

Toward a Survivor-Centric Approach

By way of centralizing the voices and experiences of male sexual violence survivors, this book has sought to paint a holistic and detailed picture of the dynamics surrounding wartime sexual violence against men in northern Uganda. Owing to the prevailing marginalization of conflict-related sexual violence against men across time and space, empirical insights into male survivors' lived realities thus far have remained remarkably underexplored and mostly absent from existing scholarship. It was my intention, therefore, to integrate male survivors' perspectives and experiences into heretofore largely normatively infused and conceptually dominated debates, to move forward the frontiers of knowledge on the gender dynamics of armed conflicts and on the civil war in northern Uganda.

The analysis pursued in this book reveals that in northern Uganda, wartime sexual violence against men was geographically widespread and perpetrated as part of wider systematic and strategic warfare operations against the civilian Acholi population. Yet, whereas the LRA rebels' atrocities have been subjected to extensive scholarly and media debate, human rights violations committed by the Ugandan government's armed forces, on the other hand, are insufficiently explored. In this context crimes of sexual violence against men perpetrated by the government's National Resistance Army in the early stages of the war are particularly poorly documented. Throughout existing scholarship on the conflict in northern Uganda as well as on the local level, among the war-affected population, crimes of sexual violence against men are heavily silenced and often only circulate as rumors, if talked about at all. This neglect of crimes of sexual violence against men in northern Uganda is thereby symptomatic for the persistent global silencing and marginalizing of male-directed sexual violence throughout scholarship and policy making alike. By way of situating these crimes within their wider sociopolitical history and overlapping conflict dynamics, I have sought to shed some light on the context, extent, and dynamics surrounding these crimes in the northern Ugandan context.

Throughout this book I have been particularly interested in how male survivors have experienced these crimes, including their impact in gendered manifestations. Toward this end, I have sought to show how situated within hetero-patriarchal gender relations and evaluated against a normative hegemonic model of masculinity, crimes of sexual violence against men significantly impact male survivors' masculinities in different ways and strike at multiple levels of what it means to be a man in this sociocultural context (chapter 4). I have shown that the impact of sexual violence on Acholi male survivors' gender identities is a longitudinal process, rather than a one-time event, that unfolds via numerous physical, psychological, and physiological harms. In this context physical acts of sexual violence, and in particular penetrative anal rape, subordinate male survivors along gendered hierarchies, thereby communicating gendered victimhood. These processes are further exacerbated through different layered and gendered harms that demonstrate male survivors' inability to protect (themselves and their families), provide, and procreate, as is expected of them according to local constructions of hegemonic masculinity.

In order to make sense of these harms, I have put forward the analytical and conceptual framework of "displacement from gendered personhood," to adequately reflect the context-specific, multilayered, dynamic, and fluid character of these processes of perceived gender subordination. I have positioned this framework as an alternative to the dominant notion of "emasculatation" by way of "feminization" or "homosexualization" as commonly employed in the literature, which tends to freeze dynamic experiences in time and space and to mask over the complexities of these deeply embedded processes. The framework of "displacement from gendered personhood" instead acknowledges the fluidity and contextual contingencies of survivors' experiences, recognizing it as a "layered and compounded process," in which the effects of violence itself are "further compounded over time through myriad gendered and sexual harms," challenging survivors' "masculine selves and roles on various levels" (Schulz 2018b: 1118).

At the same time, however, the analysis pursued in this book shows—and the conceptual framework reflects—that this "unmaking" of survivors' gendered personhood commonly occurs in tandem with multifaceted processes of "remaking" the self and gendered subjectivities. To this end, survivors also exercise agency and thrive to access services and assistance in order to (re)constitute their personhood in myriad exogenous and endogenous ways, including by advocating for justice and by engaging with their experiences in the context of survivors' groups. In northern Uganda, however, conditioned by heteronormative assumptions about masculinities and vulnerabilities, there is a striking lack of services and assistance for male sexual violence survivors, with only very few exceptions. As a result, most survivors have not yet been able to share their experiences, and the majority have not received any physical or psychological treatment, let alone any form of justice or redress. Within this vacuum of assistance and services, male survivors in northern

Uganda began creating their own forums to advocate for their needs in the form of survivors' groups. These groups enable male survivors to exercise agency in different ways while at the same time facilitating a sense of justice on the microlevel. Through peer-to-peer counseling, joint agricultural and income-generating activities, and by offering safe spaces for storytelling and disclosure, the groups facilitate a process that responds to survivors' most prevalent gendered harms, enabling them to renegotiate their gender identities, repair relationships, and mitigate isolation, as well as to obtain a sense of recognition of their marginalized and silenced experiences. As a result, numerous survivors attest that "the group is also a sense of justice."

Despite this engagement in the groups, Acholi male survivors nevertheless also demand different forms of justice and redress at other residual levels. While thus far only a handful of studies conceptually and descriptively engaged with the nexus between postconflict justice and sexual violence against men, the analysis in this book sheds important light on male survivors' perspectives on justice. Despite a heterogeneity of justice needs, survivors' priorities broadly center around recognition, acknowledgment, and reparations. This focus stands in contrast to the often unitary focus on international criminal accountability in redressing SGBV, including against men, throughout most of the literature and policy-making efforts. Instead, survivors view official acknowledgment, which can take various forms, as implying the potential to address the marginalization of their largely silenced violations. At the same time, reparations, and especially material compensation and physical rehabilitation, are expected to reen able male survivors to provide for their families and thus live up to socially constructed gendered expectations and responsibilities. Based on these findings, most Acholi male sexual violence survivors seem to desire "justice as a better future" (Nickson and Braithwaite 2014: 449), in which they are able to fully participate in community life and renegotiate their previously impacted masculine identities.

At the core of this book therefore lies the argumentation that although crimes of sexual violence significantly impact male survivors' gender identities in myriad and intertwined ways, compounded over time, these experiences do not necessarily define survivors as ever-vulnerable victims without a voice and agency. Instead, and as illustrated through the case study narrative of Okwera that opened this book, more than twenty-five years after the violations, survivors actively engage with and respond to their experiences, for instance in the context of survivors' groups and by advocating for justice. Survivors' experiences are diverse, variable, and potentially fluid and can thus best be understood as a form of displacement from gendered personhood. In fact, whereas the vast majority of survivors who participated in this study reported harmful effects on their gender identities as a result of the sexual violations, various survivors over time were also able to engage with and respond to these experiences, and partly reverse or undo them, in different ways.

By paying attention to these aspects and facets of survivors' lived realities, including their contemporary postconflict concerns and priorities, this book has sought to paint a detailed and nuanced account of the implications of wartime sexual violence and of male survivors' experiences. It is important to acknowledge, however, that there is significant variation in the experiences of the survivors whose stories are included in this book, as well as beyond other survivors in Acholiland, let alone elsewhere globally. I therefore emphasize that the arguments pursued here apply to a particularly concentrated sample of survivors, all of whom are members in organized support groups, and that survivors who are not engaged in such associations may very well be expected to have partially different experiences.

REVISITING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT GENDER, CONFLICT, VIOLENCE, AND JUSTICE

The different viewpoints presented here and the arguments pursued throughout this book nonetheless carry important implications for research on gender and armed conflict more widely, as well as for scholarship on conflict-related sexual violence and postconflict processes in particular.

As identified in the introduction, dominant research on gender and armed conflict only slowly and marginally examines the roles and positioning of masculinities in theaters of war. Throughout this growing body of literature, only scant attention is paid to men's conflict-related experiences as explicitly gendered. If and when masculinities perspectives are employed, which is increasingly becoming the case, the focus of these examinations predominantly rests on hyper- and militarized masculinities and their conceptual linkages with violence, at the expense of other, alternative, nonheteronormative, and subordinated conceptions of manhood. Such portrayals, however, frequently omit attention to male vulnerabilities and men and boys as victims in armed conflicts. By examining male sexual violence survivors' gendered and sexual harms and vulnerabilities, I have therefore sought to situate this book as part of an ongoing process of diversifying and complexifying masculinities perspectives in, and gendered analyses of, wars and armed conflict.

Another dominant position in the literature views male-directed sexual violence, if attended to at all, as a peripheral phenomenon and an exception to the norm. As a result, male survivors frequently remain of marginal concern for scholars and policy makers alike. By demonstrating that sexual violence against men is perpetrated more frequently than commonly assumed, in northern Uganda and various other contexts, the research underpinning this book thus carries implications for scholarship on gender and armed conflict, particularly for the growing research field on wartime sexual violence. The empirical deconstruction of male survivors' harms and the development of the conceptual frame of "displacement

from gendered personhood,” likewise force us to revisit domination assumptions about conflict-related sexual violence against men.

The findings and arguments put forward in this book also speak to the growing postconflict and transitional justice literature. In particular, the findings underpinning this analysis complement a growing list of critical inquiries that challenge the legal and institutional preoccupation of justice in transition processes and that instead advocate for a deeper, broader, and thicker understanding of justice that takes into account survivors’ everyday needs and priorities (see Robins 2011; Kent 2012; Gready and Robins 2014; McEvoy 2007), in line with a survivor-centric approach, as explained below. Indeed, throughout this book I show that in the absence of avenues at the macrolevel, justice often takes places at the microlevel and for the male survivors who participated in this study specifically in the context of survivors’ groups. The examination offered here thereby adds a masculinities lens and specific attention to male sexual harms to this growing body of everyday postconflict and social reconstruction scholarship, something that has largely been underdeveloped.

Closely linked to these observations, the findings and insights in this book accentuate the need to think more creatively outside the prevailing template about what justice can look like for conflict-affected communities. For instance, recognizing survivors’ groups as an important vehicle for exercising agency and thereby conveying a sense of justice is part of a larger strategy of creating “spaces for people to determine, shape and develop solutions for themselves” (Lundy and McGovern 2008: 292). Echoing Sharp, this can facilitate a “more holistic approach to the scope of justice issues addressed in transition” (2013: 152), interrogating the margins and peripheries of standardized and often technocratic and prescribed transitional justice approaches.

A SURVIVOR-CENTRIC APPROACH

Inevitably any focused research project bound by scope and time constraints can constitute only an initial investigation of a particular question or topic. Clearly more research and careful inquiries across different case sites are needed to further uncover the manifold ways in which conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence is targeted against men, how such violations impact male victims, and how survivors seek to engage with and respond to their harms and vulnerabilities. What remains strikingly absent from existing analyses, including admittedly from this book, are queer perspectives to uncover how individuals with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities experience conflict and are affected by and targeted through sexual and gender-based violence.

By and large—and although over the last decade a growing body of scholarship has been generated on sexual violence against men—most studies on the topic remain largely descriptive, undertheorized, and characterized by a dearth

of empirically grounded survivors' perspectives. Having privileged and analyzed Acholi male survivors' experiences, voices, and viewpoints throughout this book, I have sought to depart from this dominant trend of ignoring or silencing survivors' perspectives. I therefore position this book as an empirically driven counter to the largely descriptive and at times normatively infused bodies of literature on conflict-related sexual violence as well as on postconflict justice and reconstructions, offering numerous inroads into underexplored intersections and themes.

Explicitly foregrounding male survivors' experiences and views thereby leads me to revisit and reshape dominant assumptions inherent in research on the gendered aspects of armed conflict, sexual violence, and postconflict justice. For instance, my analysis of survivors' groups as spaces to exercise agency and as pathways through which justice on the microlevel can be conveyed is an immediate outcome of male survivors' views articulated during the workshop discussions and would most likely not have surfaced if interviews had been solely conducted with external service providers and so-called (often self-proclaimed) experts. To pick up again the proverb offered in the introduction, which guided my research, that "a long stick cannot kill a snake," by getting close to and centralizing male survivors' views and their experiences, I have been able to paint a more holistic picture of their lived realities.

However, one persistent problem that I, as well as others, have repeatedly observed is that a significant number of studies on conflict-related sexual violence (against all genders) seem to negate the ethical imperatives and the implications of research for survivors. Various researchers and studies frequently do not (and perhaps often cannot) involve research participants in the research process as equal and active protagonists. As a result of this, ethical sensitivity and integrity often seem to fall by the wayside, and interventionist and exploitative methodologies prevail. The implications of such approaches to the survivors who are subjected to research, and to the organization(s) that work tirelessly to establish safe spaces, are severe and stand in contrast to the self-centric and egoistic gains for intervening researchers. Having situated my research project as part of RLP's continuous and sustainable process of engagement with male survivors, I have actively and deliberately sought to address and engage with these very real and profound challenges.

If done properly and in an ethically sensitive manner, research processes can also constitute an emancipatory and empowering exercise for survivors themselves. Various survivors who participated in this study repeatedly emphasized that "it is good that we are now speaking" and that "talking has really helped, and it was important to get this out." Nonetheless, despite my tireless efforts to try to facilitate an ethically sensitive and empowering environment, I likely cannot entirely free myself from any blame for externally intervening. However, I raise an important aspect of imperative significance: that ethical considerations must be centralized and prioritized during research with (potentially) vulnerable

populations in (post)conflict and transitional settings—as I have sought to do within the context of this study.

To conclude, then, what are the implications and lessons to be drawn from this inquiry? Quite generally, of course, more scholarly and political attention needs to be directed to wartime sexual violence against men and to male survivors' experience—as clearly this type of violence is committed more frequently and occurs on a much larger scale than is commonly understood and acknowledged. Specifically applied to the context of northern Uganda, where crimes of *tek-gungu* circulate as rumors but remain insufficiently explored and only marginally recognized, it is my intention and hope that the documentation provided in this book contributes toward creating awareness for this notoriously underexplored aspect of the conflict. This newly gained recognition, in turn, is important for understanding how to address these gendered crimes and harms, as well as for survivors' continuous quests for acknowledgment, recognition, and justice. In the eyes of several survivors, documenting an understanding of the crimes perpetrated against them also constitutes a form of recognition and is thus fundamentally important for survivors on numerous levels.

Directly related to this, the vacuum of postconflict assistance for male sexual violence survivors, in Uganda and globally, signifies the importance of paying more sustained attention to informal, “everyday,” and survivor-driven approaches of remaking a world in the aftermath of violence, suffering, and harm. While state-driven, official, and top-down approaches frequently are fraught with and bound by sociopolitical, cultural, and gendered constraints and barriers, processes that are more autonomously (co)driven or influenced by survivors themselves, such as survivors' groups, imply the potential for survivors to engage with their harms and experiences on their own terms. Instead of focusing on and exclusively investing in formal and institutionalized process, therefore, more consideration should be given and more sustainable resources need to be allocated to such measures and to the actors and agencies supporting these processes. While still confronted with certain constraints, such a microlevel and survivor-centric approach can get us closer to restoring minimally functioning lives for survivors, to gaining redress or justice, and ultimately to remaking a world.

In policy terms, such procedures align with the survivors-centric approach as stipulated in the most recent UN Security Council Resolution 2467, adopted in April 2019, which constitutes the latest piece of the puzzle that makes up the UN Women Peace and Security agenda. In addition to, for the first time ever, *repeatedly* mentioning and recognizing male survivors of sexual violence, this resolution emphasizes a survivor-centered approach that ultimately must serve survivors on their own terms. The preamble of the resolution specifically recognizes the need to adopt “a survivor-centred approach in preventing and responding to sexual violence in conflict and postconflict situations, ensuring that prevention and response are non-discriminatory and specific, and respect the rights and prioritise needs of

survivors, including groups that are particularly vulnerable or may be specifically targeted” (3).

According to the propositions stipulated in the resolution, victims in conflict-affected settings should no longer be seen as only passive and helpless victims in need of external help and assistance but should instead be treated as actors with agency and choices. The resolution thereby emphasizes the urgency of providing access to justice for survivors and of addressing their socioeconomic needs. How precisely that can materialize and what it would look like in practice, however, remains arguably absent from the UNSC resolution. Indeed, while a survivor-centric approach has gained traction and prominence not only in the policy sphere but also in the postconflict literature in recent years, the term has not yet necessarily been filled with meaning and has only rarely been implemented, if ever. How a survivor-centric approach specifically applies to the gender-conditioned needs, vulnerabilities, and experiences of male sexual violence survivors has thus far not yet been explored at all, but has been put into some shape and form throughout the pages of this book.

In methodological terms, such a survivor-centric approach immediately builds upon, centralizes, and privileges survivors’ experiences, viewpoints, and concerns. As emphasized in the preceding chapters, this entails an investigation of survivors’ needs and priorities in response to their harms and experiences by way of getting close to their lived realities, utilizing the proverbial “short stick,” as explained in the introduction. Employing this methodological focus has enabled me to show that for male survivors of sexual violence in northern Uganda, a survivor-centric approach encapsulates different measures that immediately address the diverse physical, psychological, and physiological impacts that the sexual violations have had, often over the course of years if not decades. Similarly a survivor-centric approach also enables the men who have participated in this study to engage with their experiences in a diversity of ways, at different levels, in order to come to terms with their sexual and gendered harms. In the context of this book, such an approach is most strongly put into practice through the Men of Courage support group that the survivors’ have formed and operate, which enables them to engage with their experiences on their own terms, based on their needs and priorities. In light of the potential that these groups offer as avenues for postconflict recovery, and how they can link to and form part of the UN’s envisaged survivor-centric approach in responding to SGBV, more attention needs to be paid and more resources need to be allocated to such measures and to the agencies supporting and facilitating these processes, such as the Men of Courage group and the Refugee Law Project in northern Uganda.