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Navigating vulnerabilities and masculinities – how gendered contexts shape the agency of male sexual violence survivors

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A persistent cliché about survivors of wartime sexual violence is that they are helpless and ever-vulnerable victims in need of white and patriarchal protection. This stereotypical view is particularly visible for male victims of conflict-related sexual violence, who are typically thought to be indefinitely stripped of their manhood (<https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/94/5/1101/5092094>) and, as a result, to have lost all agency in the aftermath of their victimisation.

Our recent article (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0967010620929176>) in *Security Dialogue* is grounded in our mutual frustration about these and other wrong assumptions that underlie the limited yet growing body of literature on wartime sexual violence against men. Fortunately, the topic has received increasing attention (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27578337/>), in the last decade, both in scholarship (<https://www.routledge.com/Sexual-Violence-Against-Men-in-Global-Politics/Zalewski-Drumond-Prugl-Stern/p/book/9781138209909>), and policy-making (<https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/report/checklist-on-preventing-and-addressing-conflict-related-sexual-violence-against-men-and-boys/>). However, much of this growing body of research is not based on empirical data and does not sufficiently take into account the survivor's point of view (<https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520303744/male-survivors-of-wartime-sexual-violence>). This, we feel, leads to a one-dimensional and often reductionist view of male survivors

and their lived realities. One of the central problematic assumptions we tackle in our recent article is that men who were sexually abused in conflict zones are ever-vulnerable, helpless victims. As some of our [previous research](https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/94/5/1101/5092094) (<https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/94/5/1101/5092094>), documents, men who are sexually violated are frequently seen (and at times see themselves) as deprived of their masculine identities. In this process, it is assumed that with this 'loss of manhood' comes a loss of any agency, which is typically coded as a masculine trait. A related assumption is that these men hardly ever talk about their experiences and only seldom seek help.

"One of the central problematic assumptions...is that men who were sexually abused in conflict zones are ever-vulnerable, helpless victims."

Contrary to that stereotype, the survivors we worked with during our fieldwork in Croatia and Uganda exercise numerous forms of agency, including actively navigating the complexities around silence and disclosure. For instance, they choose when and where to reveal what happened, and when and where to remain silent about it. We found that survivors in Uganda and Croatia often maintain a protective silence surrounding their experiences in certain spaces, for instance within their own homes and communities, while 'breaking the silence' and talking about their experiences in other spaces, for instance in forums mediated by non-governmental organizations. Our insights did not emerge from pointed questions about their agency, but rather unfolded throughout the course of our repeated and lengthy interactions with survivors and their testimonies over time. This, we argue, points to the importance of conducting research with sexual violence survivors over extended periods of time, following a [relational approach](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/research-relationships-and-reciprocity-northern-uganda/) (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/research-relationships-and-reciprocity-northern-uganda/>), and with utmost sensitive and attention to its methodological and ethical implications and challenges.

Our findings also point out that the opportunity structure of the local gendered and socio-political context significantly shape the ways in which male survivors exercise agency. The Croatian survivors who were mostly veterans (from the victorious army) for example could apply for reparations, and could access medical care. The Ugandan male survivors, on the other hand,

were civilians and belonged to an ethnic minority. Instead of being able to access public forums or reparation schemes, they engage in peer-support in groups on a micro-level (<https://academic.oup.com/jhrp/article-abstract/11/1/171/5479480?redirectedFrom=fulltext>), where they are enabled to re-negotiate their gender identities, re-build previously broken relationships and advocate on behalf of male survivors' needs and demands. These and other examples, explored more fully in the article, paint a differential and more nuanced picture of male sexual violence survivors' lived realities and of the complexities of gendered experiences in armed conflict more broadly. One-dimensional depictions, as prevalent across the existing literature, cannot do justice to the complexities of male survivors' lives and realities. Our analysis therefore seeks to break the dichotomies of victim or agents, and of vulnerabilities versus agency, through which male sexual violence survivors' experiences are usually viewed. Our research therefore contributes to more nuanced and holistic examinations of the gender dynamics of armed conflicts in general, and of sexual violence survivors' lived realities in particular.

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