Gendered Battlefields: A Contextual and Comparative Analysis of Women’s Participation in Armed conflicts in Africa

John Idriss Lahai

Abstract

The level of women’s participation in armed violence in Africa is determined by the nature and typology of conflict. Using prior research as a data source, the article examines the nature of women’s participation in on-going and recently-concluded armed conflicts in 15 countries in Africa. Based upon data that show variations, and similarities in the contextual conditions under which women become war participants, this article presents three kinds of wars, and the conditions that distinguish them from one another, as a theoretical framework in analysing women’s involvement in Africa’s armed conflicts. The findings show that in ‘resources/opportunistic’ driven wars, women’s participation is higher and more complex when compared to ‘ethno-religious’ and ‘secessionist/autonomy’ driven wars. Moreover, this paper finds that women’s participation can be active and passive; coerced and voluntary.

It has been contended that women’s everyday life is a gendered battlefield. Cockburn (2004, p. 43) writes, “No wonder women often say, ‘War? Don’t speak to me of war. My daily life is battlefield enough.’” Women have usually been presented in the literature of wars as victims, and men as perpetrators. Dubravka Zarkov (2001, p. 96) discusses how such a conceptualisation has led to the continued dominations of notions of masculinity and the ultimate designation of who can or cannot be named a perpetrator or victim. Theoretically, analysis of gender and conflict has been dominated by the narratives of hegemonic masculinity. As a result there has been an emphasis on the patterns of practice that allowed men’s dominance over women through culture, institutions, and persuasion thereby denying women an agency devoid of victimhood in the discourse of violent gender relations (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, p. 832). However, the persistency of masculine narratives has been reinforced by women who essentialise the roles of women in conflict. Against this backdrop, this article is a departure from this male-centric theoretical explanation to a gender-centric analysis because, as Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjes (1998, p. 43) suggest, shifting the level of analysis on wars and the roles of women from feminist-essentialism—that sees women as naturally peaceful—to a more rational level would enable us to see that women are not always bearers of certain essential qualities of kindness and compassion, especially when seen from the fact that they sometimes collude in their own oppression.

However, researchers, as Kwesi Aning notes, have found it perplexing to reconcile women’s involvement in wars with the popular perception of exclusively male brutality (Aning 1998, p. 2). The questions therefore are how do we deconstruct conflicts without essentialising women’s roles, thus relegating them to the status of victims without agency? What are the factors responsible for the high presence of women combatants in some conflicts and less so in others? What are the conditions that explain women’s participation in these conflicts? These are the questions that this article will attempt to answer. Using prior research as the data source, this article examines the nature, trends and patterns of women’s participation in civil wars (ongoing and some recently concluded) in 15 countries in Africa.

Methodology

My sample of armed conflict countries is taken from the 2009 Armed Conflict report compiled by Project Ploughshares. The report lists, at the end of 2009, ten African countries: Algeria, Burundi, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, and Kenya (however, Kenya is excluded from this sample and replaced with Senegal’s Casamance Region conflict) that are in armed conflicts. To this sample, I have added five countries: Sierra Leone; Liberia; Rwanda; and Ivory Coast; and Angola whose conflicts have formally
ended. The final sample is shown in table 1.

| Table 1: Conflict Countries in the Sample (n = 15), by on-going and recently-ended war status, and region. |
|---|---|
| **Countries with on-going Armed Conflicts, and Region (n=13)** | |
| West Africa | Nigeria; Senegal (Casamance Region) |
| Central Africa | Burundi; Chad; Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaïre) |
| East Africa | Sudan; Uganda; Ethiopia; Somalia |
| North Africa | Algeria |
| **Countries with recently-ended (with year) Armed Conflicts, and Region (n=3)** | |
| West Africa | Sierra Leone (2002); Liberia (2003); Ivory Coast (2007) |
| Central Africa | Rwanda (2002) |
| Southern Africa | Angola (2002) |

This paper also relies on Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) grounded theory approach in investigating the shared gendered political conditions of war, and the patterns of women’s involvement in these conflicts. Adding to this, a total number of 31 African refugees, mostly Ethiopian, Southern Sudanese, Sierra Leoneans, and Liberians, living in Armidale and Brisbane, Australia, were randomly selected and interviewed. Gender and region were taken into consideration in the research design.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first section presents a contextual and comparative analysis of the shared gendered conditions of the countries under review. The second section contains an analysis of the typologies of conflicts, and a discussion on the distribution of conditions that differentiate them from one another, and the patterns of women’s participation. The final section presents an empirical/quantitative discussion on women in the fighting forces.

**Definitions of terms**

In this paper, gender denotes the specific and shared masculine and feminine roles and responsibilities defined in terms of their gender relations. The notions of patriarchy and masculinity also deserve clarifications. Adopting Goldstein’s (2002, p. 2) definitions, patriarchy is used in this article to denote the social organisation based on men’s control of power; and masculinity refers to the ideological and stereotypical construction that promotes male dominance. By armed conflict (which is used interchangeably with civil wars) this article adopts Project Ploughshares (2009) definition of an armed conflict, which it define as a conflict involving multiple actors (state and non-state) and in which there more than 1,000 battle-related deaths. [3]

**Shared Gendered Conditions in civil wars (ongoing), and Civil-War-torn (recently-ended) African Countries**

The data (see Table 2 below) reveals that these countries share eight generic (with some country-specific differences) engendered conditions—which are also determinants of women’s involvement in armed conflicts: (a) the masculinity of the parameters for armed conflicts; (b) the feminisation of war-related violence (such as sexual-gender-based-violence) and its influences on peace processes; (c) failed statehood reinforces the feminisation of poverty; (d) gendered representation (and the transvestite outlook of women combatants) in the fighting forces; (e) the gendered continuum of violence; (f) the existence of high pre-war domestic conflicts (mostly defined by heighten familial gender based violence); (g) the gendered differentials of the impact of war-related violence; and (h) the use of mass rape as a weapon of war and terror.
The masculinity of the parameters for armed conflicts

It is valid to argue that the more equal women are to men the higher their participation in politics; and the greater their participation the more equal a society will be and women politicians may also creates a balance between welfarism and militarism (Reynolds 1999, p. 554). Conversely, the more women are excluded the more militaristic, ethnically marginalized and conflict-prone state politics becomes. [4] According to Goldstein (2001, p. 3) in “understanding gendered war roles, the potential for war matters more than the outbreak of particular wars”. For him, the constructions of masculinity (across cultures and belief systems) motivate soldiers to fight; because war becomes a ‘test of manhood, and that men’s war roles are determined by the supportive roles (of ‘bush wives’) provided by women. He further argued that:

Males occupy the ongoing role of potential fighters, even in relatively peaceful societies. Amazon myths aside, in only one documented case (Dahomey) did women make up a substantial fraction of combat forces in a regular standing army over many years. This regularity in gender roles in contrast with much greater diversity found both in war itself and in gender roles outside war (Goldstein, 2001, p. 10)

Traditionally in Africa state institutions are dominated by men, especially in pre-war years and in time of conflict. Consequently, they are responsible for making decisions to wage war, or set the conditions that encouraged popular rebellions and civil wars. Politics in Africa, writes Sederis (2001, p. 151), “constitute exclusive male clubs, which are defined by hierarchy, authoritarian control, aggression and violence.” Feminist scholars (Enloe 1998; Turshen & Twagirumukwa 1998; Hatch 2000; Sideris 2001) have argued on the link between patriarchy and militarisation. Brommiller (1975, quoted in Sideris 2001, p. 151) contends that “ordinary men are made un-ordinary by entry into the most exclusive male-only club in the world”. Therefore this militarisation, she argues, is aggressively aggressive and masculine—which creates a sense of meaning and direction to remove women from war making decision. And in fact, the mere presence of women in positions of power is misleading according to Francine D’Amico;

Women’s increasing presence in the military does not change the fundamental gendered construction of the institution, which at its core is coercive, hierarchical, and patriarchal. In fact, the increasing presence of women serves to legitimize the institution by giving it a façade of egalitarianism (D’Amico, as quoted in, Peterson and Runyan 1993, p. 86).

In Africa the recruitment gap between women and men in the armed forces and politics, and attitudes related to women’s sexuality, provide an important vantage point from which to examine the interactions between militarism and masculinity. Though it is evident in many conflicts in Africa that women are increasingly being represented in
militaries, and that they often enjoy special benefits and opportunities that men do not, gender and power relations are still not evenly distributed. McKay and Mazurana (2004) found that equal treatment and gender parity in the fighting forces were not evident in Sierra Leone, Uganda and Mozambique; instead women were the sustainers of in-group male perpetrated violence.

At the political level, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, IPU (1997) presents statistics that shows that women were fundamentally under-represented in politics between 1991 and 1997 (the period when the continent became volatile and conflict-infested). In Table 3, the pre-war and wartime percentages of women in parliaments, and the political systems of the countries under review are tabulated. A common feature of these countries is that they were either strarcocracies or autocratic one-party dictatorships when the wars erupted. However, in the countries with recently concluded conflicts the trend is changing. Elson and Keklik (2002) contend that 13 developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have higher proportions of women parliamentarians than the United States (12%), France (12%) and Japan (10%). Rwanda has 26% and Uganda, 25%.

### Table 3 Women Political Representation in Conflict Countries in the Sample (n=15)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Number of Seats</th>
<th>1990-1993</th>
<th>1995-1997</th>
<th>Pre-War Political Systems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>West Africa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Military/Democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>6.7 (1994)</td>
<td>0 (1997-2003)</td>
<td>One Party Dictatorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>86</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Military Dictatorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Africa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burundi</td>
<td></td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnic (Luo) Dictatorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dictatorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Republic of Congo</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>1.6 (lower house)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dictatorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Formerly Zaire)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.3 (upper house)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnic (Hutu) Dictatorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Africa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>400</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Dictatorships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>275</td>
<td></td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>Military Dictatorships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>125</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>Dictatorships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dictatorship/Warlordism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Africa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>181</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.6 (1994)</td>
<td>Military Dictatorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Africa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dictatorship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s construction at basis of literature on Gender and Politics in Africa.


*The dash represents either the lack of data, or there was no parliament due to the political system—mostly military regimes ruled by dictators and therefore there were no legislative organs.*

**The feminisation of Peace processes**

Though beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the nuanced theoretical feminist arguments surrounding the peaceful nature of women, it is important to note as Binta Mansaray argues that the:

Trite expressions like ‘women love peace and men make war’ are misleading... women represent the best bet for peace, not because they are ‘naturally’ or ‘inherently’ peace-loving human beings... but because women are usually excluded from the male-dominated political groups which take war-like decisions (Mansaray 2000, p. 144).

It is within this political exclusion that I suggest we start any analysis of women in peace activism (formal and informal). In Sierra Leone and Liberia, for example, after many years as inferior actors, women became very active (though under-represented in the formal peace talks) in influencing the outcomes of the 1999 Lome Peace Accord and the 2003 Comprehensive Peace Plan. In the ongoing war in Senegal (Casamance region) women are very active in calling for an end to hostilities through demonstrations and in lobbying the leaders of the warring factions (see De-Maio, 2004). However, there are mixed result from the data. In the conflicts in Darfur, Southern Sudan, and Ethiopia (Ogaden Region) women’s role in the peace processes are invisible or non-existent.

Several factors can be identified to validate the argument that peace processes are becoming increasingly feminine—though contentious—and that women are key actors in setting the parameters for sustainable peace. Firstly, the feminisation of war related violence, especially sexual-gender-based violence, against civilian populations has emerged as one of the motivating factors for the intervention of the international community to end protracted conflicts in Africa. Secondly, the feminisation of peace processes and the essentialisation of what women do in
wartime has also influenced the emergence of women’s peace activism. Like war, peace is gendered. Whilst men dominate in the formal peace talks, in tandem with their over-concentration on the political questions that led to the conflict, women are more concerned with the socio-economic, humanitarian, and domestic/familial issues in the aftermath of war.

In his analysis on how gender shapes war systems and in the making of militarised masculinity, Goldstein (2001, pp. 323) contends that just as Hegel’s “beautiful Soul” protects ‘the appearance of purity by cultivating innocence’ about the cruel world, women’s dominance in household sphere creates a kind of metaphysical refuge for traumatised soldiers, a counterweight to hellish war. Although this gendering of psychological spheres, he argues, does not seem sufficient to account for gendered war roles, it reinforces peace processes.

Finally, despite the under-representation of women in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes, women combatants are becoming increasingly involved in the DDR programmes in countries such as DR Congo, Burundi, and Uganda. Their involvement has two implications, first in deconstructing the traditional male-centric disarmament arrangements in Africa, and second, in emphasising the importance of women as key actors in peace, conflict and security, not just mere victims of war. The need for engendering peace has also gained international footing following the UN Security Council’s adoption of Resolution 1325 on “Women, Peace, and Security” which encourages:

All those involved in the planning for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration to consider the different needs of female and male ex-combatants and to take into account the needs of their dependent (United Nations Security Council 2000, para, 13.

However, care must be taken when analysing the ‘feminised’ nature of peace processes. According to Goldstein (2001) although women are actively opposed to war more than men, their peace activism feeds into, and reinforces, masculine war roles. This, he further contends, has created a dilemma in women’s peace activism.

Failed Statehood and the feminisation of poverty

The poor management of the public sector, widespread gender-based violence and ethnic marginalization in pre-war years in these sampled countries disproportionately disadvantaged females. A closer look at the indicators of failed states, measured in terms of demographic pressures, worsening refugees/IPDs, group grievance; human flight, uneven development, economic decline, delegitimization of the State, public services, human rights, lack of human security, amid security sector over spending to the detriment of social welfare, the factionalisation of political and military elites, and the lack of effective and depoliticised external intervention (Foreign Policy Index, 2009) resulted in women’s increased domestic burdens. In such situations, as characteristic of my sampled countries, poverty becomes feminised, domestic violence increases, politics becomes more militaristic, and gender relations become more asymmetrical and violent. Put together, these problems fed into the political economy of wars.

The Gendered representation, and transvestite outlook of combatants, in the fighting forces

Although analysis on the gendered nature of war had, a priori, been male-centric, the patterns of civil wars however show that women are increasingly becoming perpetrators of violence (which is a distortion of the dominant-masculine-militaristic social order). For example, during the Rwandan genocide extremist Hutu women were actively involved in the perpetration of genocidal violations (see African Rights 1995). In Sierra Leone, Agnes Deen-Jalloh played a formidable role in the making of the Rebel group, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) (see Abdullah 1998, p. 230; Gberie 2005, p. 29) and by the end of the war, thousands of women (whether coerced or voluntarily) were combatants (Mazurana and Carlson 2004, p. 6). In Liberia, President Madam Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was very active in the making of war—and in the creation of both Charles Taylor, as Warlord, and his National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). In later years of the war, NPFL’s top female political operative, Grace Minor, shaped the (failed) outcomes of the peace processes in Liberia between 1994 and 1997 (see Aning 1998). In Uganda, the current ultra-religious (Christian) position of the Lord’s Resistance Army of Joseph Kony was shaped by Alice Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Movement (HSM).[5]

In Sierra Leone and Liberia’s wars (as in Uganda, Burundi, and DR Congo) the gendered outlook of combatants was sexualised and transvestite. According to Mary Moran, the localised context of the gendered identities of male fighters in the Liberian war was ritualised and formed part of “an altogether more complex and multilayered identity” (Moran 1995, p. 75). Adopting Moran’s line of argument, I will argue that the decision by many male combatants,
especially those of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), to feminise their appearance—wearing female clothing; dresses, brassieres and wigs—during the Sierra Leone war was either to distort (unconsciously though) societal opinion that sees women as mere victims, or as a demonstration of their ability to transcend their masculine identities. This transvestite appearance of the male combatants played a role in the exaggeration among uprooted civilian populations that women were numerically more involved in some rebel attacks.

Similarly women were also transvestite both in appearance—wearing male fatigues—and in their masculine warrior names—such as Adama “cut hand”; lieutenant “Cause Trouble”; Kumba “Blood”; and Lady “Jungle Law”—that depict wickedness and violent behaviour. This transvestism of female fighters, according to Mary Moran, was the most unsettling of predictable gender norms, and although “rebel women are drawn into this mode of representation in a process that may ‘liberate’ them from feminine convention” their transvestism “ironically emphasizes and commandeers their sexuality” (ibid, p. 84).

The Gendered Continuum of Violence

It is evident in the literature that the end of conflicts, or the signing of peace accords, does not represent the end of violence against women. Countries in the data set of “recently-ended” civil wars share this feature of increasing levels of post-war gender-based violence. In Sierra Leone, for example, after the war the dashing down of the optimism of former male combatants to reclaim their lost status in society has resulted in more cases of domestic violence. In Southern Sudan, it has been pointed out that the violence that existed in pre-war years—such as arranged marriages, battering of women, and wife inheritance—is closely related to the prevailing culture of violence that escalated during the war, with multiple cases of rape of women (Lowilla, as cited in, Bop 2001, p. 36). Right across the African continent, Bop (2001) contends that the loss of identity, bodily integrity, the distortion of agency, economic losses, loss of Leadership, losses in education and health, amid the increase in domestic responsibilities defines the precarious condition of women’s post war lives—hence the validation of Cockburn’s (2004) argument that violence against women is a gendered continuum.

Pre-War Domestic Conflicts and Violence

Following from Caprioli’s (2003) analysis on the relationship between gender structural inequality and armed conflicts; and Nordstrom’s argument that “what people tolerate in peace shapes what they will tolerate in war” (Nordstrom 1997, p. 1), I argue pre-war domestic violence was characterized by: (a) the political acceptance of violence as a means of sustaining patriarchy, and the subordination of women, and the ‘other’ men, and (b) the continuum of violence feeds into the war mentality, and often contributes to the systematisation of wartime Sexual Gender-Based Violence (SGBV). In Sierra Leone, for example, the Truth Commission (2004, Vol 3b, chp 3, para 102) found that the persistency of pre-war violence made women think that reporting domestic violence to ‘outsiders’ exposes ‘family secret.’ Consequently a culture of silence was created which spiralled out of control when war erupted in 1991. In Nigeria, prior to the Ogoni conflict women did not enjoy the same socio-economic and political rights as men. “This lopsidedness,” writes Ibeanu (2001, p. 207), “permeated both traditional and modern economic and political structures.” The same is true for the other on-going and recently-ended conflicts in Africa.

The prior research finding that informs this paper reveals that there was increased political violence before full blown armed conflict erupted in these war-torn countries. In Sierra Leone, for instance, the state sponsored the 1985 N’dogbohuso massacre, and by 1991 when the war erupted, political violence characterised relations between groups of youths, and there political benefactors. In Nigeria there was heightened state-sponsored domestic violence before the 1967-1970 and the present conflicts. In Rwanda the discrimination against the Tutsis was politically motivated.

The Gendered Differentials of the Impact of Armed Conflicts

Traditionally, I argue, as does Amani El-jack (2003, p. 11), men had largely accounted for direct combat-related deaths and other violations such as amputation and forced recruitment. However, the expansion of battle sites from the fields into the homes and ‘safe zones’ means that the casualties among non-combatants, especially women, have come to represent a larger percentage of those killed in Africa’s armed conflicts. According to Sivard after 1995 more than 75% of all casualties are non-combatant women and children (Sivard, as cited in, Skjelsbæk 2000, p. 2). However, as Skjelsbæk recognizes, these statistics are contentious, due in part to the lack of data on the sex distribution of those killed in protracted civil wars (ibid).

As we will see later, apart from killings, women are victims of systematic sexual-gender-based-violence (SGBV) in
all conflicts in Africa. In the Ivorian Conflict, it was reported that many women were victims of sexualised violence (Human Rights Watch 2007). In Darfur, Human Rights Watch (2008) reported that since the war started thousands of women were raped, murdered, and uprooted from their communities. In Somalia, UNHCR (2006, p. 67) reported 256 incidents of rape and sexual violence in 2004 in the Dadaab refugee camp vicinity alone. In Sierra Leone, Physicians for Human Rights (2002, pp. 3-4) reported that between 215,000 and 250,000 women are victims of war related rape. Emphatically, these statistics are an underestimation of the victims of SGBV because women prefer not to report out of fear and stigma.

Despite their destructive nature, wars also offer women opportunities to change the pre-war gender stereotypes and subordinations. In Chad, as a consequence of the conflict, there has been a change in the patriarchal social outlook, because “the social disorder brought by the war transformed gender relations,” and “enabled women to leave the private sphere and participate extensively in the public domain” (Women’s Commission of the Human Rights League of Chad and the Editors 1998, pp. 126-207). In Nigeria, Okechukwu Ibeanu found that the Ogoni conflict raised the profile of Ogoni Women (Ibeanu 2001, p. 207). In Sierra Leone it was after the conflict that some of the patriarchal stereotypes (of barrenness, and ancestral curse on women who contest for paramount chieftaincy elections, especially in the Northern Province) in politics were removed, making it possible for women to contest alongside men. As already noted, it was after the genocide in Rwanda that women gained parity with men in politics.

Rape: A weapon of war and terror

It is argued that wartime time systematic rape is a weapon of war that often destroys the foundations that hold societies together. According to Sideris (2001: 148) the use of rape is to humiliate women and destroy communities constitute only part of the threat to social stability because the ways women are raped in war distorts social norms and in this way threatens social and cultural integrity. This is a shared gendered condition of war perpetrated by warring factions in the countries under review. In Liberia, for example, Aning (1998, 11) noted that sexual abuse formed part of the war strategy of Charles Taylor’s NPFL:

In the case of the NPFL, rape was specifically elevated to a central position in its intimidation tactics and exercised as a tool of coercion and terrorism.... In mid-1993, an excerpt of a radio conversation between Taylor and his field commander, John T. Richardson, was clear as to its purpose. Taylor is heard giving orders to Richardson, who had surrounded a displaced persons centre in Harbel and Kakata, to shoot ‘at anything that moves’. Questioned for clarification as to what to do with the civilian populace, Taylor retorts, ‘...if you have men among them, chop them, and for the women, rape them. To hell with them!’

Right across Africa it was (and still is, in Congo and Darfur’s case) evident that the rape of women served strategic militaristic purpose. According to Turshen (1998, p. 11) “rape is a weapon of war used to spread political terror... rape is used to terrorise and silence women and force them to flee homes, families and communities.” In Sierra Leone, systematic rape characterised the ‘joint criminal venture’ between all factions, irrespective of their political affiliations.

However, do arm marauding combatants only target women as part of their strategies? Are not war rapes more of an extension of the misogyny that is embedded in the patriarchal order that defines pre-war gender relations? Are mass rapes not a natural result of the breakdown of law and order which usually underpins war torn societies? These are the questions that have presented complex interpretational problems, especially when seen from the fact that some war rapes are spasmodic—perpetrated by men (in displacement camps and homes) who are interested in satisfying their sexual ego. Moreover, perpetrators often engage their victims, albeit forcibly, in a human sexual interaction that incriminates them in their own violations (Sideris 2001, p. 148). Against this backdrop, mass war rape should also be seen as a weapon of terror.[7]

Typologies of Armed Conflicts in Africa and the Patterns of Women’s Participation

Project ploughshares define an ‘armed conflict’ as a:

Political conflict in which armed combat involves the armed forces of at least one state (or one or more armed factions seeking to gain control of all or part of the state), and in which at least 1, 000 people have been killed by the fighting during the course of the conflict (Project Ploughshares 2009, p. 1).

Whilst wars of this nature are not only confined to Africa, the continent is plagued with armed conflicts since 1978. According to the United Nations Peacemaker database between September 1978 (following the eruption of conflict in
Africa has witnessed more than 146 intra-state conflicts. However, the trends of war in Africa show three types of conflicts, which I label: (a) ‘Resource/Opportunistic’ driven; (b) ‘Ethno-religious/Nationalistic’ driven; and (c) ‘Secessionist/autonomy’ driven conflicts. I distribute the sampled countries between these typologies. However, it should be noted that the Nigerian case is unique (and complex) to all these typologies.

The data shows that women participate in these wars either ‘voluntarily’ or ‘under coercion’ especially when survival is the overriding rule for women (and men) in times of conflict. Once involved, the character of their participation is little different from that of the male combatants. Brutality is hyped in armed conflicts, as every participating combatant feels some sense of privilege and empowerment when armed with an assault rifle.

Contextually, there are variations in the research finding on the levels and patterns of participation. The findings show that in resource/opportunistic driven wars women’s participation is higher when compared to ethno-religious and secessionist driven wars. In the opportunistic wars of Sierra Leone and Liberia, for example, apart from the behavioural similarities of female and male combatants, they were ideologically less motivated, whereas in secessionist wars there are clear ideological reasons for women’s involvement—and they are empowered and motivated by the sense of liberation. However, the result shows some exceptions. In the opportunistic wars in Somalia and Algeria, for example, women are absent in the war as active (fighting) participants due to the religious (Islamic) factors, yet, active (whether coerced or voluntarily) in the non-combative arena of being sex slaves or ‘Desert Wives’ for the male soldiers/rebels.

All these types of war share some features: first, they are intense and cannot end without external military and diplomatic intervention, culminating mostly in fragile power sharing governments; second, these wars result in the distortion of conventional and gender-specific roles and responsibilities—defined in terms of ‘what men and women are trained to do’ in their gender relations. Finally, some violence is targeted at women’s sexuality. However, they are difference in that belligerents in secessionist wars have de facto antebellum territories to which they can withdraw, whereas in resource driven (and ethno-religious) conflicts the rebel forces do not have a political claim to any territory (Aning 1998, p. 6). Moreover, in opportunistic wars the use of civilians as human shield is common, a tactic that does not feature in secessionist wars.

Resource Driven/Opportunistic Conflicts

These are conflicts that are fought over resources and political power with no aim of separating the state into two or more parts. Yusuf Bangura trenchantly describes the motive behind these wars:

Combatants deliberately target civilians rather than armed opposition in prosecuting goals; and atrocities are freely committed as part of strategies aimed at publicizing political statements. In countries rich in natural resources,…the political goal of wars often interact with the multiple logics of resource appropriation…, the looting of private property, and vandalism. Such complicated outcomes have led many commentators to portray contemporary (resource driven) wars as being basically anarchic (Bangura 1997, p. 117).

Moreover, economic opportunities vigorously provide an important variable for the prolongation of conflict which undermines any peace effort. In his analysis of the opportunistic wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, Kwesi Aning posit that these “economic calculations (over time) came to exert a decisive leverage on the form taken by the civil conflict” (Aning 1998, p. 6). In other words, these wars are sustained by natural resources. For example, in Angola the warring factions, especially the Marxist Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the anti-Marxist National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, UNITA) funded their rebellions by trading natural resources, in particular diamonds and oil, for weapons and ammunition. In Sierra Leone and Liberia diamonds accounted for much of the rebel finances. According to Gberie (2005, pp. 183-184) between 1994 and 1999 Belgian figures alone registered more than $2 billion worth of diamonds imported from Liberia; and in Sierra Leone the diamonds mined and traded by Sierra Leone’s RUF and Liberia’s NPFL at different times accounted for between 4 and 15 percent of the world total.

Whilst this type of conflict is not unique to Africa, it is pertinent to add that the nature of lootable resources in these wars also includes the exploitation of women’s social capital both productive and reproductive. In these wars, I argue along with Meredith Turshen that, the use of rape is a systematic calculation:
To strip women of their economic and political assets (which) reside in the first instance in their productive and reproductive labour power and in the second instance in their possessions and their access to valuable asset such as land and livestock (Turshen 2001, p. 56).

Against this backdrop, since women in most cases control domestic labour, rape is elevated as part of a widespread tactic to enforce control of the population and destroy society’s agro-economic means of survival. Moreover, rape is militarised and politicised. Generally in opportunistic wars, the rational calculations of the rebel forces are reinforced by the belief that military defeat would result in physical extermination (Aning 1998, p. 6), as a result rape is used to produce mass displacement of civilians to create a human shield.

Patterns of Women’s Participation

McKay and Mazurana (2004, p. 22) found in their study of girls in fighting forces between 1990 and 2003 that girls enter fighting forces for a variety of reasons; ‘voluntary recruitment’, abduction, protection, taken as orphans, born into forces, tax payment, response to local violence, financial gain, response to state violence, improve educational options, abused or problems in homes, parent, sibling or spouse in force. However, they argued that the notion of ‘voluntary recruitment’ for girls is flawed because the lack of other alternatives creates latent coercive impulses that force them to become combatants. Based on their findings, we can observe two patterns of participation in opportunistic wars (as in other typologies): coerced and voluntary. In these resource and opportunistic driven wars women’s participation is highest, both in combative (fighters) and non-combative (sex slaves, and “bush wives”) roles. Table 4 shows the varying roles played by girls/women in such wars.

Table 4: Roles and Activities Assumed by Girls in Fighting Forces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Combat Soldiers</td>
<td>Porters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training for combatants</td>
<td>Looting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slave labor</td>
<td>Suicide/bombing missions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual slave</td>
<td>Mine sweepers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gather, prepare and cook food</td>
<td>Child care and rearing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spies</td>
<td>Informants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Messengers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intelligence Officers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communications</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana (2004; 24)

Coerced: In resource/ opportunistic driven wars participation frequently happens through abduction during attacks or patrols. One female combatant, in her testimony to the Sierra Leone Truth Commission, trenchantly describes the pattern:

My mother begged them [the RUF Rebels] in vain to release me but “Sergeant Small Soldier” – for that was the name of the rebel that abducted me – refused… he took me to...the camp where the girls and women were separated from the boys and men. We were left to the command of women rebels who maltreated us greatly… we were all trained to fight as rebels.... We were sent to raid neighbouring villages to loot food and bring it back. If anybody disobeyed, you were cruelly beaten (Sierra Leone Truth Commission 2004; Vol 3b; Cph 3, para. 216).

From this narrative, it becomes clear that once abducted women are coerced into handling small arms and light weapons and taught how to use them. In Northern Uganda, McKay and Mazurana (2004; see also Angulo 2000) found in their population-based survey on girls’ roles with the Lord’s Resistance Army that while girls are predominantly porters (14%), and food producers (22 percent), they were also fighters (12 percent). Among these fighters, they reported that 72 percent reported weaponry training and 8 percent advanced military training. In Sierra Leone, McKay and Mazurana (2004, p. 92) estimated the number of girls combatants at 12, 056.

As in Sierra Leone, in Liberia and DR Congo, forced recruitment took two forms: physical abduction and the use of mass rape (which forms part of the military strategy of the rebel forces) to send a message to women that they would only be safe if they join the rebellion, or were armed with an assault rifle—hence the militarisation of women’s femininity.

Voluntary: In these opportunistic wars, women also voluntarily join to benefit from lootable resources, escape their
pre-war/war poverty status, revenge the killing of their loved ones, or to protect themselves. Furthermore, the aspiration of some women to transcend their ‘femininity’ or to exhibit signs of hegemonic masculinity (physical strength, and the temerity to do harm) led some to join, and in tandem, commit crimes of a more heinous nature than their male counterparts. As argued earlier, in Liberia, as in Sierra Leone, women who wanted to be recognized and included in the command structures of the rebel forces became transvestite and assumed a male ‘warrior image’ because the combination of their femininity with a masculine appearance gave them protection.

Beyond the economic lies the social motivation. The Sierra Leone Truth Commission, based on its research on the patterns of women’s participation in civil wars in Africa, posits that a substantial number of female combatants who voluntarily participated in the Sierra Leone war were also affected by crowd psychology:

By this theory, people lose their individuality to the group and act according to the dictates of the collective. Individuals experience a feeling of ‘almost limitless power’, promoting a kind of automatism that allows people to carry out acts without conscious thought, all the time supported by the formidable presence of the group. In this state a person can commit the most vile and gruesome violations. Often those in the group are vulnerable to this kind of pressure because of their own peculiar psychological make-up, whereas without a crowd they (women) might not have the guts to carry out such actions in normal circumstances (Sierra Leone Truth Commission (2004, vol. 3b, Chp. 3, para. 394).

It must be noted here that there is a major difference between women who were coerced into becoming combatants and those who volunteered. The former perform forced labour, besides actual fighting, and are also more susceptible to in-group sexual violence. Whereas the latter wield power; they are the commanders and trainers for those abducted. For example, the Women Auxiliary Corps (WACS) in the Sierra Leone’s RUF rebel group was made up of volunteer women commandos. They were the commanders-in-charge of the abducted girl-children, whom they trained and recruited into the ‘Small Girls Unit,’ an all-girls unit that was notorious during the civil war in Sierra Leone.

Ethno-religious/Nationalist Driven Conflicts

These are conflicts where one ethnic group fights to either uphold their freedom or supremacy, amid the resistance of other group(s). In these conflicts, the inter-ethnic tensions are a reactionary move designed by the oppressed to thwart the ‘other’ from threatening their survival and beliefs.

In Rwanda, like in Burundi, the war was about ethnic control of the state between the majority Tutsis and the minority Hutus. In Burundi, there was unparalleled ethnic discrimination against majority Hutus who constituted an estimated 85 percent of the population. The President and the Tutsi-dominated army retain their dominance in decision-making and have not initiated genuine power sharing with the Hutus (Global Security 2009).

As in opportunistic wars, ethno-religious wars are equally severe. However, the question is not much concerned with lootable resources; rather it is about politics of difference and identity which are shaped by questions of marginalization, honour and humiliation. Within this crucible of humiliation the cultural symbolism of the sexuality of women plays an important role in the making of ethnic identities. In these wars, women’s sexual purity symbolizes the inviolability of their community and the power of its men to defend its boundaries, making sexual violence by outside men a dishonour of individual women, a violation of communal integrity, and a shaming defeat of men in their protective role (Urban-Walker 2009, p. 35).

Patterns of Women’s Participation

Women’s participation in actual fighting—suggestive of their ethno-religious beliefs—is lower, at least when compared to opportunistic wars. In these conflicts the literature revealed that women play dual roles; in fighting, and in performing their traditional reproductive roles. This is especially true for protracted ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia (Ogaden Region), Burundi, and Senegal (Casamance Region). However, women are more visible and active in their reproductive roles than in active combat. Women are domesticated and webbed in patriarchal dictates that demand that they produce more children to swell the populations of their respective tribes.

It is the feminisation of this typology of wars that make it valid to conclude that violence against women in ethnicised conflicts targets their sexuality as a means of shaming their ethnic group(s). The sexual abuse of the enemy’s women is part of the trophy; it is used to de-purify the victim and her ethnic group, and promote coercive population imperialism. In Africa parenting is paternal; therefore if a male member of one tribe rapes, and succeeds in impregnating his victim, the child belongs to the father. This is the kind of scorched-earth war tactic that the Sudanese
Government and their Janjaweed militia have been doing to ‘Arabise’ and dislocate the Dafuri population since the war erupted in 2003.

However, the Rwandan case represents a distortion of this data fit as women were in actual fighting. The Ivory Coast is also another case that turned out complicated results. Although abduction for combat purposes was not known to have occurred, women were combatants fighting for either the Forçes Nouvelles de Côte d’Ivoire (New Forces: FNCI) or the Forçes de défense et de sécurité ivoiriennes (Ivorian Defence and Security Forces, FDS). In this war gender narratives did not feature prominently, due, in part, to the short length (2003-2007) of the conflict and the ability of the warring parties in divorcing from their ethnic grievances nuanced gender narratives.

Secessionist/Autonomy Driven conflicts

According to Toft (2001, p. 1) the reason for conflict between the belligerents (the de jure state and the disgruntled dissentient region, and its people) in wars of this nature is the question of the (in) divisibility of the territory. While the secessionists are asking for autonomy/sovereignty over the territory they occupy, the state views that territory as indivisible. A characteristic feature of these kind of wars is that the belligerents are well organised in the traditional sense of conventional warfare. They are principled in political terms and are focused upon the attainment of their political goal. The combatants are under a central command system and are well organised, although their engagement with the enemy sometimes appears to be uncontrolled. The cases in point are the two-decade war of liberation in Southern Sudan; and conflict in Darfur. In Darfur, the secessionist war started in February 2003, when the Sudan Liberation Front, led by Muhammed Ahmed Al-Nurr attacked and seize Gulu, capital of Jabal Marra province in Western Darfur. In both Sudanese wars, the secessionists accuse the Khartoum government of oppression, exploitation and marginalization, racial discrimination and economic exclusion of their regions. However, the disagreement between warring factions over political representation and the fighting between the Pastoral Arab and the Agrarian Darfuris for resource (water) control makes Darfur a loose choice for this type of war.

The separatist conflict in Ethiopia’s Ogaden region between the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) (formed in 1984 for the independence of ethnic Somalis in Ogaden) and the Ethiopian government is another case in point. The ONLF started off as a protest organization protesting decades of political and economic marginalization of the Ogaden despite the natural resources in the region. As in other secessionist conflicts, the war tactics of the Ethiopian military involved pillage, raping of women, and the mass killing of civilians as part of a systematic campaign to force the people of Ogaden into submission. Nevertheless, for many the conflict in Ogaden is just a cover for the ethncised conflict between the Oromo (majority ethnic, yet marginalized, group in the country) and minority Tigre ethnic group that controls political and military power in the country.[11]

In Senegal, the separatist Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de la Casamance (MFDC) has been fighting for the independence of Casamance since 1982, first through popular protest, and then since 1990 through a guerrilla war. In spite of ceasefires and accords throughout the 1990s durable peace remains elusive. Reports from the region put the death toll above 1,000—the threshold of an armed conflict according to the definition of Project Ploughshares 2009—with displacement at over 63,000, out of a population of around 1.1 million (see Evans 2002). However, this conflict, though silent within the discourse of wars in Africa, also bears the semblance of an ethnic conflict between the Diola ethnic group, who are politically opposed to the separation of the region from Senegal and the other groups fighting for autonomy.

Patterns of Women’s Participations

In secessionist wars, since it is the state that is pro-active in putting down a territorially, politically and economically marginalized insurgent group’s effort to claim territorial sovereignty, or at least win fundamental rights for their people, women’s direct participation in these wars are minimal, and abduction for combat purposes does not future in these wars. However, women who are actively involved as combatants in these wars do not lose their sense of dignity and ‘womanhood’. For example, during the war for Algeria’s independence, Djamila, Zohra, and Samie tell us about their role:

We had visited the site and noted several possible targets. We had been told to place two bombs, but we were three, and at the last moment, since it was possible, we decided to plant threes bombs. Samia and I carried three bombs from the Casbah to Bab el Oued, where they were primed...Each of us placed a bomb, and at the appointed time there were two explosions; one of the bombs was defective and didn’t go off (Minne 1993, quoted in, Turshen 2002, p. 889).
Forty-two years after the liberation struggle ended in Algeria an opportunistic civil war erupted and women’s participation shifted from that of respected combatants, who took independent decisions during the first war, to sex objects (‘Desert wives’) for the male fighters. According to Chrea Meriem:

In the terrorist’ camp, I lived in hell. I woke at dawn to start cleaning, washing, cooking, fetching firewood and water. I nursed the sick and served the wives of the terrorists, the legal ones they called “free women.” Every night the terrorists visited me, taking their turns. They forced me to have sex several times a night. During my (six months) captivity I was raped by about 50 dirty, stinking, brutal, violent men…. The rest of the night, to keep me from running away, they bound my wrists and ankles with wire and took away my clothes (Belloula 2000, quoted in, Turshen 2002, p. 889).

These quotes show that women’s roles are determined by the type of armed conflict. In a war of a secessionist character, women are protected by their men, and their roles are respected. During the first Algerian conflict, Meredith Turshen (2002, p. 890) contends that 11, 000 women joined the Maquis (mountain rebels) and were active in fighting and schooling illiterate peasant women about their collective social role and in explaining the reasons for the struggle. However, in the on-going opportunistic war, she contends that thousands of Algerian women and girls are the victims who have been denied not just their womanhood but their humanity.

The data however, reveals differing patterns of women’s participation in secessionist wars. In Southern Sudan, as a case in point, women are active in the fighting and in their supportive roles. For example, one female Southern Sudanese respondent (name withheld, interviewed for this article) believes that in southern Sudan it is nationalistic for women to give birth to, and in nurturing, committed (male) fighters to defend their right to statehood[12]. In Darfur women are not actively involved in the war; rather they are the victims of sexualised violations. In Senegal (Casamance region), as already noted, though the conflict has affected women more than men, amid the lack of a negotiated settlement between the belligerents, the women are very active in calling for an immediate end to the violence.

Discussion: Countries grouped by type of conflict and the levels (and patterns) of women’s direct participation by contextual characteristics

In these conflicts, women’s participation is determined by the kind of conflict and the political, economic and social status of women, on one hand, and the public acceptance of the rebel leaders, and their agendas (popular or unpopular—defined in terms of their tendency to commit gender-based violence). As already seen, there are variations in the data for each typology of conflict, yet the findings reveal that women are more active as active combatants in resource/opportunistic driven wars. In Table 5 (below) the countries are grouped by typology, and the numbers of women combatants, including the patterns of participation is presented.

Table 5: Countries Grouped by Type of Conflict and Patterns of Women’s Participation by Contextual Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource Driven/ Opportunistic Conflict (n=7)</th>
<th>No. of Combatants</th>
<th>No. of Women Combatants</th>
<th>Area of (higher) Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>75,800</td>
<td>13,202</td>
<td>field combat/Non-combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>101,455</td>
<td>22,370</td>
<td>field combat/Non-combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>167,583</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>field combat/Non-combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Non-combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Republic of Congo</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>field combat/Non-combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Non-combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>21,000</td>
<td>4,547</td>
<td>field combat/Non-combat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethno-Religious/ Nationalist Driven Conflict (n=5)</th>
<th>No. of Combatants</th>
<th>No. of Women Combatants</th>
<th>Area of (higher) Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burundi</td>
<td>56,296</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>field combat/Non-combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>350,000</td>
<td>3,364</td>
<td>field combat/Non-combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivory Coast</td>
<td>48,064</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>field combat/Non-combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria (total, including Niger Delta)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Non-combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Non-combat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secessionist/Autonomy Driven Conflicts (n=4)</th>
<th>No. of Combatants</th>
<th>No. of Women Combatants</th>
<th>Area of (higher) Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sudan (Southern Sudan)</td>
<td>180,000</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>field combat/Non-combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>........ (Darfur)</td>
<td>60,000</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Non-combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia (Ogaden Region)</td>
<td>78,200</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Non-combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria (Delta Region)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Non-combat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senegal (Casamance Region)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Non-combat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s construction at basis of available data/literature on Gender, Conflict and Disarmament in Africa.
Although the estimated figures of those involved in wars are an underestimation, the findings reveal that there is a higher number of combatants (both women and men) in resource-driven wars. In Sierra Leone, for instance, that out of the estimated 75,800 combatants, 13,202 are women (Conibere 2004, p. 14)—of whom 4,751, including 506 girls, were demobilised (Mazurana and Carlson 2004, p. 6). In Liberia, the UN Disarmament Centre (2009) put the total estimate at 1,019,495 out of which 22,370 are women. In Uganda, adding to the previous disarmament of 36,358 soldiers of the estimated 90,000-strong National Resistance Army fighters between 1992 and 1995, as of 2006 approximately 4,547 out of the 21,000 combatants that were disarmed are women. In Angola, the lack of an appreciable number of women and girls in is due to the fact that the community and national-level DDR programmes continue to ignore their presence. CIDA (2004) argued that the 1994 Lusaka Protocol’s Demobilization Commissions which oversaw the demobilization of 9,133 boy soldiers under the age of eighteen systematically excluded women and girls from the DDR programmes. In the ongoing Somalia and Algerian wars women are absent in the war as active combatants.

Conversely in ethno-religious wars, though women are to a larger extent absent in the wars as active combatants, they are mostly active in other supportive areas—this is not to suggest that women in other wars do not perform supportive roles, besides fighting. In Rwanda, as of August 2004, the total number of combatants is 350,000 (Waldorf 2008)—out of whom 50,025 men and 334 women were demobilised (Farr 2004, p. 2). However, during the genocide women perpetrators were estimated at over one thousand. In Burundi, the UN disarmament centre (2009) put the total number of combatants at 21,000, out of whom 494 are women.

The higher gendered representation in the Rwandan conflict presents a very interesting question: why women in Rwanda appear to have been so much more active as killers than those in Burundi? Part of the answer, I argue, rests on the pre-war gender relations of both states. Despite the discrimination against Tutsis, Hutu women in Rwanda were empowered; and empowerment that emerged from (a) the parity created by ‘Hutu Nationalism,’ which was instituted by the Belgian colonial government, and promoted by the pre-genocide media propaganda, (b) the de-sexualisation of Hutu women (epitomized by the folklore of Ndabaga) in the nationalist discourse (Baines 2003, p. 479); and (c) the discriminatory militarisation of the state that followed the Juvenal Habyarimana-led 1973 coup. Whereas in Burundi, both Hutu and Tutsi women were domesticated and had little options open to them in the military and in politics.

However, in secessionist wars since it is the collective that is fighting for autonomy women are largely absent. In Darfur for instance, the leaders of both the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) had claimed that they had a combined force of 60,000 combatants (de Waal 2006), but where are the women? In Southern Sudan, since there is central de facto state system, the statistics are somehow reliable. The number of combatants is put at 180,000, out of which around 3,000 are women. However, in Senegal (Casamance Region) and Ethiopia (Ogaden) there is no data on women combatants in active combat, yet they are involved in supportive roles—i.e. wives and spies—for their rebel forces.

Apart from the uneven levels of participation of women in each typology of war—for example, while 17.41 percent of the total number of combatants in Sierra Leone are women, in Burundi they constitute 1 (one) percent of combatants. In Southern Sudan women constitute 2 percent of those in the fighting forces, there is also a large gap between male and female combatants in all typology of war. Several factors such as (a) male preference, (b) societal stereotypes attached to conflicts—as a male preoccupation, and (c) the reproductive roles (child bearing and rearing), amid increases in domestic chores, among others, can be advanced for this sex distribution gap in the fighting forces.

**Conclusion**

Despite the variations in the data for each typology of conflict, the findings reveal that women are not merely victims, but are important actors in deciding the outcome of wars. Against this backdrop, any analysis of gender and conflict should move away from the traditionally ‘male-centric’ level of analysis to a gender-centric one. Most tellingly, to depict women as the only victims of male barbarity robs women of their agency, and entrenches masculine expectations that politises violence against women to wage wars of revenge—leading to any unending circle of violence—that are reinforced by states keen to manipulate those expectations for political gain (Cockburn 2001). This contextual analysis of gender and conflict has enabled us to see that the complex web surrounding gender relations during conflicts has resulted in a gendered representation in warring factions.

**References**


Angulo, J. 2000, June. *Gender, abduction and reintegration in Northern Uganda* (Occasional Paper, No. 6), Uganda: Kampala, Makerere University, Dept of Women’s Studies.


and women's leadership" in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.


**Footnotes**

[2] I have excluded Kenya from the sample list replacing it with Senegal because according to some reports it has met the armed conflict definition threshold of 1000 battle related deaths. By adding it, this article also intends to move Senegal from its current status as the ‘forgotten conflict of Africa.’
[3] Project Ploughshares adds, retains or removes countries annually based on the magnitude of war (above 1000 battle related deaths, defines as armed conflict; below 25 deaths, not an armed conflict) and peace activities (such as the signing of a peace accord and disarmament and demobilisation).
[4] However, not all countries without women’s political representations are in civil wars or will become failed states. For instance, in the Gulf States, which have parliaments, of Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates women do not have the right to vote or stand for election, yet there is no visible sign that they will ever enter into the type of civil wars experienced in Africa.
[5] Lakwena had argued that the Holy Spirit commanded her to fight for the rights of the Acholis in Northern Uganda by overthrowing the Ugandan Government. When she was exiled to Kenya (where she died), her cousin Joseph Kony took over the HSM and transformed it into the LRA.
[6] For example in rural Sierra Leone and Liberia prior to the war it was a taboo for women to wear trousers, or to behave in ‘unwomanly’ (militaristic) manner.
[7] By adding this ‘terror’ component to the phraseology of “weapon of war”, I also intend to give voice to women victims of peacetime rape.
[9] Since the 1990s the wars in Nigeria are characterized by separatists, state, and religious violence. In the Niger delta region the main rebel group, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), is fighting for the sovereignty of the regions’ 14 million Ijaw people, whilst at the same time doing an opportunistic war for resource (oil) control in the region. The country is also infested with other religious conflicts, especially between the Muslim-based armed groups (the Arewa People’s Congress (APC), Hisbah Groups, the Zamfara State Vigilante Service (ZSVS), and Al-Sunna Wal Jamma) and the ‘disorganized’ Christian Militia. However, these religious conflicts have been exploited by minority ethnic groups—for example there are religious undercurrents in the ethnic conflict between the Fulani and Wase, who adhere to Islam, and the Taroh and Gamai, who are predominantly Christians (for more on the ethnic conflict see Florquin and Berman eds. 2005). Thus it has become very difficult to distinguish between the secessionist and ethno-religious wars in Nigeria.
[10] Conversely, in Rwanda the Tutsis were the majority at the time of the genocide in 1994.
[11] Bereket Terekeng, interviewed (via email) by author, on 2 January 2010. This, he said, explains the emergence of two other rebel groups; the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and the United Western Somali Liberation Front (UWSLF).
[12] Interviewed (transcript tape recording) in Brisbane, Australia on 10 December 2009. When asked to confirm this, a Sudanese male in another town, Armidale, said “It is right for men and women to have more children in southern Sudan so as to make it possible for many to grow up as committed southerners ready to die for their land” (transcript tape recording).
[13] There is no data to support the claim that Tutsi women, who were victims of the Hutu-instigated genocide were victims of the abduction and subjugation to sexual slavery by the Tutsi armed opposition group.
[14] According to folklore, Ndabaga was a warrior woman who hid her femininity and succeeded in becoming a commander of the Rwandan King’s military. Though her sexuality was later revealed, her prowess and strength led the King to marry her.

About the Author

John Idriss Lahai is a PhD Research Candidate (University of New England), he holds a Masters (International Law and Settlement of Disputes) (UPEACE), PGC (International Humanitarian Law), PGC (International Refugee Law) (UPEACE/Geneva), Master of Philosophy (Political Science), and a BA (Hons) (Political Science) (University of Sierra Leone). The author wishes to thank Prof Helen Ware and Dr Adeel Khan (both at the University of New England) for providing critical guidance on the development of the themes throughout this article, as well as all those who contributed to all the discussions that informed this paper.