Gender-based assumptions of war victims

IS THE VIEW OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN MERELY AS VICTIMS OF WAR TOO SIMPLISTIC?

International actors faced numerous Humanitarian crises throughout the 1990s, leading to a New War thesis, made particularly prominent by Mary Kaldor. Whilst wars have historically been concerned with violence against the most vulnerable, only recently have studies focused on massive civilian casualties, largely women and children (Kaldor 2013: 133). In mainstream thinking, war remains an exclusively male issue where men are ‘ naturally’ those who perpetrate violence; meanwhile, women and children are seen only as victims. Empirical data, however, reported that men as potential fighters are most likely to be targeted in armed conflict, including sexual aggression (Carpenter 2006: 88). Wars create all sorts of victims and perpetrators, spanning gender and roles. Thus, is the role of women and children merely as victims too simplistic? Want

This paper examines how common gender-based assumptions and unclear victim-related terms led observers to consider victimization as intrinsic and gender specific. As Cynthia Enloe (2004: 10) stated, ‘ naturally’ is a dangerous notion that depicts women as life-giving versus men as life-taking (Coulter, Persson and Utas 2008: 7). However, men, women and children’s roles are much more diverse and complex. Analysis of the Syrian crisis illustrates this argument and provides evidence that men, women and children may be victims, perpetrators, or even both.

‘ Women and Children First’.

The necessity to have a ‘ victim’.

Thinking about armed conflict and human security, victims are often at the heart of leaders' decision-making and civil society's policies. The search for adequate victims' and humanitarian programs raised the debate about which side or communities should be acknowledged as victims and revealed the many faces of victimhood (Huyse 2003: 54). Part of the dilemma comes from the political-biased connotations and the legal definition(s) of the term victim. To discuss the former argument, we choose to use the definition provided by the 1985 UN Declaration, which defined a victim as:

a person who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws operative within Member States (UN 1985).

Women and gender-based violence.

Gender-based violence, especially wartime rape, is as old as war itself. For a long time in history, the ' inferior' position of women or certain ethnic or racial minorities was considered as natural, following Browmiller's thesis that ' War provides men with the perfect psychological backdrop to give vent to their contempt for women' and became inherent to territorial advance (Brownmiller 1975, 32). During the liberation of Europe in 1945, the Russian Army raped over two million German women (Beevor 2007).

However, women had to wait fifty years with the atrocities of Bosnian, Sierra Leone and Rwandan reports on rape camps to finally obtain the ear of the International community. The mediatization of armed groups using the enemy's women to achieve ethnic cleansing, genocide and occupation goals

upon the enemy raised awareness about the use of rape as a weapon (The Economist 2001, Farwell 2004). Pressures by feminist lobbies and academics led to an attempt by the UN to reinforce the protection of women and girls from gender-based violence, recognizing this ‘ regrettable aspect of the war’ as a crime against humanity (Farwell 2004: 389, Erturk 2008: 1, DEDAW 1993).

Nonetheless, sexual violence is not the only form of conflict-related victimization of women. The over-classification of women as ‘ bush wives’, camp followers, and sex slaves undoubtedly raised the world’s awareness on gender-based violence but also diverted policy makers to address and establish efficient policies for all the range of victims (Coulter, Persson and Utas 2008: 8). For example, concerns about the health needs of women in conflict-zones – especially pregnant mothers and their children are annually expressed. In 2009 the Red Cross reported the highest rates of maternal deaths happen in war-torn countries (Puechguirbal 2009). Besides physical sequels, women suffer also from long-term and indirect psychological, social, and economical related-forms of violence. For example, women injured by sexual violence endure physical sufferings but also psychological pressures such as shame when they are back in their communities or economic deprivations and sanctions. Those issues are particularly contentious in cases where women are culturally dependent and subjected to their husbands. (Puechguirbal 2009, Erturk 2008, Tickner 1997: 628).

Children as victims

The same reasoning occurs with children. UNICEF recently alleged the number of children affected by civil wars has more than doubled over the past years, exceeding more than 5. 5 million (UNICEF 2014: 3). However, the numbers do not reflect the form of violence and oppression nor do they specify a time distinction. Children are mainly described as ‘ direct victims’ – suffering from the direct effects of violence. Nevertheless, more attention should be given to the many other invisible victims, such as those children who lost one or more family members and suffer from the aftereffects of the violence they witnessed (Huyse 2003: 57, Worldvision 2014). Usually defenceless and vulnerable, children are killed, physically abused, kidnapped, recruited as soldiers, and/or displaced.

In Syria, more than 1. 2 million children have fled their homes, most of them are under 12 (UNICEF 2014: 18). In refugee camps, children are particularly exposed to malnutrition and unsanitary conditions, leading to all kinds of disease. Separated from their family, and/or without support from parents who could barely afford to feed and protect them, children suffer socio-economic deprivation and usually have no access to basic necessities. They are prevented from going to schools and are either enrolled as child labour and/or forced into sexual slavery, – or in the case of young women, married off to older men – to supplement their family’s meagre income (Shivakumaran 2014).

In addition to physical abuses, children suffer from long-term psychological traumas from their experiences. In Syrian refugee camps, psychologists noticed unusual level of distress and visible signs social and physical dysfunction among displaced children (Atlas 2014, Winter 2014). Isolated

and socially rejected, children who have been traumatized during the conflict develop sequels that can lead to new forms of violence –child soldiers, street gangs, juvenile delinquency or vendetta— (Boyden 2006: 4). In war-torn societies, the observations can generally be extended to second-generation victims; from children who suffered high levels of stress from the adults around them and children born in camps[1], to the grandchildren who carry memories from elder generations (Huyse 2004: 54, 57).

Victims of Man's war

For a long time, there was a belief that men fight wars to protect vulnerable people, defend their family's wealth, and the interests of the nation. This stereotypical role of the ' active male protector' *naturally* defined women and children as ' passive-protected' actors. Nevertheless, this common understanding about women and children's victimization largely diverted the international debate from other under-acknowledged realities (Tickner 1997: 627, Enloe 2012: 7, Rygiel 2006: 150)

First, armed groups are not always protecting the weak; second, the assumption that victimization is gender specific overlooks the presence of female fighters among armies (Goldstein 2001: 59). Finally, keeping in mind the fate of children as victims, recent researches indicate empirical evidence about children's contribution to armed violence, including child soldiering.

From victims to active participants

Violence committed by children or women has an important symbolic power on people's minds, because it challenges traditional social constructions that women and children are the most vulnerable (Hunt and Rygiel 2006: 2).

Children as weapons

Child soldiers have been in use for a long time: regular armies before the Geneva agreements made use of children. As a result of changing societal values and greater awareness of the issue, child soldiering increasingly gained political salience over the last decades of civil wars intensification. Images of tens of thousands small boys with an AK-47 –considered as a ' cheap' and ' disposable goods' by African War-lords (Rosen 2005)– created terrifying damages worldwide (Erwin 2002, Hoge 2014). However, child soldiers are generally portrayed as direct or indirect victims, forced and pressured by adults to commit brutal atrocities.

Numerous testimonies by former child soldiers show the dilemma for those children who killed to defend themselves, either from their captor or an opposing armed faction (BBC 2005). The recent video released by the Islamic State (IS) shows the process of indoctrination and militarization: children carry guns as big as them, and are trained in radical ideology (Vinograd, Balkiz and Omar 2014). Many of those children are around 12-13 and do not actually have a choice, but some of them are already adults. This also leads to the debate around the capacity of youth to exercise a measure of personal autonomy in their decisions and actions (Maclure and Denov 2006: 120) .

Since 2002, ‘ child soldiers’ definition relies the UN straight 18 principle and outlaws all major forms of children involvement in hostilities under that age (OPAC 2007). However, this strict definition tends to obscure the weight of experience, social-context and environment in which youth are evolving (Boyden 2006, Maclure and Denov 2006) Latest psychological analyses demonstrate the necessity to differentiate childhood and adolescence: much of the analysis so far has infantilized the young people as receptors of environmental stimuli, or of adult pressures, often disregarding particular cognitive and behavioural dynamics (Boyden 2006: 1).

In some cases, children join for ideological reasons or for other advantages and opportunities war can bring – e. g. money, resources and power to name a few reasons. The prospect of getting a better life is worth war, leading young people to join the rebellion for the same reasons as adults (Hoeffler and Collier 2001, Boyden 2006: 4). Moreover, some scholars tend to explain instability in certain region as a consequence of demographic changes and increasing masses of youth. Post-conflict zones are primarily addressed taking into consideration the limited capacity of war-torn states to handle youthfulness (Maclure and Denov 2006, Boyden 2006: 10). For example, re-recruitment of child soldiers into war is particularly difficult to address (Hoge 2014). In response to evidence of child soldiering by the Kurdish rebel group, the International Criminal Court signed an agreement with the YGP establishing a ‘ non-combatant’ category for children between 16 and 18. However and despite Demobilization, Demilitarization and rehabilitation (DDR) programs, dozens of children have tried to re-join local Kurdish military unites on their own (Geneval Call 2014).

Women and Men on the moral continuum.

From Antigone[2]to the Ozalp[3], women have actively participated in all aspects of war. Historical records show that women perform successfully in war –sometimes even more than their male colleagues. The quasi-exclusion of women as ‘ combatants’, refers to the gender constructed discourse and dichotomy between women (peaceful) and men (warlike) which denied the active participation of women as individual perpetrators of violence (Hunt and Rygiel 2006). For example, in 2003, when were released the images of Lynndie England abusing Iraqi prisoner at Abu Ghraib surfaced, the first comments were not related to the atrocities perpetrated on the Iraqi prisoners nor the executors —no one knew, knows, or remembers the names of the other U. S. guards (Brittain 2006: 84). The shock was particularly focused around the picture of the ‘ little white woman’ holding a leash tethered to the prisoner’s neck (Struckman 2010, Brittain 2006: 84) Consequently, it has become necessary to critically analyse women’s role as ‘ perpetrators and perpetuators’, regarding the estimated number of women engaged today in ‘ unwomanly’ behaviour worldwide, including Western armies (Goldstein 2001, Cohen and al. 2013).

Fighting for freedom – The case of Kurdish Female fighters

The recent growing progress of IS has given particular attention to the *fighters for freedom,* which fight to prevent the expansion of the Islamic caliphate. In reporting on Kobani attacks by IS, media have begun focusing specifically on the increasing proportion of female fighters who joined the Kurdish movements under the banner of the Women’s Protection Unit (YPJ).

Never before has such international concern been given to female combatants and the role they can play in a major combat zone. In the region of Kobani, one in three of the city defenders are female (Pratt 2014, Mezzofiore 2014).

From passive ‘ protected’ to active ‘ protector’, Kurdish female fighters represent a category of women that diverge from the one previously encoded in the society. Besides their abilities to shoot multiple types of weapons, they developed a full range of other skills based on physical and cognitive differences between men and women. For instance, they are mostly marksmen and snipers, as it requires ‘ calm, patience and finesse,’ a typically female trait (Pratt 2014). Contrary to the images of vulnerable women, YPJ soldiers almost reveal signs of masculinity by accepting ‘ death as a sacrifice that is part of the life choice they have made’ (Pratt 2014). And yet, motivations could be almost identified as feminist ones. IS treat women as objects, giving female fighters even more power against ISIS; some say that Islamic rebels are more terrified of being killed by women because if they do they cannot go to heaven (Mezzofiore 2014)

The Kurdish example raises many concerns among scholars since it contrasts the common perception of women’s role. The YPJ’s struggle proves that women can be perfectly capable and willing of performing violent acts to ‘ defend the Kurdish people against all evil’ (Pratt 2014). Some suggest that this could lead to the empowerment of women in the region, since female fighters are being taken much more seriously today than in the past (Mezzofiore 2014, Gatehouse 2014).

Under fire – All victims?

The institution of war has never been good for women and children (Farwell 2004). To a larger extend, war has never been good for anybody. Even if women and children are among the worst victims, they are not the only ones. The held idea that women and children are most likely to be displaced is not always giving justice to the data. Regarding the statistics about Registered Syrian Refugees, Males represent 48. 7% and Female 51. 3% of exiles. Refugees also include elderly persons, wounded warriors, minorities, people with disabilities, etc (UNRHC 2014). By qualifying women and children only as victims or combatants, scholars conceal the large range of positions they can occupy during a conflict.

The mobilization of the society in the war effort has existed as long as war itself. During the First World War, the *Munitionettes* [4]and their children worked in factories to provide for men at war. They have been enrolled in offices, communications, intelligence, maintenance and many other under-acknowledged ways (Goldstein 2001: 78). Partly victimized, partly victimizing, women are often considered as those who sacrifice the most during war (Huyse 2003: 56) In Africa, women who must fight in armed groups have often been doubly victimized – forced to join the rebellion and raped by enemies and comrades. Consequently, it is impossible to draw a sharp line between the two categories, preventing the implementation of programs to address these women and girls' actual lived experiences (Coulter and al. 2008 XXX).

For example in post-reconstruction policies, they have failed to include women and young girls in DDR programs. Part of it is due to policy-makers' refusal to recognize woman as combatants (Coulter and al 2008: P). Thus, depending on the policies implemented, women can suffer from deeper discrimination mainly related to the structural roots prevailing in society before the conflict (Cohen and al 2013: 5) Porter's study about rape in Uganda found that rapists are more often husbands/boyfriends or men from the same community rather than enemies (Porter 2013, Utas 2005). Or they can expect better positions with regard to equality between women and men. For example women were generally granted the right to vote after World War Two.

Moreover, by emphasizing on the large proportion of women who have been abused, the debate on gender-based violence on men has been overlaid. Barring a few exceptions, the literature does not pay attention to the fact that men are also victims of poor treatment, thereby tortured more violently. Sexual violence is an issue commonly defined as affecting women and young females and yet, male rape, genital mutilation and other forms of emasculation have an important impact on men that should be documented (Cohen and al 2013: 7, Sivakumaran 2013). Aggressors often abuse male enemies or political prisoners intentionally dehumanize and humiliate them (Sivakumaran 2013, Carpenter 2006). Nevertheless, because of the psychological and social implications of male victimization, less attention is given to male adults and adolescents who have been oppressed and/or forced to commit crimes (rape, mass killings, kidnapping), leading to a bias in human security studies (Carpenter 2006).

From ‘ Women and Children’ to ‘ Women’ and ‘ Children’

Gender-based common assumptions have largely shaped the way people perceive men, women and children’s roles in war. The persistent idea of a masculine monopoly on force promotes a simplistic view of war as the continuation of politics, where men are the main actors (Enloe 2004). By categorizing men as life-taking, women as live-giving and children as the next generation, it appears that scholars have misjudged the role of women and children, especially during wars. After the mediatisation of the Bosnia Civil War and the Genocide in Rwanda, policy-makers and NGOs mainly focused on those visible atrocities that reduce the role of women and children to mere victimhood. The proportion of women and children suffering from conflicts is substantial. However, the amalgamation of ‘ Women and Children’ under a unique category because of their relative ‘ vulnerability’, diverted attention away from existing structural realities. Following this myth, scholar’s researches have exacerbated the idea of ‘ tough men’ dying to protect ‘ tender women and children’ and failed to question if women and children are *merely* victims of war.

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[1]The huge number of child refugees is not only driven by the recent Syrian conflict but also by the growing number of Syrian, Afghan and Somali children that were born in refugee camps. (UNHCR 2014)

[2]Antigone… (Anouillh

[3]With a lack of ammunition and in a hopeless situation, Ozalp killed herself not to fall into the hands of the rapists (Mezzofiore 2014)

[4]Women working in munitions factories during WWI.