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Gendered impacts of the localised protection of civilians: insights from Libya

0 comments

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Recent research suggests that it is the local communities in conflict-affected societies, rather than state authorities or international peacekeepers, that are the key actors in the protection of civilians. This 'localised' protection of civilians has significant gendered implications. Evidence from post-Gaddafi Libya suggests that women and girls are often compelled to exchange their basic rights for protection from violence and insecurity. Paradoxically, as [Outi Donovan](#) discusses here, it is often the actors meant to be providing protection that constitute the gravest threat to their security.

While [95 per cent of UN peacekeeping missions](#) today are mandated to protect civilians, limited budgets and other operational challenges mean that [peacekeepers are rarely present in situations of immediate threat of violence](#). Communities in conflict-affected societies thus often rely on self-protection

strategies. ,understood as “[activities undertaken during armed conflict to preserve physical integrity in which the primary decision maker is a civilian or group of civilians](#)”. In this ‘localised protection’, militias, religious authorities, tribal elders and family members constitute the main actors providing protection from immediate physical violence. A growing body of literature has emerged around the topic (1), cataloguing a range of self-protection strategies adopted by communities in conflict-affected societies.

I argue, in a recent [article](#) exploring localised protection in Libya, that while efforts to strengthen self-protection through resilience-building may be in line with the growing emphasis on local ownership that underpin UN and donor priorities, a troubling effect of the localised protection is that it often disempowers and at times subjects ‘the protected’ to further violence and insecurity. These dynamics are distinctly gendered, targeting not just women but also men and boys considered as ‘weak’ and ‘feminised’. In post-Gaddafi Libya, where the 2011 revolution overthrowing the regime of Muammar Gaddafi has been followed by cycles of armed conflict, armed militias – formed to protect populations loyal to them – are known to perpetrate violence against those they are meant to protect.

A reoccurring theme in my interviews with Libyan activists is the rise of physical, gendered violence perpetrated by militias, after the 2011 revolution. This is corroborated by [recent research](#) showing that areas with high reported incidents of sexual assault coincide with those that are experiencing armed conflict between militias. In a modus operandi reminiscent of protection rackets, [militias are known to perpetrate acts of harassment, intimidation and killings](#).

A number of [high-profile women politicians and advocates](#), including Fariha al-Berkawi, Salwa Henied, Salwa Bughaighis and more recently, Siham Sergewa have been assassinated or abducted. Although localised protection often leaves women and girls vulnerable, paradoxically they often reify the myth of masculine protectors. [Women often seek romantic relations with ‘heroic protectors’](#) (i.e. members of armed groups) for the security and other benefits they can provide in the context of conflict and poverty. In the Libyan context, members of militias are regarded by some women as ‘[eligible bachelors](#)’.

While localised protection in post-Gaddafi Libya relies on militias, it also functions through tribal structures. Tribal protection creates “[pockets of security](#)” whereby the ‘feminised’ are protected within their community but cannot move safely between communities because of tribal conflicts. Importantly, tribal protection applies only to certain types of violence (extra-tribal threats), while forms of ‘private’ or domestic violence that are central to women’s insecurity in conflict-settings are considered as matters internal to the family and as such, beyond tribal protection. Female family members are often confined to their homes in the name of protecting them, even though [anecdotal evidence](#) points towards high rates of domestic violence.

Another strategy of familial protection is early marriage. If not as a widespread protection strategy as in other conflict contexts, recent [reports](#) on Libya suggest a growing trend of child marriage against the backdrop of escalating violence and economic hardship in the country.

Gendered violence affects men and boys too. Sexual violence is perpetrated against ‘weak’, ‘feminised’ men, such as Libyans of African origin or migrants. Research has documented widespread rape of men and boys in Libyan refugee camps. According to some estimates, [40 per cent of male and female refugees and migrants passing through Libya are subjected to sexual violence](#).

Importantly, the effects of localised protection are highly uneven. Gender intersects with race, class and tribal affiliation in defining who gets protection and on what terms. My interviewees noted how members of prominent tribes are, for example, less likely to be targeted by militias. In contrast, those with no affiliations to powerful tribes or families of African origin or internally displaced are much more exposed to violence outside the home.



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The above dynamics of protection and violence are, as I argue following a long line of feminist research, tantamount to protection rackets whereby the supposed protectors often constitute the greatest source of insecurity. These protection rackets are enabled by conservative gender norms that significantly undermine the ability of women, girls and other ‘feminised’ groups to negotiate the terms of their own protection.

For example, male family members have control over the ‘family book’, a shared identity document required for accessing services and benefits in Libya. This means that access to resources such as bank loans is dependent upon permission from male relatives.

While the ‘feminised’ often face a situation where they have no choice but to exchange their freedoms and autonomy for protection, it is also important to be attentive to the agency of the ‘protected’. Women, youth and other marginalised groups in Libya have established a range of measures to protect themselves and their communities against violence, including knowledge exchange, protests and advocacy.



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For example, women in Libya are using social media to alert each other of areas or routes where harassment or violent clashes between militias have been reported. Another strategy has been to disguise counselling support for survivors of sexual violence and legal advice as a workshop or training on a non-controversial issue, such as IT skills. While these efforts are a testament to the agency of the feminised groups, the militarisation of the society after Gaddafi's fall has reinforced hypermasculinity that generates further violence and disempowerment.

The above experience of localised protection is not unique to Libya; gendered mobility restrictions on the grounds of security severely undermine women's access to education, paid employment, healthcare and public life in conflict zones, such as [Yemen](#). These experiences of protection in Libya and elsewhere point towards a multi-layered dynamic of protection and insecurity faced by the 'protected'. Although these risks of protection are often acknowledged by donors, they are rarely prioritised when 'the tyranny of the urgent' subjugates gender-based concerns in conflict environments.

This points to the importance of thinking more seriously about gender in the context of localised, self-protection. This line of thinking places the needs and agency of those affected by various insecurities at the forefront of protection practices. Translating these ideas into practice requires at the very least that the voices of those who are in need of protection are listened to and ideally, incorporated into decision-making structures. International actors and donors have a role to play in tying funding to this priority but also in ensuring that 'protection racketeers' are not empowered. As my interviewee put it, "you don't need to empower women, you need to disempower warlords".

(1) see [Betsy Jose and Peace Medie](#), [Paul Williams](#), [Erin Baines and Emily Paddon](#) and [Emily Paddon Rhoads and Rebecca Sutton](#).

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About the author



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Dr Outi Donovan is a Lecturer in International Relations at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. Her research investigates peacebuilding and peace processes in conflict-affected societies. Among other themes, her work has investigated the 'forgotten' pillar of the responsibility to protect principle, 'responsibility to rebuild', explored the gendered dynamics of civilian protection in peacebuilding contexts and analysed the dynamics between international and local peacebuilding agents, published as a monograph in 2017 (The Contentious Politics of Statebuilding).

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