

# Translating Violence: Exploring the Relationship between Regional Masculinity, the Combatant Male and the Perpetration of Sexual Crimes during times of Conflict.

Christian Perez

**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the relationship between regional concepts of manhood and the experience of wartime sexual violence for the sub-group that is highly at risk of victimization and its perpetration, the combatant male. The violence witnessed by sub-Saharan Africa in the wake of its independence movements and the instability caused by rival factions not only displayed incidents of sexual violence but also highlighted the social value tied to “manhood” by these regions and their populations such that the concept of masculinity was weaponized at that time. Additionally, this paper explores the more intimate sphere of the combatant’s unit and group dynamics to discuss the formation of “hyper-masculinities” that drive its members to increased aggression and the employment of harmful actions, such as sexual crimes, as a mark of manliness. As such, this paper argues that the idea of the “hegemonic male” and the social value tied to such men present a twin-edge opportunity where committing sexual crimes serves to increase the prestige of the perpetrator while at the same time, inflicting harm upon its victim with consequences beyond the initial incident of violence. Insights and data were drawn from existing literature on masculinities and the experience of militarized persons, with the intent of adding to existing knowledge on masculinity.

---

Coinciding with the demands for recruitment and maintaining a healthy stock of fighting men, the use of slogans and phrases such as “It’s a real man’s world” (1960) points towards a general understanding of combat as male-gendered undertaking and suggests that the capability of unleashing violence is also congruent with adventure and the expectations

of the roles expected of men. Indeed, this connection is grounded by the experience of conflicts in the Central African region as militant groups, predominantly male in makeup and sub-state in nature, and their engagements in violence are related to the concept of the male as dominating, violently valorous, and capable of coercive force (Schulz, 2018; Maringira, 2021). This relationship between men and combat is driven by discourse as much as action, where men frame themselves as a moral force (Messerschmidt, 2015) and subsequently draw upon a society-wide consensus of manhood for legitimacy. Maringira (2021) study on ex-fighters from Zimbabwe, for example, reveals that paramilitary men generally regard themselves as *real men* as they have endured hardship and participated in combat compared to the uninitiated civilian population. In short, regional understandings of what it means to be a man – a term called *regional masculinity* (Cohen, 2005) - are intimately linked to connotations of conflict and a person’s experience with it. Literature, however, provides evidence that this process of relating violence to masculinity renders those men who engage in combat, the *combatant male*, vulnerable to committing and being made victims of sexual violence due to the emphasis on male dominance and inviolability as integral to the conception of manhood (Harway & Steel, 2015; Schulz, 2018). Effectively, this relation of dominance to manliness combines with the dire environment of a region in conflict translating regional conventions on masculinity into the primacy of dominating power and its pursuit to the point of harm, which Cohen (2005) equates to an extreme *hypermasculinity* (Cohen, 2005). Thus, on the one hand, the region’s construction of manhood affords men high status but, on the other hand, the expectations of a man ought to be relative to that status also leaves them vulnerable to degradations

weaponized to target their status as men such as being publicly humiliated by being made subject to coercion or sexual victimization (Maringira 2021; Schulz, 2018).

Cases of wartime sexual victimization by and against men represent a uniquely double-edged phenomenon since its harmful and lasting consequences for victims coincide with the status-strengthening effects it has on perpetrators and the bonds between groups involved in armed violence (Cohen, 2013). Thus, narratives of violence, together with its methods and logic for perpetration, are influenced in no small part by those region's definitions of masculinity. Excellent work, particularly on the victimization of women and the role of discourse on power and its translation to violence, has provided nuanced insights into the consequences and the social realities of conflict (Maringira, 2021; Bains, 2014). The study of the male experience, however, is in some regards under-represented despite being a fertile ground for examination given the current order of conflict and war as a masculine - at least in terms of participating actors - domain. In this case, not only is there a gap in academic understanding but the lack of analysis and the resulting actions born of study, such as advocacy or education, may even contribute to the harm as is the case of neglected male survivors (Touquet et al., 2020). Thus, this paper analyzes the experience of victimization and perpetration of sexual during in the post-colonial conflicts of sub-Saharan Africa while integrating existing knowledge on masculinities to determine their effect on the combatant male. First, an exploration of Connell's definition of masculinity will introduce the social spheres that define and maintain them while providing the foundation for this paper's perspective on the relationship between masculinity and the risk of perpetration as well as victimization. Second, a summary of regional conflicts in post-colonial, sub-Saharan Africa will contextualize the experience of the perpetration of and victimization through sexual crimes. Recognizing their complexity in terms of their scale, historical background, and political consequences, this paper acknowledges the need for a multi-faceted examination to gain a true understanding of these conflicts. Although this paper is too narrow in scope to comprehensively tackle the discourses on masculinity and its relation to conflict-driven sexual violence, this work asserts to that case studies of these conflicts offer insights the continued discourse on masculinities. Therefore, this paper argues that

cultural concepts of masculinity are intimately linked to the combatant male sub-group and their experience with sexual war crimes as the shape the nature of perpetration while serving as a lens through which victimized men interpret their experience.

### Experience and Discourse of Masculinity

Existing literature suggests that masculinity and its expression are complex and intimately tied to their environment (Connell, 2005), such that understanding masculinity cannot be isolated from the social context in which it is performed. Culturally specific, masculinities can thus be realized not as a concrete definition per se, but rather as a series of "positions" adopted by individual actors relative to their surroundings. Connell (2005) emphasized the prevalence of the idealized hegemonic male figure, playing the role of an elite compared to other social actors and is bulwarked in this position by its capacity to enforce its will and its construction as a protector for those beneath its influence. For example, the Northern Ugandan context generally relates masculinity to the role of a "provider" (Schulz, 2018, p. III6) to their families and those men who adhere to this script, therefore, are deserving of respect from their community. Stoebenau et al. (2023) note that where men are expected to be decision-makers and to hold authority, this deference for the male position is intimately linked to their success in providing for their families, through financial or security means, and those able to do so are lauded as "leaders" (p. 2405) in their community. On the other hand, Connell (2005) frames the rise of Al-Qaeda as an iteration of "protest masculinity" (p. 849) against the West, championing local values and coinciding with the subjective experience of Afghanistan in the 1980s ("Osama bin Laden", n.d.). Both concepts present the male subject to their immediate audience not only as an ideal to be performed but also place expectations on actors such that failure to perform may pose significant social consequences; thus, embodying one's social role becomes a necessity for all actors, especially for men whose role may be understood as hegemonic.

Expanding on this framework of masculinity, the concept may be best understood as a tiered process where each *sphere* influences the other, as well as the understanding of masculinity in that context. Drawing from Connell (2005), these arenas of

interaction are categorized into the intimate, or *local sphere*, and the cultural, also known as the *regional sphere*. In the latter, the broad cultural-level constructions of manhood help in defining the societal expectations of and rewards for masculinity. With these definitions set, they then penetrate into the community and family level, the *local sphere*, and are solidified therein since the impact of a man's behaviours and adherence to these scripts may be immediately felt and judged by those closest to him. Together, these two spheres serve to not only define an environment's understanding of manhood but also reinforce and maintain the expectations tied to those definitions. In some extreme cases like the Acholi in Northern Uganda, the dichotomy and resulting exclusivity of roles and behaviours between the sexes is such that victims of sexual violence may be stigmatized due to their inability to protect their inviolability as men and are therefore regarded to be "feminized" (Schulz, 2018, p. II05). This paper maintains that strict adherence to cultural notions of masculinity does not render men inviolable, indeed, this paper aims to discuss the duality of assuming such roles. Instead, the literature suggests that masculine expression is affected both by local and regional definitions that generate complex and intimate consequences for the actors involved.

### Escalation into Hypermasculine Expression in the Local Sphere

The *combatant male* does not operate alone. Instead, paramilitary units consist of fighters pledged towards their selected cause or in pursuit of their independent group agenda (Kaunert et al., 2023). As mentioned, the *local sphere* burrows acceptable constructions from the broader social environment and cements the scripts for those constructions' performance effectively adding a layer of nuance and can very much heighten their expression. To the combatant-male, this local sphere takes the shape of the paramilitary units they are a part of.

Given the stress of conflict and the necessity for group cohesion to maintain effectiveness (Cohen, 2013), the combatant-male's general experience is to be constantly surrounded by their co-fighters and continually immersed in an environment that emphasizes the group's objectives and its uniqueness. In practical terms, the combatant-male is under sustained pressure to not only conform but to prove his alignment with his peers in a social circle that

demands escalating displays of hegemonic masculine behaviour; thus, generating a positive feedback loop celebrating violence and idealizing traditionally masculine values to such an extent as to frame the combatant-male as a more worthy being compared to the non-combatant civilian (Maringira 2021; Dashiell, 2022).

At this level, performance and one's capacity for action play a central role (Harway and Steel, 2015) in fostering an environment where achievement and prestige are pursuable through aggression and hypermasculine behaviour. For example, the inducements available to the combatant male, such as the issuance of medals, serve to distinguish one for their accomplishment on the one hand; while on the other hand, these accolades are directly linked to their achievements in combat and their capacity for violence. The local sphere is such that the combatant male is challenged to aspire toward an idealized manhood (Messerschmidt, 2015) that is both dominant in nature and is set apart from society at large. Effectively encouraging a disconnection between the combatant and non-participants in conflict, this local sphere at the unit level renders the combatant-male increasingly vulnerable to behaving aggressively and perpetrating violence, from verbally abusing, to beating, to sexually victimizing their enemies, prisoners, or those they deem as lesser (Maringira, 2021; Cohen, 2013).

### Experience of Conflict in sub-Saharan Africa

The experience of regional conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa provides fertile grounds for examining the ties between cultural notions of masculinity and its effects on the perpetration of sexual crimes. Following Musuveni's rise to power in Uganda in the late 1980s, elements of his party's military wing, the National Resistance Army (NRA), enacted reprisal campaigns in regions that were previously sympathetic to then-president Milton Obote (Bains, 2014). Within the stated aims of the NRA to prevent the outbreak of rebellion and consolidate their gains, a trend of individuals exploiting this mandate emerged. Schulz (2018) finds that although women were disproportionately affected by these reprisals, the male victims were more carefully selected for victimization by NRA fighters; for example, victims were mostly married and had families at the time of their victimization and were beaten in front

of, as well as forced to witness the abuse of, their families. Existing literature points towards a logic of perpetration, where the victimizing of persons is framed as a decisive tool to instill fear, thus achieving their objectives of exerting control, through the displacement of their victims' status as men in the eyes of their community (Cohen, 2013). Simultaneously, they may enhance their own status as hegemonic males capable of inflicting violence with impunity (Bains, 2014; Maringira, 2021). Most unfortunately, because these male victims were made subject to abuse and are viewed as powerless owing to their inability to resist, the stigma of victimization remains not only as a traumatic event for survivors but confers a significant loss of status with consequences such as the dissolution of their families and their exile from their villages (Schulz, 2018).

In the same vein, the Sierra Leone Civil War of the late 1990s to early 2000s witnessed the fighting between the militant Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and forces loyal to then-President Momah (Momodu, 2017). Despite its official stance of strict adherence to their disciplinary codes, the prevalence of "bush marriages" (Marks, 2013, p.77) among RUF fighters and their families points towards an atmosphere of coercion where female victims are faced with choosing between unions at gunpoint or sexual victimization; indeed, a majority women within the RUF reported their introduction to the group as violent capture followed by rape supporting the view of sexual victimization as a tool of recruitment for combat-participating groups (Cohen, 2013; Marks, 2013). Although press-ganging is not a novel phenomenon and is, unfortunately, yet another consequence of conflict as militant groups struggle to maintain their pool of manpower (Cohen, 2013), it is most insidious in the Sierra Leone experience as it harms women through sexual slavery while also expecting them to integrate with their captors over time. This is a paradoxical case because the men of the RUF went to great lengths to account for the welfare of these women, particularly regarding food housing, and security against the advances of co-fighters (Marks, 2013) after initial contact. The pressure to present an image of control even in a time of conflict and chaos remains important to the RUF men as their ability to access and provide for their coercively or violently procured partners is intimately tied to their sense of worth.

## Discussion

This paper presents the local sphere as the environment for refining and reinforcing constructions of masculinity, while its translation into the perpetration of crime is tied intimately to the definitions of manhood specific to the regions in which those crimes occur. The genesis of this phenomenon, therefore, most likely stems from the regional, or more aptly, cultural sphere that directly inspires the consequences and perpetration of these sexual crimes during periods of conflict. Operating within these cultural constraints and definitions, the local sphere and the individual may add nuance and transform the script into a more heightened version. In short, it is the culture-wide idealization of a hegemonic male figure in the region of sub-Saharan Africa that plays the most significant role in defining the experience of perpetrators and victims of sexual war crimes alike.

Regional understandings of masculinity have layered consequences for male victims that remain all too salient for them beyond the instance of victimization. Returning to the case study of Northern Uganda, the traditional masculine narrative of heteronormativity (Dashiell, 2022), to be subjected to sexual violence relegates the victim to the role of an inferior (Messerschmidt, 2015) with connotations of being passive or deficient. Evidence from interviews with victimized men (Schulz, 2018) supports this conclusion as the survivors claim that they were not only humiliated by their ordeal, but also their wives abandoned them as they could not "live with a fellow woman" (p. III6).

In the view of both victim and community, these men fell short of the standard of manhood during a most critical time. Being victimized, then, drives a rift between the victim and those within his intimate sphere as it leads to the latter distrusting the former in his ability to perform the associated tasks demanded from a traditionally male figure. In this context of conflict, the increased demands on a masculine protector to provide and care for their community is dramatically contrasted with their violation and unsuccessful resistance, weakening his claim to the dependence of his family and community and uprooting his very status as a man in their view (Messerschmidt, 2015). This is very much a case of regional definitions of masculinity trickling into the more intimate and salient local sphere. In the end, this results in



the assumption of the victim's unassertive and traditionally feminized position in relation to his perpetrator and strikes at the heart of the intersecting meanings of masculinity (Schulz, 2018) to utterly disassemble the victim's image of what his society would consider a man.

Likewise, regional understandings of masculinity provide the logic for perpetration. Sexual violence, in this context, is weaponizable and highly destructive. In its extreme form, the strategic violation of an enemy's male population may even be pursued to drain them of their social capital, thereby rendering them unable to resist, as was the case in Northern Uganda. To he who perpetrates the sexual abuse, deploying this specific "central technique" (Cohen, 2013, p. 463) of violence serves as a mark of victory since he can impose his will in humiliating the victim in a culturally traumatic and relevant way.

Literature also points to the strengthening effects of perpetration on the social bonds between the men committing these crimes. The phenomenon of "combat socialization" (Cohen, 2013, p.461), which is underpinned by a dire need for building rapport in the context of combat, creates group loyalties and acts as a perverse medium for building trust since the social processes of group rape also represent a rite of passage which label the perpetrator as accepting of and trusting in his new social sphere. The intensity and enthusiasm for perpetration are directly related to the individual combatant-male's niche and role in the group's overall dynamics because committing sexual violence secures his reputation as an authoritative male figure. To perpetrate sexual violence directly signals to his peers the perpetrator's power and the reach of his violent influence (Schulz, 2018), which frames him as valuable and, most importantly, committed against the group's enemies. Thus, despite his terrible actions, the perpetrator's fellow combatant-males regard him as a dependable and superior figure (Messerschmidt, 2015).

Finally, the combined effects of a hypermasculine local sphere, bolstered by the regional constructions of masculinity, place the combatant male, already at risk of perpetrating, at risk of being victimized also. To Dashiell (2022), the combatant male's extensive exposure to masculinity encourages him to mask his victimization experience to retain his gender capital as a militarized masculine figure. Reconstructing their victimization experience as an assault (Violence

as Heterosexism and Dominance, para. 4), or as a fraternal practical joke (Discussions and Conclusions section, para. 3) in the case of lesser sexual breaches, the damage to the combatant-male's masculine status is mitigated by framing his experience as an instance that is to be expected from his environment. On the contrary, the power politics (Maringira, 2021) exhibited in hypermasculine subgroups even promotes the combatant male's vulnerable state as a kind of vetting process (Dashiell, 2022) because to withstand and endure violence is especially praised. Thus, the combatant male is made to carefully navigate his victimization experience or else suffer the consequences of failing to embody the qualities of the "superior hegemonic male figure" (Messerschmidt, 2015, p. 174) that are the requisites for his peers' regard and recognition (Cohen, 2013).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, regional and local masculinities are intimately linked to the priming of the combatant male to perpetrate sexual crimes and the victimization of men in times of war. This paper aimed to provide insight into the male experience of conflict in these regions, delving into how combat-participating men navigated their social reality. In analyzing regional masculinities, a foundation for culture-wide core beliefs of what manhood is meant to be is presented as what ultimately shapes the local sphere and its concept of masculinity.

Consequently, the local sphere creates meanings unique to specific male subcultures and their aims in combat that influence the manner, rationale and experience of perpetrating violence or being subject to it. In the end, the culturally significant definition, both greater and intimate, of what a "man" is determiner of the nature of the combatant-male's encounters with sexual war crimes.

# Work Cited

- Baines, E. (2014). Forced Marriages as a Political Project: Sexual Rules and Relations in the Lord's Resistance Army. *Journal of Peace Research*, 51(3), 405-417. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343313519666>
- Cohen, D. K. (2013). Explaining Rape during Civil Wars: Cross-National Evidence (1980- 2009). *The American Political Science Review*, 107(3), 461-477. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055413000221>
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept. *Gender and Society*, 19(6), 829 – 859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>
- Dashiell, S. (2022). Deconstructing Gender Capital Involving Conversations of Male Military Sexual Trauma on Reddit. *Sexuality and Culture: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-022-10029z>
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. (n.d.). Osama bin Laden. <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/osama-bin-laden>
- Harway, M., & Steel, J. H. (2015). Studying Masculinity and Sexual Assault Across Organizational Culture Groups: Understanding Perpetrators. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, 16(4), 374-378. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039694>
- Kaunert, C., Leonard, S., & MacKenzie, A. (2023). Far-Right Foreign Fighters and Ukraine: A Blind Spot for the European Union? *New Journal of European Criminal Law*, 14(2), 247-266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20322844231164089>
- Maringira, G. (2021). Soldiers, Masculinities, and Violence: War and Politics. *Current Anthropology*, 62(S23), S103-S111. <https://doi.org/10.1086/711687>
- Marks, Z. (2014). Sexual Violence in Sierra Leone's Civil War: 'Virgination', Rape and Marriage. *African Affairs*, 113(450), 67-87. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adt070>
- Messerschmidt, J. W. (2015). Presidents: Bush and Obama. In *Masculinities in the Making: From the Local to the Global* (pp. 145-179). Rowman and Littlefield.
- Momodu., S. (2017, January 17). The Sierra Leone Civil War (1992-2002). BLACKPAST. [https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/sierra-leone-civil-war-1991-2002/National-Army-Museum-Study-Collection-\(1960\)-It's-a-real-man's-life-Join-the-Regular-Army](https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/sierra-leone-civil-war-1991-2002/National-Army-Museum-Study-Collection-(1960)-It's-a-real-man's-life-Join-the-Regular-Army). <https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1985-11-60-8>
- Schulz, P. (2018). Displacement from gendered personhood: Sexual violence and masculinities in northern Uganda. *International Affairs*, 94(5), 1011-1119. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy146>
- Stoebenau, K., Bingenheimer, J.B., Kyegombe, N., Datar, R., & Ddumba-Nyanzi, I. (2023). Development of the Gender Roles and Male Provision Expectations Scale. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 52(6), 2403-2419. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-022-02479-1>
- Touquet, H., Chynoweth, S., Martin, S., Reis, C., Myrntinen, H., Schulz, P., Turner, L. & Duriesmith, D. (2020). From 'It Rarely Happens' to 'It's Worse For Men': Dispelling Misconceptions about Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in Conflict and Displacement. *Journal for Humanitarian Affairs*, 2(3), 25-34. <https://doi.org/10.7227/JHA.049>



