

## A GENDER DISCOURSE ON WAR

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**Abstract:** Women are the victims of war... as widows they have faced the trauma of being single parents and livelihoods of families are affected. A lot of gender-related problems come up in terms of health, education, domestic violence, etc. The paper throws light on the body of language and thinking the North American nuclear defense intellectuals have generated that, filter out to the military, politicians, and the public, and increasingly shape how we talk and think about war. Masculinity was never a sufficient explanation of why men think about war in the ways they do. Therefore, the major focus of this paper is to direct attention away from gendered individuals to gendered discourses, and also to dig into the Post-COVID times for women refugees.

**Key Words.** Gender and War, Gendered Discourses, Militarized Masculinity, Theoretical Perspectives.

### I. Introduction

War is a gendered phenomenon, one with meaning for the relative status of men and women within the American society. The times of national emergency create myriad possibilities for change, and often threaten foundational social hierarchies such as gender, race, and class relations. Dating back, the white men were expected to protect their figurative women, homes, and families through military service. While women's ostensibly passive role as protectees during war underlines their efforts to maintain these same homes, thereby supporting their men, and waiting long for them to return. Therefore, such activities were contained, often through calculated advocacy, within a cultural framework that allowed for elasticity<sup>1</sup> in gender behavior during war time but did not sanction such activities as applicable in peace. One of the frequently employed models for analyzing gender and war has been the "watershed" approach that assesses whether the impact of war on gender relations proves a watershed that results in long-term change, or whether traditional gender systems were successfully reinstated after the war to minimize wartime gains by marginalized groups. The Revolutionary War for instance, provided a vehicle through which some women challenged their exclusion from the definitions of republican citizenship as the province of free, white, propertied men, further providing limited space within which some women might assert themselves as political actors. Like the Revolutionary, the Civil War is distinguished by the fact that the entire conflict was a domestic one. As distinctions between "home front" and "battle front" blurred, so too did the asymmetrical relationship between the men as "protectors" and women as "protected" that bolstered the southern gender system. Rosie the Riveter<sup>2</sup>, was characterized by wartime as a temporary worker, completely feminine, and perfectly willing to give up her job and return to her role as a wife and mother as soon as the war concluded.

The scholars have argued, for instance, that during World War II, "pinups" visible in soldiers'/ officers' footlockers, bunks, and barracks, as well as bombers and tanks named after female movie stars, sweethearts functioned as symbols of the private obligations for which men were fighting and as surrogate objects of sexual desire<sup>3</sup>. A counterpoint the "good woman" as spoils" image was the threat throughout the war of American

<sup>1</sup>As many men did not serve in the military and many military men never saw combat, similarly, many women particularly when wars were fought on American soil, achieved wartime access to political, economic, and social means of power to which they were barred in peacetime.

<sup>2</sup>i.e., image depicted a first-time female worker who enters the labor force, not for the extra income such employment might bring into her home, but rather for solely patriotic reasons to support the war effort.

<sup>3</sup>John Whiteclay Chambers' *The Oxford Companion to American Military History*, 1999

women being raped. A popular anti-war slogan, “Women say yes to men who say no” reinforced the conventional system of gender relations by placing women once again in the position of the bounty, rendering the legacy of the Vietnam War to be gendered.

## II. Emerging a Gender Discourse on War

There are persistent comprehensive reviews of evidence on the links between gender inequality and outbreaks of violent conflict (Herbert, 2014a 2014b). These in fact exhibit the ways that beliefs and values behind unequal gendered roles and power relations are instrumental in building support for and perpetuating conflict (Wright 2014). For instance, while some women reported joining armed groups in order to escape gender-based violence in the personal realm, meanwhile, men were encouraged to take part in violent conflict as a way of adhering to dominant ideas of successful manhood that they could not meet by other routes. Secondly, the gender stereotypes fuel armed conflict, in categorizations meaning, the societal notion of men as protectors, providers, and decision makers, and as strong brave individuals. On the one hand, women may play a role in supporting these discourses, by encouraging male family members to take part in forms of violent communal conflict such as cattle raiding, and deriding men who refuse to do so (Wright, 2014; El-Bushra and Sahl, 2005). On the other hand, women have been actively involved as combatants in some conflicts. However, as Wright’s review points out, “when women do take up arms, they are usually considered to be transgressing traditional gender roles, because a willingness to use violence is considered a masculine, not a feminine trait” (2014 p.15-16).

Links between gender equality, gender-based violence and conflict thus, point out the correlation between levels of gender inequality and conflict. Herbert (2014a p.3) notes that:

- There is substantial evidence that traditional patriarchal gender identities lead to militaristic and violent conflict approaches.
- The more years a country has had female suffrage, the more likely it is to resolve disputes without military violence.
- Better gender equality can indirectly increase a country’s stability through its impact on wealth/income.

As she points out to emerging research that has found that countries with high levels of violence against women and girls, are more likely to experience conflict than those which do not. Additionally, Theidon (2009) in her research on the demobilization of combatants in Columbia, argues that “constructing certain forms of masculinity is not incidental to militarism; rather it is essential to maintenance. Militarism for Theidon, requires a sustaining gender ideology as much as it needs guns and bullets (2009 p.3). Therefore, constructing a gender discourse should be done with a parallel awareness of the way that militarism and conflict is driven by broader global and regional structures and systems that are deeply patriarchal in nature. Addressing gender norms which drive violence and insecurity is therefore not only a matter of changing the way men and women think about their identities but also examining the structures which uphold those gender norms, and which are, in turn, upheld by them” (Wright 2014, p.16).

During the early years of the Reagan presidency, in the era of the Evil Empire, the cold war, and loose talk in Washington about the possibility of fighting and “prevailing” in a nuclear war, Carol Cohn<sup>4</sup> went off to do participant observation in a community of North American nuclear defense intellectuals and security affairs analysts, in which the white men theorized about nuclear deterrence and create the discourse that underwrites American national security policy. The body of language and thinking they have generated so, filter out to the military, politicians, and the public, and increasingly shape how we talk and think about war. Likewise, Joshua Goldstein<sup>5</sup> offers an encyclopedic overview of literature that addresses the issue from the perspectives of biology, psychology, anthropology, history, political science, and cultural and women’s studies. How does gender relate to war? Cultural constructions and gendered roles of domination carry the main weight in Goldstein’s explanation, which he develops after discussing the evidence from biology and anthropology. He finds that culturally constructed gender identities enable war and contribute to the production of such manhood (i.e., ‘militarized masculinity’). Cross culturally, male rites of passage entail ordeals and tests that show bravery, practices of which military boot camp is a remnant. Bravery and discipline are particularly important to fighting fear and entail the suppression of emotions.

Masculinity was never a sufficient explanation of why men think about war in the ways they do. The focus primarily, is to direct attention away from gendered<sup>6</sup> individuals and toward gendered discourses. The impact of

<sup>4</sup>Founding director of the Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights and a Lecturer of Women's Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston

<sup>5</sup>Professor emeritus of International relations at American University

<sup>6</sup>Flight away from the feminine, flight towards the masculine’ henceforth

gender discourse<sup>7</sup> is that some things get left out. Certain ideas, concerns, interests, information, feelings, and meanings are marked in national security discourse as feminine and are devalued (adjoining “I felt like a woman” believed to distort the process required to think well about nuclear weapons and warfare, leaving no room to imagine a seven-year-old boy with his flesh melting away from his bones or a toddler with her skin hanging down the strips for instance). What becomes clear then, is that defense intellectuals’ standards of what constitutes “good thinking” about weapons and security have not simply evolved out of trial and error. Moreover, “acting like a wimp”, is used as an interpretation of a person’s acts, being insufficiently masculine, is one of the most readily available interpretive codes, desiring to not perceive an international crisis as extremely dangerous and urging caution. “What kind of pussy are you, anyway?” is another popular epithet, conjoining the imagery of harmless domesticated pets with contemptuous reference to women’s genitals. Despite the diversity of gender and of war<sup>8</sup> separately, gender roles in war are very consistent across all known human societies. Causality runs both ways between war and gender, gender roles adapt individuals for war roles, and war roles provide the context within which individuals are socialized into gender roles. In war, the fighters are usually all male (i.e., the “absolute universal gendering of war”), and exceptions to this rule are numerous and quite informative but amount to far fewer than 1% of all warriors in history (following the myths of Amazon matriarchies that exclusively made up both the population and the fighting force along with seven graves of females with iron swords or daggers, bronze arrowheads, and whetstones to sharpen found in Davis- Kimball’s sites). About 23 million soldiers serve in today’s uniformed standing armies, of whom about 97% are male. Goldstein narrows his analysis to men’s domination of women during war and asks, “Does male sexuality during wartime cause aggression?”

Do societies keep women away from combat roles so that they can exploit women’s labor more extensively during war? Here, Goldstein offers an excellent overview of materials describing sexual practices in war, from uncoerced sex to military-organized prostitution, to the coerced sex extracted from “comfort women”. He attributes sexual practices of soldiers to the disruption of social norms in war but finds no evidence that male sexuality is the cause of aggression. If sexuality thus does not seem to cause violence, then perhaps it operates as a form of symbolic domination to explain why men and not women participate in war. Misogyny, visible in warrior rites that keep women at a distance and betray a fear of women as an uncontrollable force, fuels both male aggression in war and more broadly, militarism. The near universality of the potential for war applies, certainly, to the present-day interstate system as in today’s world, active warfare is not occurring in most places, but war lurks in the background as a possibility even when it is remote. Of 31 gathering-hunting societies surveyed in one study, 20 typically had warfare more than once every two years, and only three had “no or rare warfare”, thus breaking the myth of peaceful origins. ‘Border’ locates the problem of identity as not just of nationality but also of gender, by weaving the minor narratives of the individual protagonists of the film in a socio-polity differentiated along the axes of public/private, material/spiritual, inner/outer, visibility/invisibility, masculine/feminine, national borders/national interiors. War to Gabriel<sup>9</sup>, is the catalyst that distillates not just this identity but conversely also the gender of the nation that ‘confers’ that identity as masculine. Precisely because the ‘nation’ in question is no more than its military representatives, it is also a hyper-masculine entity, defined by its heroisms, its powers of violence and invulnerability. The body of the nation is thus feminine, while in the best traditions of patriarchy, its identity is claimed as masculine. A stereotypical investment in a particular mode of masculinity and heroism marks ‘Border’, so that, even as it proposes to offer ‘serious’ fare, it remains determined by the imperatives of the industry that produces it.

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<sup>7</sup>The discourse associates you with a particular gender, and also with a higher or lower valuation; a symbolic system where the real women and men are supposed to exemplify the characteristics on the lists; George Bush (with the “unitary masculine actor problem” in “he” when referring to Iraq and Iraq’s army contested) & Patricia Schroeder getting teary-eyed in public viewed through the lens of gender, seen to mean two very different things as an example of an existent “preemptive deterrent”

<sup>8</sup>i.e., as lethal intergroup violence, warfare worldwide in recent years seldom has taken the form of pitched battles between state armies; war system as the interrelated ways that societies organize themselves to potential and actual wars.

<sup>9</sup>A senior academic with a focus on trans-disciplinary research that uses innovative frameworks, which enable a calibrated understanding of social phenomena.

So, within the defense community discourse<sup>10</sup>, manliness is equated not only with the ability to win a war, but it is also equated with the willingness to threaten and use force. In the face of this equation therefore, genuine political discourse disappears (as that of “Does Bush have the stones for war?” utterly extraordinary, articulated by one defense intellectual). In other words, national security discourse<sup>11</sup> can be seen as having different positions within it, one that are starkly gender coded: indeed, the enormous strength of their evocative power comes from gender. Thus, one difficulty is, when you participate in conversation in that community, you do not simply choose what to say and how to say it; you advertently choose a position (i.e., for instance, “As a woman, I can choose the masculine position”) in the discourse. Another difficulty is in realizing the potential benefits of recruiting more women in the profession; the assumption that they would make a difference is to some degree predicated on the idea that “the feminine” is absent from the discourse, and that adding it would lead to more balanced thinking. So, it is not certainly the presence of women that would make a difference, but the feminist voice opposed to male domination and dedicated to promoting “women’s interests and gender equality. Goldstein does not position himself on the terrain of feminist theorizing in the subfield of international relations except in signal that a strong version of postmodern feminist analysis<sup>12</sup> is incompatible with his findings. Locked in language, truth claims convey what has been validated previously, often under conditions of male bias. Goldstein’s definition of gender shares a kinship with constructivist understandings, seeking evidence from Doyle’s comprehensive survey of scholarship on war and peace that contain six-gender related index entries but devotes only about one tenth of 1% of its space to gender. While on the other hand, Jean Elshtain describes a “polyphonic chorus of female voices...At the moment [1987], feminists are not only at war with war but with one another.” Most feminist approaches (i.e., liberal, difference, and postmodern) share a belief that gender matters in understanding war and share a concern with changing “masculinism” in both scholarship and political military practice, where masculinism is defined as an ideology justifying male domination.

The strands (i.e., liberal<sup>13</sup>, difference<sup>14</sup> & postmodern<sup>15</sup>) of feminist theory explain gendered war roles in different ways underlining women to be capable warriors, gender differences as deep-rooted and partly biological, arbitrary cultural constructions favoring the men in power. Beyond the obvious point that mainstream approaches omit both gender and women, some feminist political scientists (i.e., Bacon, E.O. Wilson & Desmond Morris) argue that traditional theories of war reflect deep masculinist biases and that their models of the world assume male superiority. For instance, Ramazani<sup>16</sup> clarifies in the wake of feminist critiques, that how the patriarchal appropriation of birthing metaphors serves to naturalize belligerent national ideologies. More specifically, she reexamines the institution and the practice of war as a central feature of state fetishism. For gender and sexuality have been linked to war, historically, just as war has been linked to the concept of nation by an idealist assumption of teleological necessity that is based on a myth of bodily unity. What is it about this imaginary body that a masculine sublime of rational violence disavows on the one hand, yet on the other hand appropriates, incorporates, and projects in abstract and self-evident metaphors of Truth? It is the uncomfortable unawareness, the feeling of ambiguity, that the body of war is “made” to contain to subordinate to its abstract, rational contours, to its hard, unyielding, “masculine” frame. Yet for all its symbolic coherence and cohesion, the body of war is an unsound container, a permeable entity whose contents leak out:

<sup>10</sup>Every military innovation, be it as material as an aircraft carrier and as conceptual as network-centric warfare is a social construction. Thus, its meaning is not derived from its firepower or its application in conflict but from the way social actors constitute it in discourse.

<sup>11</sup>Security and defence of a nation state, including its citizens, economy, and institutions, which is regarded as a duty of government.

<sup>12</sup>Postmodern feminists see gender itself, and gender roles in war, as fairly fluid, contextual, and arbitrary. Gender shapes how both men and women understand their experiences and actions in regard to war. Therefore, gender is everywhere, and some scholars reveal and deconstruct the implicitly gender-laden conceptual frameworks of both theorists and practitioners of war. Some postmodern feminists analyze the uses of binary oppositions, which readily map onto gender, to structure models or theories.

<sup>13</sup>They argue that women equal men in ability, and that the gendering of war reflects male discrimination against women (i.e., sexism)

<sup>14</sup>Regarding war, difference feminists argue that women, because of their greater experience with nurturing and human relations, are generally more effective than men in conflict resolution and group decision-making, and less effective than men in combat.

<sup>15</sup>For postmodern feminists interested in war and peace, women play many roles in war, some of them even seemingly contradictory, and masculinity too differs from place to place.

<sup>16</sup>Kathryn B. Gore Professor of French Studies at Tulane University. His research interests include French literature and culture, critical theory, and critical international relations.

wars, says Ruddick<sup>17</sup>, “rarely have the neat endings their partners envision.” “To arouse a sturdy suspicion of war,” in Ruddick’s estimation, “it is necessary to undermine the kinds of thinking that legitimate war making”, that cast war as a self-evident, even vulnerable, institution. What horror makes natural the horrors of war; what fearful unreason makes it reasonable to kill? For the problem is not just the obvious one, that in the gendered dichotomies of patriarchal culture the feminine concern for private affections is devalued with respect to manly ideals such as public duty and tough impersonal thinking. Instead, it is and should be the commitment and ability to develop, explore, rethink, and revalue those ways of thinking that get silenced and devalued. In an “objective” and “universal” discourse that valorizes the “masculine” and deauthorizes the “feminine”, it is only the feminine emotions that are noticed and labeled as emotions, and thus in need of banning from the analytic process. Significant is to distort the roundly rational thought within the community of the defense intellectuals and by extension, to cripple democratic deliberation about crucial matters of war and peace.

In Cooke’s<sup>18</sup> analysis, “postmodern war” refers both to a periodization and to a cluster of defining characteristics. Here, Schott finds the conceptualization of postmodern war both problematic and provocative to the extent that it debunks myths of rigid gender patterns during wartime, which define women on the home front and men at the front, and that it risks overlooking the way that gender may not be primarily fluid. Whatever account so is given to explain sexual violence against women in wartime, the persistence of this violence is one indicator that gender identity is a pivotal factor in women’s fates both during and after war. War affects not only individuals who are gendered as female, but also more generally contributes to the construction of gender identities<sup>19</sup>. Schott also contends that, the more one can understand how hostilities and aggressions are catalyzed along gender lines, the more one can explore strategies for diffusing this aggression. Feminists so have argued that the postmodern destruction of women is useful in challenging a universalist conception of women, which then separates out gender from other determinants of social identity.

### III. The deadly COVID-19 And Women Refugees

“We are afraid because we have nothing,” says Mobina Khatun, 45, a Rohingya woman volunteer in the Ukhiya sector of Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. “As we live in a very congested area, if there is limited access to medical treatment and the virus comes here, we will all die. So, we need sufficient hygiene materials like soaps and masks, along with doctors and nurses.”

The deadly COVID-19 pandemic as we know, has impacted lives everywhere, and it hits hardest those who have the least, i.e., the refugees and displaced persons. Of the 71 million people forcibly and brutally displaced around the world, over 80% of refugees and nearly all internally displaced people are hosted in low- and middle-income countries<sup>20</sup>. As refugees seem to experience a unique set of challenges as a result of the health crisis, images from refugee camps in Greece and Bangladesh pose questions about how far and to what extent has social distancing been possible. With social distancing orders in purview and the limited access to food rations provided by NGOs and the UNHCR, widespread hunger has been documented in many refugee settlements like those in Jammu<sup>21</sup>. In a nutshell, they face added risks of having limited access to water, sanitation systems and health facilities, alongside the dangers that have compounded.

When it is about women, it is about the triple-crisis they naturally go through in the process of awareness, establishment and strengthening community. For them, the implications of COVID-19, displacement, and gender-based violence have overlapped adversities, urging the need to a gendered analysis of a global health crisis. Lockdown orders at the beginning of the outbreak have hampered the educational and economic prospects of women refugees. Studies (i.e., Human Rights Watch Report of 2019, Malala Yousafzai’s *What Works in Girls Education*, 2016) have shown that very few girls, especially among refugees, return to school after dropping out. Discrimination and unequal access to skill acquisition in the past have also restricted women refugees to jobs in the informal sector, which now translates into heightened job insecurity. Increased unemployment and rising financial concerns then result in a spike in prostitution, human trafficking, and child marriages, according to reports by Refugees International<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, the pandemic has predicated the escalated anxiety, loneliness, fear, and uncertainty of these refugees, while talks about mental and social health remain limited, vehemently coercing the situation at war and conflict. It is about one year ago, just over 700,000 people fled Myanmar for Bangladesh in fear of their lives. They endured terrible journeys of up to two months or more:

<sup>17</sup>Feminist philosopher and the author of **Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace**.

<sup>18</sup>Braxton Craven Professor of Arab Cultures at Duke University.

<sup>19</sup>Sara Ruddick (1993, 110)

<sup>20</sup><https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/compilation-women-refugees-and-covid-19>

<sup>21</sup>Aathira Konikkara, 2020

<sup>22</sup>Angelina Dash’s **The Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Refugee Women and Girls**, 2020

on the move constantly, sleeping rough, fleeing attacks along the route, and some even losing children in the confusion of flight<sup>23</sup>. In particular, social, and cultural norms severely restrict Rohingya women's and adolescent girls' mobility, both through the practice of purdah. Research from Rakhine state has found that women had limited access to public spaces and little meaningful involvement in public decision making prior to displacement. While some refugee camps have significant movement restrictions which have resulted in a reduction of livelihood opportunities for refugee families: girls and young women, as well as working on family land, rely on trading and work as maids in nearby cities. COVID-19 combined with insecurity makes this impossible. Many refugee women, at least 25% of whom are heads of households, are dependent upon acquiring and cultivating land within host communities, not necessarily nearby, as a critical source of food and income to meet basic needs. Even after authorities lift the movement restrictions, the potential economic damage in host communities could have lasting effects on the ability of refugees to make a living<sup>24</sup>. Finally, increasing xenophobia which has been noted in various countries during the pandemic has also exacerbated their vulnerability to discrimination and even physical violence (Devakumar et al. 2020; Oryem 2020). Lack of legal status of women in South Africa, makes it almost impossible to find jobs in formal employment, irrespective of skills levels, and previous research has shown that refugee women have less choice and more difficult access to informal employment than their male counterparts (Crankshaw et al. 2021 forthcoming). Prior to COVID-19, many of the women interviewed had been employed in the informal sector, for example as childminders, hairdressers, nail technicians, or car guards, jobs that were already precarious and open to exploitation. With the start of the lockdown their workplaces were closed, resulting in loss of jobs and income. Although most of the other interviewees had not reached the stage of being evicted, an inability to pay rent was a serious source of insecurity, not only because they felt worried about possible evictions, but also because of violent behavior, they experienced from landlords who used intimidatory tactics to try and force them to pay the rent. For women, especially those living alone or alone with their children, these violent threats from landlords were particularly intimidating<sup>25</sup>. While on the other hand, even though they did not talk about having experienced physical violence from their partners, women did talk about the mounting levels of stress and tensions in their households as a result of the lockdown, resulting in increasingly violent arguments between couples. Fear of COVID-19 also appeared to prevent those with chronic health issues, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, etc. from going to hospitals, and in many cases meant that these women stopped attending their regular appointments or did not get the treatment which they needed<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, it becomes necessary to find a way to address these difficulties both at the policy and the civil-society level.

#### IV. Conclusion

Despite international standards and frameworks to better guide humanitarian policy and to ensure that gender is mainstreamed in the first phase of humanitarian response, in reality this often only happens much later – usually after lessons have been learned the hard way. Gender constructs become real not only in discourse but also through institutionalization. While most male scholars of war bypass questions of gender, feminist theorists have elaborated several ways that gender affects war. Not surprisingly, there is resistance against the feminization of militaries, a sentiment that women and peacekeeping undermine combat capabilities, that soldiers cannot be both warriors and peacekeepers. Shedding light on these operations of gender thus, is an important task for feminists and a necessary complement to the unmasking of militarized masculinity so adamantly advanced. The vehement use of gender stereotypes to invoke 'protective' action when women and girls have been abused seems to be linked to broader political motivations. "The health of every person is linked to the health of the most marginalized and vulnerable members in a society", says Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees<sup>27</sup>. By understanding the gendered problems prevailing among refugees, the pandemic can be leveraged to mitigate the negative effects of adversity, while simultaneously allowing female refugees to become meaningful participants of their host country's society and economy. Most importantly, we must maintain solidarity with refugees, especially women and girls, not just in times of pandemic, but afterwards as well. For even if they have had citizenship rights taken away, they are still human. While these interlinkages mean and suggest that it is not possible to find evidence that considers the relative significance of gender, as compared to

<sup>23</sup> Oxfam International, September 2018

<sup>24</sup> Plan-International.Org's Close to Contagion: The Impacts of Covid-19 on Displaced and Refugee Girls and Young Women

<sup>25</sup> Victoria M Mutambara, Tamaryn L Crankshaw, Jane Freedman's Assessing the Impacts of Covid-19 on Women Refugees in South Africa, 2021

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/coronavirus-covid-19.html>

other factors, in each individual conflict, this does not lessen the importance of gender in fueling violence and conflict<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup>[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/549\\_Gender\\_as\\_A\\_Causal\\_Factor\\_in\\_Conflict.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/549_Gender_as_A_Causal_Factor_in_Conflict.pdf)