

# International Responses to Sexual Violence in Conflict: Where Do Men and Boys Fit In?

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## Abstract

*Until very recently, most academic researchers and international responders overlooked sexual violence against men and boys in political conflict situations. While a growing body of scholarship now investigates the gendered dynamics of conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys, and awareness of the pervasiveness of its perpetration has spread, male survivors have yet to be mainstreamed into international responses and on-the-ground service provision. A critical debate is whether the normative framework created by the UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda can address conflict-related sexual violence in a gender-inclusive, non-binary way while leaving space for the development of tailored, gender-specific services for individual survivors. This broad review of the literature supports the conclusion that the best way to address conflict-related violence against men and boys is not to separate sexual violence against men and boys from the existing agenda, but to work within this tradition to expand research on the gender-specific dynamics of victimization and violence. Doing so would help support the creation of gender-sensitive responses and funding streams that include men and boys in addition to women and girls, and design care and treatment mechanisms that take account of local cultural norms around gender. This paper sets forth that research agenda.*

## Background and Context

Conflict-related sexual violence is a tactic of war, torture, and terror perpetrated against combatants and civilian populations, and recognized by the United Nations as both a violation of international criminal and human rights law and a threat to international peace and security. In 2000, Security Council resolution 1325—the United Nations’ landmark resolution on Women, Peace and Security—acknowledged the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women and girls, and sexual violence in this context, calling “on all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse.” Follow-on resolutions strengthened

the UN’s commitment to addressing sexual violence in conflict situations, focusing on women and children: UNSCR 1820 (2008) condemning sexual violence as a tool of war and stating that rape and sexual violence can constitute war crimes; 1888 (2009) mandating peacekeeping missions to specifically protect women from sexual violence; 1889 (2009) emphasizing the responsibility of member states to end impunity and to prosecute those responsible for violence committed against women and girls in armed conflicts, including rape and other sexual violence; 1960 (2010) strengthening accountability measures, including establishing a reporting mechanism for reporting sexual violence in conflict to the UN Secretary General; and 2242 (2015) which

reviewed and took steps to operationalize recommendations from the 2015 global, high-level Women, Peace and Security review undertaken to coincide with the fifteenth anniversary of UNSCR 1325.<sup>1</sup>

While the issue of conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls has garnered increased international attention in the past two decades through these UN resolutions and the establishment of a Special Representative to the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys has only recently emerged as an issue calling for specific consideration and targeted action. With responses to conflict-related sexual violence firmly embedded into the UN's Women, Peace and Security agenda framework, it was not until 2012 that high-level attention turned to male victims of conflict-related sexual violence, with António Guterres, then UN High Commissioner for Refugees explicitly recognizing that men and boys were at risk of conflict- or displacement-related sexual violence. Guterres acknowledged that compared to women and girls sexual violence in conflict situations was “less understood or acknowledged,” and issued guidance on behalf of his office for working with male survivors.<sup>2</sup> In June 2013 this recognition of men and boys as potential and actual victims

of conflict-related sexual violence appeared in UN resolution 2106: “Sexual violence in armed conflict and post-conflict situations disproportionately affects women and girls, as well as groups that are particularly vulnerable or may be specifically targeted, *while also affecting men and boys and those secondarily traumatized* as forced witnesses of sexual violence against family members.” In spite of this inclusion of men and boys in the language of the resolution, its main focus remained on women and girls, stressing that acts of sexual violence in conflict situations “not only severely impede the critical contributions of women to society, but also impede durable peace and security as well as sustainable development.”<sup>3</sup>

The following month in July 2013, Zainab Hawa Bangura, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, convened a workshop focusing specifically on the issue of conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys, at which documented allegations of sexual violence against men and boys in some 25 countries, ranging from rape to genital mutilation, were highlighted to indicate the still relatively unknown scope of problem. Recognizing that there was a “blurring of ‘gender,’ ‘women,’ and ‘SGBV [sexual- and gender-based violence]’” and that “the

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1 UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), 31 October 2000. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1325\(2000\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1325(2000)); UN Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008), 19 June 2008. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1820\(2008\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1820(2008)); UN Security Council Resolution 1888 (2009), 30 September 2009. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1888\(2009\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1888(2009)); UN Security Council Resolution 1889 (2009), 5 October 2009. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1889\(2009\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1889(2009)); UN Security Council Resolution 1960 (2010), 16 December 2010. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1960\(2010\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1960(2010)). UN Security Council Resolution 2242 (2015), 13 October 2015. [http://undocs.org/S/RES/2242\(2015\)](http://undocs.org/S/RES/2242(2015)).

2 UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Working with Men and Boy Survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Forced Displacement*, July 2012. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5006aa262.html>.

3 Italics added for emphasis. UN Security Council Resolution 2106 (2013), 24 June 2013. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2106\(2013\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2106(2013)).

Women, Peace, and Security lens may have inadvertently led to adverse and exclusionary programming practices in the field,” among the 29 recommendations issued from this workshop were calls for increased funding and commitment from the international community to respond to male victims of conflict-related sexual violence, as well as a call for more research and gender disaggregated data collection on the prevalence and impacts of sexual violence against men and boys in situations of armed conflict.<sup>4</sup> At the Security Council level this increased focus on men and boys in the context of conflict-related sexual violence was reflected in resolution 2331 (2016) which referenced boys alongside girls as potential trafficking and sexual-violence victims due to conflict-related displacement, and in resolution 2467 (2019)—the first to address conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys directly rather than as an “and also”—urging UN member states to protect “victims who are men and boys through the strengthening of policies that offer appropriate responses to male survivors and challenge cultural assumptions about male invulnerability to such violence.”<sup>5</sup>

While the UN Security Council remains actively engaged with the issue of conflict-related sexual violence and has taken steps as of late to separately acknowledge conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys, global responses, funding, and on-the-ground interventions remain weak across the board, particularly for men, boys, and victims explicitly targeted because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. The rate of incidences of conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys, and specific vulnerabilities of men and boys in different conflict and displacement contexts, remain under-researched, though the physical, emotional, and psychological damage wrought by this sexual violence is known to reverberate throughout communities and, in the case of male victims, heighten the likelihood of triggering long-lasting cycles of violence and abuse.<sup>6</sup>

There are likewise many areas in which sexual violence against men and boys is still under-theorized as compared to parallel scholarship undertaken in the context of sexual violence against women and girls. It took decades of research and advocacy to fully bring the issue

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4 Office of the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, “UN Workshop on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Men and Boys, 25-26 July 2013: Report and Recommendations,” 5 December 2013. <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/report/execute-summary-report-of-workshop-on-sexual-violence-against-men-and-boys/Workshop-on-Sexual-Violence-against-Men-and-Boys-in-Conflict-Situations.pdf>.

5 UN Security Council Resolution 2331 (2016), 20 December 2016. [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2331\(2016\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2331(2016)); UN Security Council Resolution 2467 (2019), 23 April 2019. [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2467\(2019\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2467(2019)).

6 See for instance, Ligia Kiss, et al., “Male and LGBT Survivors of Sexual Violence in Conflict Situations: A Realist Review of Health Interventions in Low- and Middle-Income Countries.” *Conflict and Health* vol. 14, 11 (February 2020). [doi.org/10.1186/s13031-020-0254-5](https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-020-0254-5); Janine Natalya Clark, “Masculinity and Male Survivors of Wartime Sexual Violence: A Bosnian Case Study” *Conflict, Security, and Development* vol. 14, 4 (2017): 287-311. [doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2017.1338422](https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2017.1338422); Kirsten Johnson, et al., “Association of Combatant Status and Sexual Violence with Health and Mental Health Outcomes in Post-Conflict Liberia,” *JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association* vol. 300, 6 (2008): 676-690. [doi:10.1001/jama.300.6.676](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.300.6.676); and Johnson, et al., “Association of Sexual Violence and Human Rights Violations, with Physician and Mental Health in Territories of the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.” *JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association* vol. 305, 5 (2010): 553-562. [doi:10.1001/jama.2010.1086](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2010.1086).

of sexual violence against women and girls to the forefront of the international agenda, and in many ways, theoretical and advocacy work related to sexual violence against men and boys is comparatively in its infancy. A deeper understanding of how gender norms, particularly related to masculinity, shape perceptions of and responses to victims and perpetrators is needed not only to fully recognize and address the issue of conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys, but to move policy toward a gender-inclusive approach to mitigation and care. And while there is an assumption and—as a small but growing number of published case-studies bear out— a growing body of evidence showing that sexual violence against men and boys in conflict situations is pervasive, security, legal, and humanitarian systems are in many instances playing catch-up, dependent on data that, when available, is still by and large not disaggregated by gender.

As cautioned by legal and gender justice scholar Lisa Davis, a narrow focus on quantification and numbers collection around conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys can feed into the creation of “hierarchies of harm” and ultimately be counter-productive when quantification dictates levels of attention and response. According to Sandesh Sivakumaran, an early advocate for attention to male survivors, there is a “Catch 22” at work in this context, in that a lack of quantification undercuts acknowledgement of the problem and

justification for funding and programming.<sup>7</sup> Underreporting and this lack of evidence of conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys have created a situation where there is little agreement on the types of prevention and treatment interventions that should be made in pre-conflict, active conflict, and post-conflict scenarios in areas including basic security measures, sensitization training, education, and community-based medical and psychosocial systems. With research still lagging, the need for and efficacy of services across a range of sectors is lacking, the prospects of rehabilitation or recovery for victims is illusive, and justice response mechanisms remain limited.

## **Data and Challenges to Documentation**

UN guidance for data collection around conflict-related sexual violence originally focused entirely on women and girls. UNSCR 1960 (2010) for example called for the establishment of monitoring, analysis and reporting arrangements, encouraging “the Secretary-General to engage with United Nations actors, national institutions, civil society organizations, health-care providers, and women’s groups to enhance data collection and analysis of incidents, trends, and patterns of rape and other forms of sexual violence ... .” With conflict-related sexual violence data collection at the outset built within a framework meant to focus on women and girls and collected through medical and

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<sup>7</sup> Lisa Davis, “Gender Inclusive Responses to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence,” Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination at Princeton University Workshop, 4 May 2018; Sandesh Sivakumaran, “Lost in Translation: UN Responses to Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in Situations of Armed Conflict,” *International Review of the Red Cross* vol. 92, 877 (March 2010): 259-277. [doi.org/10.1017/S1816383110000020](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383110000020).

civil-society organizations (including “women’s groups”) attuned to their specific needs, men and boys were left outside of formal data gathering mechanisms. Systematic, gender disaggregated data collection around the rates of incidents of conflict-related sexual violence against men across different country and conflict contexts remains limited at best. Quantitative evidence of sexual violence against boys specifically remains almost non-existent subsumed within studies that broadly address sexual violence against children.<sup>8</sup>

Still, since 1998, cases of conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys have been documented in conflict situations worldwide, including in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Central and Latin America.<sup>9</sup> Some of the first serious studies quantifying rates of conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys came in the context of broader investigations related to the medical and mental health outcomes of post-conflict populations. In their study of post-conflict Liberia, for example, Kirsten Johnson, et al. (2008) found significant numbers of female and male victims of conflict-related sexual violence in a wider study of the impacts of the Liberian civil wars, assessing the prevalence and impact of war-related psychosocial trauma, exposure to sexual violence, social functioning, and mental health.

Their survey found high rates of conflict-related sexual violence among combatants and civilians alike: some 51 per cent of female (42.3 percent of combatants, 9.2 percent of non-combatants) and 40 percent of male (32.6 percent of combatants, 7.4 percent of non-combatants) survey respondents. The researchers further found that male and female combatants who experienced sexual violence had worse mental health outcomes than non-combatants and combatants who did not experience sexual violence, particularly related to rates of PTSD, depression, and suicidal ideation. Still, it was noted by the authors that, “The use of males for sexual slavery is not well documented in the postconflict literature,” and that “[t]he Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration educational program of Liberia was meant to deliver health care, education, skills training, family tracing and reunification, and response to the particular needs of women and girls, many of whom struggled with the psychological, physical, and social consequences of sexual and other forms of physical abuse, forced ‘marriage,’ pregnancy, and childbirth.”<sup>10</sup> Similar subsequent case studies of eastern Democratic Republic of

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8 See UNSCR 1960, op. 8; Chris Dolan, “Into the Mainstream: Addressing Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in Conflict” Briefing Paper, Overseas Development Institute, London. May 14, 2014.

9 “UN Workshop on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Men and Boys, 25-26 July 2013;” Detailed and focused analyses that included conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys began to emerge in earnest during the early 2000s. This was due in part to attention called to incidents of male rape reported during the war in Yugoslavia. See for example, Pauline Oosterhoff, Prisca Zwanikken and Everett Ketting, “Sexual Torture of Men in Croatia and Other Conflict Situations: An Open Secret.” *Reproductive Health Matters* vol. 12, 23 (2014): 68-77. [doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080\(04\)23115-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080(04)23115-9).

10 Johnson, et al., “Association of Combatant Status and Sexual Violence with Health and Mental Health Outcomes in Postconflict Liberia,” 676-690, quoted selections 676, 677.

Congo (2010) and Sri Lanka (2019) found lower, but still significant numbers of men who experienced conflict-related sexual violence.<sup>11</sup>

In spite of studies like these, the prevalence of conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys remains under-documented. The challenges of immediate data gathering in the chaos of conflict and post-conflict situations are compounded by prevailing assumptions and practices that functionally ignore male survivors.<sup>12</sup> Quoting research by Luke Juran, William Affleck, et al., posit that like in post-disaster situations, in post-conflict situations pre-existing gender inequalities are “maintained and regenerated, if not magnified.” This, the authors contend, creates a dynamic in which “women are assumed to be socially more vulnerable than men,” diverting attention, resources, and access to services to their particular needs. “The relative privilege of men, as a group, leads to their vulnerability being overlooked.”<sup>13</sup>

Male victims of sexual violence are in fact often simply overlooked, with the result that men and boys are less likely to be identified as victims of conflict-related sexual violence. A basic roadblock to fully understanding the scope of the problem is that men and boys are not asked by medical workers, on-the-ground service providers, and post-conflict security personnel if they witnessed or had sexual-violence perpetrated directly against them. Outreach undertaken in the field is often undertaken specifically with women and girls in mind, and data-driven research likewise skews toward women and girls. Indeed, Affleck, et al., found that since 1988, fully 95 percent of gender-focused research of trauma and humanitarian responses among refugees—including sexual violence—addressed women’s issues, with a scant 5 percent addressing the experiences of men.<sup>14</sup>

Further, healthcare providers often do not recognize or document physical trauma in men and boys as having been caused by sexual violence. Male survivors of conflict-

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11 Sri Lanka the authors found up to 21 percent of all men experienced conflict-related sexual violence. Johnson, et al. “Association of Sexual Violence and Human Rights Violations with Physical and Mental Health in Territories of the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo;” Richard Traunmüller, Sara Kijewski, and Markus Freitag, “The Silent Victims of Sexual Violence during War: Evidence from a List Experiment in Sri Lanka.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* vol. 63, 9 (February 2019): 2015-2042. doi:10.1177/0022002719828053; Dolan, “Into the Mainstream;” See also, Lara Stemple, “Male Rape and Human Rights.” *Hastings Law Journal* vol. 60, 3 (2009): 605-647.

12 The NGO All Survivors Project has proposed leveraging existing UN data-gathering mechanisms (e.g. the Monitoring, Analysis and Reporting Arrangements (MARA) on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, and the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on Grave Violations against Children) which are mandated to provide disaggregated gender data, and better coordination of local, state, and international (UN, NGO) data reporting as a potential way to address some of these data gaps. See, All Survivors Project, “Checklist on Preventing and Addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Men and Boys,” (December 2019), 17-19. <https://allsurvivorsproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Checklist-English.pdf>.

13 William Affleck, et al., “Underrepresentation of Men in Gender Based Humanitarian and Refugee Trauma Research: A Scoping Review.” *Intervention: Journal of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Conflict Affected Areas* vol. 16, 1 (2018): 22-30. <http://www.interventionjournal.org/text.asp?2018/16/1/22/228770>; Luke Juran, “The Gendered Nature of Disasters: Women Survivors in Post-Tsunami Tamil Nadu.” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* vol. 19, 1 (2012): 1-29. doi:10.1177/097152151101900101.

14 Affleck, “Underrepresentation of Men in Gender Based Humanitarian and Refugee Trauma Research.”

related sexual violence rarely volunteer information, as feelings of shame, cultural norms, and concerns about stigma lead them to hide the fact that sexual violence had been perpetrated against them. Laws that criminalize homosexual acts in some 76 countries globally further silence male survivors who fear prosecution under these laws. When violations such as genital mutilation and anal penetration are reported by victims, they commonly come to be framed, documented, and legally recognized as torture rather than rape or other forms of sexual violence.<sup>15</sup>

Societal definitions of masculinity further contribute to a broad culture of silence among male survivors. In a 2012 literature review, Jessica Turchik and Katie Edwards identified six “myths” about male rape that have contributed to the “invisibility and marginalization” of male victims of sexual violence that are pertinent to the specific case of sexual violence against men and boys in conflict situations: (1) men cannot be raped; (2) “real men” can defend themselves against rape; (3) only gay men are victims and perpetrators; (4) women cannot rape; (5) men are only raped in prison; (6) rape makes the victim homosexual.<sup>16</sup> With male rape stigmatized and defined as abnormal in the context of traditional gender norms and “myths” that continue to shape understandings and interventions to this

violence, male victims of sexual violence are caught in a cycle in which they are often unwilling to seek treatment or speak openly about their experiences but encounter a dearth of services because the numbers of men and boys needing such services is perceived as being negligible. The practical result is an absence of policy interventions meant to directly address the underlying motivations of perpetrators of male rape in conflict situations (e.g. exerting power and undermining resistance of individuals and communities) and of direct action in places where sexual violence against men is known to be prevalent in conflict situations (e.g. prisons and detention).

This dearth of systemic data underpins the absence of a coordinated response to conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys, limits the ability of male victims to obtain treatment or legal redress, limits attention and funding at the international level, and undercuts the development of international and local efforts to mitigate this violence and address its aftermath. Mainstream humanitarian programming rarely makes specific provisions for men and boys, while international guidance for mitigating conflict-related sexual violence and assisting victims remains female-centric. Limited programmatic responses feed from and into a global discourse around conflict-related sexual violence characterized by a lack of

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15 On these issues, see especially, Pauline Oosterhoff, Prisca Zwanikken, and Everet Ketting, “Sexual Torture of Men in Croatia and other Conflict Situations: An Open Secret.” *Reproductive Health Matters*, vol. 12, 23 (2004): 68–77; and Stemple, “Male Rape and Human Rights.”

16 Jessica Turchik and Katie Edwards, “Myths about Male Rape: A Literature Review.” *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* vol. 13, 2 (2012): 211–226. [doi.org/10.1037/a0023207](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023207). See also Caroline Forde and Nata Duvvury, “Sexual Violence, Masculinity, and the Journey of Recovery.” *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* vol. 18, 4 (June 2016): 301–310. [doi.org/10.1037/men0000054](https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000054).

gender inclusivity, as well as monitoring and programming mechanisms that incorporate little or no acknowledgement of male victimization into their work.

## Gender Frameworks and the Dynamics of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

The nine resolutions in the UN's Women, Peace and Security agenda largely provide the international framework for addressing conflict-related sexual violence. This framework underpins a larger human security framework that is highly gendered, building on the historical recognition of women and children as de facto victims of conflict, but that often excludes men as potential and actual victims of violence, particularly sexual violence. Indeed, the term "violence against women" appears over 100 times in UN resolutions and other documents, implicitly framing violence—including but not exclusively sexual violence—as a gendered phenomena perpetrated against women by men.<sup>17</sup> Although critics have noted the limitations of this framework for addressing conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys, there is a growing consensus that these limitations are rooted not in the WPS framework itself, but rather in the slow pace of incorporating analysis related to power and the gendered dynamics of sexual violence in to the

practical application of the WPS framework. "Acts of wartime sexual violence against men and women are not distinct phenomena, but are inter-related," asserts legal scholar Valorie Vojdik. "Like the rape of women, the rape and sexual violation of men constructs and enforces actual and symbolic gendered power on several levels," functioning to empower particular male groups over others.<sup>18</sup> A gender inclusive approach calls for understanding gendered hierarchies and gendered responses to sexual violence, not simply through a binary lens of female or male that establishes one as victim and the other as perpetrator, but in a more fluid way that considers power and the ways in which sexual violence—regardless of gender identity—upends traditional notions of male strength and female weakness.<sup>19</sup>

Here, insights of feminist scholarship about the power dynamics of sexual violence and early advocacy for women and children in conflict situations can be drawn upon and expanded in order to better understand the relationship between sexual violence against men and boys and the exploitation of hegemonic masculinity and the hierarchical gender order on which notions of this masculinity are based. The dynamics of sexual violence in conflict as perpetrated against men and women then can be interrogated not only in the

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17 Stemple, "Male Rape and Human Rights;" Janine Natalya Clark, "The Vulnerability of the Penis: Sexual Violence against Men in Conflict and Security Frames" *Men and Masculinities* vol. 22, 5 (2019): 778-800. [doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17724487](https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17724487); Harry Apperley, "Hidden Victims: A Call to Action on Sexual Violence Against Men in Conflict." *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* vol. 21, 2 (2015): 92-99.

18 Valorie Vojdik, "Sexual Violence against Men and Women in War: A Masculinities Approach." *Nevada Law Journal* vol. 14, 3 (2014): 926. <https://scholars.law.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1564&context=nlj>.

19 For new approaches to understanding the gendered dynamics of conflict-related sexual violence, see Marysia Zalewski, et al., eds., *Sexual Violence against Men in Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018).

complex ways in which they are similar but how they are not, and how and why those differences matter. In conflict situations, as explored by Sarah Solangon and Preeti Patel, “gendered binaries and strict gender roles are primarily responsible in accentuating sexual violence against men in terrorizing and humiliating victims.” Rape and other forms of sexual violence “feminizes” male victims, asserts David Eichert, by employing “the weaponization of masculinity, bodily integrity and /or sexual identity,” to both “reaffirm group belonging and hetero-masculinity among perpetrators,” and “send a message to a larger community of nation regarding supremacy and power hierarchies.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, it has been argued that by not more rigorously interrogating conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys through the lens of feminist scholarship and this scholarship’s critical examination of the dynamics of female victimization in conflict and non-conflict situations, efforts to fully understand the functioning of hegemonic masculinities and patriarchal power relations in this context have been undercut.<sup>21</sup>

Gendered hierarchies not only shape the commission and meanings of sexual violence in the context of conflict, but local and international community attentiveness and policy responses to it. “Masculinities in conflict-affected and peacebuilding contexts have generally speaking been under-researched,” observes Henri Myrntinen, et al. With much of the existing conflict-related scholarship around masculinity focusing “relatively narrowly on men and their ‘violences,’” revolving around “either men’s ‘innate’ propensity to violence or relative simplistic uses of frameworks such as ... ‘hyper’-masculinities.” More sophisticated work that has been undertaken on an academic level the authors observed “has yet to filter through to on-the-ground work.”<sup>22</sup> This disconnect has had profound practical implications. According to research conducted by Monica Adhiambo Onyango and Karen Hampanda, communities and aid- and care-providing organizations are “not equipped” to adequately address the needs of male survivors of sexual violence because this violence “undermines social constructions of masculinity.” And so, while women have access—albeit often

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20 Sarah Solangon and Preeti Patel, “Sexual Violence against Men in Countries Affected by Armed Conflict.” *Conflict, Security and Development* vol. 12, 4 (2012): 417-442. [doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2012.724794](https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2012.724794); David Eichert, “‘Homosexualization’ Revisited: An Audience-Focused Theorization of Wartime Male Sexual Violence.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* vol. 21, 3 (2018): 409-433. [doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1522264](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1522264). Sara Meger, *Rape Loot Pillage: The Political Economy of Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). See especially Chapter 8: Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in Armed Conflict, 174-188.

21 Aliraza Javaid, “Feminism, Masculinity and Male Rape: Bringing Male Rape ‘Out of the Closet.’” *Journal of Gender Studies* vol. 25, 3 (2016): 283-293. [doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2014.959479](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2014.959479); Chris Dolan, “Has Patriarchy been Stealing the Feminists’ Clothes? Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and UN Security Council Resolutions.” *IDS Bulletin* vol. 45, 1 (January 2014): 80-84. For a consideration of the potential pitfalls and utility of this approach of applying feminist theoretical frameworks and intersectional analysis to analysis of masculinities in the context of conflict situations, see Marsha Henry, “Problematizing Military Masculinity, Intersectionality, and Male Vulnerability in Feminist Critical Military Studies.” *Critical Military Studies* (Masculinities at the Margins Issue) vol. 3, 2 (2017): 182-199. [doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2017.1325140](https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2017.1325140).

22 Henri Myrntinen, et al., “Re-Thinking Hegemonic Masculinities in Conflict-Affected Contexts.” *Critical Military Studies* vol. 3, 2 (2017): 103-119. [doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2016.1262658](https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2016.1262658);

cursory and tied to reproductive healthcare and maternal supports—to medical and psychosocial services, parallel treatment services to address physical and psychological trauma are often wholly unavailable to male survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. Further, long-term personal and public health concerns related to sexually transmitted diseases and increased rates of intimate partner abuse among male survivors of conflict-related sexual violence go largely unaddressed.<sup>23</sup>

Theoretical work that has yet to trickle into policy conversations, and the still scant body of data documenting conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys is reflected in, and reinforced by, the limited and halting attention paid to the issue in the UN policy agenda. While there has been increased NGO advocacy around the issue of conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys and growing support among some member states for more attentiveness to the issue, it remains a largely secondary consideration within the UN's normative framework for addressing sexual violence against women and girls in conflict situations. As bluntly stated by Ellen

Gorris, men and boys have been “historically and structurally rendered an invisible group of victims in international human rights and policy responses towards conflict-related sexual violence stemming from the United Nations.” According to Gorris, women and girls constitute a “visible” group of victims needing and deserving of international attention and aid. Men and boys (though to a lesser extent because of their status as children) are “invisible” victims based largely on gendered notions of victimization. The institutionalization of gendered constructions of masculinity, victimhood, and sexual violence have had broad and long-lasting implications.<sup>24</sup>

This gendered dichotomy has historically shaped structural deficiencies and even discrimination against male victims of conflict-related sexual violence in policy and humanitarian interventions. A post-UNSCR 1325 review of over 4,000 NGOs undertaking work on sexual violence in conflict found that only 3 percent mentioned male victims in their literature or programming.<sup>25</sup> Here, the political contexts in which UN policy developed to address

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23 Adhiambo Onyango and Karen Hampanda, “Social Constructions of Masculinity and Male Survivors of Wartime Sexual Violence: An Analytical Review.” *International Journal of Sexual Health* vol. 23, 4 (2011): 237-247. [doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2011.608415](https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2011.608415). See also R. W. Connell, “Masculinities, the Reduction of Violence and the Pursuit of Peace,” in Cynthia Cockburn and Dubravka Zarkov, eds., *The Postwar Moment: Militaries, Masculinities and International Peacekeeping*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart), 33-40; Kimberly Hutchings, “Making Sense of Masculinity and War.” *Men and Masculinity* vol. 10, 4 (2008): 389-404; and David Duriesmith, *Masculinity and New War: The Gendered Dynamics of Armed Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2017). Public health concerns related to the management of STDs were acknowledged in 2013 by the Special Representative on the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict as a particular area of concern. See “UN Workshop on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Men and Boys,” 5 December 2013.

24 Ellen Anna Philo Gorris, “Invisible Victims? Where Are Male Victims of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in International Law and Policy?” *European Journal of Women's Studies* vol. 22, 4 (2015): 412-427. [doi.org/10.1177/1350506815605345](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506815605345).

25 Augusta Del Zotto and Adam Jones, “Male-on-Male Sexual Violence in Wartime: Human Rights' Last Taboo?” Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, New Orleans, March 23-27, 2002.

and make recommendations related to conflict-related sexual violence remains salient. Until resolution 1325 women, and issues that impacted them most intimately, were—actively at worst and passively at best—ignored in international policy and law. When violence against women, especially rape and sexual violence in conflict situations, became a central focus of attention around which policies related to the protection of women in conflict situations developed, those interventions ultimately came to be umbrella policies for all mandates and interventions related to sexual violence in conflict. Yet this structure has functioned to reinforce Gorris’ visible-invisible, worth-unworthy dichotomy—as well as essentialized gender assumptions about perpetrators and victims of violence—positioning one group of victims as the rightful beneficiaries of attention and resources while silencing, largely by inattention, the other.<sup>26</sup>

## Policy Challenges

While international policymakers are increasingly, as reflected in UN resolution 2467 (2019), recognizing men and boys as potential and actual victims of conflict-related sexual violence, the prevailing normative framework around sexual violence in conflict remains largely one-dimensional, and functionally exclusionary of male victims. As noted by Sandesh Sivakumaran, UN resolution 1820 (2008)—a foundational resolution (and the first

follow-on from resolution 1325) in which the UN recognized and condemned sexual violence as a tool of war, and stated that rape and sexual violence can constitute war crimes—is broadly inclusive in its aspirational statements but exclusionary in its language of implementation. While the resolution describes the problem of sexual violence and general measures in inclusive language, the language becomes exclusionary when it delineates the concrete and detailed measures of enforcement. “When it is at the level of heightening awareness and responsiveness, the language is inclusive—all civilians, including women and children. However, as the provision goes on, and when the matter shifts to the more onerous prevention of sexual violence, the objects of protection are exclusively women and girls,” Sivakumaran found across a number of operative paragraphs in the resolution. “This is not a one-off, a mere slip of the drafting pen,”<sup>27</sup> but rather a policy parallel to Ellen Gorris’ construction of visible and invisible groups of potential and actual victims of conflict-related sexual violence.

To respond effectively and comprehensively to the needs of all victims of conflict-related sexual violence, there must be a broadening of the global discourse on sexual violence, an acknowledgement that men and boys are also at risk of sexual violence in conflict situations, and the development of service provision mechanisms that address the particular needs of male victims. A key debate then in

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26 Academic studies asserting the need for increased attention by international actors to male victims of conflict-related sexual violence include R. Charli Carpenter, “Recognizing Gender-Based Violence against Civilian Men and Boys in Conflict Situations.” *Security Dialogue* vol. 37, 1 (2006): 83-103. [doi.org/10.1177/0967010606064139](https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010606064139); Sivakumaran, “Lost in Translation;” Dolan, “Into the Mainstream;” Apperley, “Hidden Victims.”

27 Sivakumaran, “Lost in Translation.”

the creation of such effective, responsive, and inclusive policies to address sexual violence in conflict against men and boys is whether the existing Women, Peace and Security framework and structures that serve women and girls which have developed from it should be adapted to include men and boys, if a parallel framework—a “Men, Peace, and Security” framework as it were—and entirely separate funding and service provision mechanisms should be developed within around the specific needs of male victims, or if a gender relational “Gender, Peace, and Security” framework, reconceptualized around a more fluid understanding of gender norms and the functioning of masculinity and femininity in conflict contexts, should be developed.<sup>28</sup>

The uptick in scholarship exploring multifaceted dynamics of masculinity and gender norms in conflict contexts not yet translated into the policy space where men are rarely explicitly named in UN guidance documents on sexual violence in conflict and remain largely invisible in Women, Peace and

Security implementation efforts. “In the international policy framework on WPS, men, boys, and masculinities are notable by their absence,” observes practitioner Hannah Wright, reiterating that of the nine Security Council resolutions that comprise the Women, Peace and Security agenda, only three (2106, 2242, and 2467) explicitly mention men and boys. Only UNSCR 2467 directly addresses men and boys as potential victims of conflict-related sexual violence, and engages the topic of gender norms and masculinity by urging member states to “challenge cultural assumptions about male invulnerability to [sexual] violence.” Wright further highlights the absence of men in the WPS normative framework by noting that National Action Plans—the primary policy tool for states’ implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda—focus almost exclusively on programming and policy development for women and children, and that in the over 400 pages that constitute the 2015 high-level review of WPS, only nine include a reference to masculinity.<sup>29</sup> Twenty years after UNSCR 1325, the needle

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28 On the construction of a Men, Peace, and Security Agenda, see Callum Watson. “Begging the Question: What Would a Men, Peace and Security Agenda Look Like?” *Connections* vol. 14, 3 (2015): 45-60; Jeanne Ward, “It’s Not About the Gender Binary, It’s About the Gender Hierarchy: A Reply to ‘Letting Go of the Gender Binary.’” *International Review of the Red Cross* vol. 98, 1 (April 2016): 275–298. [https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irc\\_97\\_901-16.pdf](https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irc_97_901-16.pdf); and David Duriesmith, “Engaging or Changing Men? Understandings of Masculinity and Change in the New ‘Men, Peace and Security’ Agenda” *Peacebuilding*, November 2019 (online, print forthcoming). [doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2019.1687076](https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2019.1687076). For engagement on the question of the need for a new gender-violence framework, see Zalewski, et al., eds., *Sexual Violence Against Men in Global Politics*, in which the editors note, “It is the case that sexual violence (when noticed at all) has historically been understood to happen largely, if not only, to women, allegedly because of their gender and their ensuing place in gender orders. This begs important questions regarding the impact of increasing knowledge about sexual violence against men, including the impact on resources, on understandings about, and experiences of masculinity, and whether the idea and practice of gender hierarchy is outdated.”

29 Hannah Wright, “‘Masculinities Perspectives’: Advancing a Radical Women, Peace and Security Agenda?” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 11 November 2019 (online, print forthcoming). [doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2019.1667849](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2019.1667849); Henri Myrtilinen, “Locating Masculinities in WPS,” *The Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace and Security*, Sara Davis and Jacqui True, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 88–97. On the issue of National Action Plans, see also All Survivors Project, “Checklist on Preventing and Addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Men and Boys,” 20-22.

has not substantially moved beyond token incorporation of men into the broader Women, Peace and Security framework.

The theoretical-practical disconnect highlights the larger issue of how men should be incorporated as both partners in peace- and security-building efforts, and as recipients of the on-the-ground interventions and processes that have facilitated women moving more to the center of efforts to mitigate war and address conflict-related insecurities. Limits to on-the-ground implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda that have functionally limited the full incorporation of women into decision-making processes and participation in political, governance and security structures as the agenda intended, works in a similar way to exclude men as potential and actual victims of conflict-related sexual violence. Current efforts to bring men more fully into the work of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and gender equality efforts focus largely on programs intended to either “engage or change”—to engage men as allies of and participants in existing female-centric programming, or to change male behavior and attitudes toward gender norms that deny women access to traditionally male spaces and social or political prerogatives—but commonly around issues of reproductive rights or intimate partner violence, and less so around armed conflict and peacebuilding

efforts.<sup>30</sup> This “men as allies” approach to the WPS agenda falls short, however, in the context of conflict-related sexual violence and challenging prevailing norms and assumptions of male power and male vulnerabilities.

Concerns remain, however, that moving men and boys more fully to the center of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and any increased service provision for male victims of sexual violence will necessarily be drawn from an already limited pool of available resources for both state- and civil society-sponsored humanitarian programming. Though it remains unclear whether or to what extent increased on-the-ground service provision for male survivors of conflict-related sexual violence will siphon resources from women and girls, these concerns speak to the need for a double paradigm shift: a paradigm shift that breaks the gender binary through which the majority of research and response has been filtered; and, related, a paradigm shift that prioritizes spending on human security as much as, if not more than, military security. Fundamentally this means no longer dividing violence against women and violence against men into two separate silos, and incorporating new thinking on victimization and masculinity, and acknowledging that men and boys are not only at risk of sexual violence in conflict situations but have a right to survivor

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30 David Duriesmith, “Engaging Men and Boys in the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Beyond the ‘Good Men’ Industry.” LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security Working Paper, 15 December 2017. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2017/12/15/engaging-men-and-boys-in-the-women-peace-and-security-agenda-beyond-the-good-men-industry-david-duriesmith-112017/>. See also Duriesmith, “Engaging or Changing Men?” for a recent assessment of some of this programming within the context of a proposed Men, Peace and Security framework; and Connell, “Masculinities, the Reduction of Violence and the Pursuit of Peace.”

services as well. While the ways in which men and women are targeted may differ, and the individual and community ripple effects of that conflict-related sexual violence may be different for women and men, addressing this violence broadly can have real impacts on the ways in which resources are allocated and funding is earmarked from central budgets. A related, arguably broader challenge, is to confront an assumption of resource scarcity by working to shift norms of security spending away from military budgets and toward a more wholistic, human security framework which values and invests more heavily and deliberately in conflict prevention and supports for civil society and victim outreach and support.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusions

Effective interventions for female sexual violence survivors may create a basic architecture around which gender-sensitive programming can be implemented for male survivors as well. In a 2015 review of interventions for female survivors, Spangaro, et al., identified five mechanisms that underpinned interventions deemed successful by recipients of those services: (1) “there is help for this problem”; (2) “services are acceptable and feasible”; (3) “it is safe to tell”; (4) “we can work together to address

this problem”; and (5) “we have our own ways of dealing with this problem.” Spangaro, et al., note that the first four relate to the knowledge and availability of and access to recovery services, and the fifth addressing the need for care adapted to local cultural and social norms to overcome issues of stigma and discrimination. To date, even the most basic of these intervention mechanisms are absent for male conflict-related sexual violence survivors, and when services are available, lack of knowledge, fears of revictimization, and gendered differences in help-seeking behavior often decrease the likelihood that male survivors will utilize them.<sup>32</sup>

The scarcity of disaggregated data related not only to incidents of sexual violence against men and boys in conflict, but also related to service provision, limits the conclusions that can be drawn about the efficacy of existing resources for male survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. Additional field work needs to be undertaken to document incident rates as well as basic information about available care and treatment services. Supported by funding streams that empower local actors, intervention mechanisms and recovery services should be developed that incorporate theoretical understandings of

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31 A separate, yet important line of discussion is that of how funding is filtered through the international humanitarian system, at what level, and through what mechanisms. For contours of this debate see, Hari Krishna Bhattarai, Kshitiz Acharya, and Anthony Land, “Humanitarian Assistance: Is It Politically Instrumentalized?” *Health Prospect* vol. 17, 1 (2018): 1-4. [doi.org/10.3126/hprospect.v17i1.20563](https://doi.org/10.3126/hprospect.v17i1.20563); and Fatema Sumar and Tara Gingerich, “The Future of Humanitarian Action Is Local,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Spring 2020). [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_future\\_of\\_humanitarian\\_action\\_is\\_local#](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_future_of_humanitarian_action_is_local#).

32 Jo Spangaro, et al., “Mechanisms Underpinning Interventions to Reduce Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: A Realist-Informed Systematic Review.” *Conflict and Health* vol. 9, 19 (July 2015). [doi.org/10.1186/s13031-015-0047-4](https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-015-0047-4). For an extended discussion of the findings of Spangaro et al., in the context of successful on-the-ground interventions in various country contexts, see Kiss, et al., “Male and LGBT Survivors of Sexual Violence.”

masculinities, femininities, and violence—as well as an understanding of a given society’s notion of what it means to “be a man” or to “be a woman”—and how this might influence care seeking and information sharing by sexual violence survivors.

Successful interventions for female survivors of conflict-related sexual violence show that care that is gender-sensitive, attuned to local gender dynamics, and that builds capacity for recovery at the community level have been the most successful. The challenge and the task ahead will be to identify ways to integrate this approach into the creation of programs meant to support male survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, and to effectively leverage momentum building at the international level around the issue of conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys into funding for sustained programming within the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

While the theoretical dynamics of sexual violence in conflict may illuminate our understanding of conflict-related sexual violence perpetrated against both women and men, and the UN’s Women, Peace and Security agenda creates a framework for addressing conflict-related sexual violence, it remains that there needs to be tailored gender responses to the practical medical and psychosocial harm it causes. The problem may be the same, but the responses and services for survivors demand degrees of difference. Policy therefore must be gender inclusive but implementation cannot be

gender neutral. The challenge is to achieve this inclusivity while not flattening the experiences of men and women, and moving toward potentially counter-productive, one-size-fits-all interventions and service provision that fails to take into account how gender difference shapes notions of victimization and individual and community responses to sexual violence.



## About the Author

**Beth English** is Executive Director of the Organization of American Historians. She received her PhD from the College of William and Mary, where she was a Glucksman Fellow and Visiting Assistant Professor. Her research has been funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. English's research and teaching focus on gender, historical and contemporary labor and working class issues, global economy, and the US and Global Souths. She is the author of *A Common Thread: Labor, Politics, and Capital Mobility in the Textile Industry* (UGA Press 2006), and her recent publications include "Better Work Beyond the Workplace: A Comparative Study of Gender Dynamics in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Kenya, Lesotho, and Vietnam" (ILO Discussion Paper, co-authored with Kelly Pike, 2020), *Global Women's Work: Perspectives on Gender and Work in the Global Economy* (Routledge, co-edited with Mary E. Frederickson and Olga Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2018), and "Global Women's Work: Historical Perspectives on the Textile and Garment Industries" (*Journal of International Affairs*, 2013). From 2010 to summer 2020, English directed LISD's Project on Gender in the Global Community where she oversaw the Institute's initiatives on Women, Peace and Security; Women's Economic Security; Children and Armed Conflict; and Prevention of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, and co-convened a student fellows group focusing on gender and security.

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