

The UK Stabilisation Unit and Sexual Violence in Conflict



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Intersections between men, a gendered misrecognition and transitional justice across conflict geographies

Coinciding with the British presidency of the G8 and under the leadership of Foreign Secretary William Hague, on 10-13 June 2014 the UK will host a global summit on sexual violence in conflict areas. As part of the UK Stabilisation Unit's *Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative*, the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict will gather representatives from the 122 countries that endorsed the UN Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, along with civil society actors, scholars, judicial, medical, NGO and military practitioners.

According to the Foreign Office, it will be the **largest ever convened high-level summit** on sexuality and conflict, aiming to tackle sexual violence in warzones and to strengthen mechanisms to document and investigate sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) in conflict areas. Certainly, sexual violence against women and girls is a main component of SGBV in conflict – it is, however, not the end of the story. The more I familiarise myself with Hague's initiative and discussions, the more I observe with concern that the issue of sexual violence in conflict appears overwhelmingly situated within issues of women's and children's rights, women and peace-building or women-oriented projects of post-conflict transformation. Sexual violence against men, boys and sexual minorities, however, is barely mentioned.

While tempting, my intention in this article is not to discuss Britain's motivations to embrace sexual violence in conflict areas as a 2014 top foreign policy priority. I am sure that such motivations will shortly generate critical debate among scholars and students of transnational sexuality studies. Rather, the objective of this post is to draw attention to an overlooked issue that the Stabilisation Unit and the international community needs to take more seriously: sexual and gender-based

violence against men.

The list of documented cases of sexual violence in conflict against men is extensive. In **Sri Lanka**, over twenty per cent of Tamil Tigers were sodomised in prison with chillies rubbed on a baton. In a previous paper, I documented and analysed the brutal methods that Iraqi vigilante militiamen used to terrorise men in Baghdad's impoverished ghettos [1]. The methods included the injection of glue into men's anuses and the provision of laxatives to provoke diarrhea. Subsequently, men died as a result of peritonitis (**HRW 2009**). In the Great Lakes Region of Africa, the forms of sexual crimes have been even more brutal. Often men were "forced to penetrate holes in banana trees that run with acidic sap, to sit with their genitals over a fire, to drag rocks tied to their penis, to give oral sex to queues of soldiers, [or were] penetrated with screwdrivers" (**Storr 2011**). Let alone the stories of male political prisoners behind bars in Diyarbakir, San Salvador and Cairo, or the cases of male-on-male rape at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis documented by **Belkin (2012)**.

Yet most documents and investigations on sexual violence in conflict areas are overwhelmingly focused on women and girls. On most occasions academic, legal and humanitarian texts portray men as stereotypical active perpetrators of violence, and women as passive recipients of masculine aggressions. This gendered binary largely overlooks the mounting evidence of sexual crimes perpetrated against men, boys and sexual minorities. As a result of this **gendered**

inequality – in practice – most humanitarian programmes, policies and projects on SGBV in conflict areas are gender-biased and leave male victims largely unattended (Sivakumaran 2007).

Acts of sexual violence against men and women have enormous secondary effects. In the case of women and girls, these have been carefully documented and post-conflict reconstruction projects have been central in targeting them. However, when the violence is perpetrated against men, the effects are less easy to identify and therefore to target (Carpenter 2006). The lack of international recognition of male victims of sexual violence in conflict is gradually resulting in an international legal blind spot that international policy-makers are not adequately addressing. Meanwhile, in conflict-affected areas – where post-war barriers to redress the issue are enormous – male victims carry deep psychological wounds, which left unattended manifest themselves in various forms including depression, stigmatisation, alcoholism, suicide, drug consumption, and ultimately in the break-down of community and family bonds (Sivakumaran 2007).

The critical legal and gender work on the exclusion of male victims from mainstream SGBV-oriented programmes, remains predominantly focused on the Great Lakes Region –particularly at the Kampala-based **Refugee Law Project** (RLP) at Makerere University. The emerging interdisciplinary analyses on sexual violence, law, masculinities, militarisation and war developed on the DRC and Uganda (RLP 2013) could fruitfully be extended to other geographical contexts where sexual violence against men has been rife. Indeed, the coming global summit in London would offer considerable opportunities for the UK Stabilisation Unit and the G8 to urge national governments and international organisations to develop and implement gender-specific policies and programmes directed to male victims.

Initiatives to tackle sexual violence in conflict areas usually emerge in the post-conflict phase, and, often, sexual violence is a key pillar of transitional justice agendas. Having said this, the London summit could *additionally* be used to highlight the importance of adequately addressing SGBV in countries where a transition from conflict to post-conflict stabilization might start in the near future, for instance in Syria or Colombia. In both countries, the UK Stabilisation Unit has SGBV-related projects in place.

On the Syrian borders, the **Stabilisation Unit**, together with the I-NGO Physicians for Human Rights, provided trainings to medical experts working with Syrian refugees on the documentation of sexual violence. Meanwhile on his last visit to Colombia, Foreign Secretary Hague **expressed his awareness** of a “survey that estimated that between 2001 and 2009 almost half a million Colombian women were victims of sexual violence associated with the conflict”. He added that “the suffering of women must never again be treated as an issue of secondary importance, and survivors must never be shunned and abandoned for they should be supported and freed from stigma”. I cannot agree more with your words Mr. Hague, victims of sexual violence should never be abandoned. However, your declarations do indeed reproduce the main concern that motivates this article – the suffering of boys, men and sexual minorities cannot longer be a tangential issue.

The London summit can effectively be used by rights groups to urge national governments and multilateral organisations to develop and implement gender-specific post-conflict programmes aimed at alleviating the suffering of male victims. Now, Britain has an extraordinary opportunity to distance itself from mainstream-approaches to sexual crimes in conflict, and to develop gender-sensitive, original and ambitious programmes according to the needs and suffering of *women, men, girls, sexual minorities and boys*.

The inability of society – and particularly of policy-makers involved in transitional justice and post-conflict reconstruction mechanisms – to recognise the vulnerability of boys, men and sexual minorities in conflict areas is having large destabilising effects. Why do girls and women-oriented aid projects on sexualised violence appear so sexy to donors and multilateral agencies?

There are myriad answers to this question – such debate, however, exceeds the scope of this article. On a very basic practical technocratic level, some have argued that the utilitarian political economy of international north-south aid is key to understanding the nature of the problem. On a

more critically reflexive level, however, one might argue that Western gendered notions of masculinised protectors and feminised victims are palpable in this issue.

[1] Unpublished research by the author on “The Sexual Politics of anti-Imperialism: A sociological analysis of authoritarian religious movements and the 2009 death squads in post-Ba’athist east Baghdad”

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