Responding to Sexual Violence: Women’s Mobilization in War

Anne-Kathrin Kreft, PhD candidate in Political Science, University of Gothenburg, anne-kathrin.kreft@gu.se

Introduction
Conflict is gendered, inter alia, in that fighting is male-dominated. This leaves women as the dominant group among the civilian population. The existing literature generally discusses two dimensions regarding the situation of civilian women in conflict:
1) Their victimization: sexual violence, indirect consequences of conflict, e.g. displacement, poverty, malnutrition...
2) Their gains in agency: as local peacekeepers, in women’s and peace movements, increased political and social participation...

How do these two dimensions come together? What are the drivers of women’s mobilization in war?

Existing accounts propose that women fill spaces created by the absence of men. I contend that this does not tell the full story.

My contribution

Gendered conflict

Women’s mobilization

My contribution

My contribution

Methodology

Mixed-methods research design to capture macro-level patterns across conflicts and examine causal mechanisms.

Statistical Analysis
Hypothesis: Higher prevalence of sexual violence in civil conflict is associated with higher woman’s political mobilization.
Dependent variable: women’s mobilization (two indicators)
1) women’s non-violent protest (1991-2006)
2) linkages to women’s international NGOs (1990-2006)
Independent variable: wartime sexual violence
Models: negative binomial regression models for overdispersed count data, with country fixed-effects

Control variables for battle deaths, regime type, development, women’s civil liberties, international factors

Case Study: Colombia
Investigation of an extreme case, i.e. with prevalent wartime sexual violence and high women’s Mobilization, to elucidate causal mechanisms.

Analysis of wartime sexual violence, macro-level patterns of women’s mobilization, exploration of the reasons for mobilization in response to wartime sexual violence.

Evidence: primarily interview data (representatives of women’s organizations, international actors), complemented with existing research.

Aim: identify both patterns and divergences/ variation across interviewees

Our [organization’s] hypothesis is that in the lives of women there exists a continuity of violence. Not because a single woman experiences violence in all stages of her life, but because women as a social collective experience different kinds of violence since we are born.

I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation (KAW 2013.0178), Forskningsfondet Theodor Adelswärd Minne, Wilhelm & Martina Lundgrens Vetenskapsfond and Adlerbertska Stipendiefondet.

Results

Cross-National Patterns
A conflict country with systematic or massive sexual violence has on average 2.48 women’s protests for every protest in a country experiencing a conflict with no reported sexual violence (p<.05).
A conflict country with widespread sexual violence has on average 1.15 (p<.01), and a conflict country with systematic or massive sexual violence 1.14 (p<.01) linkages to international women’s NGOs for every such linkages in a country experiencing a conflict with no reported sexual violence.

The graphs visualize the predicted number of protests and WINGO linkages, plotted against battle deaths.

Case Study
Women in Colombia mobilize at very high levels: they have played an important role in including gender concerns in the 2016 peace agreement and have been actively involved in drafting legislation. The major women’s organizations work explicitly on making the gendered nature of the armed conflict visible, and all mobilize (to varying extent) around wartime sexual violence. Some, like la Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres y Mujeres en la Lucha, even emerged in response to sexual violence against women in the conflict and subsequently broadened their focus.

The interviews yield support for the collective threat mechanism, with the following themes emerging:
1) women are subjected to violence as women
2) sexual violence is perceived as a (particularly strong) manifestation of patriarchal culture
3) sexual violence threatens women as a group.

In support of post-traumatic growth, all interviewees have observed the transformation from victims into political actors or (local) leaders, within their own organizations and beyond.

Questions for future research
What kinds of gender-based violence in conflict are — under what conditions — perceived to pose the greatest collective threat to women?
How do the two causal mechanisms interact with other factors known to affect mobilization, such as socio-economic status or existing networks?
What political and social conditions enable mobilization around sexual violence?