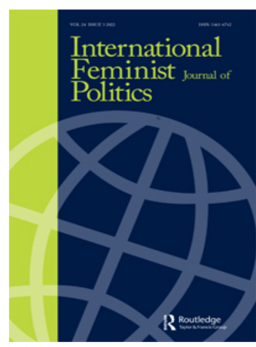

International Feminist Journal of Politics

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfjp20

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Christelle Rigual (she/her/hers), Elisabeth Prügl (she/her/hers) & Rahel Kunz (she/her/hers)

To cite this article: Christelle Rigual (she/her/hers), Elisabeth Prügl (she/her/hers) & Rahel Kunz (she/her/hers) (2022) Gender and the micro-dynamics of violent conflicts, International Feminist Journal of Politics, 24:3, 345-367, DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2022.2083652

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2022.2083652

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INTERNATIONAL FEMINIST JOURNAL OF POLITICS
2022, VOL. 24, NO. 3, 345–367
https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2022.2083652

Gender and the micro-dynamics of violent conflicts

Christelle Rigual (she/her/hers) [a], Elisabeth Prügl (she/her/hers) [a] and Rahel Kunz (she/her/hers) [b]

[a]Gender Centre, Geneva Graduate Institute, Geneva, Switzerland; [b]Institute of Political Studies, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

Conventional stories about conflicts often miss the role of everyday practices in escalating and de-escalating violence and how intersecting social dynamics of gender, ethnicity, age, and religion shape these practices. In this article, we introduce the Special Section on Gender and the Micro-Dynamics of Violent Conflicts. Situating the section within the scholarship on gender and violent conflict, we discuss the opportunities and paradoxes opened up by the adoption of a micro-level approach. We present theoretical and methodological reflections that emerge from the findings of the contributions and that arose in the process of implementing the research project on which these articles draw. We also reflect on the practical implications of our research. Specifically, we discuss conundrums of violent conflict research regarding two key feminist concepts – namely, gender and intersectionality – and explore (explanatory) arguments about the complex intersectional relationships between gender and violent conflict.

KEYWORDS Gender; conflict; violence; intersectionality; causality

Introduction

Around the world, people living in conflict settings struggle in their daily lives to manage conflict and develop resources to prevent violence, to tame it when it occurs, and to repair wounds and rebuild the social fabric in the aftermath, often drawing on gender dynamics. Yet, in these same settings, gender dynamics can also become a force fueling conflict, evoking the imperative of masculinist protection, nourishing gendered performances of violence or authority, and catalyzing struggles over masculine hegemony. Conventional stories about conflict often miss the role of people's everyday practices in escalating and de-escalating violence and how intersecting social dynamics of gender, class, ethnicity, age, and religion shape these practices. Without

CONTACT Christelle Rigual christelle.rigual@graduateinstitute.ch Gender Centre, Geneva Graduate Institute, Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2, 1202, Geneva, Switzerland

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a focus on the micro-dynamics of violent conflicts, the realities, knowledges, and practices of people in violence-affected communities remain hidden, as does the role of gender and intersecting axes of differentiation in driving conflict cycles.

The articles in this Special Section contribute to both civil war and feminist literature by exploring the gendered dynamics of conflict cycles from the everyday perspective of the people who live and participate in these dynamics. The contributions build on trends in the civil war literature to shift attention from the macro level of states to the meso level of groups and the micro level of neighborhoods and communities, and to complement existing explanations of conflict escalation focusing on structural dynamics, economic inequalities, political regimes, and greed, with a focus on ethnic fractionalization and individual psychology (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999; Cederman and Vogt 2017; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Kalyvas 2006; McCauley and Moskalenko 2008; Tilly and Tarrow 2015). However, the civil war literature entirely disregards the role of gender in conflict cycles. The articles in this Special Section thus build on feminist literature that has long called for the exploration of violent conflict from a contextualized, bottom-up perspective.

Feminist security studies have made visible the myriad ways in which gender inhabits local practices of violent conflict, such as by reconceptualizing war as a complex, context-specific experience (Sylvester 2010), ethnographically investigating practices of sexual violence (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009, 2018b; Marks 2014), and analyzing the participation of women in armed struggles (Alison 2004; Parashar 2009) and the local governmentalities of the Women, Peace and Security agenda (Aharoni 2014; Barnes 2010; Basini and Ryan 2016; Basu 2016; Rahmanpanah and Trojanowska 2016; Shepherd 2020). The articles in this section build on this literature to develop detailed, situated explorations of the way in which gender is linked to conflict cycles. They answer calls for "more field-based ethnographic work" on the complex relationships between gender and violent conflict (Cohn 2011, 585; see also Prügl and Tickner 2018).

The articles come out of a six-year collaborative research project entitled *The Gender Dimensions of Social Conflict, Armed Violence and Peacebuilding*, which sought to understand how gender, in intersection with other axes of differentiation, shapes processes of escalation, de-escalation, and conflict management in different regions of Indonesia and Nigeria at the micro level.[1] In international relations (IR) debates about levels of analysis, "micro" usually refers to the *individual* level of analysis, and "micro-foundational" approaches focus on *mechanisms* for social explanation (Kertzer 2017). We started from this approach but expanded the understanding of the micro to encompass three intertwined dimensions: a *spatial* orientation toward the subnational, an *ontological* orientation toward the

everyday (Elias and Rai 2015; Enloe 2011; Randazzo 2016), and an *epistemological* orientation toward situated knowledge (Haraway 1988). Focusing on gendered micro-dynamics here means shifting away from systemic and state-level approaches to conflict studies (both from quantitative and discursive perspectives) and unpacking violence cycles at the community level in different conflict-affected settings. It also means investigating the everyday practices of people living, participating in, and negotiating violent conflict.[2]

Our research focused on communities that have experienced different types of conflicts in Indonesia and Nigeria. The two countries offered fruitful materials for comparison because they combine very different geographical locations with useful similarities. Both countries shifted from authoritarian to democratic regimes at the turn of the century, and both subsequently witnessed violent conflict. Both are also regionally diverse, and violence has taken different forms, including ethno-religious conflicts, insurgencies, and resource conflicts. Ethno-religious conflict erupted in Maluku, Indonesia, between 1999 and 2003 and in Plateau state of Nigeria intermittently between 2001 and 2010, in both instances killing thousands of people. The cases of Aceh, Indonesia, and Delta state in Nigeria illustrate anti-government violence. In both cases, we took 1999 as a starting point, with the Aceh conflict ending with a peace agreement following the 2004 tsunami and the Delta conflict ongoing. Finally, we explored resource-driven tensions in East Java, Indonesia, and in Enugu state in Nigeria, which in both instances have resulted in violence and killings. The research team, including scholars from Indonesia, Nigeria, and Switzerland, conducted more than 300 interviews and focus group discussions and undertook cross-community comparisons of the way in which gender relations, in intersection with other axes of differentiation, affected the conflict cycle in selected communities and neighborhoods.

This collection of articles answers long-standing calls from feminists for more collaborative research and co-authorship across the Global North/Global South gap and other types of divides. Some have undertaken such collaborations in highly reflexive and innovative ways (Ackerly, Stern, and True 2006; Benson and Nagar 2006; Nagar 2014). The project and this Special Section follow their lead; we jointly conceptualized and implemented the project and have co-authored the articles for the Special Section. The members of the research team are at various stages of their careers, and with various experiences, from multiple disciplines and spanning the academic/activist divide. While feminists have called for collaborative research across Global North/Global South divides, it is still relatively rare to find such research – and, in particular, co-authored publications – emerging from such research.

The context and overarching aims of the project from which the present contributions emerged sparked theoretical and practical discussions on

gender and conflict that we reflect on in this article. The research project was funded through the Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development (r4d), which is a joint initiative of the Swiss Development Cooperation Agency and the Swiss National Science Foundation. The Programme required that our project have practical impact and contribute to solving global problems. Our theory of change specified that we sought to create knowledge that would be useful to peacebuilders. Working in a Global North–Global South–Global South research partnership, we were able to draw on different strengths in terms of knowledge, competencies, and networks to collect and analyze our data and communicate our findings. Throughout the six-year project period, we met regularly to plan and discuss our research, publications, and outreach events. In these meetings, the demand for practical relevance generated debates over methodologies, in particular over the kind knowledge that would be practical for peacebuilders. Given this attention to creating "useful" knowledge, the findings of this Special Section speak not only to scholars but also to activists and practitioners in the fields of security, conflict management, and peacebuilding.

In the remainder of this article, we situate the Special Section and other research emerging from our project within the scholarship on gender and violent conflict and discuss the opportunities and paradoxes opened up by the adoption of a micro-level approach and by our practical research purpose. We present theoretical and methodological questions and reflections that emerge from the findings of the articles and that arose in the process of implementing the project more broadly. Specifically, we discuss conundrums of research on violent conflict regarding two key feminist concepts – namely, gender and intersectionality. We also explore (explanatory) arguments about the complex intersectional relationships between gender and violent conflict.

Researching the relationship between gender and conflict

The conflict management literature suggests that conflict is an inherent feature of human interaction, but not necessarily destructive. Conflict can be constructively managed or can destructively escalate into "unconstrained violence" (Kriesberg and Dayton 2012, 4). Conflicts are also in constant flux, evolving and moving through oscillating cycles of escalation, de-escalation, and resolution or transformation (Kriesberg and Dayton 2012, 8; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall 2016, 34). Approaching violent conflict as fluctuating in this way resonates with feminist proposals that violence in and outside war constitutes a continuum. There is no clear-cut beginning or end to violent conflict; rather, violent forms of conflict build upon, exacerbate, and prolong pre-existing (and often unpunished) forms of

violence, including sexual and gender-based violence (Cockburn 2004; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2018a). Similarly, the militarization of societies, economies, and masculinities long precedes and echoes beyond armed violence, with profoundly gendered effects (Enloe 2000).

Taking conflict cycles as an entry point led us to focus on people's agency and social practices at the micro level. This resonates with a feminist constructivist approach that conceptualizes gender as co-constructed in practices of international politics (Locher and Prügl 2001). Thus, the contributors to this Special Section probe how conflict escalation, de-escalation, and management are imbricated with gender, how gender drives cycles of violence, and how violence and conflict management reconstruct gender in diverse ways. This approach also resonates with feminist methodologies that seek to situate knowledge in specific contexts (Haraway 1988).

This is by no means the only way to approach the topic. Top-down, macro-level studies of the connection between gender and violent conflict have explored the effect of degrees of gender equality and found them to be correlated with the likelihood that states solve conflicts violently (Caprioli 2000, 2003, 2005; Caprioli and Boyer 2001; Hudson et al. 2009; Marshall and Ramsey 1999; Melander 2005; Regan and Paskeviciute 2003; Tessler, Nachtwey, and Grant 1999; Tessler and Warriner 1997). Explaining the reasons for this correlation has so far proven difficult, but attempts to do so have ranged from assuming the inherent peacefulness of women (Caprioli 2003; Caprioli and Boyer 2001) to adducing evolutionary and psychological processes through which societies ruled by men become "primed for violence" (Hudson et al. 2009, 19; see also Caprioli 2005). In other words, the idea of gender as a social construct is secondary in these explanations.

Structuralist arguments offer an alternative approach, suggesting that highly discriminatory and exclusionary processes that shape the social world – including phenomena as diverse as the global gender division of labor, neo-colonial forms of domination, and the invisibility of sexual violence – can fuel social divisions and violence (Hunnicutt 2009; Rooney 2018; True 2015). Gender hierarchies infuse all aspects of socio-economic arrangements, from the state to the household, concealing forms of control under the guise of protection in both spheres, and ultimately explaining "the prevalence of men's violence against women in the private household as well as the male dominance of state-sanctioned war and conflict" (True 2015, 419). The idea that gender intersects with other structures of domination is part of this approach. For example, Caprioli's interest in intra-state (often ethnic) conflict leads her to identify nationalism and nationalist ideologies as profoundly fed by misogyny: "Ethnic and nationalist appeals for violence depend on gender inequality and structural violence as a legitimation of violence by relying on gendered language and gender stereotypes to mobilize the masses" (Caprioli 2005, 166; see also Hudson et al. 2009, 21). Similarly,

for Cockburn (2010, 146–148, 2004), fighting wars is just the tip of the iceberg of a systemic set of institutions and relationships – one phase in a continuum of violence that includes sexual, interfamilial, social, economic, and political forms of violence.

Structural approaches to gender and violence hence move from an essentialist understanding that focuses on the human nature and socialization of women and men toward gender as a structural relationship that does not work in isolation but intersects with other structures such as nationalism, ethnicity, and class. Yet, like the first body of scholarship, this second approach also remains highly generalized and focuses on the macro level, unable to account for the complexity of agency and practices in specific contexts at the micro level.

The articles in this Special Section share a commitment to understanding people's agency in specific situated contexts while remaining aware of intersecting relations of power. The contributors conceptualize gender as a power relation that thickly defines identities, informs symbolic orders and agency, and directs material processes (Cohn 2013, 3–5). In this logic, gender and war go together – in other words, they are co-constituted; gender relations are imbricated in processes of militarization and logics of war, and war reproduces binary gender constructions, militarist masculinities, and corresponding femininities. However, war and violence also disrupt gender. Focusing on the micro level makes visible processes of co-constitution and disruption because it is in everyday practices that gender is negotiated, activated as a resource to fuel or manage conflict, and often unsettled when situations are declared as exceptional.

In the following sections, we discuss some of the conundrums around particular concepts and commitments arising from a constructivist approach to gender and violent conflict. First, masculinity constitutes a core concept of such an approach, but the concept faces challenges in theory and practice. Second, the concept of intersectionality has been widely adopted among constructivist feminists so that gender can no longer be thought of as a singular axis of differentiation independent of other social dynamics. However, the concept is also deeply contested. Finally, we want to engage the question of explanation, probing how our analyses can be useful for practical purposes of peacebuilding when writing from a micro-level and situated perspective that resists fixed categories and grand theories.

Masculinities

Feminist scholars have developed the notion of gender as socially constructed sets of representations of masculinities and femininities (Scott 1986; Tickner 1992). Yet, these two very concepts have become problematic, especially when mobilized for the study of violence, where masculinities have

taken a central stage and scholarship has run the risk of establishing violence as an essential characteristic of men.

Diverse strands of feminist IR literature have found that particular forms of masculinity are closely intertwined with militarism. Examining gender constructions in political texts, Elshtain (1982) identified an opposition between men as "just warriors" and protectors and women as "beautiful souls," in need of protection. During war, men are called on to defend women and the homeland, triggering what Young (2003) has called the "logic of masculinist protection" (see also Stiehm 1982). In other words, constructed gendered identities make it possible to think of war as an honorable activity in which to engage. Empirical studies have followed in this vein, illustrating the ways in which militaries and militarism produce masculinities associated with aggression, physical strength, risk taking, and the ability to suppress emotions. The values that encourage male warfighting also entail a denigration of women and everything associated with femininity. As men are trained for war and societies are militarized, violence against women becomes part of the fabric of everyday lives (Cockburn and Zarkov 2002; Detraz 2013; Duncanson 2009; Enloe 1983, 2000; Goldstein 2003; Sjoberg and Via 2010; Whitworth 2007).

Taking on the field of IR, Tickner (1992, 6) has argued that international politics is associated with a form of masculinity that celebrates "toughness, courage, power, independence, and even physical strength" and, following Connell (1987), has described this as "hegemonic masculinity" sustained through subordinated and devalued masculinities. However, suggestions of this kind are contested by scholars who question what it means for a form of masculinity to be hegemonic and voice uneasiness over the reification of masculinities into a fixed set of traits. Masculinity, often thought of as toxic, becomes an easy explanation for a wide range of problems, from war to sexual violence, while ignoring the fluidity, relationality, and situatedness of gender constructions (Demetriou 2001; Duncanson 2015; Kunz, Myrttinen, and Udasmoro 2018; Zalewski 2017).

Adopting a micro-level constructivist approach enables us to identify different forms of masculinity while taking into account their productive effects. It allows for a detailed analysis of gendered representations in conflict-affected communities and of how they infuse social outcomes, including through their embeddedness in institutions, symbolism, identities, and behaviors. Representations and performances of masculinities and femininities both enable and constrain agency; they can push people to fulfill social expectations or to contest them. Articles from the project by Rigual, Udasmoro, and Onyesoh (this issue) and Rahmawati and Talakua (2017) show the relevance of this argument at the micro level. The first explores how gendered constructions of authority or solidarity shape responses to violent conflict. The second provides a stark illustration

of how appeals to masculinity motivate young boys to participate in violence.

Another response has been to recall that masculinities should not be thought of as achieved but as aspirational. Explanations then do not lie in masculine traits or even aspirations but in frustrations over an unachievable ideal. Thus, Duriesmith (2014, 2016) and Chinkin and Kaldor (2013) argue that "insecure masculinity" and "protest masculinities" of men who are too poor to live up to the ideal are central to understanding the characteristic features of "new wars" (see also Parpart 2011). Similarly, in their work with soldiers in the armed forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2018b) report combat stories of fear and anxiety that run counter to the notion of heroic forms of militarized masculinity. Soldiers who committed rape "showed no hint of rape as an expression of successful masculine performance"; rather, they "presented it as an expression of failed masculinity" (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2018b, 539). This links to a growing body of research on "thwarted" masculinities – the idea that men resort to potentially violent behavior precisely because they cannot fulfill the normative masculinity scripts (Kimmel 2018; Myrttinen, Khattab, and Naujoks 2017).

Poststructuralists might argue that this does not go far enough and that efforts to characterize masculinity – whether as a set of traits or aspirations – are complicit in reproducing the gender binary, together with its power relations. According to Butler (2006), the concept of gender, by relying on the dichotomy of masculinities and femininities, itself *produces* sex as dichotomous (Butler 2006), and Stern and Zalewski (2009) have cautioned against feminist scholarship participating in this production of "sexgender." Along these lines, Hutchings (2008, 402) suggests considering masculinities as "empty signifiers" whose content can vary infinitely but that invariably function to secure the meaning of war:

> To challenge the ways in which masculinity and war secure each other's intelligibility, the stability of masculinity and femininity as mutually exclusive categories must be challenged, along with the idea that either masculinity or femininity is tied to any fixed, substantive content.

War and gender in this understanding are co-constituted through the production of difference. In other words, gender is an empty vessel that can be filled with multiple meanings that reproduce dichotomies not only between men and women, but also between war and peace. Gender is also linked to violent conflict in the sense of contributing to produce the opposition between us and them, friend and enemy. Rather than holding on to an opposition between masculinity and femininity, it may thus be useful to begin to disrupt this opposition.

Indeed, the literature has shown that militarized masculinity does not attach only to male bodies. For example, the abuse at Abu Ghraib has

been associated with a "culture of masculinized militarism" that supported the sexual exploitation of prisoners, even if perpetrated by women (Kaufman-Osborn 2005, 612; see also Åhäll 2015; Hutchings 2008). Moreover, the expanding literature on women as agents of violence, together with an incipient literature on non-violent masculinities, unsettles the gendered dualisms of war and peace (Åhäll 2015; Alison 2004; Kunz, Myrttinen, and Udasmoro 2018; Parashar 2009; Shekhawat 2015; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 2009). Research questioning the identification of sexual violence as exclusively inflicted by men upon women and revealing male and queer victimizations also contributes to such unsettling (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013; Sjoberg 2014; Zalewski et al. 2018; Zalewski and Runyan 2015). So does the political economy literature that illustrates the disruptions and odd reconstitutions of gendered divisions of labor in the context of conflict and its aftermath. Udasmoro's article in this Special Section provides a vivid illustration of this, showing not only context-specific rearrangements of gendered and ethnic economic niches during communal violence in Maluku, but also women becoming breadwinners in the Aceh mountains while men retained this role in fishing villages.

If research on the micro-dynamics of gender and violent conflicts wants to retain the concepts of masculinities and femininities, it needs to be attuned to these insights. Investigating situated understandings of masculinity in everyday practices of violent conflict, it needs to distinguish the traits of men from the aspirational and performative aspects of masculinity. And it needs to listen to instances in which constructions of femininity and masculinity cut across differently sexed bodies. If these insights are clear from the theoretical literature, they are notoriously difficult to apply in empirical research. Even if we recognize alternative performances of gender, how do we do justice to the seemingly monotonous refrains referencing violent men and victimized women, authoritative male leadership and female followers? And if we want to contribute to social change, (how) should we generalize about the multiple, complex, and sometimes unexpected constructions of gender in practices driving or managing conflict cycles?

Intersectionality

It has become accepted wisdom that women are not a homogeneous group and gender does not operate on its own but intersects with other axes of differentiation.[3] These insights have been expressed through the concept of intersectionality. The origins of this concept are commonly attributed to the work of Crenshaw (1991) and Collins (1993). They developed the concept to theorize the complex forms of subordination of Black women in the US, which were unaccounted for by feminist theories focusing on white women and race studies focusing on Black men (Davis 1983; hooks 2014;

McCall 2005). Yet, intersectional analysis has a much broader base, rooted in movements aimed at ending discrimination against women ranging across multiple contexts in the Global South and Global North, in part linked to anticolonial feminisms (Hancock 2015; Mendoza 2016). Thus, the intersectionality paradigm is both an intellectual and political project that aims at rendering visible and rethinking the analytical relationship between categories (Hancock 2015). Over time, intersectionality has developed into a field of study that analyzes experiences in multiple contexts in which various axes of differentiation converge, including gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and age. In its broadened manifestation, intersectionality focuses on the "multicategory dynamics of power" (Hancock 2015, 6).

While appropriations of the intersectionality paradigm have been criticized in various ways (Alexander-Floyd 2012; Puar 2013), we find the concept useful in studying the micro-dynamics of gender in conflict cycles. In empirical research on gender and violent conflict, it has been adopted in multiple ways, focusing on groups, processes, systems, identities, or structures. Rooney (2018, 328) suggests that intersectionality "in conflict studies is concerned with deep underlying structural inequalities and the social divisions and violence they give rise to." She explores how narratives of the Northern Irish conflict have invisibilized women – in particular, those affected by poverty – and how political and religious discrimination affected women differently (Rooney 2007). Cockburn (2010) has similarly argued for an approach that locates the reasons for violence in linked systems of power that produce class, ethnic, and gender inequalities. She insists that intersectionality not only pertains to the level of individual identities but "also and always works at the macro level" (Cockburn 2010, 150).

Other contributions focus more on the macro–micro continuum of intersectionality. For example, Kappler and Lemay-Hébert (2019, 11) investigate personal narratives through an intersectionality lens in order "to view the individual experience as a specific translation of wider structures of disadvantage and privilege." In this way, intersectionally shaped experience is understood not as atomized but "as a peephole through which the 'worlds' of violence and peace can be explored" (Kappler and Lemay-Hébert 2019, 11). Using an intersectional approach, Cross Riddle (2017) finds in her analysis of women's peacebuilding groups in Manipur, India, that social locations significantly shape the experiences of women peacebuilders and sometimes pose obstacles. She shows that "ethnic and religious hierarchies often disrupt women's attempts to build peace" and "interethnic peacebuilding groups that rely on gender-based solidarity tend to privilege the experiences of the women coming from the majority ethnic group" (Cross Riddle 2017, 574).

The rich literature on gender and nationalism also deals with issues of intersectionality, highlighting the intersections between gender and national

identities. In times of conflict and turmoil, women are often framed as the repositories and reproducers of ethnic, religious, or other collective identities and come to symbolize the essence of a group. Their reproductive potential and their sexuality become instrumentalized as boundary markers that need to be both protected and policed. Vice versa, war often contributes to re-constituting a particular understanding of the community as patriarchally ordered (Enloe 2014; Giles and Hyndman 2004; Handrahan 2004; Pettman 2005; Sjoberg 2013; Tickner 2013; Yuval-Davis 1997). The intersection of gender with ethnic and national imaginaries thus produces particular understandings of gender, nation, and war.

The intersectional co-constitution of axes of differentiation in the conflict cycle is analyzed in a range of articles stemming from our research project. For example, the article by Rigual, Udasmoro, and Onyesoh (this issue) highlights how the slow crystallization of ethno-religious representations and identities worked in confluence with age and gender to shape expectations around authority and political representation, becoming powerful forces in the escalation of violence. Conversely, the confluence of gender and ethno-religious divides has different context-specific impacts on conflict management: while in the case of Manipur, ethno-religious identities functioned to disrupt efforts at conflict transformation (Cross Riddle 2017), Rigual, Udasmoro, and Onyesoh (this issue) observe multiple instances in which shared gender identities enabled solidarities across ethno-religious divides. Similarly, the conference paper by Rahmawati and Talakua (2017) shows that poverty, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, or, more broadly, social deprivation or class intersected with age and gender (young men) to catalyze violence in Aceh.

Although it helps to make sense of the complexities of conflict situations, the concept of intersectionality also raises methodological issues. A first challenge pertains to the selection of social dynamics to include in the analysis. Much of the literature on intersectionality foregrounds the dimensions of gender, race, and class. However, different dimensions are salient in different socio-cultural contexts. Yet, who defines salience? If we focus on locally recognized categories, do we miss invisibilized axes of differentiation? For example, sexual orientation remains a taboo topic in Indonesia, and homosexuality is a crime in Nigeria; thus, these themes might not come up frequently in interviews and analyses. Does this mean that sexuality does not operate as an axis of differentiation in these contexts? An interrelated challenge is the question of the methodological entry point and the (necessary? implicit?) privileging of one dimension over another (for example, by focusing first on gender and only then bringing ethnicity into view). The notion of an *intersectionally gendered approach*, as spelled out in Rigual, Udasmoro, and Onyesoh (this issue) and further developed in Prügl and Rigual (2018), might go some way toward addressing this problem by making explicit the entry point and the hierarchy of focus that guides the analysis.

From a poststructuralist perspective, some uses of the concept of intersectionality have been challenged for essentializing identities (Puar 2013). If the concept is simply used to denote that a phenomenon has various dimensions, an intersectional approach may reproduce these categories and gloss over the more detailed analysis of how the categories work together to produce silences, perpetuate subordination, or drive violence. How can we analyze the dynamics of intersecting axes of differentiation, what they produce, and what remains invisible if we do not take these axes of differentiation as pre-existing? How can we continue analyzing social dynamics while moving beyond the usual, often dichotomous categories that may keep us trapped? Puar (2013) provides one answer, proposing that we conceptualize intersectional identity markers in terms of what they do rather than what they are. Other scholars suggest a relational approach to intersectionality that "rejects either/or binary thinking and embraces a both/and frame instead" to focus on interconnections rather than distinctions (Collins and Bilge 2016, 42). Overall, it might be useful to consider intersectionality less as an approach or concept and more as a lens and attitude toward (empirical) research – a willingness to take seriously the intersections of social dynamics, power relations, and identities.

Practical knowledge

The requirement that research findings have a practical impact has become standard among funding agencies. Such requirements clearly link to neoliberal politics of surveillance and, perhaps less ominously, respond to democratic demands for accountability (Strathern 2000). However, they also operate in a historical context in which the dividing lines between academic knowledge and political knowledge, between truth and politics, and between knowledge production and application have become utterly blurred. Postpositivist critique, including from feminists, has rendered suspect any pretense of scientific knowledge as value free. As a form of discourse, scientific knowledge is broadly acknowledged to have a "real-world" impact. In addition, an important strand of feminist scholarship has long been committed to building knowledge "in a way that can be used by women to change whatever oppressive conditions they may face" (Tickner 2005, 7). In other words, feminist IR scholars recognize the "practicality" of their work, either by emphasizing the practical effects of their disruptive writings and/or by measuring the practicality of their work against its potential uses.

Questions of practicality have both normative and methodological implications. Adopting Cox's well-known distinction between problem solving and critical theory, some scholars have argued that feminist research should contribute to the emancipatory goals of the latter, specifically the goal of enabling women to transform themselves and the world around

them (Ackerly, Stern, and True 2006, 28; Tickner 2005, 9, 1997, 619). Tickner (2005) calls such knowledge practical in the sense that it helps to enhance feminist practice, and suggests that historical and anthropological methods starting from women's experiences lend themselves particularly well to the creation of such knowledge. Moreover, committed to a relational ontology, she argues that feminist research is not geared toward providing causal explanations, which she associates with establishing observable regularities and with the problem-solving approach of positivism. At most, it might share constructivism's preoccupation with asking constitutive questions rather than causal ones (Tickner 2005, 19), perhaps establishing "constitutive causality" for explanations focusing on interests and identities (Locher and Prügl 2001; Sjoberg 2009; Wendt 1998).

There is no agreement, however, on whether feminist explanation should forgo causal arguments. Positivist and structuralist feminists clearly suggest that there is a causal relationship between gender equality and the likelihood for war (Hudson et al. 2009) or between patriarchy and warfighting (Cockburn 2010). Yet, different understandings of causation underlie these two approaches. In the first, the correlation of two variables is taken to suggest, if not prove, causation; in the second, the causes for violence are located in the structures of patriarchy, capitalism, and nationalism/ethnic chauvinism. Whereas the first offers a notion of "efficient causation," to use Aristotle's term – that is, the suggestion that we know the cause of something by looking at what preceded it (see Falcon 2015) – the second could be subsumed under the notion of constitutive causation, although Cockburn (2010) prefers the notion of "root causes" indicating what makes war thinkable.

Arguably, both studies may contribute to practical knowledge, though they do so through different pathways and generate different effects. Quantitative literature in the vein of Hudson et al. (2009) is widely cited in United Nations documents where it may persuade some of the relevance of gender but where it also reproduces essentialist gender constructions; by contrast, Cockburn's (2010) study has become a key text informing Women's International League for Peace and Freedom strategies, inspiring movement activists, and enabling alternative visions to existing patterns. Both thus offer framings that recognize the importance of gender in violence and peacebuilding, emerging as practical for different types of political agents and agendas. Yet, they are not necessarily practical in the sense of identifying feasible points of intervention; Hudson et al.'s (2009) causal explanation hinges on evolutionary processes and Cockburn's (2010) on macro-level structures.

Pragmatists suggest a different approach to causality, inviting us to consider it from the perspective of the effects produced and thus making practical interventions a core concern. Some forms of pragmatism go so far as

to make manipulability the main criterion for calling something a cause. Thus, a cause refers to "whatever event, process, thing, power, condition, which human agents can control in order to produce or prevent another state of affairs (their 'effect')" (Kurki 2008, 152). If we take that state of affairs to be violence or war, establishing their causes might require that we identify the controllable mechanisms or processes that bring them about. In other words, it might require that we look at what people do and what they think about alternative actions or interventions that could generate a different outcome (Jackson 2017). Holding on to such a notion of causation allows for a different way of generalizing, one that is anchored not in identifying laws but in discerning practical activities. A cause establishes a general connection between an input and an output and should thus provide information on how to intervene (Jackson 2017, 704).

Ackerly and True (2006, 248) take a similarly pragmatic perspective when they suggest that "feminist IR scholars privilege the moment of practice in the process of theorizing and judge theories in terms of the practical possibilities they open up." A micro perspective that focuses on everyday practices of violence and peacebuilding and starts from the situated knowledge of people living in conflict settings does exactly that because it lends itself to identifying practical causes.

Most of the publications resulting from our collaborative research project probe intersectional gender constructions in the form of gendered agency, gender identities, and gendered mechanisms, imputing different understandings of causality with an eye to practical relevance. Highlighting the force of *gendered agency*, Rahmawati (2021) outlines how kinship with and proximity to men in power (often former commanders) both enabled and constrained the political ambitions of female ex-combatants in Aceh; Onyesoh (2021) describes how women in south-eastern Nigeria derive agency from the institution of the *Umuada*, women in a lineage traditionally charged with resolving conflicts, to establish themselves as powerful peacebuilders; and Udasmoro (this issue) shows how conflict rearranges gender divisions of labor in intersection with other axes of difference, shifting patterns of labor force participation and opening up different economic opportunities for women and men from opposing ethnic and religious groups.

Focusing on *gender identities*, Udasmoro and Kunz (2021) show how cross-community art-for-peace projects in Ambon develop new identity performances that transform violent masculinities and create new spaces for women's voices. Myrttinen, Rigual, and Achakpa (2020) similarly highlight the force of masculine identity construction and introduce vigilantism as simultaneously a driver of violence, a form of peacebuilding, and an enforcer of gender norms.

Seeking to identify *gendered mechanisms*, Rigual, Udasmoro, and Onyesoh (this issue) discuss the force of gendered authority and solidarities. They show

how male authority in Ambon and Jos has been deployed to counteract rumors; how women in Jos use their authority to "checkmate" those intent on violence; and how gender-based solidarities, such as among market women, operate to de-escalate conflicts. In a similar vein, Onyesoh and Kunz (2020) discuss women's spirituality in Nigeria as a mechanism for conflict transformation. Rigual, Udasmoro, and Achakpa (2020) argue that social criticism should be considered a mechanism of peacebuilding, and Udasmoro and Prügl (2021) agree when they suggest that women's landgrab protests in East Java establish an "agonistic peace."

The peacebuilding practices identified through our micro-level research seek to achieve a number of ends, including women's political and economic participation, new identity constructions, and ultimately "peace" (in its multiple meanings). By narrating peacebuilding practices as practical interventions, we hope to show the value of approaching these varied ends as final causes in a pragmatic vein.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that a micro perspective on gender and conflict can make a contribution to both the peace and conflict literature and feminist security studies. Exploring individual and collective practices of violence, conflict management, and peacebuilding highlights the complex and context-specific interweaving of social inequalities, gendered institutions, and expectations around social identities, as they constitute, shape, and constrain such practices. We have argued for an intersectional approach that takes gender as an entry point and highlighted some conundrums that such an approach might face.

Even in-depth empirical research cannot integrate all axes of differentiation in a given setting. Do we then, as researchers, contribute to obscuring intersectional discriminations or to essentializing certain social categories, in spite of our careful attention to such dynamics? Can this be avoided by adopting a dynamic and co-constitutive understanding of various axes of differentiation? How can we reconcile the selection of dynamics on which we focus with taking seriously people's experiences and their own (religious, political, ethnic, gender) identity representations, which might at times reify certain categories? Similarly, how can we explore the implications of gender representations in violent conflict without reifying them? Different conceptions of masculinities, in particular, have been linked to violence in the literature, but, ultimately, (how) is it possible to characterize them without reifying what masculinities (or femininities) are? What tools can we develop to avoid *doing* "sex-gender" in our research?

Our efforts to do "practical research" have led us to not only ask who benefits from such practicality but also to explore different ways to think

about practicality in relation to causality. While establishing causalities seems crucial to guiding effective interventions, we are wary of thinking about causality as a matter of formulating law-like propositions. The articles in this Special Section instead identify intersectional gender constructions and performances, gendered mechanisms, and processes of co-constitution and sometimes find resemblances in very different contexts in Nigeria and Indonesia. They attempt to generalize about social processes in a manner that is not deterministic but provides information about potential pathways. Yet, in gesturing to causality and practicality, we undoubtedly become enmeshed in governmental processes and associated constructions of difference. The ethics of such gesturing thus deserves continued questioning.

Despite these difficulties, we believe that analyzing the micro-dynamics of gender in violent conflicts through empirically rich data in an intersectional way can contribute to advancing the dual goals of gender justice and inclusive peacebuilding. However, our efforts cannot be but a beginning. Rather than providing a roadmap for future research, we hope to open up fruitful discussions on the conduct of such research and on its political potential.

Notes

1. The research design of the project was developed by Krause (2018) in her book *Resilient Communities: Non-Violence and Civilian Agency in Communal War*. We expand and develop the framework of the book by integrating a gender lens and investigating further communities in Indonesia and Nigeria.
2. For additional contributions from this research project adopting a similar lens but focusing on peacebuilding practices, see Prügl et al. (2021).
3. Various terms have been proposed in the literature to refer to these axes of differentiation: see, for example, "grounds of identity" (Crenshaw 1991), "social divisions" (Yuval-Davis 2006), and "axes of inequality" (Klinger and Knapp 2005). In our research, we emphasize the importance of a dynamic understanding that allows us to focus on how these axes are co-constituted and interwoven, rather than just added on top of each other, and how each social differentiation dynamic has its own particularities and "ontological basis" (Yuval-Davis 2006, 195).

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the previous editors of the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* for their great support and patience in elaborating this Special Section. Thanks also go to the three anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and generous comments. Financial support under the Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development (400240_146777 and 400240_171176) is gratefully acknowledged. See project website at http://graduateinstitute.ch/home/research/centresandprogrammes/genre/gender- dimensions-of-conflict.html.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development [Grant Numbers 400240_146777 and 400240_171176].

Notes on contributors

Christelle Rigual is a political scientist and a research affiliate with the Gender Centre at the Geneva Graduate Institute, Switzerland, where she coordinated the Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development (r4d) project *The Gender Dimensions of Social Conflict, Armed Violence and Peacebuilding*. She holds a PhD in International Relations and Political Science from the Geneva Graduate Institute.

Elisabeth Prügl is Professor of International Relations and Co-Director of the Gender Centre at the Geneva Graduate Institute, Switzerland. Her research and teaching focus on feminist international relations (IR) and gender politics in international governance. She was the responsible applicant of the r4d project *The Gender Dimensions of Social Conflict, Armed Violence and Peacebuilding*. Since January 2022, she has been co-editor of the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. This article was accepted for publication before she assumed the role.

Rahel Kunz is a Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Political Studies at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland. Her research draws on feminist poststructuralist and postcolonial theories to focus on gender issues in migration and development, and conflict and security. She was a co-applicant of the r4d project *The Gender Dimensions of Social Conflict, Armed Violence and Peacebuilding*.

ORCID

Christelle Rigual http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1699-2588
Elisabeth Prügl http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4363-3540

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