

Contribution to the Expert Talk “Gender and Conflict: Causes, Course and Strategies”
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Gender and the Emergence of Conflict: Defining the Problem

In September 2001 (9.28.01), the American online magazine SLATE published an article entitled, “Osama Bin Laden’s Man Trouble.” It was written by Lionel Tiger, an anthropologist and sociologist at Rutgers University, and one of the most eminent defenders of socio-biological positions in the United States.

Tiger noted that all the hijackers of the September 11th attacks were male, a fact that cannot be seen as a coincidence. According to Tiger, a person’s gender is a determining factor for the means chosen to settle a conflict in a given situation. Violent conflict resolution is a male, not a human, problem. Especially problematic and prone to violent conflict resolution, writes Tiger, are young men. Their sexuality and “reproductive potential,” as he calls it, is an important matter politically for all societies. This, to a certain extent, biological anthropological explanation for the needs of young men poses a challenge for every society. Young men are notably aggressive, impressionable and seeking dominance. They have a natural tendency to form tight-knit male communities. Particularly male terrorist communities satisfy this need. In Arabic countries, writes Tiger, the attraction of “male bonding” is strengthened due to the regimented and controlled access to women, which prevents the venting of sexual aggression. Furthermore, writes Tiger, these young dominance-seeking men are constantly wounded in their narcissism by the superiority of American culture. This combination of aggressive masculinity, a lack of prospects within society, which leaves young men’s natural needs unsatisfied, and international globalization makes up a gender-specific matrix surrounding crisis-ridden developments and violence in the world.

Tiger’s article represents is one of few attempts to raise “gender” as a significant issue for the emergence of war-like conflict. However, Tiger raises the issue in a way that appeals to everyday reasoning, not to the “state of the arts” in the debate at hand. Anthropological or essentialist approaches – as were indeed also common in

some branches of feminist peace research in the 1990s – no longer play a role in the debate at hand. Still, questions regarding the relation between gender structures and gender discourses and the emergence of war-like conflicts remain largely underdeveloped. Although the demand for “gender sensibility” has become the new orthodoxy in considerations of violent conflict or in peacebuilding, this does not mean that gender is actually an established category of analysis.

Despite the fact that gender-specific characteristics of collective violent action are undeniable – as Lionel Tiger’s example also confirms – the question about the role of gender relations, gender discourses and gender-specific identities in the emergence of war-like conflicts can be seen as under-theorized and under-researched

Although violent action – especially when exercised collectively – is without a doubt “gendered,” “gender” as a category remains an analytical newcomer in the German-speaking world, and is discussed predominantly in feminist-oriented niches. Also on a practical-political level, the establishment of gender perspectives is still met with resistance, as the experience of NGOs and UN employees working on the issue confirms. In the words of a UN official, there is high-profile rhetoric on gender, yet this hardly affects the operational level (Gender in NGO Policy Dialogue, 2000). And an employee of Oxfam realized:

Gender is not identified by INGOs as a key defining factor of identity in relation to how war begins, what it is about, how groups are mobilized to fight, how cease-fires and peace agreements are reached, and what kind of peace can be said to have been achieved. For women, the end of war rarely brings peace, and can in fact bring new levels of violence into their lives (Suzanne Williams in Cockburn, 85).

The existing work on the question “Why does gender matter in the analysis and management of violent conflict?” offers the following answers (briefly outlined):

First, there are biologically constructed, or alternatively, socialized, male and female social characters with different positions on questions of war and peace. Due to their anthropological or psychological make-up, women represent a greater potential for peace than men. Hence the thesis that war and conflict analysis needs to focus on the psychological or psychoanalytic questions of male identity formation. Generally, women can be considered as more capable of peace than men.

A second answer is that existing work on war-like conflict and its effects draws a characteristic blank: it fails to mention that men and women are *affected differently* by collective violence, or rather, that there are gender-specific risks and costs of wars. In reality, gender-specific violence predominantly affects women (even if not always and not only); men and women are exposed to different dangers and have different access to security zones and resources necessary for survival; and men and women are also affected differently by measures taken during phases of reconstruction. Here we are dealing primarily with the issue of how men and women are affected differently by military and political developments, and writing women into the analysis and description of violent conflicts and its environment.

A third answer departs from the vital contribution that women in their respective social positions make to the survival of societies pervaded by conflict, or rather, from their contribution to the reconstruction of such societies. The argumentation goes that this contribution was not recognized for a long time. Thereby, key resources that could have been used during reconstruction and the creation of a viable community were also ignored.

A final answer, which focuses on the development of democracy and human rights, is: Democracy is not divisible. Gender cannot be defined as a “cultural idiosyncrasy” separate from the democratic policy goals during peacebuilding. Creating democratic conditions also requires gender democracy. This means that if democracy is a prerequisite for peace then it is apparent that women’s equal participation in peace processes and the restructuring of society is indispensable.

These answers are fundamental for justifying the significance of “gender” as a category and for extending one-sided analyses and descriptions of conflict scenarios. Still, they cannot answer all aspects of the question “why gender?”

One starting point that explains the *structure* of gender relations in connection with the inclination towards violent conflict resolution is offered by Caprioli’s quantitative study on the relation between gender relations and the inclination towards violent conflict resolution. She comes to the conclusion that a higher degree of gender equality corresponds to a lower inclination towards violent conflict resolution, and

vice versa, that gender inequality increases the likelihood that states will resort to military means in conflict situations. According to this study, those countries in which there is greater sensibility towards gender equality are more likely to resort to diplomatic means and compromise during international conflicts than those in which gender equality is not part of the repertoire of values. The study defined equality as political, social and economic equality, which on a practical level included the active and passive right to vote and hold political office; access to education and health care, as well as control over one's own body; and lastly, participation in the job market (Caprioli 2000).

A further area where the question regarding gender's significance was repeatedly raised and sustainably discussed is the former Yugoslavia. A study by Marina Blagojevic suggests that the economic and political crisis of the 1980s and 90s was flanked by a gender crisis, which reinforced and furthered the crisis dynamic. According to B., the core of this gender crisis revolved around common gender notions and gender discourses losing value in the face of the economic crisis, which triggered considerable loss of orientation and behavioral problems in the affected subjects.

In pre-war Serbia, Blagojevic notes, gender relations were traditional and gender roles were rigid and not very open. Although the rhetoric of gender equality was fostered during the communist era, it did not figure drastically into the organization of gender relationships. Female employment was the norm and women also had access to political posts, however, this hardly changed *societal notions* about masculinity or femininity, or the organization of gender relationships and the family. The opening up of non-traditional roles to women only selectively changed notions of femininity, while it did not change notions of masculinity at all. To adequately fulfill a male role meant to be head of the family, breadwinner, employed and placed hierarchically above women. These constellations became explosive when the 80s were met with grave economic changes, or rather, changes in the workforce. Rapid de-professionalization made it impossible for men to fulfill their assigned roles. According to Blagojevic, since the 80s, providing for the family depended largely on women's resources and female networks of care.

Thus, individual men could hardly continue to meet prevailing notions of masculinity. The result was, in the words of Blagojevic: “a patriarchy gone out of control,” marked by a rise of alcohol and drug consumption among men in Serbia in the late 80s and 90s, a decrease in male life expectancy and a rise in domestic violence.

The attempt to resolve the “gender crisis” led to a mobilization of traditional cultural gender discourses such as “soldier for the fatherland” or “fighter and defender.” “Identity-forming agents,” in other words, political actors, were also interested in forcing such subject positions since they were interested in perpetuating the crisis-ridden situation. The success of these “identity-forming agents” depended not least on the attractiveness of their offers in light of the prevailing “gender crisis.”

Blagojevic’s analysis and observations suggest the following: *First*, in pre-war Serbia, a dynamic of masculinity developed that, of course, cannot be declared as a “cause of war,” but that nevertheless encouraged violent conflict resolution. *Second*, processes of masculinity and war-like conflict cannot be attributed to a simple cause-and-effect relationship, as postulated by Lionel Tiger’s socio-biological validation; instead, they arise out of an interplay between cultural constructs, states of interest and positions of power, as well as socio-economic developments.

A further area of research includes the question: What role does “gender” play in the establishment of collective identities, which are one precondition for the escalation of collective conflicts. War-like conflicts are largely collective undertakings, dependant on the convincing construction of an in-group and an out-group. Thus, “us” and “them” discourses constitute the respective collective identities and/or communities of all war-like conflicts. Groups and collectives, however, are not “natural occurrences.”

An “us” consciousness does not simply arise out of a common culture or common traditions. In other words, an “us” consciousness is not a natural reflex or objective shared cultural identity (Sherrer 1997, 4; Rabehl 2000), instead, it needs to be established. As we already know, a key symbol that helps constitute these communicative processes during conflict is the female body. When political groups enter into conflict, gender/femininity are regularly politicized and related to the political identity of the group – the by now sufficiently famous representations of

nations as “feminine” makes this clear (the French Marianne, the Statue of Liberty in the USA). Assaults against the women of a community, culture or nation are also seen as a symbolic rape of the body of the people. Thus, the specific combination of gender and nation gives strategic weight to the female body during conflict.

Moreover, the specific integration of gender into the cultural construction of the nation or the collective predetermines gender dynamics that influence and shape the progression of a conflict.

The conflict scenario in the former Yugoslavia further demonstrates the interplay between national and gender discourses. Already in the 1980s, the outbreak of the Kosovo war was preceded by a nationalized discourse on sexuality, in which gender imagery played a decisive role. The Kosovo Serbian population’s fears of losing status were linked to discourses of masculinity and fears of assault against Serbian women. Although according to national statistics, the rape rate in Kosovo was below the Yugoslav average and interethnic rape was of secondary importance, the fear of rape (by Albanians) played a prominent role in the Serbian media. Through nationalistic propaganda, the plight of the Serbian nation appeared as the plight of Serbian men, who were unable to defend “their” women from Albanian assaults. Recognition of the Serbian nation was, to a certain extent, combined with the recognition of Serbian masculinity.

By amalgamating discourses of nationality and discourses of masculinity and in turn, national identity and masculine identity, an acknowledgement of the nation meant an acknowledgement of masculinity, which was one – not to be underestimated – step towards the subjective readiness for war before the outbreak of violence in the stricter sense. Also, the media presented the Serbian-Albanian relationship as a problem of competing masculinities, in which Serbian masculinity was largely defined as Serbian men being able to prevent assaults against Serbian women. As a result, the female body symbolized the success or failure of national notions of masculinity (Bracewell 2000).

These briefly explained examples should make clear how experiences made in the economic, political or military realms are processed subjectively against the backdrop

of specific gender discourses. They also demonstrate how a simple cause-and-effect model, as offered by Lionel Tiger, cannot explain the relation between gender and violent conflict resolution. In other words, masculinity is not an anthropological constant and masculinity per se does not lead to violent conflict resolution. Without a doubt, gender/masculinity was one of the many factors among socio-economic developments, states of interest, power struggles and cultural constructions that fed the violent conflicts in the given examples. Since gender is a cultural construction based on assigned binary constructions, we need to account for *gender* constructions overall and ask the following question: What constructions of femininity back and help constitute constructions of masculinity that are marked by a preparedness to use violence? And how do both sets of constructions, respectively, enter into the cultural constructions behind war-like conflicts?

In war-like conflicts, we are obviously dealing with situations that can be described as a continuum – from the emergence to the resolution of the conflict – interwoven with gender relations. As Blagojevic's study demonstrates, subjective, institutional and structural (gender) relations in a society can be such that they boost the motivation for war. When conflicts are settled, gender-specific imagery determines communication between the involved parties; this imagery leads to gender-specific costs and consequences once the conflict is carried out. Lastly, we must also analyze the specific gender relations during the post-war period. Currently, both in theory and in practice, we are still far away from satisfying gender perspectives on war-torn and post-war societies.

Translated by Stefanie Fahrion