

Helpdesk Research Report

Links between gender-based violence and outbreaks of violent conflict

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Question

What evidence exists for links between gender-based violence and outbreaks of violent conflict?¹

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1. Overview

Gender-based violence (GBV) is violence targeted at individuals or groups on the basis of their gender (both women and men). Although definitions vary, GBV is often divided into two interlinked categories: interpersonal, and structural/institutional violence. Interpersonal violence refers to an act of economic, sexual, psychological, physical or other violence perpetrated by an individual against another individual. Structural/institutional violence refers to 'any form of structural inequality or institutional discrimination that maintains a [person] in a subordinate position, whether physical or ideological, to other people within

¹ See related query: Herbert, S. (2014). *Links between women's empowerment (or lack of) and outbreaks of violent conflict*. GSDRC Helpdesk report 1170. Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham. <http://www.gsdrc.org/go/display&type=Helpdesk&id=1170>

her family, household or community’ (Manjoo, 2011).² Inequalities and (intersecting forms of) discrimination cause GBV (ibid, 2011). GBV is prevalent in all contexts and countries of the world.

Literature base

Different links between GBV and conflict are discussed in the literature, with varying levels of evidence, including: (1) whether structural/institutional GBV (e.g. gender inequalities, norms and identities) leads to, or is an indicator of, outbreaks of conflict; (2) whether interpersonal GBV (e.g. household violence, rape) leads to, or is an indicator of, outbreaks of conflict; or (3) whether outbreaks of conflict lead to increased GBV. There is a small body of literature on point (1) that generally suggests correlation, rather than causation. This literature tends to focus on political, economic and social measures of gender inequality. There a paucity of literature on point (2) with little focus on interpersonal GBV as an indicator of potential conflict. Again, the literature that is available suggests correlation rather than causation. There is a great deal of evidence on link (3), and consensus that outbreaks of conflict lead to increased GBV. This query focusses on the first two points, and briefly summarises the key issues of point 3.

The majority of this literature has been produced by the same small group of academics over the past 15 years. The literature includes quantitative, qualitative and theoretical analysis.

Data difficulties are highlighted as a key limitation. The links between GBV and conflict are complex to separate out from other factors, as GBV causes and consequences are influenced by many factors and rooted in context. This complicates the analysis of standard indicators across contexts. It also makes it difficult to ‘determine the nature of this relationship, and therefore to establish whether levels of gender-based violence can serve as a useful indicator of the risk of other types of conflict’ (Saferworld, 2014). E.g. different GBV forms will likely have different relationships with conflict (intimate partner violence may be less likely to indicate a potential for armed conflict than GBV committed by members of one social group against another) (ibid).

Some argue that there is limited data on GBV (especially prior to conflict and over long-term periods). In areas such as sexual violence, while there are some robust and simple *indicators*, a problem is that people do not want to report incidents. Saferworld (2014) argue for ‘significant improvements’ in data gathering on prevalence of GBV.

Key findings

- GBV is prevalent in all contexts and countries of the world.
- A number of studies quantitatively find a strong correlation between levels of *structural/institutional* GBV (manifested as gender inequality) and conflict (e.g. Caprioli, 2005, etc). They find that gender inequality increases the likelihood that a state will have internal conflict. Countries with low human rights standards (including on gender inequality) are more likely to have militarised and violent interstate disputes (during the period 1980 to 2001). However, the nature of the relationship is not clear.
- There are a few studies that quantitatively find a relationship between *interpersonal* GBV (the physical security of women) and the relative peacefulness of states. Emerging research has found that countries with high levels of national violence against women and girls (e.g. domestic

² See the GSDRC Topic Guide on Gender - <http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/gender.pdf> and the forthcoming GSDRC topic Guide on Gender and Conflict.

violence, female infanticide and sex-selective abortion) have been more likely to experience armed conflict than those which do not (Hudson, et al., 2009, in Saferworld, 2013). This study argues that the physical security of women is one of the most important factors for predicting the peacefulness of societies. However, it also recognises it as complex, not fully understood, and likely to be correlation as a causal relationship cannot be proven.

- Some argue that GBV is a form of violent conflict in itself, and is not necessarily an indicator of future conflict.
- There is substantial evidence that traditional patriarchal gender identities lead to militaristic and violent conflict approaches. Traditional gender identities frame men as protectors and fighters, and women as vulnerable and needing protecting. Women also can be viewed as 'war bounty' or as a target to attack (or preserve) traditional culture. During periods of conflict these identities can be accentuated and politicised.
- Indicators on gender norms which drive conflict (e.g. violent ideas of masculinity) might be more useful for early warning.
- Throughout history, and during conflicts in different parts of the world, there have been incidences where GBV has exacerbated conflict and led to revenge attacks.
- Levels of GBV are higher during and after armed conflict. Sexual violence can be part of strategies during in violent conflicts. GBV often does not subside post-conflict. It affects both men and women in different ways.
- Sexual and gender-based violence remains the most widespread and serious protection problems facing displaced and returnee women and girls.

2. Structural/institutional GBV and outbreaks of conflict

Theoretical arguments linking gender inequality and conflict

Caprioli and Trumbore (2006) analyse theoretical arguments linking gender inequality and conflict, from a feminist international relations perspective, building on Galtung's concept of structural violence. Key premises are that states replicate national politics patterns at the international level, and apply the same norms in both contexts. They find a large body of literature confirming that norms of violence are 'inherent to hierarchical social structures', and they highlight the 'interconnection between violence at the domestic [national] level, both physical (repression) and structural (ethnic and gender discrimination), and violence at the international level' (ibid).

Are more gender unequal states likely to be involved in violent conflicts?

Caprioli and Trumbore (2006) create an index of human rights 'rogue states' (ranking countries according to data on systematic gender and ethnicity discrimination and general state repressiveness) and test it quantitatively to see if these countries are more likely to become involved in militarised and violent interstate conflicts. The indicator used for gender inequality is percentage of women in the legislature. Their research finds:

- 'Human rights rogues' are more likely to become involved in militarised interstate disputes in general, and violent interstate disputes specifically, than other states during the period 1980–2001;
- Social norms and values have a powerful impact on the likelihood of states becoming embroiled in interstate disputes. While there is only limited evidence that democracies are more peaceful in general, they find strong evidence that human rights rogues are more violent in general;
- The Rogue State Index includes about one-third of all states for any given year, and finds these collectively account for 60 per cent of all violent conflicts during that period.

Sobek, Abouharb and Ingram (2006) also quantitatively test this on pairs of all states from 1980 to 2001, and confirm that joint respect for human rights decreases the probability of conflict.

In a 2005 paper, Caprioli examines quantitatively whether states with higher levels of gender inequality are more likely to experience intrastate conflict. Similar to a Caprioli and Trumbore (2003) paper, Caprioli (2005) uses the two indicators of percentage of women in the paid labour force and fertility level, arguing they effectively capture the complexities of gender discrimination and inequality (along political, economic, and social discrimination dimensions). Findings include:

- Gender inequality increases the likelihood that a state will have internal conflict.
- The higher the level of gender inequality a state has, the greater the likelihood of internal conflict (over the research period of 1960–2001).
- States characterised by gender inequality, hierarchy, discrimination, and violence, have norms of violence that make internal conflict more likely.

This research builds on earlier quantitative work by Caprioli and Trumbore (2003) looking at whether human rights rogue states are more likely to be the aggressors during international disputes. In this paper, indicators include: the percentage of women in the paid labour force and fertility level. They found:

- The higher the level of national gender and ethnic discrimination and state repression, the greater the likelihood that a state will use force first in interstate disputes;
- Just as benign norms of equality and peaceful national dispute resolution transfer to the international arena, malignant norms of discrimination and repression transfer to the international arena as well.

In a 2001 paper, Caprioli and Boyer quantitatively analyse gender inequality and conflict, using the following indicators: percentage of women in the legislature and duration of a women's suffrage (i.e. the number of years women have been able to vote for). They find: the severity of violence used in a crisis decreases as national gender equality increases. Meanwhile, higher levels of women's representation in parliament, and parity in education, may have a pacifying effect on state-behaviour, reducing the likelihood of inter-state war (Caprioli, 2000).

Are more gender equal states associated with lower levels of intrastate conflict?

Melander (2005) builds on Caprioli's 2003 study and explores the extent to which gender equality is associated with lower levels of intrastate armed conflict. It uses the indicators: whether the highest leader of a state is a woman; percentage of women in parliament; and female-to-male higher education attainment ratio. It concludes that gender equality is associated with lower levels of armed conflict within a country.

Implications and nature of the relationship

The above studies argue that addressing gender inequality could contribute to more stable societies. Another implication is that various aspects of gender (in)equality and gender relations in a country could serve as an early warning of the risk of violent conflict. For example, reduction in women's status, increased discrimination against women and violations of women's human rights and attacks on women may be direct precursors of further repression and violent conflict (Schmeidl and Piza-Lopez, 2002).

While these studies quantitatively find correlations between levels of gender inequality and conflict, the nature of the relationship is not clear. As a Saferworld and Conciliation Resources (2014) policy paper notes – it is not known whether conflict leads to greater gender inequality, whether gender inequality leads to conflict, whether gender inequality is a proxy for something else that might cause conflict, or whether countries that are prone to one type of violence, are also prone to others. Furthermore, recent studies have reconsidered the evidence on gender inequality and GBV, noting that GBV occurs across countries including in those with high levels of gender equality (e.g. Wiklund, et al. 2010, in UN, 2011).

GBV is conflict

As Saferworld (2014) underlines, 'GBV is a form of violent conflict in itself'. Rather than being seen as an indicator of future conflict, it argues that GBV should be seen as an indicator that conflict is already happening. This echoes other literature that calls for a more human-security centred understanding, rather than a state-security centred understanding (e.g. Caprioli & Trumbore, 2006).

Gender identities

Traditional gender identities can be drivers of conflict as men are framed as protectors and fighters, while women are vulnerable and need protecting (El-Bushra & Sahl, 2005). E.g. violent cattle raids in South Sudan are a tradition and rite of passage for men when cattle are exchanged for girls and women – however the raids also perpetuate conflict between communities, and exacerbate violent abductions and revenge attacks (Saferworld & Conciliation Resources, 2014).

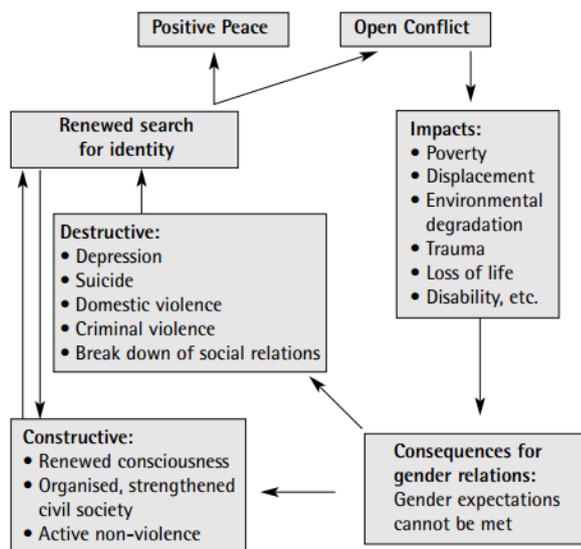
Moreover, during periods of conflict these identities can be accentuated and politicised. Goldstein (2001, in Schmeidl and Piza-Lopez, 2002) notes that war has influenced gender identities and norms profoundly through history. Qualitative research among women's anti-war organisations worldwide argues war deepens already deep sexual divisions and 'in particular, it legitimates male sexual violence, enabling mass rape of women' (Cockburn, 2010).

States may draw on masculine identities of protection and physical strength, to ensure male soldiers are recruited to fight. If men do not demonstrate these traits of bravery, strength and domination, they can be outcasts in society (Schmeidl & Piza-Lopez, 2002). Meanwhile, cultures that limit women's access to

resources, and characterise women as inferior to men, foster attitudes of women as property, with norms of household violence, and state repression and violent conflict in the public domain (ibid).

A book summarising a research project in Sudan, Uganda, Angola, Mali, and Somalia (from 2000 to 2001) suggests constructions of gender identity contributed to motivations leading to war, and perpetuated violence that had already started (see Figure 1) (El-Bushra & Sahl, 2005). Anderlini (2006 in Saferworld, 2014) finds that violent hyper masculinity can be indicative of tensions leading to conflict. E.g. women’s increasing power, following conflict and changing gender roles, led to an increase in household violence in Sudan and Uganda (El-Bushra & Sahl, 2005).

Figure 1: Gender impact flowchart: How gender identity can contribute to cycles of violence



Source: El-Bushra & Sahl, 2005, p.118

Gender-sensitive conflict analysis and early warning systems can potentially improve understanding of the relationships between gender and conflict dynamics, and reveal hidden conflict drivers and triggers (e.g. violent masculinity identities) (Anderlini, 2006 in Saferworld, 2014).

Patriarchal gender relations and norms

Qualitative, cross-country research indicates patriarchal gender relations are partly responsible for causing and perpetuating conflict at all levels of society (Cockburn, 2010). In a literature review Saferworld (2014) suggests that indicators on gender norms which drive conflict (e.g. violent ideas of masculinity) might be more useful for early warning. However, they caution that more research is needed to understand how to measure norms and their relationships to armed conflict (ibid).

Based on empirical research among women’s anti-war organisations worldwide, and drawing on feminist literature, Cockburn (2010) finds patriarchal gender relations intersect with economic and ethno-national power relations in perpetuating a tendency towards armed conflict in societies.

3. Interpersonal GBV and outbreaks of conflict

In a book based on ten years of empirical research Hudson et al, (2012 in Hudson & Emmett, 2012) argue it is not possible to establish a causal relationship due to concerns over data, theory and philosophy.³ However, correlation is evident, with the following findings:

- The higher the level of violence against women, the more likely a nation-state is to be non-compliant with international norms;
- The higher the level of violence against women, the worse a nation-state's relations with its neighbouring countries;
- The larger the gender gap, the more likely to be involved in inter- and intra-state conflict, and to use violence first in a conflict;
- The higher the level of violence against women, the less peacefully the nation-state will behave in the international system;
- They also note adverse effects on state security from of: abnormal sex ratios (favouring males), polygamy, and inequitable family law, among other gendered aggressions.

In their 2009 paper, similar to the 2012 book, Hudson, Caprioli, Ballif- Spanvill, McDermott and Emmett quantitatively analyse the 'physical security of women' across countries. They compile their own Physical Security of Women Index (PSOW) by examining the prevalence of domestic violence, rape, marital rape, and murder of women in the nation, plus another variant index that includes the degree to which son preference is present within society. Preliminary results find: a strong and statistically significant relationship between the physical security of women and the relative peacefulness of states. They also found that countries with high levels of violence against women and girls (including, for example, household violence, female infanticide and sex-selective abortion) are more likely to experience armed conflict than those which do not (Hudson, et al., 2009, in Saferworld, 2013).

In a journal article focussing on gender equality and state militarism, Caprioli (2000) draws on other sources to note that 'societies with high levels of family violence are more likely to rely on violent conflict resolution and are more likely to be involved in wars compared to societies with lower levels of family violence' (citing research by Brumfield, 1994; Erchak & Rosenfeld, 1994; Levinson, 1989).⁴

Exacerbating conflict and revenge attacks

Throughout history, and during conflicts in different parts of the world, many conflicts have framed women as bounty for winning a war. The UN resolution 1888 affirms that when sexual violence is used as a deliberate war tactic or as part of systematic attacks, it can 'significantly exacerbate situations of armed conflict and may impede the restoration of international peace and security' (UN, 2009).

³ See page 36 for Hudson, et al. (2009) analysis of this - <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/isec.2009.33.3.7>

⁴ All except the first citation are not accessible online and therefore this query is unable to review them.

In Somalia rape and sexual abuse of a rival clan's women can trigger inter-clan conflict and 'during the current conflict it became an act of revenge, with rival militias trying to outdo each other whenever one of them gained control of a region' (El-Bushra & Sahl, 2005, p.47-8).

At the same time, women have also turned to conflict as revenge for GBV. In a case study in northern Uganda (El-Bushra & Sahl, 2005, p.28) women joined (state and rebel) armed forces because of a 'desire for revenge at the abuses they have suffered by the other side', among other factors.

4. Conflict and GBV⁵

There is much evidence that conflict leads to increased levels of GBV. Sexual violence is often part of the strategy in violent conflicts, as acknowledged by the UNSCR 1325 (Saferworld, 2014). Data also shows that GBV does not subside post-conflict, and certain types of GBV may increase (Ward & Marsh, 2006).

GBV during conflict affects both men and women in different ways. As men comprise the majority of combatants, they suffer to a greater degree from direct violence, injuries and killings from combat. Women, however, suffer disproportionately through: systematic sexual violence; greater levels of displacement and presence in refugee camps where mortality rates tend to be higher; and social and economic vulnerability, due largely to loss of access to sources of livelihoods and to basic services.

During conflict, men may lose their traditional roles as providers, which can result in a crisis of identity and threat of emasculation. Male combatants may also be socialised with militaristic visions of masculinity. This, in turn, can result in increase in household violence and broader gender-based violence.

During times of emergencies, weakening community structures, disruptions in law and order, economic hardship, migration and over-crowded living conditions in refugee/displacement camps are all factors that increase the risk of sexual and gender-based violence. E.g. the International Rescue Committee found that sexual violence against women was the main reason that Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan (women and men) fled Syria (in Gender and Development Network, 2013).

Sexual and gender-based violence remains the most widespread and serious protection problem facing displaced and returnee women and girls. Increasingly lengthy stays in refugee/displacement camps, which are often located in insecure areas and may be subject to cross-border attacks, lack of privacy and livelihood opportunities, and declining international attention and resources, lead to various protection risks for women and girls.

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⁵ This section draws on the GSDRC Topic Guide on Gender - <http://www.gsdr.org/docs/open/gender.pdf>

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