

WRITTEN BY JANA KRAUSE

Women, Peace and Security: Prevention and Resolution of Communal Conflicts



Massive expansion of farming in Nigeria has cut access to grazing land for nomadic herders and fuelled persistent violence. Photo: Luis TATO / AFP / TT.

JOINT BRIEF SERIES: NEW INSIGHTS ON WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY (WPS) FOR THE NEXT DECADE

On 31 October 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Several other resolutions followed, which together constitute the normative framework for the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. This brief series was initiated in connection to the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 and promotes the realization of the WPS agenda through evidence-based policy and practice. It is the result of a collaboration between the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), and UN Women.

The editorial board has consisted of Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Sophia Wrede from FBA, Louise Olsson from PRIO, and Katarina Salmela and Pablo Castillo Diaz from UN Women. The views and opinions expressed in the brief series are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the collaborating partners.

■ INTRODUCTION

Communal violence has attracted both research and policy attention in recent years. Global developments, such as climate change and its aggravating effects on farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria, election violence in India and Kenya, or attempts by UN peacekeepers to protect civilians from attacks by communal militias in Mali and South Sudan have brought such violence to our attention and illustrate the death and destruction such conflicts can cause and the need to better address them.

Communal conflicts are violent conflicts that do not include the state as one of the key parties. As such, they are often assumed to be sporadic in nature and significantly less deadly than civil wars. However, in countries such as India, Nigeria, Mali, Indonesia or South Sudan, communal conflicts have killed thousands – sometimes within a few days or weeks. These conflicts are often marked by atrocities and ethnic cleansing. Even if the killing subsides after only a few days, they tend to leave behind serious legacies of trauma, displacement, loss of market structures and income, and weakened social trust. All these factors can negatively impact political processes and stability at the national level and deserve increased attention in the global debate on peace and security.

Academic scholars increasingly analyse the causes, patterns and consequences of a wide variety of violence beyond large-scale civil wars, such as vigilantism,¹ sexual violence,² and election violence.³ This broadening of the research field enables scholars to study the connections between different forms of political violence. It also opens up space for more meaningful engagement with feminist research on gendered experiences of insecurity struggle, and victimization. Feminist scholars have long argued that for many women, the experiences of physical and structural violence do not end with a peace agreement after civil war.⁴ A focus on communal violence demonstrates that these experiences also do not start with civil wars. Communal violence is primarily carried out by armed actors such as gangs, vigilantes and militias. These actors often police, protect and terrorize communities outside periods of communal conflict. They thus embed violence in the everyday social fabric of predominantly poor communities neglected by the state and deprived of government services. One important marker of this social fabric is gender relations.

The findings presented in this brief are based on my research on communal violence, gender and peacebuilding in Indonesia, Nigeria, Kenya and South Sudan.⁵ It examines how communal conflicts relate to women's and men's protection from (sexual) violence, unequal gender relations and the risk of conflict, and women's participation in local peacebuilding and sustainable peace. A meaningful prevention and peacebuilding agenda needs to integrate a systematic analysis of communal violence and its gendered dimensions. Without addressing such conflicts and their roots in polarized societal relations, gender inequality and group discrimination, insecurity and the latent risk of armed conflict remain present in many conflict-affected states. I first discuss how we can better understand communal conflicts. I then focus in more detail on the gender dimensions of communal violence and women's participation in local-level peace negotiations. In the conclusions, I summarize implications for the implementation of the WPS Agenda.

COMMUNAL CONFLICTS AS SITES OF PEACE AND SECURITY

The study of communal violence has developed into a vibrant research field but its findings often remain isolated from broader conflict and peacebuilding research. This is in part due

to different terminologies used across research communities. In some fields, communal conflicts are referred to as 'ethnic conflicts', 'religious violence', 'farmer-herder violence' or 'tribal clashes'. Such terms may describe one important dimension of such conflicts but also obscure their complexity. In election violence research, communal violence is commonly referred to as 'riots', but the term is problematic because it suggests small and spontaneous clashes linked to protests, even though much election-related violence is organized, premediated and taps into long-standing communal tensions. In the peacekeeping and peacebuilding literature, communal conflicts tend to be referred to as 'local conflicts', despite the fact that they are linked to elite politics on the national level and state institutional structures. For example, 'most of the protracted communal conflicts in eastern Congo and elsewhere in the country have been provoked, instrumentalized, or sustained by regional, national, or provincial political actors.'⁶

Communal conflicts are non-state armed conflicts fought between two or more social groups. They exhibit significant variation in type and scale. Some lead to death tallies in the double digits, while others easily reach the level of a small civil war. If a communal conflict kills more than 1,000 people per year, I define it as a communal war. Differentiating between different types of communal conflicts is important for thorough analysis and tailored intervention strategies. The dynamics of violence and prevention differ substantially when thugs may kill a number of people and professional police intervention could bring fighting to a halt, compared to communal wars fought by well-armed militias that are difficult for security forces or UN peacekeepers to contain and disarm.

In order to better understand and address the wide variety of communal conflicts, I distinguish such conflicts according to four key criteria: type, geography, armed actors and national context, see figure 1. The type of conflict can vary from one-sided communal conflicts or pogroms in which a majority attacks a minority, to dyadic conflicts fought between two groups of equal strength, such as two militias. Geographically, such conflicts can be either primarily urban or rural in character. A heavy deployment of mobile police and the military in urban areas can often bring communal violence under control. But in rural areas such as where much of Nigeria's and South Sudan's cattle-related fighting takes place, security forces are inevitably spread thin and can hardly protect civilians. It is important to account for the geography of such violence, because urban and rural conflict dynamics

often interlink and may intensify each other. Communal conflicts also show significant variation in terms of who the armed actors are, ranging from neighbours who take out kitchen knives to attack each other, to urban gangs that carry out election-related violence, to well-armed militias that fight with significant military training. The national context also shapes conflicts and the risk of escalation. Large-scale communal violence is more likely in countries undergoing regime change, such as Indonesia in the late 1990s, in contested national or local elections, as repeatedly observed in India or Kenya, or in the context of ongoing civil war and regional insurgencies, such as in Mali. Communal violence can also increase the risk of civil war and undermine post-war peacebuilding. For example, in South Sudan, communal wars preceded the country’s civil war (2013–2018) and increased again dramatically as of 2019 when the revitalized peace agreement ended hostilities in the civil war.

It is important to recognize that communal conflicts, much like civil wars, are fundamentally political in nature. This means that they need to be addressed through policymaking and political change. Even though communal conflicts are defined as non-state conflicts, the state, its institutions, and the performance of governance shape their root causes and the risk of escalation. These causes include local-level competition among political elite, access to resources and land rights, and discrimination and marginalization of social groups. Apart from these factors,

gender inequality may compound the risk of conflict escalation and hamper effective prevention and peacebuilding.

Communal wars are difficult to resolve because civilians arm themselves for community protection. Even when violence decline, systematic disarmament often does not take place. In urban environments, the legacies of communal violence may lead to increased gang violence and armed crime, which results in other forms of female and male victimization. In rural areas such as South Sudan, efforts by the state and by peacekeepers to disarm communal militias have repeatedly backfired dramatically, at times killing thousands in the aftermath of forceful disarmament campaigns that have resulted in attacks on recently disarmed communities.

GENDER DIMENSIONS OF COMMUNAL CONFLICTS

Differentiating communal wars from smaller-scale conflicts and analysing them according to type, geography, armed actors and national context supports a more gender-sensitive approach to prevention and peacebuilding. For example, my research shows that widespread sexual violence against both women and men is more likely to take place in one-sided pogroms than in dyadic clashes between two groups. During Kenya’s post-election violence (2007–2008), attacks by a local majority group against a minority allowed for such atrocities

Figure 1. Patterns of violence in communal conflicts

Dimension	Spectrum	
Type	(One-sided) Pogrom	(Dyadic) Communal Clashes
	Attacks; Massacres	Battles, (Joint) Attacks; Massacres
Geography	Urban – Peri-Urban – Rural	
Armed Actors	Neighbours – Vigilantes – Thugs – Gangs – Communal Militas – Security Forces	
National Context	E.g. Regime Change – Civil War – Democratization – Elections	
Repertoires of (Non)-Lethal Violence	Homicide; Sexual Violence; Forced Displacement; Torture; Kidnapping; (Sexual) Slavery, etc	

Source Jana Krause. 2018. *Resilient Communities: Non-Violence and Civilian Agency in Communal War*. Cambridge University Press.

because the perpetrators did not have to fear immediate retaliation. By contrast, dyadic clashes, as in Nigeria in the context of elections, are often much deadlier than pogroms. Sexual violence rarely takes place in the heat of more frontal battles between gangs and militias. Consequently, a focus only on high casualty numbers may ignore the scale of sexual violence that is often part of communal conflict and its legacies. These legacies include not only personal victimization but also displacement and deterrence from voting against opposition groups. Protection from sexual violence is an important aspect of a gender-sensitive civilian protection agenda in areas of communal conflict. Peacebuilding efforts should recognize the significant impact of sexual violence associated with communal conflicts on political processes and stability.

More generally, research has established a connection between gender inequality and the likelihood of armed conflict and prospects for peacebuilding.⁷ Communal conflicts are one important form of armed conflict. This means that everyday gender relations shape the risk of communal conflict and the prospects for peacebuilding. In civil wars, male and female combatants often leave their families and communities (or are forced to do so) and are, to varying extents, exposed to combatant training, socialization and armed group ideology. Thus, in rebel groups, these factors (re)shape notions of masculinity and femininity and may demand, encourage, tolerate or prohibit specific acts of violence. In contrast, those who fight in communal conflicts remain embedded within their families and communities, even if they fight within well-armed and organized militias. They remain husbands, sons, brothers and friends who kill in relatively close proximity and return home after hours or days of fighting.

My research of communal violence and its prevention in the city of Jos in central Nigeria illustrates this connection between everyday gender relations, civilian mobilization, and violence. I found that neighbourhoods with stronger women's groups and support for/monitoring of young and unemployed men at risk of being drawn into fighting were better able to establish effective conflict management and prevent killings. By contrast, in the most violence-prone neighbourhoods, vigilante members with a reputation for very violent punishments in the near-absence of regular police protection and gangs were the first to fight in communal

clashes. The mobilization of (primarily) men who also engage in interpersonal violence outside conflict periods explains the organizational capacity for mass violence when communal conflicts escalate. This capacity is embedded in everyday gender relations and violent local orders, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

In Nigeria, Indonesia⁸ and in many other countries, hegemonic masculinity – i.e., expectations for being a respected man – includes holding a job with a steady income that allows one to get married. Such expectations are very difficult to fulfil when high youth unemployment prevails even among high school and university graduates. Men who cannot achieve this ideal can either choose violent masculine identities to assert dominance and control or alternative forms of nonviolent and non-hegemonic masculinities. In other words, men who cannot access social status through education, legal income and decent housing are vulnerable to joining gangs and using their physical capacity to enact violence as a means to generate social status and income. The display of violent masculine strength is a means of making a living from the margins of society that can be more attractive than choosing nonviolent menial work, such as agriculture or petty trade, which remain professions dominated by women.

Developing nonviolent and non-hegemonic masculinities requires alternative masculine identities linked to norms of nonviolence that receive positive reception within the community and society, within the male peer group and among young women.⁹ For example, in one community in Jos where leaders and residents successfully prevented killings, men and women developed alternative notions of nonviolent but respected masculinities. Respected men were those who would not be provoked into fighting, followed community leadership, endured mockery for not proving themselves 'as men' in fighting as young men from neighbouring areas did, and protected the community not by violent means but through active violence prevention.

Women also uphold norms of masculinity that may fuel violence. They may frame or support the framing of men as violent protectors of the endangered community, thus shaming them into participation in fighting. In rural Nigeria and South Sudan, women, children and the elderly provide the organizational logistics necessary for militias to carry out

attacks. Women are responsible for essential food preparations so that hundreds of men from different areas can assemble and carry out attacks, while children may aid the militias as combatants and herders.¹⁰ At the same time, women also bear the brunt of the consequences of fighting and destruction. If their husbands and sons die, are maimed or are arrested by security forces, women are left to generate income for their families. If their husbands and sons return alive, their experiences of having fought and potentially killed may result in increased levels of domination towards women and domestic violence. Men who fought in the clashes in Jos explained that violence prevention and peacebuilding efforts should not only focus on the young male perpetrators but also on women, so that the latter are less likely to encourage or pressure men to fight. Women leaders explained that they educated women to influence their husbands and sons and discourage fighting. They demanded that women stop accepting looted goods their men brought home from violent attacks on other communities.

Communal conflicts are also important – yet often internationally neglected – sites of peace negotiations that require women’s participation. In Jos, peace negotiations repeatedly took place between ethnic and religious leaders, as well as government officials. One such local peace process was supported by the HD Centre and brought women representatives of ethnic and religious groups into the negotiations.¹¹ However, as in many peace processes, female participants found themselves expected to only address ‘women’s issues’ and struggled to influence the negotiations among male representatives. In many other local peace processes that ended major communal conflicts – such as, for example, the Malino II peace agreement for the Maluku conflict in Indonesia – women were completely absent from the negotiations, despite having formed an interfaith women’s peace movement that contributed to paving the way for the high-level peace negotiations.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In order to implement the WPS agenda of protecting women and men from sexual and other forms of violence and promoting women’s participation in all forms of peacemaking and peacebuilding, international actors need to move beyond a narrow focus on civil war and elite politics. A gender-sensitive peacebuilding agenda needs to systematically integrate the

prevention of communal violence. Communal conflicts result in significant levels of death and destruction, increase the risk of (renewed) civil war and undermine peace processes and political stability.

This brief has demonstrated that when developing such preventive interventions against communal conflict, the promotion of gender equality and an understanding of the role of masculinity and femininity should constitute core aspects. Because communal conflicts are fought by armed civilians rather than organized rebel groups, everyday gender relations shape conflict dynamics and mobilization for fighting. Tackling communal violence therefore requires effectively addressing gender inequality at the community level, including recognizing that some women encourage destructive male roles. This brief further underscores the need to work with men and women in these processes so they are more likely to form and uphold other forms of constructive masculinities. This is an underdeveloped aspect of the WPS agenda.

Finally, the brief has highlighted the role of women’s agency in peace processes and their contributions to societal security. Preventive interventions should therefore involve supporting women groups beyond national-level peace processes and political participation, and nurturing their capacity to sustain their activism against ethnic and religious polarization, as well as norms of violent masculinity that aggravate communal violence. The UN Secretary-General’s Peacebuilding Fund 2020-2024 Strategy has recognized the importance of local-level women’s peacemaking and includes not only commitment to strengthening women’s participation in peace processes and but also “supporting local-level and community-based processes to complement high-level mediation efforts”.¹² ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 E.g. Regina Bateson. 2020. ‘The Politics of Vigilantism’ *Comparative Political Studies*, online before print.
- 2 E.g. Elisabeth Jean Wood. 2018. ‘Rape as a practice of war: Toward a typology of political violence’ *Politics & Society* 46(4): 513–537; Dana K. Cohen. 2016. *Rape during Civil War*. Cornell University Press.
- 3 E.g. Sarah Birch, Ursula Daxecker, and Kristine Höglund. (2020). ‘Electoral violence: An introduction’ *Journal of Peace Research* 57(1): 3–14.

- 4 Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Dina Francesca Haynes, and Naomi Cahn. 2011. *On the Frontlines: Gender, War, and the Post-Conflict Process*. Oxford University Press.
- 5 Jana Krause. 2018. *Resilient Communities: Non-Violence and Civilian Agency in Communal War*. Cambridge University Press; Jana Krause. 2019. 'Gender Dimensions of (Non)Violence in Communal Conflict: The Case of Jos, Nigeria' *Comparative Political Studies* 52(10): 1466–1499; Jana Krause. 2019. 'Stabilization and Local Conflicts: Communal and Civil War in South Sudan' *Ethnopolitics* 18(5): 478-493; Jana Krause. 2020. 'Restrained or constrained? Elections, communal conflicts and variation in sexual violence' *Journal of Peace Research*, 57(1): 185–198.
- 6 Jason Stearns, Koen Vlassenroot, Kasper Hoffmann, and Tatiana Carayannis. 2017. 'Congo's inescapable state: The trouble with the local' *Foreign Affairs* (online), March 2017.
- 7 Valerie M. Hudson, Mary Caprioli, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Rose McDermott, and Chad F. Emmett. 2009. 'The heart of the matter: The security of women and the security of states' *International Security* 33(3): 7–45; Theodora-Ismene Gizelis. 2009. 'Gender empowerment and United Nations peacebuilding' *Journal of Peace Research* 46(4): 505–523.
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- 9 Gary T. Barker. 2005. *Dying to Be Men: Youth, Masculinity and Social Exclusion*. London: Routledge.
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- 12 United Nations. 2020. UN Secretary General's UN Peacebuilding Fund 2020-2024 Strategy. March 2020.

HOW TO REFER TO THIS BRIEF:

Krause, J., November 2020, Women, Peace and Security: Prevention and Resolution of Communal Conflicts, Joint Brief Series: New Insights on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) for the Next Decade, Stockholm: Folke Bernadotte Academy, PRIO and UN Women.

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UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr Jana Krause is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Oslo, Norway. She is the author of *Resilient Communities: Non-Violence and Civilian Agency in Communal War* (Cambridge University Press 2018). She directs the ERC Project 'Resilience Building: Social Resilience, Gendered Dynamics, and Local Peace in Protracted Conflicts' (2020–2025).