTI**, 15 March 2018

Dear Mr. Slim:

History shows that whenever women are involved in a political process, and war is one of them, they tend to behave as their male peers. During the Second World War Soviet female pilots and snipers were as deadly as men and the Resistance Group included women in their ranks. Elizabeth I and Margaret Thatcher as well as Catherine of Russia were not pacifist. Certainly Hillary Clinton did not participate in the Libyan Civil War as a peacemaker. Women soldiers participated in the torture inflicted to Iraqi soldiers in the Abu Ghabri prison. And at the home front hundreds of thousands of women cheered the soldiers that went to the First World War.

I don't think it is possible to affirm that organized violence is born out of male culture. Of course most wars and violent deeds and actions were perpetrated by men but that is because until recently the world was led by men. Today more women are involved in politics and yet we have the same violence, massacres and conflicts we had before.

My point is that political violence has other roots and Male Culture, if it really exists, is not the cause but the effect of these other roots. I base my point in the archetypes theory of Carl Gustav Jung who postulated that there are patterns of behaviours in the collective unconsciousness of humankind and that persons who take certain roles in society have the tendency to be influenced by those patterns. It's a kind of natural process of eternal repetition of conducts that affects whoever is in charge of military or social power.

The focus on gender too easily falls in a politically correct approach and clearly never reached the core of the issue.

**CALLUM WATSON, 16 March 2018**

Thanks for shedding light on this important topic. I think it would be good, however, to highlight that the feminist movement has been discussing masculinities in conflict in detail since the second wave in the 1960s, and organisations such as WILPF have highlighted the associations between rigid masculine roles and conflict since their foundation in 1915.

In the humanitarian sector, here are some organisations that have already addressing this topic:

- Abaad, Lebanon (2011-): <http://www.abaadmena.org/programmes/masculinities>
- CARE International, working in former Yugoslavia (2007-), <http://www.care.org/work/education/youth/be-man>
- DCAF, Switzerland, providing training sessions on men and masculinities at NATO Gender Advisor courses (2015-), research from 2014: <https://www.dcaf.ch/preventing-and-responding-sexual-and-domestic-violence-against-men-guidance-note-security-sector>
- Institute of Development Studies, UK-based, working in Senegal (2007-): <https://www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/Masculinities.pdf>
- International Alert, UK working in countries such as Burundi, Colombia, Myanmar, Nepal and Uganda (2014-): <http://www.international-alert.org/publications/rethinking-gender-peacebuilding>
- Living Peace, DRC (2014-): <https://promundoglobal.org/programs/living-peace/>
- Promundo, Brazil and now elsewhere (1997-): <https://promundoglobal.org/resources/young-men-and-the-construction-of-masculinity-in-sub-saharan-africa/>
- Rozan, Pakistan (work pre-dates 2011): <http://www.rozan.org/?q=article/mens-program-humqadam>
- Saferworld, UK (2014-): <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/862-masculinities-conflict-and-peacebuilding-perspectives-on-men-through-a-gender-lens>
- Sonke, South Africa (2006-) – collaboration with UNFPA from 2011: <http://genderjustice.org.za/project/regional-programmes-networking/conflict-post-conflict-research/>

- UNHCR (2012-), <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5006aa262.html>
- USAID (2015-): [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/Men\\_VAW\\_report\\_Feb2015\\_Final.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/Men_VAW_report_Feb2015_Final.pdf)
- Women Peacemakers Program, Netherlands working in 17 countries including Indonesia, the Philippines, Zimbabwe (2009-); <http://www.womenpeacemakersprogram.org/resources/media/overcoming-violence-exploring-masculinities-violence-and-peacebuilding/>
- Youth Action Network, Northern Ireland (2009-), [http://www.youthaction.org/young-men/why\\_Young\\_Men.aspx](http://www.youthaction.org/young-men/why_Young_Men.aspx)

Note also the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) that has been carried out in 20+ countries and covers men's relationship with violence, often in post-conflict settings or those in which there is a risk of renewed conflict: <https://promundoglobal.org/programs/international-men-and-gender-equality-survey-images/>

In addition, MenEngage is an international network that most of the organisations listed above are part of: <http://menengage.org/>. They have member organisations from around 60 countries.

I think it's important to include those already working on this topic so we don't reinvent the wheel...

**ASHA HERTEN**, 17 March 2018

As Callum Watson points out, there are numerous actors and researchers covering this topic, yet they predominantly remain in the academic, NGO, health and development sectors. The question becomes, how do we get the 'mainstream' actors, the public servants and the policy-makers, the MPs, the think-tanks and the policy institutes, to engage on these issues?

Applying an intersectional feminist lens to 'traditional' foreign (and domestic) issues like trade and security, interlinked with a understanding of individuals' psychology and, I believe, their capacity for empathy and exposure to the concepts of power and privilege, in a manner unique to their identity and experiences, is critical. I would love to see the ICRC, with all their clout, engaging more publicly with this topic, and with more 'mainstream' actors.

Projects to develop empathy and emotional communication among children find that they are more compassionate ('pro-social') and less likely to bully. Rather than waiting for the next generation, is there space to start working with adults before they sit down at the negotiation table? Could the study of international relations be enhanced by uniting an intersectional feminist analysis with experimental methodologies? Chatham House is exploring the application of a gender lens to their work, and would be a good place to start.

**PWAKIM JACOB CHOJI**, 17 March 2018

In as much as I agree that men are predominantly the planners and actors of war, its important to conduct reseracj so as to know what role women play whether as sisters, girlfriends, and wives. This is critical considering that there is a research which shows that women encourage the maale into acts of violence but only research can show to what extend. So, we await a research on that too so as to see the role of sex in conflicts and violent conflicts.

**AD BELJAARS**, 17 March 2018

Thanks Hugo,

It is true that fighters are usually men. The reason is our upbringing, I will come to that. Today females increasingly play important roles at the political front, one of the three crucial pillars of Clausewitz' Trinitarian Warfare model. I think of Thatcher, but actually today quite a number of countries have female ministers of defence, such as in my country The Netherlands. And we don't feel as Dutch being "at war", but you will find quite a number of Dutch military active in various types of conflict abroad, all commissioned by the Ministry of Defence. I have no doubt that under a female ministry's watch the same atrocities will occur as under a male minister. I think of the reputation of the just appointed female head of CIA in

the US, and the impression that some female warriors that I came across made on me: They were not in for high tea. Women have by far been a minority in political leadership positions, yet there is an impressive list of convicted female war criminals, including female political leaders. Yet they seem to be indicted and convicted proportionally far less than men, which has been the case both during the Neurenberg as well as during the Rwanda trials as this interesting read poses:

[http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/katie-engelhart/female-war-criminals\\_b\\_908080.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/katie-engelhart/female-war-criminals_b_908080.html)

The problem is in our gender-role upbringing, in many cultures unquestionably privileging opportunity to one group, thus limiting the other life-long voice, influence and decision-making power. That’s where the male-female socio/political distinction blueprint is being imprinted which results in power difference. Individual men may feel the hubris, and abuse it.

---

*Leave a comment*

Name \*

Email address \* *This is for content moderation. Your email address will not be made public.*

Your comment

**Post comment**



*Get Law & Policy updates*