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# War, gender and culture: Mozambican women refugees

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## Abstract

Analyses of the psychological sequelae of war-related violence for women tend to rely on the concepts developed in research on male combatants. Post-traumatic stress disorder or varying combinations of its symptoms are identified as the principal outcomes of war-related events for women. By and large, the dominant literature does not examine possible outcomes which could be specified by gender. This paper refers to the war in Mozambique during the 1970s and 1980s as a typical illustration of how women are an integral part of the battlefield. It draws on research on African women and uses testimony of Mozambican women refugees who settled in South Africa to explore how gender is linked to psycho-social outcomes of massive social conflict. The paper argues that a richer understanding of the psycho-social outcomes of war and the needs of survivors is promoted by investigating gender in specific historical situations and how this frames the responses people have to experiences of violence and social destruction. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## Introduction

This paper examines the psycho-social outcomes of war for a group of African women survivors. It seeks connections between social processes and subjective expressions of distress and suffering. Inserting the social into psychology is a difficult task, not least because western cosmology defines psychology as the study of individual behaviour and intrapsychic dynamics, and the social and cultural are usually depicted as variables external to the individual, which to a greater or lesser extent may impact on behaviour.

In the field of trauma studies, work on the psychological effects of organised violence tends to rely on the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which was developed in research on male combatants (Andreasen, 1995; Buydens-Branchey, Noumair, & Branchley, 1990; Hendin & Haas, 1984; Tomb, 1994; Wilson & Lindy, 1994). That PTSD is a prevalent outcome of war-related trauma is without question. Whether PTSD, which focuses on cognitive processing of emotions and

biological changes, is the predominant form of suffering across situations of organised violence has, however, been challenged.

The biomedical framework that underpins PTSD tends to isolate the individual from the social and this obscures the range of feeling-states constituted by social relations, which in some cosmologies are given higher priority than internal dynamics. Furthermore, because PTSD identifies discrete incidents of violence as they threaten individual physical and mental integrity, this concept is limited in its capacity to provide insight into effects of the destruction of social and cultural order on individuals. A significant body of critical work has called for alternatives to the *diagnostic enterprise* (Turner & Gorst-Unsworth, 1990). This work emphasises the significance for individuals of the social and collective features of war-related trauma, highlights the interconnectedness of social processes and personal mental life, and posits healing strategies that lie outside medical interventions (Becker, 1995; Bracken, Giller, & Summerfield, 1995; Bracken, 1993; Kleber, 1995; Summerfield, 1995; Turner & Gorst-Unsworth, 1990).

Feminist scholarship has long argued that women's psychology is *woven in context* (Walker, 1989) and has

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sought to understand the constitution of self in social relationships which are embedded in, and structured by economic and political dimensions of power. For example, it was early research by feminists on sexual violence that pointed out how the meaning and traumatic significance attributed to rape is mediated by social constructions of sexuality and culturally sanctioned sexual practices and values. In this way, feminist frameworks located both violence and its outcomes firmly in the context of social relations of power.

For aid workers and those involved in social reconstruction in the aftermath of violence, one of the most important aspects of recent research on organised violence conducted within a feminist framework is that it seeks to understand the differential content and consequences of large-scale social violence for men and women (Agger, 1989; El-Bushra, 2000; Idriss, 2000; McCallin, 1991; Pillay, 2000; Swiss & Giller, 1993; Sideris, 1999; Thomas & Ralph, 1994; Turshen & Twagiramariya, 1998).

Thus an examination of the outcomes of war specific to gender provides an opportunity to refine our understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of trauma in situations of war and organised violence and the multi-faceted psycho-social outcomes. But, further to academic considerations, there are ethical reasons for gender analyses of the psycho-social outcomes of organised violence. A gender analysis requires those designing interventions to seriously consider the differential needs of survivors, but more importantly, to be vigilant of how gendered relations of power repress the voices of particular survivor populations. And it is precisely this perspective that challenges us to develop restorative interventions which incorporate social transformation. The arguments presented below draw on evidence from the most marginalised survivors of war—African women refugees. Testimony gathered from Mozambican refugee women allows us to explore how socio-historical experiences and socially structured relations between men and women can modulate subjective expressions of distress.

Gender is an organising principle of social relations across widely differing cultures. For example, though the extent and content of sexual violence differ in particular social contexts, such violence is an aspect of women's lives in a wide variety of societies. But within a dominant discourse of male domination and female subordination, particular forces—material, ideological, institutional—frame divergent experiences of what it means to be man or woman. This suggests that an examination of how gender affects the psycho-social outcomes of violence for women must be located in time and place. What follows is an attempt to explore, through the voices of a specific group of women, how connections between the individual and the social, and between local specificities and broader social structures,

shaped women's responses to the brutal experiences of war and flight.

This paper takes the 1970s/1980s war in Mozambique as a typical illustration of how women are an integral part of the battlefield in war. Unstructured interviews conducted over 2 years with 30 women, aged 16–60, who fled brutal attacks on their communities to settle in border villages in South Africa, provide the bulk of the data used to examine how social context frames psychological responses to violent social conflict. Fieldwork was conducted in a rural area, the Nkomazi district, which was part of the former KaNgwane homeland under the South African apartheid regime. Results of thematic analysis of the interviews were presented to the same women in focus group discussions (FGDs). These discussions provided the participants with an opportunity to compare views, discuss and debate interpretations, check the researcher's understanding of the material and to provide additional data.

Arthur and Joan Kleinman (1991) argue that, in an attempt to analyse the experience of disease, ethnographers freeze the illness experience “at a certain moment”. In this way “the anthropologist creates the illusion of finality and continuity and coherent meaning, when in fact even the simplest illness episode has more complex resonances than can be accounted for by the analytic models that are available to us” (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1991, p. 279).

How can we account for the myriad individual encounters with horror that constitute the actual experience of war? For an outsider to the lived experience of extreme violation and local life-worlds of its victims, the comprehension of suffering is necessarily incomplete. By drawing on the testimony of individual women, their accounts of atrocity, and their views and interpretations of the impact of war, this paper attempts to stay *near* the experiences of the women,<sup>1</sup> while analysing these individual stories in the context of shared socio-historical experiences. In other words, this article is limited in that the distinctive life histories of each individual are not examined. Instead, the testimonies are representative of a category of individuals who were especially attacked during the war—rural women subsistence farmers. Moreover, because it seeks connections between social processes and subjective expressions of distress, the paper focuses on negative outcomes and may be construed as suggesting that the adaptive capacities of survivors are irreparably damaged. This is definitely an incomplete picture. The women who are the focus of this study demonstrated a remarkable will and capacity to survive. They drew on internal and external resources to deal with what had happened to them, and,

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms (in brackets) are used to protect the identity of individual women. “Focus group discussion” indicates that the testimony is taken from transcripts of focus group discussions.

in difficult social circumstances, adapted historical coping tactics to secure basic existence and reconstruct social bonds. By actively trying to reestablish social connections and lives with dignity, their survival represented more than the difference between living and dying. But the crises they had to master and the survival strategies used were provided by the constraints and possibilities of the situation to which they fled, and by socio-historical experiences of suffering and survival. In other words, the complex interplay between vulnerability and resilience that characterises the lives of survivors is firmly located in context.

#### *The social and cultural destruction of war*

The war in Mozambique was characterised by attacks on the civilian population and their social and cultural foundations, something which has become a distinctive feature of contemporary warfare (Nordstrom, 1991). In this kind of war the social fabric unravels. Those social arrangements and relationships which provide people with inner security, a sense of stability, and human dignity are broken down. For example, in Mozambique, sons killed fathers. Children raped mothers. The dead were left unburied. This inversion of social norms and perversion of accepted values constitute destruction of the social order that undermines a coherent sense of life and meaning—in itself a traumatic experience. In the words of a woman who went through it, “the war was the end of the world”.

Media coverage, academic analyses, government reports, and literary accounts provide strong evidence showing that the majority of Mozambican women were directly affected by the war (Arnfred, 1988; Buruku, 1989; Chingono, 1994; Hall, 1990; Magaia, 1988; Minter, 1989; UNICEF, 1989; Urdang, 1989; Wilson & Nunes, 1992). These women who fled the war and came to settle in the villages of the Nkomazi district came from the destruction zones of the war—the southern Mozambican provinces of Maputo, Gaza and Inhambane (Gersony, 1988). RENAMO (Portuguese acronym for the Mozambique National Resistance), the right wing insurgent group formed by Rhodesian security forces and later actively supported by apartheid South Africa, initiated armed insurrection against the newly independent Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) government in the late 1970s. The proximity of the southern regions to RENAMO’s South African military supporters is a factor that, some have suggested, explains the extreme brutality inflicted on the civilian population and the high number of massacres carried out by RENAMO in these regions (Minter, 1994).

Without a coherent political programme and largely an artificial creation of outside forces, RENAMO’s agenda was to destabilise the country and destroy the

economy. The war in Mozambique, which went on for well over 10 years until a peace agreement was signed in 1992, was catastrophic. It cost the Mozambican economy over US\$15 billion (UNICEF, 1989). In itself the devastation of social and economic infrastructures caused immense human suffering. But the cost in human suffering was caused by more than destruction of property. Murder, rape, and mutilation were perpetrated on a mass scale. Homes were plundered, land and crops were burnt, and livestock was butchered. The terror that was instilled in ordinary people and the wholesale destruction of homes and land disrupted the functioning of families and entire communities.

In a conflict in which the domestic sphere was a primary site of conflict, women were at the centre of the battlefield. As members of the civilian population their lives were overturned by the chaos the war created. As the linchpins of domestic life, they were strategic targets of attack (Nordstrom, 1991). Women who constituted the large majority of agricultural producers found it difficult to carry out the daily activities necessary to provide for the needs of their families. Farming was disrupted by attacks. Routine tasks such as fetching water and collecting firewood became extremely dangerous due to the threat of abduction or murder at the hands of rebel soldiers. Dead bodies thrown into wells by the rebels contaminated water sources. Countless women abandoned their homes and fields to flee to towns or cross the border into neighbouring countries (Magaia, 1988; Vines, 1991).

If you go to Ressano Garcia and Moamba it’s terrible. They [the rebels] destroyed a nice place. We used to plough—peanuts and other things—to reap. And there came the devil. You watch them come and destroy your farm, steal your cattle and make a *braai* [barbecue]. (Madalena)

Rape and other forms of sexual violence became weapons of terror and intimidation. Women were raped in front of their husbands, children, and compatriots. There are widespread reports from women and men testifying about husbands being used as mattresses—they were forced to lie on the ground, while their wives were raped on top of them. Children were raped in the presence of their parents. The following testimony captures the experience of thousands of Mozambican women.

On the spot where the man raped me I was terribly shocked about seeing a man sleeping with a five year old—a very small child. That child couldn’t even manage to walk. He took a panga and killed the child. Instead of caring about my own rape and feeling for what happened to me, even today I still see that man sleeping with a small child and after that the child being killed. Most of the people who were

taken by Renamo were teenagers and school children. I have seen many young people being raped by these Renamo. (Lucia)

### Local discourses of suffering

#### *Spirit injury*

How can we begin to understand the effects of the social destruction inflicted by this kind of war on individuals? The kind of war that took place in Mozambique has been going on in Sudan for over 30 years, has since been echoed in conflicts in Rwanda and central Africa, all the way to the Balkans—a war where the process of social and cultural destruction is achieved by perverse defilement of individuals and their property and individual distress is caused by the violation of cultural norms and social relationships. The women's narratives revealed a constellation of consequences—features of clinically well-documented PTSD and locally specific forms of suffering that cannot be adequately explained in biomedical terms. They described a set of feeling-states, expressions of personal distress defined with reference to social relations, severed bonds with the living and the dead and fractured social connections.

Injury to the spirit (*vavisa imoya*) (see footnote 1), loss of social belonging, and somatic afflictions are the outcomes the Mozambican refugee women gave most weight to in their discussions of how the war had affected them. For the purpose of analysis, these feeling-states are discussed separately. However, the narratives make it clear that they are closely interrelated by a system of explanation according to which social order, self and body are dialectically linked. The profound sense of hurt implied by *vavisa imoya* is conveyed in its phenomenology and its aetiology. The experiential components of injury to the spirit are: preoccupation with individual violation and social destruction, grief, physical deterioration, bodily distress, loss of vitality, loss of efficacy to sustain life, loss of a sense of continuity of self, feeling lost, and suicidal ideation. Family discord, community fragmentation, murder, death of relatives, moral disorder, severance from the land and fractured social connections, all cause injury to the spirit.

The injury to the spirit is worse than those other things of not sleeping, dreaming, being afraid. If the spirit is hurt you get thinner and thinner. (FGD)

If you hear and see all those kinds of things, you are always in trouble, the spirit will not be okay. To see killing as the Renamo killed, you cannot be okay, you are spiritually dead. The land from which you were living has been taken away. Your people have

been killed. Your heart is sore but you are spiritually dead. (Flora)

Take for instance if your relative died, you are far from there. If you do not bury the dead their *imoya*<sup>2</sup> is not resting. The *n'anga* will tell you this person's *imoya* is just wandering around, there is nothing you can do. This can bring bad luck, they [the ancestors] can be angry because you did not bury him or her properly. (FGD)

#### *Loss of social belonging/identity*

Loss of social belonging and identity describes a loss of culture in its broadest sense. In their testimony, the women reflected on how the war deprived them of those daily practices, kinship arrangements, social rules and obligations which gave them a sense of purpose and dignity, and anchored their sense of who they were. In their framework of analysis, identity is given by social belonging—family bonds which provide support, access to land which sustains life and kinship and participation in familiar social practices which create meaning. The conditions to which these women fled were harsh. They faced extreme poverty, the constant threat of deportation and were exploited as cheap labour. But the social situation was not alien. Mozambicans were able to communicate in local languages. Structures of authority in the villages were familiar. There were few constraints on religious practice. Traditional healers and prophets of African syncretic churches were available and many women continued to consult them. Despite these continuities, women communicated a profound sense of feeling lost, alone, and disconnected.

Where social relationships and historical bonds—relationship to family, community, ancestors and the land—are emphasised as vital to individual well-being, as suggested in the above descriptions of *spirit injury*, it is reasonable to expect that social dislocation will have grave consequences.

The war has taken our *ixinzuthi*.<sup>3</sup> We are not the way we used to be before the war. In our villages we were people with dignity. We farmed the land of our

<sup>2</sup> Because *imoya* is directly translated as *spirit* it is tempting to equate it with soul. But scholars caution against simple comparisons. Hammond-Tooke (1989) prefers to describe it as *breath of life* in a physical sense. Magesi (1997, p. 52) gives the notion of *life force* great symbolic significance. He argues that in African religious thought the force of life is given by God and humans have a responsibility, a religious obligation to use this force to sustain life in others and in nature.

<sup>3</sup> *Ixinzuthi* literally translated means the *shadow of a person*. Scholars of African philosophy explain it as the shadow, moral weight, influence and prestige, the personality or the soul (Bergland, 1976; Hammond-Tooke, 1989).

ancestors. We provided for our families. We were respected. But the war has taken it away. The *ixinzuthi* is who you are. It goes together with your spirit. If your dignity is respected your spirit also will be okay. (Martha)

In this place we are suffering. The worst part of it is that we don't plough. We are used to ploughing. There in our place we got mielies [corn] from our fields, we got maybe vegetables. We supported our children quite well. (Alice)

I found that all my relatives who were left in Mozambique, my uncle and his children, all died. This happened when Renamo was still there. They lit a fire and all the people in this house were killed. It is really terrible because if you know that maybe you have got a problem, you always go to your relative. But now I have got no-one, nowhere to go even in Mozambique. (Lucia)

The above testimony describes feelings of aloneness, destitution, abandonment, alienation and economic insecurity that together make up a loss of social belonging. Displacement is a result of the war but loss of social belonging denotes an emotional response, a feeling-state, constituted by social processes.

#### *Somatic distress*

At the simplest level the somatic complaints that the Mozambican women described indicated real physical dysfunction and actual injury caused by the injuries they incurred and the physical deprivation they were exposed to. At the same time their somatic complaints described a sense of disorder which embodies the overall suffering produced by the war.

I can say I am sick. How can I describe my sickness I don't know? Because where am I now? I'm just in the middle of nowhere. There is nothing that can ever help me. I think a lot. That is why I can't say I have this or that. Everywhere all over my body is sore. I don't feel as if I am a person. (Julia)

This woman expresses her distress in somatic terms—a sense of total bodily indisposition. For many women sickness in specific body sites or generalised physical malaise provides a record of the war experience.

I have pain in my stomach and I suffer from headaches since the war. I am not well—even to work. I only work because I have no one to support me. I mean that I am not well through what the Renamo has done to me. The Renamo made me crippled. They beat me and raped me. Now it is as if I am a crippled somebody. (Regina)

A close reading of the testimony presented above shows that *spirit injury*, loss of social belonging and somatic afflictions are defined by each other. Injury to the spirit encompasses the bodily disorder produced by vicious and dehumanising violation. Dislocation and ruptured social worlds disturb personal and social identity and cause injury to the spirit. Physical problems communicate social suffering. This dynamic interaction of states of mind, body and spirit, social and individual is clearly emphasised in the following testimony:

What has happened to us, our properties have been damaged, our bodies have been injured. We have no relatives. The spirits of those who were not buried are not resting. Everything—our lives have absolutely changed because of Renamo. The spirit is sore. (Celeste).

#### *The interdependence of social destruction and individual distress*

The outcomes these women prioritised are based on their own framework of understanding the world, a system of explanation in which the individual and the social, the mind and the body, and the visible world and spiritual realm are not rigidly separated. Explanations of the causes of affliction are unified in such a way that individual well-being is integrally linked to social health. Physical ailments can be an expression of disturbed social relations. And the invisible world of the ancestors plays a significant role in both individual and social health.

Though the discourses of suffering articulated in the above accounts are informed by locally specific beliefs, their conceptualisations are not simply culture-bound. Their views present an alternative way of understanding the consequences of the collective experience of violence. The destruction of social and cultural order is manifested in subjective forms of distress reflecting the interdependence between human psychological processes and social environments, which is a largely neglected area in the biomedical discourse.

The social worlds under attack in war are neither homogenous nor harmonious. That system of relationships between people, nature and the visible and invisible world referred to in the testimonies above is organised hierarchically and structured by relations of power. Age, gender, and spiritual realm are the foremost organising principles of the hierarchy. The particular social positions they occupy place individuals and groups in distinct relationships to family, community, land, and the elders. Gender relations define the place that women occupy in the family, their status in relation to children, men and the elders, their economic roles, and also inform their religious obligations.

## The social construction of discourses of distress

### *Gender and loss of social belonging*

If social factors specify the experience of belonging—that is relationship to family, community, land and the ancestors—then we can expect that women, by virtue of their social location, will have a particular experience of the loss of social belonging. Loss is a central theme in the lives of refugees: loss of language, cultural values, economic roles, respect, social status, familiar environment, religion and self-identity (Eisenbruch, 1990, 1991; van der Veer, 1995). Eisenbruch (1990, 1991) developed the concept of *cultural bereavement* to analyse the response of Indo-Chinese refugees living in Australia and the United States to the catastrophic loss of social structure, cultural values, and self-identity.

This study suggests that the loss of social belonging identified by Mozambican women as one of the worst outcomes of the war is a feeling-state shared by other refugees. Feeling different to those around them, misunderstood and wanting, the alienation that comes from loss of continuity and relatedness to place is core to the sense of loss of social belonging (Fullilove, 1996). But research indicates that displacement affects men and women differently. Loss of economic roles presents a greater risk to women who are less mobile due to their caretaking roles. Men are free to seek work in unfamiliar environments (Ager, 1991; Buruku, 1989; Callaway, 1985; Ferris, 1991; McCallin, 1991; Wilson & Nunes, 1992). Women's caretaking roles are strained by having to raise children in unstable environments with few support structures. Without kinship support networks and institutionalised conflict-resolution mechanisms, women can become more vulnerable to the abusive practices of male partners (DeWolf, 1995; Ferris, 1991; McCallin, 1991). Perhaps due to some degree of the over-idealisation of home that accompanies displacement, Mozambican women who were neglected and abused by their partners pointed out that access to kinship support in the home country would have made it easier for them to get some protection. They lamented the absence of elder relatives, who they argued could support, protect them, and negotiate their relation to men.

I am not okay with my husband. Even when he works and gets some money he doesn't look after me and the children. He spends his money on drinking. If all these things were happening while I was in Mozambique I would have left him. I would have had my family to go to. (Sara)

Practices such as *lobola*, in which family elders negotiate marriage and bride price, reinforce the notion of women belonging to men and thus women's

subordination to male power. Most often *lobola* restricts women's ability to leave their marriages because the practice requires her family to pay back the bride price if she leaves her husband, something many families are either reluctant or unable to do. It is understandable that in the face of the void left by severance from community and kin, some survivors seek the security of social order. At the same time, the feelings expressed by these women illustrate how deeply gender discourse is embedded in their sense of social order and how women will acquiesce to practices which restrict their autonomy.

In our village the custom was that if they see that in one family there is a grown-up somebody then the other family will say, "we can see that this girl is okay then she can be married to this family." They propose to you—elderly people not the young boyfriend. Then *lobola* is paid. Here I am afraid, because you can find that a person is alone. He is alone, maybe he is a problem. In Mozambique we used to marry them but because they were innocent and from the same place. Our families knew them. They were farming. So it wasn't easy for them not to support us. Really I will not tell you lies, I am afraid here because I am thinking that I might get a man who doesn't behave. (Flora)

Almost all the women in the study identified the insecurity and burdens they experienced due to loss of access to the land and their traditional economic roles as one of the worst outcomes of dislocation. In large part, this is due to the real threat to material survival that they faced in the host country and the exploitation they confronted in the labour market. The extreme poverty experienced by the refugees in the villages to which they fled is poignantly described by a local aid worker.

Many of these refugees don't eat—two, three, four days they don't eat. On Wednesday, Maria's child came here. I said to her, "I have made a soup of beans", it was cold. I said to her, "can I give you some?" She said, "Oh! Granny it seems as if you can see that this is the third day I ate nothing, just look at my mouth how dry it is." Then she said, "do you want me to show you what I have in my hands?" She had come from the bin behind my kitchen to get what we had thrown in and had put that food in a plastic. You know, I was so upset.

However, the women who were interviewed communicated a loss of self-worth, which suggests more than a threat to material survival, when they described lack of access to land. Talking about their work on the land, they described the pride derived from being able to provide for one's children, the status gained from being able to maintain subsistence while men were engaged in migrant labour, and the position they enjoyed in their

communities. Their roles as subsistence farmers in rural Mozambique gave them a sense of self-worth, dignity, and shaped their identity.

For most rural Mozambicans, the land is symbolic of lineage and sustains kinship relations. But historical forces have given rural women in southern Mozambique a particular relation to the land. During colonial occupation, when a male migrant labour system was entrenched, women subsistence farmers played a pivotal role in the reproduction of subsistence economy. Women became the backbone of agricultural production, an area in which they developed and asserted their skills (Harris, 1959; Urdang, 1989; Arnfred, 1988).

In Mozambique we were ploughing. Many of the men were away in Joni and we were doing everything for ourselves. We were respected for the work we did. We had a place in the community. Now we are living as if we are lost. (Madalena)

The plunder of their land was an attack on women's personal and social identity. Hence loss of social belonging—that set of emotional responses denoted by an altered sense of identity shared by refugees across space—is given special significance by local conceptions of personhood and is greatly elaborated by the historically distinct relationship Mozambican women had to agricultural production, a relationship produced by the intersection of traditional gendered divisions of labour and colonial penetration. Loss of land is by no means a universal consequence of war for women in Africa. For example, the genocidal massacres in Rwanda in 1994 had the effect of increasing women's access to land (Turshen & Twagiramariya, 1998). Though expanded responsibility for subsistence production increased their burdens, it also opened up possibilities for greater autonomy.

*Changes in gender identities—a psycho-social outcome of war?*

Much has been written about the existential dilemmas and changes to the sense of self that are amongst the outcomes of organised violence (Janoff-Bulman (1989); Lifton, 1988; Turner, 1993; Wilson, 1989). But the subtle shifts in gender roles and identity that war can induce have not been adequately examined in the psychological literature, which is surprising given the effects these changes have on individual men and women, family structure, and social relations between men and women.

One aspect of the social disintegration wrought by recent and current conflicts in Africa is that, in their efforts for survival of self and of dependants, women take on roles previously reserved for men, particularly in the area of agriculture and informal trade. Large numbers of women on the outskirts of the city of

Maputo in Mozambique established a successful vegetable production system which for a long time served as the main supply to the city's markets (Chingono, 1994). The economic security many of these women achieved gave them relative autonomy from male authority in the domestic arena. In Uganda, for instance, the conditions of war necessitated a split in families with men hiding in different locations to women. Many women in that context became active in subsistence production and were able to ensure the survival of their children and aged dependants during the conflict. This capacity to survive resulted in an increase in their sense of strength and resilience, and altered their sense of what it meant to be a woman—autonomous and capable, rather than a vulnerable dependant (El-Bushra, 2000).

Where the demands of hostile conditions force women to survive, many make up successful family units with their children, units that men may find difficult to reenter. One Mozambican woman put it this way:

What makes us strong is that a woman dedicates herself, suffering or no suffering—I want to stay with my children. As a woman you can build your home with maybe one of your children. But a man cannot build a home on his own. For the moment it is okay for me to be without a man. (Martha)

Research in Uganda suggests that one effect of the loss of traditional roles for men is evidenced in increasing numbers of men in groups found socialising and drinking all day, further alienating women (El-Bushra, 2000). Women from Somaliland reflect on the effects of war on gender roles in the following way:

(N)owadays, women seem to be better at work than men. They are all on the move bustling to make ends meet. Men seem to have lost their bearings about their family concerns, lost confidence in their abilities to maintain their families (Bennet, Bexley, & Warnock, 1995)

Paradoxically, the male-dominated arena of war can pose threats to traditional notions of masculinity. The research data quoted above suggest that war can leave some groups of men with an eroded sense of manhood. Even where a militarised masculine identity dominates, if the economic foundations of societies have been destroyed, ordinary men and demobilised soldiers usually have limited access to productive resources and few skills to play a positive role in the reconstruction of their communities. Whether these men reassert their superiority or manhood in the private sphere of intimate relations, how they do this, and the implications these processes may have for increased levels of gender-specific violence, are all questions that need to be taken into account by those working with survivor populations (Kelly, 2000; Sideris, 2000).

*Sexuality, culture and power*

When examining the outcomes of sexual violence, the focus of attention is on women, who constitute the large majority of victims. Yet the women whose testimony is the focus of this paper provided a subtle analysis of the differential effects of acts of sexual violence on men and women. In their discussion of the sexual violence perpetrated against them, they did not categorise all men as perpetrators or benefactors of violence. Their narratives reveal a concern for the suffering of men who were drawn into the sexual torture of their own relatives and an understanding that individual men differed in their reactions to women who were raped.

Their testimony displays insight into how the experience of masculinity and femininity shapes the suffering that results from sexual violence. In their accounts, women suggest that it is the social construction of what it means to be a man or woman which placed the heaviest burden on women. It is worth quoting at length to illustrate how these women reflect on the lived experience of gender in their deliberation on men's responses to rape.

If you are a married somebody and your husband hears you have been raped, even if he doesn't chase you from the house, that feeling he is sleeping with a woman who has been raped, it is not nice. (Anna)

And also what would happen? Renamo would get you and the husband. They sleep with you in front of the husband or maybe they force him to be a mattress. Then you get pregnant in his presence. These men feel it badly. Some accept the child and some don't. Men are not all the same. Some do understand and some don't. (FGD)

For example, if you were married and happened to escape and come home with a child conceived in the Renamo camp, there was going to be a fight with your husband. This has even led to many families breaking up. When the war was still on, if you brought a child from the camp or you were pregnant, people in the community wouldn't allow you back. People would say, "Oh Mrs So-and-So has got a small Renamo." They said that child also will be a Renamo and it is the thing that has made them suffer. But the child is innocent. Even the mother also has got no bad things—she was forced. (FGD).

We are really suffering. A man can go and sleep out and come back in the morning. When he comes he'll expect you to say, "Oh! you are back baby." You make tea for him. You don't say anything. Even if you quarrel, you can't say to him, "you were out with a girlfriend." You can't say that because you will be

beaten like hell. It is his home—you have no rights. (FGD)

These testimonies point to the way in which gender discourses tend to lay the main responsibility for sexual integrity on women who in this sense are the *bearers of culture*. But it is the intersection of this discourse with locally specific beliefs about lineage that gives the threat of social rejection a special power. Giving birth to a child conceived by Renamo often led to rejection of rape victims by their families and communities. Nordstrom, in her research on the social destruction wrought by the war in Mozambique (Nordstrom, 1991, 1993), reports that in some communities, children conceived by rape are called *lixo*, which means rubbish. She quotes a woman who had returned to her community with a child born during her captivity, "No one wants me. My family, my husband—they call this child the war has given me *lixo*, garbage" (Nordstrom, 1991, p. 7).

The emotional, interpersonal, and social conflicts involved in accepting a child conceived in rape are understandable. But cultural values complicate these conflicts. In rural Mozambican societies, the norm is for children to trace their descent through the father, who has ultimate power over them and whose family must take ownership of them (Junod, 1927). Given the significance of children to ancestral descent and the importance of the father for tracing ancestry, the question arises, how can children whose fathers are unknown and worse yet, unacceptable, be integrated into the family and the lineage (Magesi, 1997)?

In the aftermath of the mass rape of women in Rwanda, strong ties to Catholicism (over 70% of the population) prevented women from seeking abortions and resulted in thousands of abandoned children—discarded on the roadside or in holes in the bush, starved to death. Nuns of the Roman Catholic church encouraged women to keep their babies, but the social pressure to reject children of militiamen, the personal revulsion of women toward these babies, and women's fears of rejection, led many to give birth secretly and abandon the babies. One suggested solution was to allow women to give birth secretly and then put the babies up for adoption. This, however, was rejected as "un-African" because knowledge of the descent of children is so important to African families (Hilsum, 1995).

Thus preoccupations with lineage and fears that the evil associated with the perpetrators would contaminate the children they fathered create conflicts for the integration of the children conceived by rape and of their mothers. Of course the pliability of culture and the force that social context has to corrupt norms must always be kept in mind. For example, many women who flee their home countries with their children and whose kinship ties are ruptured do not face the same kind of rejection. There is also evidence from many

Mozambican communities where children borne out of rape by rebel soldiers were accepted and efforts were made to restore their social place and functioning.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the threat of rejection contained in values combines with actual rejection to leave women fearing condemnation for the rape and the social chaos it can produce. Thus the trauma of rape is tied to both the violation of the body-self and the violation of the social body. Victims respond to the lived experience of rape as a discrete incident of violence and to the social fragmentation it creates. However, the fact that, in the context of war, rape is one of a number of possible traumas, and that it is so evidently linked to the overall process of social destruction, makes it difficult to distinguish a full set of reactions which are uniquely related to rape (Lunde & Ortmann, 1992). Post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and concerns with family and community breakdown, a core dimension of *spirit injury*, encompass emotional responses to rape.

There is, however, a unique relationship between social constructions of femininity and outcomes that are particular to sexual violence. The fear of rejection in rape survivors is explained by gender relations where practices such as *lobola* (bride price) cast women as property and accord men the power to disown “damaged goods”. It is interesting to note that the men who were forced to participate in the sexual violation of their relatives were not threatened by rejection. Even somatic afflictions directly attributed to sexual torture are informed by local beliefs about female sexuality and the symbolic value assigned to particular sites of women’s bodies.

#### *The body as a biological and cultural artifact*

Medical literature on sexual torture provides evidence of long-term fertility problems and, in some cases, permanent impairment of reproductive organs (Sharma, Lama, Ale, & Maharjan, 1995). Nevertheless, often somatic complaints in victims of rape are found to have no organic explanations. Disturbance of menstruation, non-specific pains in the lower abdomen and pelvis, and fears of having contracted a sexually transmitted disease are reported in research on survivors of sexual violation (Allodi & Stiasny, 1990; Groenenberg, 1993; Mollica & Son, 1989; van Willigen, 1984).

It has been argued that the biological body provides a record of trauma not only in physical scars but in the

embodiment of external violation through the senses. Degradation is *inscribed* on the body through the senses, which later recall the ill treatment (Sveaass & Axelsen, 1994, p. 15) In her analysis of rape trauma, Cathy Winkler, herself a survivor of rape, argues that the trauma must be understood *sensorially* (Winkler, 1994, p. 250). She describes the lived experience of the rape attack, the bodily experience of odours, saliva, pain, and how through the body’s memory, in other contexts, *visceral* reactions and reenactments of the horror occur.

Many taboos in indigenous Mozambican religious practice are related to the reproductive cycles of women’s bodies. For example, menstrual blood is considered hot (*pfisa*) and it is prohibited for a man to have sexual intercourse with a woman who is menstruating, because menstrual blood can make him ill. In addition, a large measure of the social value women have derives from their capacity to bear children. Taboos and the power that biological functions associated with sex and reproduction have to cause illness and misfortune attest to the importance of sexual symbols. The social value given to the capacity to bear and produce children by rural Mozambicans is shared by women who associate their self-worth with fertility. Men judge the value of their wives by their capacity to conceive and bear children and many women have been punished and rejected for not conceiving.<sup>5</sup>

The intricate interaction between the nature of the attack involved in rape, the view shared across many cultures that implies female sexuality is a commodity, and the locally specific significance and symbolic value attributed to female fertility and reproductive powers provide an explanation for the strong concern expressed about damage to reproductive organs. Evidence of women who were rejected confirms that such fears are rooted in real experiences of being devalued.

I am worried that people will speak and point at me and say, “that woman has been raped.” I am afraid that people might shout at me, talk bad about me, send me away. Meanwhile this thing didn’t happen because I wanted it to happen. I think people will think badly of me. (Julia)

Sometimes I might have my period on the 3rd, sometimes on the 20th. And I always go to the toilet like a pregnant somebody. I expect that maybe there might be infections. Even if I complain of pains in the womb, at the clinic they don’t give me proper treatment. It’s only last week a blood and urine test was taken. They didn’t say anything. They discharged me. I feel very worried. If that person has got

<sup>4</sup>The work of Mozambican psychologists from the organisation *Reconstruindo Esperanca*, shows that in some families and communities the value that children hold restrains norms which would reject children whose lineage is unknown. In others the mother’s family may take ownership of the child. And, in many, the demands posed by simply trying to exist take priority over cultural proscriptions.

<sup>5</sup>Workers at a rural rape crisis centre in Nkomazi, Masisukumeni Women’s Crisis Centre, report that the fear of being beaten by their husbands for not falling pregnant prevents many women from using contraceptives.

a disease he has already put a disease in you. Who is going to heal you? How are you going to be healed and be a normal woman again? He made me dirty. (Anna)

Csordas (1994) uses the term *embodiment* to convey how the world is experienced bodily. He argues that the notion of *embodiment* goes beyond the view that the body is both biologically and socially constructed to suggest the body as the experiential base of biology and culture. Thus, for the women quoted above, the physical sensation of still having dirt in them cannot be separated from the emotion of feeling spoiled—a common social construction of raped women—and is, in this sense, the *embodiment* of gendered dimensions of sexuality.

## Conclusion

The testimony of the Mozambican women presented above challenges researchers and clinicians working in the field of trauma studies to view psychological responses to massive social conflict as not only and simply constituted by intrapsychic and biological processes. Their views present a divergent conceptualisation of feeling-states that take place within and are framed by mutable social conditions. This is not a new argument. But even within the body of scholarship that critiques biomedical approaches to trauma, the force of gender in organising psycho-social consequences of extreme trauma is not always sufficiently emphasised.

The accounts of Mozambican women describe how psycho-social outcomes of the war have been framed by their experience of gender relations. Their narratives refer not only to the social roles of men and women but to how gender discourses permeate and are permeated by material forces and symbolic aspects of life. For example, the fear of rejection that individual women felt as a result of sexual violence is structured by the interpenetration of gender relations and local religious and cultural practices. Local social beliefs regarding ancestral descent intersect with patriarchal constructions of women as property to clarify the particular significance that pregnancy from rape held for Mozambican women.

There is evidence to show that women who were raped during the conflict in Bosnia–Herzegovina were also rejected by their families and communities (Arcel, 1994). The dominant explanation for this rejection lies in the belief that a woman whose sexual purity is spoiled brings dishonour to her family. Thus patriarchy, which charges women with responsibility for sexual purity and gives men the power to disown damaged women, unifies the experience of victims of sexual violation in different contexts. But locally specific religious and cultural

beliefs specify the rationale for rejection and give social rejection special meanings.

In this sense, a shared *form of suffering*, fear of rejection, but different cultural environments will create distinct priorities for recovery (Shweder, 1991, p. 315). For Mozambican women and other African women to whom individual well-being is in large part defined by having a social place, reconstituting links to community is critical to healing the injury done by rejection consequent to sexual violation. Recovery for raped Bosnian women who bear the burden of bringing their families to disrepute calls for different healing narratives.

A gender analysis of the relationship between organised violence and its psycho-social consequences requires us to move beyond a focus on broad social structures to one that comprehends how these structures impact on and are impacted on by local specificities. Obviously a gender analysis also requires us to understand how the relations of power between men and women enacted in local social worlds specify experiences of distress. This has implications for intervention strategies aimed at survivors.

A biomedical discourse which focuses on individual internal dynamics, cognitive processing, biological changes and neurochemical processes is not able to accommodate feeling-states which are constituted by social process. But neither is this discourse able to distinguish between forms of suffering for people in the same culture (Das, 1990). For example, social dislocation affects men and women differently by virtue of the variations in their access to material resources, social status, and power. Therefore, the emotional response and loss of social belonging/identity, will be felt differently by men and women and require distinct interventions. Hence, models of analysis which incorporate gender can help to deepen our understanding of the needs of survivors and open our field of vision to a multiplicity of restorative strategies.

There is another motivation for a gendered analysis of organised violence. If those working in the field of trauma consider questions of reparations, peace-building and social reform necessary spheres of intervention, then approaching the continuities of gender-specific violence should be a critical component of individual treatment and social reconstruction programmes.

Questions of how to encourage alternative, non-military notions of masculinity that do not incorporate the need for maintaining power and do not legitimise violence are important not only in the treatment of individual men but for the shape that gender relations take in reconstructed societies. An essential aspect of interventions for women survivors is to help them sustain the economic gains they may have made during war. And ensuring that war tribunals and truth commissions are not only gender-sensitive but actively

challenge the political and cultural values that perpetuate gender-specific human rights abuses is critical to individual recovery and collective and national healing.

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