

Conflict-related sexual violence and international peace operations

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Abstract

Within the United Nations peace and security work, as well as in academic research, advocacy and policy initiatives concerned with peace and security, gender is mainly conceptualized as synonymous with women while sexual violence is largely conflated with gender-based violence and thus regarded as an issue that exclusively affects women as victims and men as perpetrators. This however led to the exclusion of male victims of conflict-related sexual violence from academic research, advocacy and policy initiatives, as well as UN initiatives on gender, peace and security. This thesis seeks to explore ways to conceptualize and address conflict-related sexual violence in a comprehensive and inclusive way within the UN peace and security agenda and particularly in peace operations. By the means of a critical analysis of academic literature and policy developments the thesis discusses the dominant conceptual and operational frameworks that have been developed to address conflict-related sexual violence and suggests a re-conceptualisation of gender and gender-based violence in order to better accommodate the empirical reality of male victims and female perpetrators of conflict-related sexual violence.

The dominant explanatory and policy frameworks developed by scholars and adopted by the UN to prevent sexual violence in armed conflict are largely based on a narrow approach and fail to adequately address the complex dynamics of conflict-related sexual violence. Conflict-related sexual violence is conceptualized on the basis of a strict male perpetrator/female victim dualism that regards the perpetrator/victim relationship as a male/female relationship and thereby links it to sex rather than gender. This precludes an effective gender analysis of sexual violence in armed conflict and does not permit to include male victims and female perpetrators into a discussion on the root causes of conflict-related sexual violence. The dominant conceptualization of conflict-related sexual violence furthermore relies on an essentialist representation of men and women, portraying women as vulnerable victims of sexual violence and men as aggressive perpetrators. Through the perpetuation of these associations, existing gender stereotypes, identities and power relations that make sexual violence an effective tool of humiliation and intimidation in times of armed conflict are reinforced rather than challenged.

Thus this thesis argues that a more inclusive and comprehensive gender approach to conflict-related sexual violence should be adopted that addresses the various root causes and underlying dynamics by challenging traditional gender stereotypes and identities promoted by dominant gender discourses. Strategies to enhance the ability of UN peace operations to protect civilians from conflict-related sexual violence will hardly be effective as long as gender stereotypes and ideologies that lie at the roots of sexual violence in armed conflict are reproduced rather than deconstructed in UN discourse on peace and security as well as in the discourses of member states and particularly their military institutions.

Table of contents

1. Introduction and delimitation of the subject	4
1.1. Introduction	4
1.2. Analytical framework	6
1.3. Delimitation of the subject	8
2. Gender and armed conflict	13
2.1. Gender, gender-based violence and sexual violence	13
2.1.1. Gender	13
2.1.2. Sexual and gender-based violence	14
2.2. Gender and armed conflict	18
2.2.1. The pre-conflict stage	19
2.2.2. The conflict stage	20
2.2.3. The conflict resolution and post-conflict stage	22
2.2.4. Gender analysis	23
2.3. Gender mainstreaming and peace operations	25
2.3.1. Gender on the international security agenda	25
2.3.2. Gender mainstreaming in UN peace operations	28
3. Sexual violence and armed conflict	33
3.1. Circumstances of conflict-related sexual violence	33
3.2. Causes of conflict-related sexual violence	35
3.2.1. Causal factors at the individual level	36
3.2.1.1. Sociobiological theory	36
3.2.1.2. Theory focusing on sex hormones	38
3.2.1.3. Social learning theory	40
3.2.2. Causal factors at the structural and the institutional level	41
3.2.2.1. Feminist theory	41
3.2.2.2. Theory focusing on masculinities	50
3.2.3. Causal factors at the structural, institutional, interpersonal and individual level	57
3.2.3.1. Instrumental and strategic use of conflict-related sexual violence	57
3.3. Comprehensive gender approach to conflict-related sexual violence	61
4. Peace operations and conflict-related sexual violence	65
4.1. Conflict-related sexual violence on the UN peace and security agenda	65
4.2. The UN discourse on conflict-related sexual violence and peace operations	68
4.2.1. Representation of men and women	68
4.2.2. Victims and perpetrators of conflict-related sexual violence	73
4.2.3. Sexual violence as a “tactic of war”	76
5. Conclusion	78
Bibliography	81

1. Introduction and delimitation of the subject

1.1. Introduction

Conflict-related sexual violence has recently received growing attention in academic and policy literature, in advocacy and activism as well as in the United Nations peace and security work, culminating in the adoption of United Nations Security Council resolutions 1325 (2000) and 1820 (2008) that address gender-mainstreaming and conflict-related sexual violence. The predominantly feminist perspective adopted in most of the literature and instruments implies an exclusive focus on women and their particular vulnerability and needs as victims of sexual violence during armed conflict. The existence of male victims and female perpetrators has, however challenged these dominant explanatory and policy frameworks that generally aim at highlighting the victimization of women. While the majority of victims of sexual violence during armed conflict are women, it is nevertheless problematic to focus solely on female victims of conflict-related sexual violence and thereby exclude male victims, as sustainable peace and the effective protection of civilians cannot be achieved as long as one group of victims is excluded from mechanisms of conflict resolution in general and from strategies for the prevention of conflict-related sexual violence in particular.

This thesis therefore seeks to explore ways in which conflict-related sexual violence can be conceptualized and addressed in a comprehensive and inclusive manner within the UN peace and security agenda and particularly in peace operations, that today take the form of multidimensional missions and cover a wide range of tasks aimed at reacting to complex humanitarian emergencies. Through a critical discussion of academic literature and policy developments the thesis aims at analyzing the dominant conceptual and operational frameworks that have been developed to respond to conflict-related sexual violence and suggests a re-conceptualisation of gender and sexual violence in order to better accommodate and address the empirical reality of male victims and female perpetrators of conflict-related sexual violence. Finally, this work attempts to critically reflect upon the extent to which UN policy instruments, developed to enhance the ability of peace operations to respond to conflict-related sexual violence, have adopted an inclusive and comprehensive gender approach to prevent sexual violence in situations of armed conflict and represent an effective means to address the complex underlying dynamics and root causes of the phenomenon of conflict-related sexual violence.