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October 26th, 2018

Male survivors are not 'emasculated' but experience 'displacement from gendered personhood'

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Taking Northern Uganda as a case study, [Philipp Schulz](#) explores the intersecting harms experienced by male survivors of sexual violence, and argues that these harms can potentially be mitigated. He suggests that improved understanding – and language – can aid recovery.

The United Nations Security Council (UN SC) and the [Women Peace and Security \(WPS\) agenda](#) initially paid [insufficient attention to sexual violence against men and boys](#). Since the passing of [UNSC resolution](#)

[2106](#) in June 2013 and subsequent resolutions, however, there has been growing recognition of men and boys as victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the policy-arena and in scholarship. Even though women and girls remain disproportionately affected by gender-based violence, male sexual harms are now increasingly incorporated into conceptions of wartime sexual violence, and these crimes have been [documented in over fifty contemporary armed conflicts](#) globally.

Despite this growing awareness, however, the dynamics surrounding these crimes – and how sexual violence affects male survivors' lives, relationships and gender identities – remains poorly understood. It is widely argued that male-directed sexual violence compromises male survivors' masculine identities, in a process often termed as 'emasculatation' by way of 'feminisation' and /or 'homo-sexualisation'. The vast majority of studies on sexual violence against men suggest that 'emasculating' male survivors is at once a motivation for sexual violence against men to occur as well as its primary consequence. Yet, despite initial conceptual insights, how the compromising of survivors' masculinities unfolds empirically, and what the effects of these crimes on male survivors are, remains insufficiently addressed.

In a recent article in *International Affairs*, I argue that the impact of conflict-related sexual violence against men is a dynamic process, perpetuated over time through social interactions, health implications and a lack of gender-sensitive medical provisions. In the context of hetero-patriarchal gender relations, physical acts of sexual violence – and in particular anal rape – subordinate male victims along gendered hierarchies. According to locally-specific constructions of gender and sexuality in Northern Uganda, if a man is raped, he involuntarily takes on a female sexual role and character, and is thereby made subordinate in the hierarchical gender order.

The gendered effects of sexual violence extend beyond the physical violations, and are [compounded through different physical, psychological](#)

and physiological consequences, which in turn result in sexual and gendered harms. These intersecting harms signify male survivors' inability to protect themselves as well as their families; to provide materially and economically as a result of physical injuries and long-lasting health implications; and to procreate because of physiologically conditioned inability or difficulties to achieve or sustain an erection. In combination, these intersecting experiences impact upon male survivors' masculine identities in a myriad of ways, striking directly at multiple levels of what it means to be a man in Northern Uganda's society.

In addition to this insight – that the impact of sexual violence on gender identities is a layered process, rather than a singular event – I argue that survivors' lived realities are not necessarily static, but often dynamic and variable. Throughout the literature on sexual violence against men, however, processes of 'emasculatation' are often understood as the *ultimate* and *definite* loss of manhood, and survivors are seen as being *completely* and *indefinitely* stripped of their masculine identities. For instance, in his seminal article on the topic, Sivakumaran posits that sexual violence *robs* victims of their masculine status, suggesting non-reversible effects. In reality, however, there often is a gap between the language and idea of 'emasculatation', which appears static and unambiguous, and survivors' experiences, which often are fluid and variable and can potentially change.

Deconstructing male survivors' gendered harms reveals that the impact of sexual violence on gender identities can potentially be mitigated, of course not without leaving their physical and psychological marks. To illustrate, male survivors in Northern Uganda often expressed to have felt to be '*less of a man*' as a result of the sexual violations they had experienced. One survivor explained that after having been raped, he '*started feeling useless and not man enough*'. For numerous survivors, however, these feelings and perceptions were able to change again over time, influenced by a range of factors, such as membership in survivors' groups or access to physical and psychological rehabilitative support.

One survivor described that *'before we came together [in a survivors' group] we had a lot of feelings of being less of a man, but since being in a group, these feelings have reduced.'* Others who have received physical and psychological support, for instance by the [Refugee Law Project](#), attested that *'through the medical treatment, I was able to work again and provide for my family like a man.'* Such testimonies suggest that although the sexual violations clearly impacted upon their gender identities, these experiences can be mitigated and addressed over time.

In light of these findings, I argue that it might be more accurate and appropriate to speak of the effects of sexual violence on gender identities as ['displacement from gendered personhood'](#), rather than as 'emasculatation' through 'feminisation' and/or 'homo-sexualisation'. In many ways, these terminologies rely on misogyny, gender essentialism and homophobia – by assuming that being symbolically rendered feminine and/or homosexual automatically translates into degradation and humiliation and is necessarily and inherently negative. Ultimately, the assumptions of invulnerable masculinities in contrast to infantilised femininities that underpin the language of 'feminisation' (when employed for male sexual assault) risk reinforcing dominant and damaging ideas about masculinities and hetero-sexualities.

But the idea of 'emasculatation' also falls into a tendency of freezing dynamic experiences into time and space. As an alternative, using the framework of 'displacement from gendered personhood' – inspired by [Edström, Dolan and colleagues](#) – instead recognises that comparable to physical displacement, for instance into a refugee or internally displaced persons (IDP) camp, 'displacement from gendered personhood' can potentially be temporal and possibly be alleviated.

The conclusions to be drawn from this are that sexual violence can compromise male survivors' masculinities in a dynamic way that is perpetuated over time; but that these experiences are not necessarily static and ultimate, and can potentially be mitigated through different

factors. This is important for comprehending how these crimes are perceived and experienced in terms of their gendered damage, and also has implications for survivors' contemporary quests for justice and assistance.

The author presented on this topic at a workshop hosted by the Centre for Women, Peace and Security at LSE in May 2018. The workshop was part of the [Strategic Network on Gender Violence Across War and Peace](#) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council Global Challenges Research Fund.

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