



Book Review

Gender, Violent Conflict And Development: Dubravka Zarkov (Ed.)

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Reviewer Profile

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This edited volume is the outcome of an interdisciplinary dialogue between scholars, practitioners and policymakers working on issues that lie at the intersection of gender, violent conflict and development. The dialogue was hosted by the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Clingendael, The Hague, in 2003. The ideas and perspectives shared at this dialogue served as the kernel for the studies included in this book.

The authors offer a rich mix of theoretical inputs and “from-the-field” perspectives on the ways in which gender influences development practice and violent conflict. They question conventionally held beliefs about the “causes of conflict”, calling for a deeper analysis of the role of militarism and hegemonic masculinities and femininities in processes of armed conflict.

Militarism and Neo-liberalism: Re-examining the Causes of Armed Conflict

The book opens with the proposition that the growing culture of militarism is linked closely to the widespread use (and often imposition) of gendered neo-liberal economic policies in regions coded as “post-conflict”. As the Editor of this volume, Dubravka Zarkov, notes in the *Introduction*, “Violent conflicts and wars are not just a by-product of today’s global capitalism, but its intrinsic element”. In many “post-conflict” regions, neo-liberal policies manifest themselves as Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which hit social sectors such as health care and education. These Programs rest on gendered concepts of what constitutes work and production wherein women’s unpaid work is considered irrelevant. This means that while women do 60 percent of the world’s work, they get only 10 percent of the world’s income, and own one percent of the world’s property. Ruth Jacobson, in the study on the “complex political emergency” in Mozambique in the 1980s, shares that the SAPs imposed on the country (by the World Bank) led to an increase in the “feminization of poverty”. The introduction of user charges, in health and education, meant that such services were no longer accessible for a large section of the female population.

The book’s focus on the role of global economic processes in the sustenance of violence (at different levels) is a valuable addition to the literature on armed conflict. Particular emphasis is placed on the economic interests of MNCs and

Western governments. For example, Zarkov notes that the top 10 MNCs account for 76 percent of global production, making them the drivers of trade and investment. What this also means is that these corporations (and Western governments) now play a key role in the economic and political processes of the countries – mostly in the Third World – where the armed conflicts are raging. The now established complicity of MNCs in trading “conflict diamonds”, minerals and oil in areas such as West Africa, the Gulf and the Great Lakes Region, with support from Western governments, is only the tip of the iceberg. Yet, most international agencies and NGOs often ignore this dimension and continue to see poverty, underdevelopment, identity politics and/or the “failed state” as the key causes of contemporary armed conflicts.

The Role of Masculinities and Femininities in Conflict

Zarkov also underscores the role that gendered ideologies and practices, marked by violent masculinities, play in sustaining the culture of militarism and exacerbating violent conflict. Central here is the exclusion of alternative gender practices, particularly those that advocate a “nonviolent masculinity”.

She points to the need to examine the structures of gender inequality (within the domestic domain as well as in the arenas of economy and governance) saying that masculinities and femininities are not adequately recognized as factors in violent conflict. Where these are recognized, the tendency is to “bring the women in” into whatever it is that the NGO, agency or government is doing on the ground. This causes further problems because, first, the men are left out of the process (which often results in a backlash against the women). Second, the process is pre-determined because it is based on what the funders/organizers believe is the need on the ground. Consultations with local men and women from a gender perspective are rarely ever the case. Third, when the women are brought into the process, their participation is seen in terms of numbers rather than the perspectives they bring to the issue.

Foregrounding the relationship between militarism and a certain construction of masculinity, Zarkov notes that in many regions of conflict, “soldiering” and “security” jobs have emerged as viable livelihood options, leading to an unprecedented acceleration of militarization on a global scale. In Afghanistan and Iraq, for instance, the militaries (of the Western governments and the national governments) remain the biggest employers. Added to this is the market for private military companies and private security companies, which is growing at the rate of USD 10 billion a year.

Inherent in the training and recruitment processes for such jobs is the principle that violence is the most effective tool to address conflict and that a man's sense of self is linked to the exercise of power, through violence, over women and children as well as over unarmed battle-age men and old men. Henri Myrntinen, in the study titled *Sketching the Militias: Constructions of Violent Masculinities in the East Timor Conflict*, reminds us that such masculinities are not just prevalent "out there" in regions experiencing mass violence, but rather they are constructed in, and disseminated by, the First World. He points to the training that the Indonesian security forces and militias (in East Timor) received at facilities such as the notorious School of the Americas (now renamed Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) in the United States of America. At SOA, men are not only taught that violence is the most legitimate tool to confront political, personal and social problems, but the construction of their masculinity is linked to the wielding of power over people. While a glorification of violence is inherent in such constructions of masculinity, nonviolent conflict resolution and mutual empowerment are seen as weaknesses and have no place at facilities such as SOA.

The studies on Rwanda, Iraq, Mozambique, East Timor and Sri Lanka show that in many regions of armed conflict, a similar understanding of masculinity prevails. Men assert their "manhood" by being breadwinners or soldiers and engaging in confrontationalist and aggressive behaviour. Women's femininity is linked to their vulnerability and is manifested in their image as "symbols of communities" and as "homemakers". Femininity is often equated with powerlessness, and during war, this notion is narrowed down to the image of the women war-victim.

The focus on dominance and violence in conceptions of masculinity proves particularly disastrous in a context already fraught with political and social conflict. Armed conflicts are marked by widespread destruction of economic resources and activities, forced migration, psychological and physical injury, and separation from one's usual social networks. In such situations, dominant notions of masculinity - defined through marriage, property and participation in community life - become inaccessible for a vast majority of men. In other words, many men are unable to achieve the kind of masculinity that is prescribed by their community. These men, in turn, use aggression and violence (often against women) to establish a sense of self-respect and "manhood" (as defined by their community). A vicious cycle ensues whereby masculinities produce and normalize violence and the violence further entrenches hegemonic notions of "manhood".

Civilian men can also “reclaim” their manhood during violent conflict by joining the militaries and militias. As members of such groups, they regain power and status by engaging in looting and violence. Such acts help to restore to the men access to property and to women (often seen as property). The authors of the studies from Africa and East Timor in fact note that the concept of the “bride price” system, prevalent in these regions, gives credence to the belief that women are the property of men!

Such constructions of masculinity and femininity have been shown to play a role in the exacerbation of sexual violence. The study on the Rwanda genocide by Chiseche Mibenge (titled *Gender and Ethnicity in Rwanda: Legal Remedies for Victims of Wartime Sexual Violence*) makes the revelation that men engaged in sexual violence to reclaim the lost ground of patriarchy and reassert male dominance by driving women out of the public space (that they sought to share with the men). Tutsi women who were, in particular, seen to be questioning power relations between men and women emerged as a threat to male dominance, and were therefore a key target during the genocide.

Deeply rooted structures and attitudes, which inform definitions of “manhood” and “womanhood” not only cause violence but, in some ways, also rigidify once the violence has ended. For instance, NGOs and international organizations often assume that violent conflicts provide opportunities for the transformation of gender relations and for establishing women’s equality. Yet, the study by Judy El-Bushra titled *The Culture of Peace or The Culture of the Sound-bite: Development Practice and the Tyranny of Policy* reveals that an increase in women’s work and responsibilities (and the resultant self-confidence that this process unleashes) is accompanied by psychological problems of adjustment for the men. The deeply-rooted notions of masculinity and femininity ensure that the *values* concerning men’s and women’s behavior do not change and neither do the community or national-level *institutions* that could provide women with decision-making powers. On the contrary, power relationships between men and women (particularly within the domain of the home) change little.

At the macro-level, attempts by policymakers to legislate for women’s rights often encounter a backlash against women and children. For example, Chiseche Mibenge in the study on Rwanda shares that even though the post-genocide period has been characterized by women’s participation in decision-making processes, this does not mean that women can now assert their fundamental human rights. The gap between men and women’s wealth, literacy levels and school enrolment has only widened. Added to this is the stigmatization that women experience because of the sexual violence carried out against them during the genocide.

Citing an instance of the way in which deeply rooted *values* and *attitudes*, about “manhood” and “womanhood”, play themselves out in daily life, El-Bushra points to a situation commonly encountered in camps housing refugees and internally displaced people. The responsibility of fetching water for the family lies with the women and the girls. Because water often becomes a scarce resource in times of conflict, women and girls spend many hours standing in line to fetch water. The staff of development organizations notice this problem and often work around it by increasing the number of water access points instead of encouraging the men (who have much less work) to shoulder this responsibility or to at least share the burden with the female members of the household. Even if development workers want to do something about it, El-Bushra concludes that the “tyranny of the urgent” prevents them from doing so.

Chiseche Mibenge, in the study on Rwanda, shows how specific notions of masculinities also inhibit gender justice. The construction of masculinity is such that men can be shamed through the act of sexual violence against the women of their community. In a post-conflict situation, men therefore try to conceal the incidence of such violence because its revelation in a public forum (such as a courtroom) would mean that the men were unable to protect the women of their community. Such protection is traditionally assumed to be a prerogative of masculinity. This sense of communal shame among the men is cited as a reason for the low number of prosecutions even though at a societal level, the scale of the sexual violence during the genocide is widely discussed. Accompanying this notion of masculinity is a femininity that silences the rape survivor and disempowers her to access mechanisms of justice. Therefore, as Mibenge puts it, “stories about the rape are told in public by the press, by lawyers and by academics, but hardly ever by the women who lived through it”.

The book’s focus on masculinities and femininities is a valuable contribution to peacebuilding literature because it foregrounds a re-conceptualization of violent masculinity and of power relations between men and women as a central element of efforts to build sustainable peace and security. A first step in this respect is to redefine masculinity as one which creates a space for nonviolence and in which a man’s sense of power is not related to his ability to carry out violence against a woman. Second, support for alternative masculinities must also be accompanied by the recognition of “agency” and “subjectivity” as central elements in conceptions of femininity. Third, new constructions of masculinity and femininity must also recognize the widespread victimization of men in conflict. If their victimization is indeed recognized, it is often listed in a hierarchy of victimhood where the violence committed against them is less visible and considered less real than that against women and children. This needs to change,

and perhaps will change once masculinities and femininities are constructed in more inclusive and nonviolent ways.

Feminist Critique of Development Practice

The gendered impact of mainstream development practices in contexts of violent conflict forms another key focus of the book. Evaluating a diverse set of development projects from regions of conflict, the authors state that while the differential impact of development on men and women has been recognized, policy and rhetoric have often been easier to influence than practice.

This, as Sunila Abeysekera notes in the chapter *Organizing and Mobilizing Women for Peace: Some Reflections on Sri Lanka*, is most clearly reflected in the “rushed” and “non-consultative” nature of contemporary development practice, which tends to focus on the “fulfillment of internationally designed and sponsored projects through the cooption of local human resources”. Echoing this perspective, Sarala Emmanuel, in the second study on Sri Lanka titled *Global Issues, Local Realities: A Note from a Post-Tsunami Coastal Town*, writes that international organizations have earned the reputation of parachuting into regions of conflict and deciding for the local people what their needs are. In the rush to be the “first” or the “leading” agency, organizations show little concern for local sensitivities and perspectives. This often leads to an incorrect assessment of the needs on the ground, and, worse still, has a negative impact on the dynamics of inter-personal and inter-group relations.

The consequence of such practice is that it creates a situation where development policies (particularly economic) exacerbate social and economic exclusion and increase the “genderedness” of such exclusion. A central leitmotif of the book, this issue comes up in nearly all the empirical studies, and, in some cases, the evidence even links development practice to higher rates of public and private violence against women. What comes out starkly is that while the “do-no-harm” approach entered the lexicon of the development profession close to a decade ago, sadly, in many regions around the world, development practice continues to exacerbate conflict, failing to reflect local perspectives and sensitivities.

The problem begins with the very way in which Western agencies and governments define development and then impose it on countries coded as “post-conflict”. Ruth Jacobson in the chapter *Gender, Development and Conflict in Mozambique: Lessons of a ‘Success’ Story* writes, “Linked closely to the paradigm of ‘modernity’, development is advocated as a transition from tradition to modernity to be brought about through emulation of the economic and social systems of Western capitalism.” While there are several problems with this

conception, perhaps the most significant is that such a process sidelines the perspectives and aspirations of local actors as well as indigenous resources for development.

Edda Kirleis in the essay *Rethinking Gender, Violent Conflict and Development from Local Perspectives: Reclaiming Political Agency in South Asia* adds that the problem also lies in the definition of the “political and development actor”. Citing examples of South Asian women’s groups who have engaged in successful grassroots peacebuilding work for several years, Kirleis observes that when government-level peace negotiations and development projects are designed, these women are not recognized as political actors and are often kept out of the decision-making process. Even while they are the most active in the arena of peace, reconciliation and rehabilitation, they are not perceived as *actors* or *agents* and remain mere *objects* of peace negotiations as well as of development planning and implementation.

Elaborating on this point, Kirleis writes:

“There is a need to redefine the actor in gendered terms, in order to recognize women’s political agency as well as the nonviolent agency of men....In the dominant notions of femininity and masculinity, it is not surprising that in situations of violent conflict, those who are seen as political actors are at the same time addressed as development actors. Those whose agency is not recognized in the conflict are also not taken into account for taking charge of their development. They may be addressed as victims and become objects of humanitarian assistance. Not surprisingly, those commonly...acknowledged as political and development actors in a violent conflict are those who are leading the communities and the militaries into the conflict, and those who carry the arms. As the majority of those in formal politics, in the military...and in leading multinational and private enterprises are men, it is men who are commonly perceived as actors in both violent conflict and in development, while women are seen as...bystanders and as victims. When rehabilitation takes place or development activities are planned, political and military leaders are called to the negotiating table. Inevitably then, they are also the actors who have the power to decide what the society of the future will look like...Only a change in gender relations and in notions and practices of masculinity and femininity will bring about a recognition of women’s agency in politics and development alike as well as a recognition of male victimhood and agency in peacebuilding.”

The failure to recognize women as *actors* in the development process has had disastrous consequences. For example, many of the studies point to the prevalence of sexual violence in refugee camps owing to the physical location of water access points and toilets. The location of these facilities made the women vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence. This could have been avoided had the women been consulted in decisions concerning the location of the toilets and other facilities.

Jacobson in the essay on Mozambique notes that during the armed conflict, development and emergency relief agencies “replicated patriarchal assumptions about the nature of family relationships”. “The distribution of food and other goods to displaced families was conducted on the assumption that the normal family was male headed and special provision could only be made for widows. As a result, unmarried women and female-headed households were simply left out of the aid process.” Although policy-level changes in humanitarian organizations have sought to address this problem, the results on the ground have been mixed.

Criticism also stems from the failure of the development profession to recognize that most contemporary conflicts do not follow the neat time-lines of “pre-violence”, “active violence” and “post-violence”, and are, in fact, characterized by long periods of prolonged violence. The result has been the establishment of clear-cut lines separating “humanitarian” and “relief aid” from “development”. The assumption, albeit naïve and even dangerous, is that development can happen only in times of peace. The essays in this book question this neat chronology by pointing to today’s reality which is that most regions of conflict are marked by perpetual and prolonged violence that varies in intensity and nature (from structural and private violence to criminal, inter-group and state-led violence). Linked to this is the continuum of violence that women experience, from domestic violence within the home to sexual harassment, rape and torture, which are used as instruments of religious repression and political weapons in war. The studies on the conflicts in Iraq, Mozambique and Rwanda reflect this phenomenon marked by high rates of domestic violence in “post-ceasefire” and “post-agreement” contexts.

The tendency to focus on “emergency relief and assistance” at the cost of longer-term development needs is cited as a major shortcoming of development policy in regions experiencing prolonged violence. Often, development policy is designed in such a manner that the linkages with other dimensions of peacebuilding (human rights, social justice, psychosocial healing, governance, women’s rights et al) are simply not made.

A big part of the problem, as Welmoed Koekebakker in the study titled *Women and Violent Conflicts in Iraq* notes, is that while it is much easier to mobilize financial resources for the provision of shelter and food, it is much more difficult to raise funds for issues such as governance, justice and human rights. Koekebakker shares that international organizations are more willing to give money to meet the short-term goals of “relief and assistance” in areas such as housing and health care than for longer-term projects on reproductive rights, local governance and education. Due to the prolonged nature of the conflict in Iraq, scores of women and girls have been unable to attend school for years. Therefore, while female literacy should be a central goal for development policy in Iraq (and even though local Iraqis articulated this sentiment in their conversations with Koekebakker), most international organizations and Western governments have instead focused on the short-term goals of relief and rehabilitation. As a result, the more complex issues of development are left to local civil society groups to address.

This has created a situation wherein, often, international development agencies and local civil society groups work at cross-purposes with the latter advocating a broader definition of development that includes human rights and social justice issues.¹ In this context, the authors advocate a broader definition of development practice, linking it to issues of gender, peace, justice and sustainability and foregrounding the psychosocial and relational dimensions in addition to the political and economic aspects of the conflict.

They assert that a thorough research of the complexities of the local context *prior* to the conceptualization of development policies should be the *norm* rather than the *exception*. Often, people are forced to accept global policy approaches even if they have articulated a different perspective on the kind of development support they need. While the reasons for this imposition vary from the dictates of funders to those of “time efficiency” and “less effort”, the result is that development practice fails in its goals of economic reconstruction, social and gender justice, and most importantly, in enabling local stakeholders to reach their fullest

¹ Due to the paucity of funds for such issues, some local civil society organizations are forced to shut down operations. Many, as a survival technique, change their agenda to the blinkered goal of “delivery of assistance and relief”. Others become sub-contractors for larger national and international NGOs. The two studies on Sri Lanka by Sunila Abeysekara and Sarala Emmanuel highlight this phenomenon and point to the “brain drain” that international agencies and organizations have initiated by poaching local staff – often women – of community-based NGOs through the allurements of exorbitant salaries and job benefits. In a situation already marked by scarce human resources, such processes have a detrimental impact on local civil society activism and capacities for peacebuilding.

potential. The starting point, as the authors indicate, should be to dialogue with those who have suffered from the conflict, and to ask them to envision the kind of society they wish to build. Inherent in this dialogue is a discussion on gender identities and gender relations, and how these might change in the “post-conflict” context.

In the context of the above critique, a key question that the authors ask is this: Is it possible to think of “development from within” where the process is conceptualized and sustained by local stakeholders rather than driven by an external source, be it the World Bank or an international women’s NGO? Can the benchmarks for success be re-conceptualized to include the “development of local capacities, the establishment of local ownership over activities, and the promotion of an active civil society”?

Women in Decision-Making Processes

Even as the authors emphasize the valuable role that women play in development and peacebuilding, they try to transcend the essentialist notion that women are “born peace-lovers, care-givers and nurturers” and that men are “warriors”. In so doing, they point to the violent agency of women and the nonviolent agency of men as peacebuilders and as victims as well.

In this context, the authors, drawing on their research from diverse regions of conflict, debate the question: If a “critical mass” of women were to be included in decision-making processes, would policy and practice be different? Some of the authors feel that it would be naïve to overstate the impact of the mere physical presence of women at peace negotiations. For example, Jacobson in the study on Mozambique is sceptical if the presence of women could have averted the imposition of neo-liberal economic conditions on the post-conflict government. Others hold that women’s presence will make a difference once they are also involved in the planning and design stage. They take the view that the focus on a “critical mass” of women will not show results if such processes have been conceptualized without a gender lens. Mibenge in the study on Rwanda notes that even though women have 30 percent reservation in the national Parliament, their presence has had little impact on the number of prosecutions for sexual violence during the genocide. This is attributed to the absence of a gender lens in the conceptualization of the legal and political frameworks. Reflecting the divergences on this question, the book acknowledges the need for far greater empirical research on the subject.