

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PROGRESS AFTER ATROCITY: EVIDENCE FROM RWANDA AND BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social upheavals lead to the loosening and disruption of strict gender norms, which can allow women the space to step out and become more visible in public life. In both Rwanda and Bosnia, violence facilitated some fluidity in the gendered social ordering: women joined community-based organizations and entered public spaces in ways that were previously unimaginable. Yet in both cases, progress has been side-lined and setback by a series of political and social barriers. Today, many women in both countries express their frustration with the lack of progress and lament the inequality and violence that persists in their daily lives (see Berry 2015a).

This presents a critical question: if mass violence can facilitate women's increased political mobilization, how is this mobilization maintained? We address this question by exploring the processes that have emerged to undermine or limit women's ability to sustain mobilization after violence. Drawing from interviews with more than 230 women in both cases, we conclude that despite the change war precipitated in women's lives in Rwanda and Bosnia, the domestic state, international actors, and patriarchal structures complicated and restricted women's gains. The discussion that follows raises important points for discussions of gender, peace, and security and on how to best include women in post-war political processes.

DOMESTIC INTERFERENCE FROM THE STATE

The structure of the post-violence political settlement—namely, regime change in Rwanda and the fossilization of the old political elite in Bosnia—profoundly impacted the ability of women's grassroots mobilization to manifest in

formal political spaces. In each case, the state worked to secure the country and address the needs of victims. In the process, however, these efforts elevated certain categories of victims over others and reinforced new social divisions, which shaped the continued ability of women's grassroots initiatives to thrive.

Since ending the genocide and taking over the state in 1994, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), led by Paul Kagame, has prioritized development and social engineering. It has erased ethnicity from public discourse, drastically reorganized the rural population, and "cleaned up" urban areas to make them appear more ready for foreign investment (see Campioni and Noack 2012; Straus and Waldorf 2011). It has also overseen rapid economic development and the election of the world's highest percentage of women to Parliament at 64 percent (IPU 2016). Such accomplishments, however, have been made possible by the Rwandan government's use of violence and social control (see Mann and Berry 2016). The regime's restrictions on civil society have been particularly detrimental for women's organizing. The regime has shut down planned women's solidarity marches; women's organizations working on "sensitive" issues have been threatened; and many of the strongest women's leaders from civil society have been invited to join the government, effectively ending their potential to orchestrate meaningful social change (see Burnet 2012; Berry 2015b). Thus, while the civil war and genocide in Rwanda caused shifts in women's political engagement, repressive government policies make ordinary women's advancement more difficult, giving pause to celebrations of Rwanda's success in promoting "women's empowerment."

Bosnia's political system, while more dysfunctional than the Rwandan state, has similarly undermined women's

organizing efforts and set back many gains they had made. The war's prolonged dominance over the social and political landscape and the separation of the country into two ethnically-defined entities—Republika Srpska and the Bosniak-Croat Federation—undermined the establishment (or reestablishment) of cross-ethnic solidarity on the basis of women's collective interests. This two-entity system also complicates the impacts of women's organizing efforts. For example, women's organizations and activists campaigned for the enactment of a federal law in 2006 that classifies women rape survivors as civilian victims of war. This classification entitles them to small, regular welfare payments as well as medical assistance, legal aid,

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and priority in finding employment and housing (Cockburn 2013). But women who live within the Republika Srpska (and the independent federal district of Brcko) are not entitled to these benefits unless a health commission deems them to have 60 percent "bodily damage"—in other words, permanent physical disfigurement or disability (Amnesty International 2009; de Vlaming and Clark 2014). Those suffering from PTSD or other psychological ailments are not entitled to benefits. In contrast, the Federation has declared that the 60 percent threshold does not apply to survivors of rape, opening the possibility that such cases may be deemed eligible.

The government's dysfunction is also evident in the courts. Between 2004 and 2013, the national courts completed just 215 war crimes cases, leaving a backlog of 1,315 war crimes cases (OSCE 2014). It is not known how many of these cases are related to war rape and other crimes of sexualized violence. At the current pace, it will take decades before these cases make their way through the courts. There has been little to no justice for rape survivors—by 2012, only 33 people had been convicted of conflict-related sexual violence (Amnesty International 2012; TRIAL 2015). Many perpetrators of war rape live

with impunity in the same neighborhoods as their victims, subjecting survivors to retraumatization and fear of moving around freely in their communities.

INTERNATIONAL ACTORS IN "AIDLAND"

The humanitarian response in both Rwanda and Bosnia kept millions of people alive and did a great deal to mitigate suffering. But the arrival of a virtual army of foreign workers and aid programs was not a neutral phenomenon. Many INGOs partnered with grassroots organizations in order to implement programs, but in doing so, shaped the structure and mission of these organizations to better align with international funding priorities than local needs. This ultimately undermined and stunted some women-led grassroots initiatives.

One way international actors did this was by adopting and propagating a simplified narrative of both conflicts. In Rwanda, the genocide was understood to be led by the "evil Hutu" against the "innocent Tutsi." Such simplified narratives had acute implications for the distribution of aid and other resources. When INGOs gave funding to women's grassroots organizations, Tutsi-led, "widow" or "survivor" organizations were better positioned than Hutu-led ones to access international funds and technical assistance. Creating this hierarchy of victimhood helped facilitate the rise of Tutsi women in politics, while providing few channels for ordinary Hutu women to ascend to positions of power. It also entrenched social divisions in society and limited the chances for women to form allegiances across ethnic lines.

The international involvement in Rwanda also impeded women's ability to mobilize in other ways. Top-down technocratic knowledge about how to care for refugees and rebuild infrastructure often replaced local knowledge about the same projects. Foreign NGOs also frequently shut down or supplanted local organizing efforts. They sometimes did this directly, by preventing Hutus from congregating based on the idea that they posed a security threat, or indirectly, by hiring the most impressive emerging leaders from civil society, granting them positions that could eventually lead to their promotion within the global structure of these organizations (USAID 2000, 2001). While such promotions were likely good for the financial and social status of the individuals hired, they deprived many local

women's organizations (and likely organizations more generally) of their strongest members.

The humanitarian aid industry in Bosnia similarly employed countless problematic strategies. With little knowledge of the local context, INGOs implemented programs that targeted women as a monolithic group and thereby reinforced essential gender stereotypes. For instance, INGOs carried out programs aimed at creating income-generating projects for women. But without conducting skills assessments of the group they were trying to serve, many assumed Bosnian women had little education or skills. They therefore enlisted women in sewing, knitting, or housekeeping businesses that confined them to low-profit gender-segregated work (Walsh 1998: 336). Highly educated women found these projects insulting and a way of further taking away their dignity.

International actors also created hierarchies of victimhood, often building from the political rhetoric advanced by nationalist politicians. One of the most notable hierarchies involved the elevation of "raped women"—and particularly Bosniak women—over all other categories of victimhood. Humanitarian NGOs decided that this "epidemic of rape" warranted swift and immediate attention. They began constructing centers for "raped women," which offered psychological therapy, financial resources, and other types of social support. Yet these well-intentioned projects rested on several problematic assumptions. The first was that women survivors of sexualized violence would willingly assume the identity of "rape victim." This assumption ignored the potential for the distribution of aid on the basis of this victim identity to create a self-fulfilling prophesy. For women, being identified as a rape victim had deeply negative repercussions. It diminished survivors who articulated their experience as one of survival (Summerfield 1999) and, moreover, stigmatized rape survivors as "soiled" and pitiful (Mertus 2000: 28). Such programs for "raped women" also assumed a narrow focus on rape over the many other forms of violence that harmed women—and men. These efforts also centered nearly exclusively on Bosniak and (less often) Croat women, neglecting the thousands of Serb women—and men—that also experienced sexual violence during war. Further, they failed to consider the different experiences of women from different class backgrounds—poor, rural women faced tremendously different struggles

after displacement than women from upper class, urban backgrounds.

The prioritizing of certain types of victimhood and suffering had profound political consequences, as particular victim categories were then used to serve certain interests, mobilizing nationalist groups, and even legitimizing

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aggression during the war. Bosniak politicians, for example, held up widows and rape victims to justify their most nationalistic political decisions. Further, competition for resources between community organizations led to infighting, a lack of trust, and the withholding of information, thereby limiting opportunities for collaboration. Immediately after the war women presented a united front, but since then, divisions between ethnic groups have polarized women in general. These divisions have also led many community-based organizations to be ethnically homogenous, limiting prospects for inter-ethnic collaboration and peace-building in the long run.

REVITALIZATION OF PATRIARCHY

In both Rwanda and Bosnia, women's gains were further pushed back or undermined because of a third theme: the resurgence of patriarchal norms, transmitted through the family, religious institutions, media, and the education system (see Enloe 1993; Cockburn 1998). Of course, patriarchal power relations are ubiquitous across the world. Thus, is not surprising that, for instance, women in Rwanda continue to spend an average of 20 hours per week on domestic tasks, compared to men who spend just nine hours (Republic of Rwanda 2011). Nor is it surprising that women in both countries are often regarded as dependents of their male relatives, and their primary responsibilities are to serve as wives and mothers.

What is alarming and more worrying is the escalating rate of violence against women and the emergence of new forms of violence since the wars. This phenomenon suggests

that the line between war violence and violence more broadly is not always clear. When asked to explain why violence prevails, many interviewees often referenced the “mentality” of Bosnians or Rwandans. Such references to a “mentality” of violence suggest that it is a deeply ingrained social and cultural process that will be hard to change. An evolving field of literature has attempted to document the link between women’s economic or educational gains and rates of domestic violence within the home. Some studies have posited that when women increase their authority and control over household finances or have a higher social status than men because of their education, men may attempt to reassert their control over the household through violence. In both Rwanda and Bosnia, women made the link between the gains they had made after the war, including their enhanced social networks, and the rate of violence they experienced. To avoid this violence, women often defer to men within the home regardless of the positions they have taken on in their communities.

CONCLUSION

While Rwanda and Bosnia are unique in many ways, the similarities between the cases suggest that efforts to secure women’s advancement after war can sometimes unintentionally create new forms of oppression. Such lessons are critical to keep in mind when designing programs to benefit women affected by more recent conflicts, such as in Libya, Syria, Central African Republic, Afghanistan or Iraq. In each of these other cases, the state, international actors, and patriarchy more generally may also work in particular ways to complicate and setback women’s gains after large-scale violence. Policymakers should consider whether the humanitarian aid industry could alter its practices in order to limit the risk of harm after violence. One simple way to do this would be to give local actors a platform to determine the most urgent issues facing their communities without outside (i.e., donor) pressure, and distribute resources accordingly. In addition, INGOs should consult regional and local specialists while designing postwar relief programs; knowledge of the local context is often more important than technocratic expertise developed in other contexts.

Underlying all of this is the continued persistence of violence in both Rwanda and Bosnia more than twenty years since the end of armed conflict. Women in both countries face high levels of violence in their lives from spouses, family members, and others in their communities, reminding us that for women especially, violence takes many forms beyond those on the battlefield. This violence limits the ability of women to take advantage of many of the legal rights the government has granted them since the war. Moreover, these experiences of quotidian violence highlight the importance of not just establishing peace after mass violence, but of establishing a positive, “gender-just” peace (Björkdahl 2012) that recognizes women’s agency and secures their specific social and legal rights.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- In the aftermath of violence, the humanitarian aid industry must provide local actors with a platform to determine the most urgent issues facing their communities without outside pressure, and distribute aid accordingly.
- Knowledge of the local context is often more important than technocratic expertise developed in other contexts, therefore, INGOs should consult regional and local specialists—including academics and journalists—while designing relief programs.
- Local governments together with foreign actors should make greater efforts to include women and enact policies designed with long-term gender issues in mind; further, an intersectional approach is critical, as women from different ethnic, class, regional, religious, and linguistic backgrounds will face different challenges and harms.
- However, simply including women in post-war peace-processes will not be enough to ensure their security and ability to mobilize after mass violence. Instead, it is essential to re-think the way in which humanitarian aid is distributed and state-building efforts are designed.

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

The series is produced by the Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy, a center of excellence within the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver, with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The views expressed are those of the authors.

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