

# **Gender and violent conflict<sup>1</sup>**

## **Proposal for an NWO research line**

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## Gender and violent conflict

The media daily report cases that show the interweaving of gender and conflict, ranging from child rape and murder, honour killings, family violence, sexual harassment of female soldiers, or gay bashing. Such violent incidences expose a structural gender inequality, even in peaceful circumstances in the Netherlands. A basic understanding of gender conflict in peacetime is needed to comprehend the workings of and consequences for gender in times of large-scale conflicts. Violent expressions of gender conflict are often exacerbated during armed strife and political conflicts: see the war rapes in Bosnia or Darfur, the sexual humiliation of male prisoners in Abu Ghraib, or the rise of prostitution among destitute populations. Moreover, the after-effects of a war may pose problems long after the peace treaty has been signed: how to deal with child soldiers who have to unlearn how to kill and rape, with mothers who have to raise children forced upon them, and with traumatized soldiers who vent their frustration on their wives or children. These cases reach the media, ask for attention and need a strategy of social action.

The meaning of gender in conflict has become a topic of academic and policy interest. Men and women have different roles in conflict and peace processes, are affected in different ways by conflict, and notions about manhood and womanhood as part of the ideological underpinnings of conflict are likely to change as a result of conflict. While the importance of gender is generally recognized, a lack of accurate data and refined insights that take into account gender differences between countries or regions, and between different classes, ethnic or age groups constrains the development of gendered policy. To enhance and refine present insights in gender and conflict, the Taskforce Women, Security and Conflict<sup>2</sup> has suggested to the Netherlands Research Council (NWO) to develop a research programme on gender and conflict. The programme has been drafted in interaction with representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence. It is linked to the NWO Strategic Theme *Conflict: Functions, Dynamics, and Cross-Level Influences*.

This programme aims to deal with the meaning of gender in violence and times of conflict. By gender we mean the social and cultural ways of being and seeing men and women. A first level of gender concerns the social positions of men and women, and the question why their numbers differ in specific social roles. In this particular context, we may wonder for instance why their numbers differ among combatants, terrorists, peace negotiators (mostly male dominated), or among civilian casualties, internal refugees, or sexual victims (mostly female dominated). What do these differences mean for the course and the content of conflicts? What does it mean for the persons involved? How can resulting inequalities be changed? A second level of gender concerns the normative ideas of masculinity and femininity, how these change over time and impact on positions. Men killing female relatives for maintaining sexual relations without the family's approval or peacekeeping soldiers abusing local women are guided by specific ideas on proper femininity. At the same time, their behaviour is guided by their ideas on what constitutes proper manhood, which may include in these cases: honour and prowess. This raises questions of how violent conflict is informed by ideas of masculinity and femininity, and how gender notions may encourage or alleviate the type, extent or duration of violence used. A third level of gender refers to the conceptions people maintain about

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<sup>2</sup> This was a joint Taskforce of the Dutch Ministries of Social Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Defence and International Affairs and Kingdom Relations operated from 2004-2006 with a mandate to promote the implementation of UN Resolution 1325.

themselves as a (proper) man or woman. One's identity is partly dependent on one's social role and conformation to the social norms of gender. When these are disturbed in conflictuous situations, as when women are raped or made to prostitutes or when men are feminized by being raped, or by not being able to protect their kin this can lead to severe psychological trauma.

The current programme is expected to lead to a better understanding of the continuity and discontinuity of gender-related violence during peace time, in times of open conflict and in post-conflict societies. As of yet, little research has been done on how changes in warfare relate to changing conceptualisations of gender (e.g. for the soldiers in World War I another type of masculinity was required than for those fighting in Iraq). Neither violent conflict, nor gender should be seen as a-historic variables when studying their mutual interaction. The process by which changing gender roles can affect the occurrence of violent conflict may take decades, and the changing roles and ideologies for men and women that are observed during conflict may or may not acquire permanency in the post-conflict situation. A well-known example is formed by the women who had run the productive sectors during World War II, only to be relegated back 'to the kitchen' after their husbands returned. While women's magazines during the war specialized in providing 15-minute recipes, they started to excel in the post-war years in recipes for meals requiring three hours of preparation. In a similar way, women's active participation in armed revolutionary movements does not automatically translate into a fuller participation in public life after the end of the conflict.

The programme focuses on violent conflict. Non-violent but nevertheless influential gender inequalities in the social, economic, and governance domains will be brought in contextually or to investigate their specific relation to the occurrence of violence. Changing gender relations can have a positive or negative effect on the use of violence, both in inter-personal relation as between groups, within or between societies. For example, the upsurge of nationalist or fundamentalist ideologies (Christian, Islamic, and Hindu alike), effecting restrictions on women, can partly be explained as a reaction against changing roles for women. Also, the changing globalized division of labour dispossessing men in many areas of their economic roles creates conditions that facilitate the recruitment of rebels or other supporters of violent conflict. But also more insight is needed into why more and more women themselves participate in fundamentalist terrorism or as soldiers in other conflicts. Also attention is needed for the genderedness of the symbolic dimension, as it appears in the rhetoric, the symbols, the rituals and the visual representation of conflict, and the effects this has for the conflict and the participants and victims involved. In-depth studies are particularly needed to gain insight in the ways gender patterns interact with and get shaped through a range of social categories and spheres, including ethnicity, socio-economic position. It is therefore important to situate and study violence and conflict in a broader context.

Contemporary wars are fought by a mixture of global, regional, national and local institutions and communities, with conflicting as well as conflating political and economic interests, with longer or shorter periods of intense violence, within and beyond the borders of states, and often without a clear and definite beginning and end. Countries like DR Congo, Uganda and Sudan are examples. When large-scale violence ends, its impact continues to be felt, and often different forms of violence continue to take place. War, or armed conflict, is thus not a clear-cut opposite to peace.

The occurrence of violence and conflict naturally spurs the desire to develop strategies and interventions, by inside and outside parties, to mitigate their effects or effect peace. To be able

to intervene in informed ways that are sensitive to gender and other factors, more in-depth studies are necessary to detail the ways in which gender intertwines with the dynamics of conflict. Some authors have already noted the multifaceted roles of women in those conflicts and, more fundamentally, the gendered nature of contemporary conflict solution as a whole. This starts at the level of framing of conflicts, in which gender ideology, the prescription of men and women's roles, is a significant element. One of the implications is that women culturally find more room for manoeuvre to engage in advocacy for peace and conflict prevention. Yet this does not translate in the inclusion of women in official and formal peace negotiations.

The programme provides room for interdisciplinary research projects on three themes. A first theme concerns gender, lives and livelihoods in violent conflicts. This theme opens up a venue to especially explore the ways in which gender and conflict intertwine. It focuses on the question how men and women's lives and livelihoods change in contexts of violence and violent conflict, and how this is influenced by formal and informal law and institutions. It brings out the challenge on how to build theory and derive policy lessons from the highly diverse and contextualised expressions of gender and conflict. A second theme focuses on violent conflict, trauma and gender. It focuses specifically on the use and effects of violence before, during and after conflict and raises questions about the ways societies can deal with these effects without falling back into violent conflict. The final theme, on gender and sexual violence in conflict-interventions, most explicitly deals with the interfaces between outsiders and insiders in conflict-related interventions. It concerns peacekeeping operations, as well as peacebuilding activities of states and civil society actors.

The programme will especially invite integrated research projects that combine different disciplines and can address different aspects within the identified themes. Representatives of the Ministries and implementing agencies have been involved in the development of the programme and utmost care will be taken to provide regular feedback to policy-makers and practitioners and maintain close interaction with different fields of implementation. Research projects submitted in response to this call are expected to generate intermediate results and work towards relevant and applicable outcomes. The Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs are explicitly interested in certain regional conflicts (Sudan, Afghanistan and the Great Lakes) and these will therefore be given special attention.

### **Research theme 1: Gender, Lives and Livelihoods in Violent Conflicts**

This research theme focuses on the intersection between gender and violent conflicts, by focusing on everyday realities of women and men. It aims to explore on the one hand how conflict is part of gender practices and relations and on the other how everyday notions and practices of gender inform large scale conflicts and result in different effects of war for women and men. It asks how everyday gender violence is carried over into, or in turn is influenced by wars, and what this means for people's livelihood and personal lives.

Gender is one of the central categories of giving meaning to our everyday lived realities. We see it operating on, and impacting upon, several different levels of social organization. This research theme aims to unravel the different and mutual ways in which people define themselves in relation to violence and conflict; the ways in which conflicts or other contexts

of violence change the lives and livelihood chances and strategies of men and women; and how this is affected by and impacts on gender ideologies and practices.

Gender first acts at the level of institutions and organizations that structure the social positions of men and women, as well as the ways by which these positions are acquired. Here we seek to explore the material resources on which women's and men's social positions and roles are based, as well as their institutional organization and protection, including the role of national and international law. We still need more gender-differentiated statistics to provide forceful evidence for the continued gendering of institutions and organizations. In the family, in the labour market, in politics or before the law, women and men face different institutional support or obstacles for their choices; their contributions and capacities are valued differently; their actions are given different meanings. In this particular context, we may ask about different positions of young and adult women and men in different military formations (from the state armies to the para-militaries), among combatants, terrorists, official and unofficial peace negotiators, among civilian casualties, (internal) refugees, or victims of sexual violence. We may also ask about changes in the positions and responsibilities of women and men of different age in the family, household, the job market, and local community, and the way these changes affect and are affected by collective and individual violence, during the war and in its aftermath. What do these gendered engagements and their differential institutionalization mean for the course and the content of large scale violent conflicts, and issues of post-war justice? What do they mean for the persons and groups involved? And how can resulting inequalities be changed? What is the (possible) role of Human Rights treaties such as the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women?

Secondly, gender acts at the level of ideology and doctrine. Ideologies justify gendered institutional arrangements and create normative frameworks within which these will be interpreted. They define dominant notions of masculinity and femininity, prescribe attitudes and influence aspirations; evaluate individual and collective achievements, and justify punishments for those who do not comply. In this respect we may ask: if dominant notions and practices, as well as personal aspirations and identities link manhood to protection of and provision for women and family, what happens when social conditions do not provide circumstances for these expectations to be met? In other words, what happens with women, men and youth when economic and social developments do not provide, or stifle and thwart, possibilities for achieving individual and group aspirations of manhood and womanhood, and how are dominant gendered prescriptions, aspirations and expectations of manhood and womanhood affected by these dynamics? What alternatives are there or can be created? How can we learn from cultural forms of conflict reduction or solution in peacetime to develop strategies during and after war?

Special attention is needed for gendered symbols and metaphors that come about in specific histories and cultures. Such symbols help individuals and groups to give meaning to their changing everyday realities and to cope with and interpret conflict and peace-time violence. States, political groupings and media all use gendered symbols as elements when conflict builds up and during the course of conflict, ranging from 'mourning mother', 'unknown fallen soldier', 'liberty', 'enemy', 'motherland', 'fatherland', 'rape victim' and 'whore'. In times of peace, sexual and domestic violence are linked to the symbols of sexual modesty and morality and symbols of female obedience and male domination (such as 'proper dress', 'provocative behaviour', 'speaking back'). How do these symbols function in relating gender to conflict? Which symbols gain dominance and why? How are they gendered and in which ways do they affect people's lives? An interesting question is how these images penetrate

everyday realities and alter the relations between men and women, as well as the range of options people, including widows, returning combatants, and youth have to make their livelihoods, gain access to resources, adapt to new circumstances, and find political representation. It is these gendered assumptions and practices, operating on different levels, and affecting lived realities of women and men that this program is set to explore, starting from everyday life of women and men of different age, in different localities, facing different forms of violence.

Third, gender acts at the level of subjective identities. Women and men acquire conceptions of themselves in their daily lives, through negotiating, resisting or aspiring to specific ideals of manhood and womanhood ascribed by dominant gender norms, or through struggling to create and assert alternative ones. Experience of different forms of violence – be it on individual or collective level, be it in peace time or during war, perpetrated or endured – affects the gendered sense of self. These conceptions of self strongly affect the ways in which people shape their lives and livelihoods: ranging from the ways they cope with the economic adversities of living under conflict to the roles they see for themselves engaging in the conflict or alternatively in pursuing the end of conflict and violence. Although in general terms these relations are understood, questions remains as to how the effect of gendered identities intersects with other social relations of power (such as age and sexuality) or collective identities (such as ethnicity and religion) in specific situations? Are there differences in these dynamics in the times of peace, during the large scale violence and in the process of conflict transformation? Some of the questions to be addressed here are:

- How do gender, violence and conflict intertwine and affect the everyday lives and livelihoods of men and women living in conflict or violent conditions?
- How do changing, disappearing, or new institutions and regulations affect the social conditions of men and women in conflict?
- How do men's and women's social conditions change in conflict, and what does that imply for their chances of making a livelihood and participating in society?
- How do gender symbols created in the preparation, course of aftermath of conflict affect people in their everyday life?
- What happens with women, men and youth when economic and social developments do not provide, or stifle and thwart, possibilities for achieving aspirations of manhood and womanhood, and how are dominant gendered prescriptions, aspiration and expectations of manhood and womanhood affected by these dynamics?

## **Research theme 2**

### **'Violent conflict, trauma and gender'**

This research theme concerns war-affected communities in and after conflict. It focuses on gender-bound characteristics of psychological trauma caused by gender violence during war, and on the individual and societal consequences of violence.

Systematic gender violence is often used as a weapon of war. From conflicts in the Balkans to Peru to Rwanda, Congo and Sudan, girls and women as well as boys and men have been singled out for rape, imprisonment, torture and execution. Rape has been documented in many armed conflicts; these include, next to the ones mentioned, those in Afghanistan, Iraq, Cambodia, Haiti, Liberia, Somalia and Uganda. In addition, girls and women are also subject

to forced prostitution, sex slavery and trafficking during times of war, sometimes with the complicity of governments and military authorities.

On the individual level, sexual violence often results in psychological trauma. Experiencing violation of one's personal integrity, mostly combined with life threat, may cause unbearable feelings of anxiety and powerlessness, and result in severe and prolonged mental disbalance. The overall psychological consequences of sexual violence in war, however, are far more than the sum of individual psychological traumas.

Systematic sexual violation of women erodes the fabric of a community. Rape's damage can be devastating because of the strong communal reaction to the violation and pain stamped on entire families. Rape of individual women is at the same time an attack on their families and cultures, as in many societies women are viewed as repositories of a community's cultural and spiritual values. Also, rape can harm a community's reproductive capacity through affecting women's sexual life. Purposely transmitting HIV infections guarantees long-suffering, not only for the victim but also for her partner or children. Forced impregnation of women by the enemy's soldiers may cause social exclusion of those women and/or their children and serve to influence a community's ethnic composition.

Rape, humiliation and coercion to carry out repugnant acts are systematically inflicted during armed conflicts to males as well. Also, males may experience extreme powerlessness when impeded in their roles as protectors, or when having to witness their wives or children being harmed or killed. Consequently, masculine roles can be undermined through male victims' self reproach, social withdrawal, loss of respect and loss of sexual desire. Culture or religion-bound sexual norms and taboos may determine the traumatizing effects of such experiences. An example of this is formed by the Iraqi soldier who became severely depressed, broke his betrothal and isolated himself socially after 'only' having been undressed and genitally fondled by western female guards during imprisonment in the Abu Ghraib jail.

Finally, communities may be confronted with the fact that both sexes either have both suffered sexual violence or have performed different roles as perpetrators. Women, whether or not having to cope with a traumatic past of their own, may in post-conflict phases have to deal with a husband returning from war (or jail, like in Rwanda) after a long absence.

While research has recognized a certain universality of the individual mental health consequences of traumatic experiences, this is not so for gender differences over different cultures in the case of trauma by sexual violence, or for the social consequences of violence. Within the framework of this research theme, trauma through gender violence is defined as a combined individual and social phenomenon, manifesting itself through individual psychopathology as well as through the experience of demoralization, confusion about collective identities and loss of meaning and social cohesion within a community.

The traumatizing potential of violence depends amongst others on counter forces that originate from ideological beliefs, safety and security, recognition, respect and social connectedness. The extent to which violence is capable of undermining existential certainties, is influenced by the degree to which the victims' prevailing worlds of ideas and meanings are disrupted. An equally important factor is the way the surrounding community's reactions are supportive or counter-productive to the victims' effort to process their experiences. Social position and support have a determining role here. Existential meaning, social role and

connectedness are factors essential to the experience of dignity, identity and trust, the very elements of mental and social equilibrium that are at stake in case of trauma.

If a community doesn't succeed in recovering from mass traumatization through violence, it may remain fragmented and hyper reactive to social stressors. Mental disorder may result in social dysfunctioning; powerlessness experienced may result in family violence, commonly felt rage in repeated collective violence. Gender violence experienced, analogous to how it is rooted in daily life gender inequality, in its turn may impact the experience of gender and gender roles in its aftermath.

The outcome of the processing of traumatic gender violence seems to depend not only on the help, recognition, respect, security and social support that individual survivors seek and meet, but also on a community's ability to re-find or re-define its social structure. In the latter domain, gender-bound capacities, roles, tasks and relations are most relevant. One of the interesting aspects is how women and women's movements can transform their victimhood towards pro-actively addressing gender inequality in their society, as has been witnessed in many countries in Latin America and parts of Asia.

The main research question concerns the effects that trauma by systematic gender violence during war has on individuals and communities. Relevant study areas concern gender and culture/population differences in:

- the trauma criterion: which experiences are traumatizing, how strongly; what causes individual differences; what is the role of culture, religion, political ideology, nation, ethnicity
- individual emotional and functional manifestations: mental health, physical, social functioning
- coping mechanisms: 'acting in' versus 'acting out', focus on emotional versus practical support
- family, group and communal reactions: shame, exclusion, change of roles, violence; the influence of culture, religion, profession, political ideology, nation, ethnicity
- societal consequences: shame, collective identity confusion, hostility, violence
- (access to) resources for support: marital, familial, gender group
- possible community-based interventions, and the role of women's organisations and social movements.

### **Research theme 3**

#### **Gender-sensitivity and sexual violence before, during and in the aftermath of peacebuilding and peacekeeping operations**

Violent conflicts often spur the need in outside parties or the wider international community out of human rights concerns, to restrict the chances of spill-over effects or to safeguard international interests. Apart from a range of interventions in the fields of diplomacy, humanitarian and development aid, different kinds of military interventions are often part of international responses to conflict. This research theme is focused on the gender dimensions of third party interventions: peacekeeping as well as other state and non-state peacebuilding. It focuses on the conflict-affected populations, peacebuilding actors and peacekeeping forces.

In order to develop strategies how to prevent, mitigate, and resolve conflicts and their effects, we need to have insight in the mechanisms of conflict control in everyday life. We need to know which local groups, local practices and cultural key-values have proven to be effective in conflict control and whether and how these can be restored as soon as possible after conflict.

Peacekeeping forces must be able to address real security needs of people in situations of severe insecurity. People who live in conflict-afflicted areas are considered the best source of intelligence on the topic of their own needs and peacekeepers must engage in a continuous process of communication, consultation, dialogue and partnership with these problem-owners. Experience has shown that women's groups are especially important to discover as accurately as possible what people want and need, and the interaction between different actors and forms of peacekeeping and peacebuilding deserves attention.

In order to increase peacekeepers' awareness of gender dimensions, insight is needed into the everyday military attitudes towards socially constructed differences between men and women. Amongst others, this involves research into the gender identity effects of the education and socialisation of male and female military students training to become NCO's or officers. It can be expected that peacekeepers maintain differentiated and often conflicting images about womanhood and manhood for different men and women and little is yet known about the ways they deal with these dynamics. Similar tensions may exist between gender norms of intervening civil society actors and locally differentiated gender prescriptions. A delicate balance needs to be found between enhancing change (hence supporting conflict as an inevitable aspect of social change) and mitigating violent conflict. This is especially the case where gender politics become part of political interventions and peacekeeping, such as in Afghanistan.

An interest into military gender attitudes incorporates the fundamental question of what constitutes sexual violence. Sexual violence is not a phenomenon constricted to wartime. Attention should be paid to the ways in which the military conceptualize domestic –or family- violence and sexual violence in wartime. The relation between the conduct of military personnel with regard to sexual violence in wartime and their attitudes with regard to sexuality in their every day life is one of the interesting subjects to be explored.

Peacekeeping and peacebuilding must be based on locally defined agendas for peace. One of the questions is how local people can be the drivers of their own peace-process and how they can protect themselves against abuse of intervening parties. It should be studied in what ways local population (i.e. women's groups) can be involved in the administration of justice in cases where peacekeepers have misbehaved. Study of local women's groups active in the quest for openness, peace and justice is also relevant to gain insight in gendered roles and strategies in peace-keeping and peacebuilding. What can we learn for instance from the organisation and activities of groups like the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, Women in Black, or reconciliation committees, for the development of active women's contribution to peace elsewhere?

Special attention needs to be given to trafficking and sexual exploitations that are often prevalent in conflict and post-conflict areas. Experience in the Balkans, for instance, has shown that peacekeeping operations can have the unintended consequence of providing a demand for trafficked women for forced prostitution. Besides the moral and legal dilemmas

involved, by not being able to recognise the effects of human trafficking, peacekeepers find themselves on perilous grounds that will endanger their mission.

Questions to be addressed under this theme comprise:

- How can women's informal and formal conflict reducing capabilities in peacetime be put to use during and after wars? Is indeed inclination towards peace gendered, and if so, to what extent?
- In what ways can the gender-sensitivity of peacekeepers and peacebuilders be measured?
- How can gender sensitivity change and institutionalise?
- How does the interaction between peacekeeping forces, broader peacebuilding activities and the local population impact on the perceptions and attitudes towards gender?
- What can be the role of the local population in sanctioning breaching of standards by peacekeeping forces?
- What are the dynamics of human trafficking and what is the relation with peacekeeping operations?