

GENDER, SOCIAL NETWORKS, AND CONFLICT PROCESSES

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Abstract

War is an inherently social process, from the mobilization of new, armed organizations, to the relational aftershocks of violence affecting families and local communities. This essay synthesizes existing feminist research on dynamics of conflict and peacebuilding and brings a social network approach to understanding gendered patterns of intersectional inequality. It presents a framework for understanding how civil war affects social structures vis-à-vis personal support networks, and in turn how that can constrain or enable women's and men's social and economic opportunities. Through a descriptive analysis of communities in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, I argue that war's social processes, and ongoing militarization in particular, can create structural constraints for people seeking to participate peacefully in civilian life, and incentivize maintaining armed group connections. Network research shines light on the social processes that reproduce gendered inequalities and cleavages after conflict. It also reveals opportunities for bridging divides and transforming wartime networks into peacetime support structures.

Introduction

Over several decades, critical and empirical feminist research has established unequivocally that women and girls play myriad crucial roles in warmaking: victims, perpetrators, bystanders, collaborators, and more (Cohen and Nordas 2014; Elshtain 1987; Enloe 1989; Moser and Clark 2001). Women's participation in armed groups – from state-backed ground troops, to international peacekeeping forces – has grown tremendously in recent years (Cawkill et al. 2009; Henshaw 2016; Murdoch et al. 2006). State forces are increasingly recruiting women into their ranks in a wide range of roles (Duncanson and Woodward 2016; Woodward and Duncanson 2017). Although participation rates vary widely, nearly every NATO state military saw the percentage women troops increase in the past two decades (Obradovic 2016). In Africa, nearly half of armed groups include female participants, and almost 90 percent of rebel groups that have waged large-scale wars on the continent include women and girls (Thomas and Bond 2015). Globally, the majority of rebel groups include female participants, with some regions, like Latin

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America, seeing exceptionally high rates of women's participation as non-combatants, fighters, and leaders (Henshaw 2016, pp. 8-9). Moreover, rebel groups that employ and deploy women are statistically more likely to succeed than those that exclude female participants (Braithwaite and Ruiz 2018).

In light of women's increasingly visible mobilization for armed conflict, academic and public interest has largely focused, on the one hand, on war's effect on women and girls (particularly relating to victimhood), and on the other hand, on longstanding feminist questions about how gender relations affect militaries, militarism, and armed conflict (Cohn 1987; Cockburn 2010; Melander 2005). However, of equal importance is an adjacent question that this essay aims to address: how does women's participation in conflict affect individual and community gender relations after war ends?

This is an inherently relational question. War disrupts social taboos, social roles, and social relations that are shaped by, and shape, gender. Examining this from a relational perspective can shed light on existing individualist actor and societal level research and theory. Prevailing conflict research approaches questions about gender through the prism of individual or archetypal social roles without fully exploring the iterative and mutually constitutive nature of gender norms, gender performativity, and societal gender dynamics (Marks 2014, 68-69). Yet, far from seeing war as only a moment of rupture, feminist research has played a pivotal role in highlighting the ways conflict enfolds social and political continuities. Studying social networks can substantially improve our understanding of how and why roles and relationships re-cohere in more or less gender equitable patterns after conflict. Examining relationships as such reveals the social fabric underpinning political and economic inequalities intersecting through gender, economic, ethnic or racial, and religious dimensions.

This essay synthesizes existing feminist research on gendered dynamics of conflict and peacebuilding and brings a social network approach to understanding patterns of intersectional inequality. Building on research that understands war as a social process (Richards 2005; Wood 2008), this essay examines existing theories of how and why gender inequalities persist despite post-conflict opportunities for transformation. It does so through the prism of conflict-affected communities in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Using a descriptive structural analysis of women's and men's social support networks, I examine how war-related networks

might facilitate or constrain people's possibilities in conflict-affected communities. I argue, in Congo and beyond, war's social processes can create structural constraints for both women and men seeking to peacefully participate in civilian life and reintegrate into conflict-affected societies.¹ Resurgent gender norms in particular further exert a conditioning effect on women's life chances (Utas 2005).

The argument begins by linking prevailing debates about gender dynamics in armed groups to post-conflict political settlements. The following section delves more deeply into the gendered dynamics of social reintegration after armed groups demobilize. I then explain how studying social support networks enables empirical analysis of the relational ties that give rise to gender identities, performances, and power structures. The last section presents a research design and descriptive analysis of intersectional inequalities in social support patterns in conflict-affected communities in Eastern Congo (DRC). Network research shines light on the social processes that reproduce inequalities and cleavages after conflict. It also reveals opportunities for bridging divides and transforming wartime networks into peacetime support structures. I conclude with suggestions for how social network approaches can be developed to ask and answer feminist questions related to peace and conflict.

Gendered conflict and political settlement processes

This section begins by outlining some of the key ways in which women's conflict participation can open opportunities for improved social status and changing gender relations. It then explores how post-conflict processes leave intact or reassert patriarchal patterns and gender inequalities (Ní Aoláin 2016). During and after active conflict, armed groups function as political institutions and as sites of individual and group experiences and social processes. State militaries and non-state armed groups alike can facilitate claims to citizenship, political power, and public respect. When women participate in armed conflict, the expectation is not only that they have greater access to individual political power and agency, but also that buying into hegemonic military power structures might lead to gender transformative opportunities for women as a group. Thus,

¹ Feminist security studies and DR Congo-specific research alike stress the blurred continuum of physical and structural violence characterizing war and peace. In this paper, I use conflict-affected, postwar, and post-conflict to capture the militarized period after major pitched battles have largely subsided, but while peace remains unconsolidated. Militarization and mobilization remain defining features of life in the DRC for conflict-affected communities.

women's participation in armed groups—state and non-state—is not just an expression of individual agency, but ostensibly also buys access to political capital, material benefits, and social opportunities.

As Orna Sasson-Levy and Sarit Amram-Katz write of Israel, “The military is perceived both as a citizenship-conferring institution and as an initiation rite to masculinity” (2007, p. 110). Some women have described similar motives for joining revolutionary movements and community defense forces. A female fighter in El Salvador's FMLN insurgency described joining in patriotic terms, “You became aware of the injustices that were happening...we knew that if we didn't make that change ourselves, we Salvadorans, then nobody was going to come and do it for us” (Viterna 2013, p. 89). As Nilsson describes for women in the Peshmerga, “by becoming part of the Kurdish military tradition, they are becoming part of society in a broader sense than before, and redefining the proper social roles of women” (2018, p. 276). Demanding inclusion in armed groups on the basis of political rights and entitlements is more than a semantic gesture. It also provides people from historically excluded or marginalized groups entry into militarized power structures and resource networks, and provides an opportunity for political voice and agency. The international community – through the body of the UN – has also taken up the mantle of women's increased participation in war and peace through “gender mainstreaming” and increasing women's participation following UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and related resolutions on women, peace, and security (Olsson and Gizelis 2013). For example, international campaigns against conflict-related sexual violence (Baaz and Stern 2013a) occur alongside state security sector reform and UN peacekeeping efforts to integrate greater numbers of women into formal military settings (Bastick 2017; Karim and Beardsley 2017; Pruitt 2016). All of these initiatives are implicitly or explicitly focused on increasing gender equality and women's political rights and protections related to peace and security issues.

Armed conflict is far from a reliable catalyst for social, political, or economic gender equality, but there are three avenues through which conflict is expected to have gender transformative potential. First, is the individual access women gain to military power, opportunities, and political agency described above; as well as the positive economic and social sequelae that might accrue to people who participate in armed groups (jobs, education, training

opportunities etc.). Second, women's participation in rebel and state armed groups is seen as having the potential to change societal conservative gender norms, opening the range of potential jobs and roles women can hold alongside men (Marks 2017). However, many feminist scholars have also noted a converse effect, wherein women's participation in organized militarized violence reinforces conservative gender norms (Clarke 2008, 54). Finally, conflict settlement is understood as a moment of structural opening, when constitutional, electoral, and legal reform processes present opportunities for securing women's political representation, protecting women's rights, and broadening the role of women's organizations in civil society.

In many contexts, even where women have mobilized militarily or politically in large numbers, social and economic gender inequalities have often proven to be remarkably change-resistant (Berry 2015; Hendricks 2015). Women have played a pivotal role in post-conflict social movements and civil society peacebuilding processes across diverse contexts (Adeogun and Muthuki 2018). Women have made the largest post-conflict gains in formal political representation and rights in African countries (Tripp 2015). Regardless of women's sacrifices on and off the battlefield, and in spite of the social transformations resulting from armed conflict, deeper patterns of inequality persist in men's hold over informal power and social assets, including in business, religious institutions, and traditional authority structures (Tripp 2015, pp. 4, 10, 237). In negotiated settlements, the prevailing way contemporary conflicts end, formal peace talks and informal settlements redistribute power among mostly-male military and political power brokers. Fionnuala NíAoláin describes this as "gender-based cooperation between seemingly oppositional elite men whose patriarchal instincts are generally well aligned" (2016, p. 155; 2009). Thus, while increases in women's formal political representation and women's rights have been rightly celebrated in many post-conflict countries, the *gender settlement* of patriarchal patterns privileging men throughout society and the state does not undergo such dramatic change.

In some contexts, scholars have identified a patriarchal backlash, wherein conservative gender roles are used to reassert the pre-conflict status quo (Pankhurst 2012; Mackenzie 2012). This echoes through intimate physical spaces and personal relationships, underscoring continuities between war and peace in people's lived realities. Studies from Northern Ireland to Eastern DRC draw attention to how gendered experiences of violence in armed conflict

correspond with high levels of personal and private violence long after the official “fighting” has ended (Annan and Brier 2010; Peterman et al. 2011; Swaine 2015). As Amina Mama and Margo Okazawa-Rey argue:

War and conflict are merely the explicit expressions of deeply gendered, as well as ethnicized and classed, long-term dynamics that precede the outbreak of conflict, escalate dramatically, and persist long after ‘peace’ has been officially declared and the transition from overt warfare is taking place. (2008, p. 3)

Thus, conflict processes echo throughout “post-conflict” reconstruction, shaping outcomes for men and women in intersecting ways according to their group and conflict-related identities. Continuities between war-time experiences and post-war outcomes are particularly salient for women whose mobilization pathways into violence and fighting shape their trajectories and life chances after fighting subsides.

Gendered processes in demobilization and integration

(Re)integration is an important conceptual framework for thinking about gendered processes of peacebuilding, because it captures the social context in which norms and relationships are transformed – or reinforced – at the individual and community level. Conflict’s social processes – and the multilevel transformations they bring – make gender a key site of social engineering and imagineering for societies emerging from war. Social engineering happens in the institutions, programs, and formal processes implemented or constituted after war. Formal disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs, security sector reforms (SSR), NGO initiatives, and transitional justice institutions, from truth commissions to reparations programs, all provide opportunities for identities to be negotiated and constructed (Munive and Jakobsen 2012). Reintegration patterns in conflict-affected societies are important because they shape the individual life chances of men and women, girls and boys; they shape armed groups’ demobilization or remobilization pathways; and they can affect the broader distribution of wealth, power, and wellbeing in society.

Existing studies of demobilization and reintegration largely focus on individual outcomes specifically, or on the risks and predictors of ex-combatant recidivism to violence and conflict (Kaplan and Nussio 2018a). This is partly due to the rational actor bias in contemporary political

science research, which understands individual behavior as arising primarily from people making personal cost-benefit calculations. It also reflects the assumptions that underpin liberal peacebuilding programs, where jobs, elections, and economic development are seen as the magic bullet for conflict prevention and development (McMullin 2013, p. 39). As described by the World Bank, the leading funder of contemporary DDR programs:

For ex-combatants, families, and communities alike, reintegration is a continuous, long-term process that takes place on social, political, and economic levels. Social and political reintegration is broadly defined as the acceptance of an ex-combatant and his or her family by the host community and its leaders. Economic reintegration implies the financial independence of an ex-combatant's household through productive and gainful employment. (Colletta et al. 1996)

Quantitative surveys conducted in Sierra Leone (Humphreys and Weinstein 2007), Liberia (Pugel 2006), Burundi (Gilligan et al. 2013), and Colombia (Arjona and Kalyvas 2011; Oppenheim and Soderstrom 2018) have found that internationalized, UN-sponsored DDR programs have mixed or minimal impact on former fighters' job prospects or their political integration. Many studies have examined these perceived reintegration failures as a programmatic problem – targeting developmental or security sector reform – and focus accordingly on the efficacy of DDR interventions. In their critique of DDR programs, Bøas and Bjorkhaug write, “DDR is very much a reaction to the notion that these people [ex-combatants] are unattached to society, set apart in their own world, and therefore need particular attention” (2010, 16).

Feminist interventions have drawn critical attention to the social norms and expectations that sit beyond the remit of formalized DDR programmes (Jennings 2009; Pratt and Richter-Devroe 2011). Research into the post-war experiences of child soldiers also has often taken a more gender-sensitive approach, particularly with regard to the social dynamics of reintegration and the role of the family in welcoming – or shunning – children formerly affiliated with armed groups (Betancourt et al. 2010; Betancourt et al. 2011; Denov and Maclure 2007; Mazurana et al. 2002). Family and community relationships can be particularly potent factors affecting individual wellbeing (Annan et al. 2009; Annan et al. 2011), especially for victims when former fighters and perpetrators reintegrate into victims' home communities (Brounéus 2014). Despite

the emphasis in academic literature and policy practice on families and communities, the success of reintegration has been overwhelmingly measured in individual outcomes and survey based self-reports of men feeling accepted or facing problems.

The individualist orientation means that prevailing approaches to reintegration often under-conceptualize the relational and political nature of group-level divisions after war (Söderström 2013). Reintegration is a collective process navigated in the context of armed actors' wartime social networks and communities' political cleavages. A prominent study from Sierra Leone found, "The breaking of ties between combatants and their factions...is not associated with more successful reintegration into the economy, the community, or political life" (Humphreys and Weinstein 2007, p. 533). This is because social networks largely facilitate wellbeing and access to resources, particularly in fragile post-conflict contexts. Delinking from the very people who supported ex-combatants' survival through the war can make them acutely vulnerable and socially dislocated after war. As Gilligan et al. explain from their research in Burundi, "the ability to establish good working relations with one's community or family (social reintegration) is often taken to be an important moderator of an ex-combatant's economic and political reintegration prospects" (2013, p. 601).

Armed groups provide important sources of social support for combatants during war. They also function as sites of power, where elites and groups use military force to consolidate their authority over territories both big and small. The vertical power within an armed group can provide its members access to privileges and power otherwise unavailable outside the organization; similarly horizontal ties within the group can help group members secure goods, opportunities, and social support within the organization. As a result, armed group participation becomes part of participants' social and political identities. Just as gender shapes women's and men's experiences of mobilizing for and fighting in militaries and rebel groups, so too does the process of mobilization shape men's and women's gender identities. As a result, women who participate in armed groups become more closely connected to male-dominant military power structures than do civilian women who do not mobilize to fight. The following section explains how social network analysis can be used to better understand gendered patterns of post-conflict reintegration for peacebuilding, as well as to identify how intersectional dynamics—the connecting and interaction effects of layered and multiply identities (gender, ethnicity,

employment, conflict mobilization status, education level, etc.)—shape individual pathways to peace and wellbeing (Cho et al. 2013).

Social networks in conflict and peace

There are myriad individual pathways to conscription or other forms of mobilization for armed conflict (Viterna 2013). These processes are relational: they are embedded in the interactions between people and the networks that connect individuals together into a socially meaningful group. This collective entity in turn shapes people's preferences, their adherence to organizational norms, and their identity (Hoover Green 2016; Shesterinina 2016). Social network research analyzes these underlying social structures to understand relationships, as well as individual and collective behavior and outcomes (Marks and Stys, forthcoming; Perliger and Pedahzur 2011). This section outlines some of the ways social networks underpin armed conflict processes, and then elaborates preliminary findings about the after-effects of conflict on social networks. Existing research demonstrates the importance of social networks in facilitating armed group mobilization and violence. Less is known about how networks facilitate or constrain post-war possibilities.

Social relationships are essential for mobilizing armed groups and violence, and for perpetuating conflict. In Rwanda social connections were a strong predictor of whether people participated in genocidal political violence (McDoom 2013a; 2014a). Social proximity affected information diffusion about violence once the genocide began, and people's peer groups and networks generated pressure, influence, and enforcement for participation in congruence with Hutu and Tutsi identities (McDoom 2013a). Conversely, in Lebanon, where armed conflict has been much more protracted, long-term mobilization and even remobilization has been sustained through what Sarah Parkinson calls quotidian social networks, the every day relationships between husbands and wives, friends and neighbors (2013). These networks build trust and social structures through which the Palestinian Liberation Organization has been able to supply, finance, and provide information for multiple waves of mobilization across different levels of political and militant participation (Parkinson 2013). Moreover, elite-level relational ties are crucial for forging alliances—or enmity between groups—which can then be parlayed into mobilizing followers and fighters (McDoom 2014b; Roessler 2016; Walther et al. 2017).

Meanwhile, in settings where conflict has been successfully deescalated and defused, armed groups have often translated their networks and skills to other forms of violence and organized crime. DDR programs are designed to break down command chains and armed organizational structures, but wartime ties persist. In Colombia and other contexts, this has translated to ongoing insecurity, with high levels of ex-combatant involvement in organized crime and drug trafficking networks even after individuals demobilize from active rebel and paramilitary organizations (Saab and Taylor 2009). However, these same networks can be important for reducing levels of homicide and other criminal violence and generating bottom-up accountability structures (Rozema 2008). In Liberia, elites coordinate with former commanders of various armed groups to manage not only violence, but political power, economic opportunities, and distribution of public goods (Themnér and Utas 2016). Anders Themnér argues that former wartime command networks do not play a prominent role in drug trafficking, but might play an important role in post-conflict statebuilding because of their ability to act as brokers and mobilize former conflict networks (2018). These studies indicate how wartime social networks continue to shape ex-combatants' access to public and private goods, opportunities, and other benefits of social capital after conflict (Utas et al. 2014). They have long-term effects, as well, shaping political mobilization, patronage, social support and more for decades after war's end (Söderström 2017). As De Vries and Wiegink write:

The word '*reintegration*' seems to imply that the environment to which combatants return has not fundamentally changed since they left, as if war was fought in another dimension. However, war is not an abrupt rupture in a peaceful situation after which everything returns to the status quo ante (2011, p. 44).

In war-transformed communities, wartime social ties are sustained as post-conflict support networks and can provide a key source resource for former armed group affiliates' opportunities. Women's and men's outcomes after demobilizing are therefore shaped not only by their gender and status as ex-combatants, but by the group with whom they fought, the rank they achieved, role or responsibilities they fulfilled, and more. These intersecting and cross-cutting identities and structural positions shape individual experiences of harm, violence, mobilization, and survival in armed conflict (Marks, forthcoming). Black feminist research identifies these intersecting individual and group identities as co-determined with and by social power structures.

Structural inequalities in society, politics, and the economy constrain – but also by necessity enable – women’s agency (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 2009). These structural underpinnings of inequality shape and are shaped by social norms and institutions that can be measured through social relationships. As Weldon writes, “Focusing *only* on mobilization by specific race-class-gender groups of women does not help us understand how these groups of women are positioned vis-à-vis other groups of women and men by social norms, practices, and institutions” (2006, p. 238).

Militaries can themselves be sites and sources of intersecting power and identities, including patriarchal, masculine, able-bodied, and often racial or ethnic dominance (Madlala-Routledge 2008). These can be understood by looking at different groups in the aggregate, not just as combatants-civilians, men-women, but as crosscutting identity groups arising from hierarchical armed groups that are themselves constructed through social processes.

Understanding post-war inequalities and possibilities for peace therefore requires exploring and examining the institutional and organizational power structures that situate women and men, and which generate patterns of multidimensional marginalization or exclusion.

Few women – and relatively few men – are able to fight their way into positions of power and privilege from the rank and file of any armed group, state or non-state. Women often find themselves demobilizing from civil wars and rebellion back into positions of increased marginality. Black Diamond, the alias of a former commander in the rebel group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, described her experience after the war in terms of hardship and facing social stigma from her neighbors: “they come up with lies about me, they make me look like a monster...it is easier to be friends with other rebels because we have been through the same things” (Nilsson and Thapar-Bjorkert 2013, p. 114).

Gender roles often become a source of tacit social security – vis-à-vis predictability and stability. If women and men go back to behaving like “good” women and men, the thinking goes, society can heal. Everyday relationships and community interactions are possible because people establish common social norms, such as trust and reciprocity, that follow gendered patterns and that they expect others to follow. Gender remains one of the most powerful identifiers individuals have, hence conforming to gender expectations carries social currency. It can make friends, neighbors, and acquaintances more trusting, which in turn builds individual and

community-level social capital. As a result, gendered relationships become a key site of peacebuilding, with stigma and negative consequences for women who do not return to socially accepted gender roles (Mackenzie 2012).

Individuals' egocentric networks (ego-nets) measure the trusted relationships upon which people rely for advice, encouragement, and material support. They are a relational approach to measuring social capital. While social capital has recurred throughout policy documents and research on reintegration, most analyses take a micro-level perspective that focuses on individual actors. Studying relationships (or "relational ties") rather than actors is a significant departure from prevailing approaches to studying ex-combatant reintegration and the effects of conflict on community dynamics more broadly. It enables us to identify and disentangle patterns of connectedness or isolation between individuals and groups. Moreover, ego-net data can also be used to better understand individuals, thereby building on existing studies of individual determinants of reintegration (Kaplan and Nussio 2018b). The foundational assumption of reintegration programming, e.g. in DDR or DDRRR (when it involves repatriation and resettlement of foreign fighters), is that former armed group participants are returning to communities that have a deterrent or neutral effect on people's future mobilization pathways. This ignores the reality that community dynamics are often central to how and why people mobilize to fight in the first place. And they are particularly salient for understanding how gender affects individuals' opportunities and experiences during and after war.

Individuals' social networks enable us to assess: To what extent do ex-combatants reintegrate into the civilian population, versus stay connected to their wartime companions? This has a bearing on longer-term prospects for peacebuilding, and individual outcomes across intersecting identities, including armed group or ethnic affiliation as well as gender. As we know from previous research, most women and girls are ushered back into traditional or gender-conforming roles after mobilizing for war, a process which in turn marginalizes them from male-dominated political and economic realms (Mackenzie 2012). This is compounded by society's broader gender norms.

In DRC, this essay's case study, women and girls have been prominently targeted for intimate and conflict-related sexual and gender based violence, including during major attacks in Masisi and Rutshuru, near our field sites. Moreover, Congolese culture is highly patriarchal. The

church stresses gender conformity and wives' subservience to husbands, yet its gender conservatism belies the fact that it is a source of empowerment and support for many women (Wild-Wood 2008). Local authority is male-dominated, land is held overwhelmingly by men, and women are generally expected to defer to men. Even Congolese women soldiers—who are often seen as subverting gender norms—not only describe social pressure to conform to feminine ideals, but may face greater pressure to perform submissive gender relations with their husbands and in intimate spaces to 'compensate' for their masculine profession (Baaz and Stern 2013b). Cultural gender norms are thus embodied and enacted in interpersonal relationships. As they appear systematically across a community, they gain cachet and become culturally or socially observable. Thus, social structures facilitate cultural transformation or conservatism.

Gender and social networks in Eastern DRC

As a collaborative project, these lessons were applied to examine gendered dynamics of social and economic wellbeing in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), looking at how armed group networks shape social support for men and women in conflict-affected communities.² Individuals' social support networks provide a crucible for understanding which relational ties exert the most influence over people's daily lives. Taking an individual network approach complements and connects other prominent DRC research streams focused on individual wellbeing, and those oriented toward public authority and elite ties (Cuvelier and Bashwira 2016). This section outlines the rationale for the case selection, a brief summary of the conflict context, and the research methodology.³

Congo case selection and methods

Eastern Congo provides a valuable case study for looking at gendered patterns of conflict and peacebuilding as it unfolds. Protracted conflict in the region has created, on the one hand, a conflict environment unique for its duration, complexity, anti-civilian harm, large-scale population movements, and persistent economic strife. However, on the other hand, the DRC is typical of contemporary conflict trends, which show increasing levels of internationalization,

² A detailed overview of the research implementation in the field is available from the author: Stys et al. (2018).

³ Ibid.

regional spillover, and politico-military alliances of convenience in pursuit of broader war economy gains (Stearns 2014). From a gender perspective, DRC presents a critical case for gender transformation. Widespread rape and sexual violence by public and private actors has persisted alongside hierarchical—patriarchal—gender norms (Bartels et al 2013; Mukengere Mukwege and Nangini 2009; Pierotti et al. 2018); yet Eastern Congo has also, as a result, been a site of historic interventions to serve victim needs and pursue gender equality (Douma and Hilhorst 2012; Baaz and Stern 2013a). As a case study, North Kivu province in Eastern Congo can therefore be considered indicative of contexts with large-scale conflict mobilization and population displacement, which might in some ways hasten transformation of gender norms toward women’s empowerment, while simultaneously retrenching patriarchal patterns (Lwambo 2013).

Though inter-group conflict started decades prior, the region has been acutely affected by war and displacement since the large population movements throughout the Great Lakes region in the early 1990s (Stys 2015). During the second Congo war (1998-2003), much of the territory was controlled by Rwanda-backed *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie* (RCD), a Tutsi-majority rebel group with tens of thousands of participants across the Kivus (Stearns 2012). After the war ended, the RCD along with numerous other armed groups were incorporated into the FARDC, the state military, in a security sector reform process Maria Eriksson Baaz has described as “never-ending military integration” (Baaz and Verweijen 2013a). Several groups refused to integrate into the state forces, however, including local militias and a large faction of the anti-state RCD that transformed into a new rebel group, the *Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple* (CNDP), headquartered in Masisi. A swirling landscape of military alliances and fragmentation has characterized the past decade, creating a local security dilemma that fuels further mobilization of community militias under the banner of *mai-mai* (Vlassenroot et al. 2016). Unlike the integration of the RCD and related Rwandophone armed groups into the FARDC, attempts to integrate *mai-mai* fighters into the army have been partial and largely failed (Baaz and Verweijen 2013b). The APCLS mostly-Hunde militia has opportunistically been in conflict— and conversely, allied— with FARDC troops at various times in the past decade in defense of their claims to land and customary authority structures (Mueller 2014).

Armed group mobilization has unfolded along visibly ethnolinguistic lines that, although not exclusive or determinate, have led each major armed group to have an ethnically predominant membership. This creates an endogenous cycle whereby the ethno-political fissures and power struggles that motivated contentious politics in the first place (Mararo 1997) have continued to shape armed group affiliations, further dividing communities. The breakdown of trust and communication across the region has led to fragmented local authority (Raeymaekers 2013, 605) and increased conflict over land (Vlassenroot 2004, 81-83). It is easy to lose sight of gender dynamics in high stakes, criminalistic conflict environments where elite politics and illicit networks seem to over-determine contours of power. Yet, these networks are constituted at the grass roots through highly gendered parochial friendships, obligations, and other interpersonal interactions. Broader patterns of violence and militarization are produced by groups of individuals, connected to one another horizontally – and vertically to power structures – from positions embedded within local communities.

To study relational patterns of solidarity and support, we recruited a team of talented, locally connected enumerators with experience working in North Kivu, DRC, led by Pat Stys (Stys et al. 2018). The team identified field sites in the Masisi-Rutshuru axis where it would be safe and secure to do research with communities that have been intimately affected by cycles of armed conflict and group mobilization. The area in which the field team implemented the survey had not seen active fighting for approximately 18 months; however, it was still a highly militarized environment, with prominent state military deployments (FARDC), police (PNC) presence, and ongoing local militia mobilization. The latter was comprised largely of the mai-mai militia group known most recently as the Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo (APCLS) under the command of General Janvier. The Mai-Mai Janvier, or APCLS are a largely Hunde group active in the Masisi-Rutshuru border area in North Kivu. These factions are the latest iteration of many generations and gestations of armed group formation and fragmentation in North Kivu, DRC.

The research design involved conducting life history surveys with willing adult participants, and at the end of the interview, asking respondents to tell us to whom they go for advice, social and emotional support, and loans or job opportunities. To understand how previous experiences of armed group mobilization might affect people's present day support networks,

our survey sampled among former participants of the key armed group agglomerations, including: the Rwandophone-dominant RCD rebel group, which signed the 2003 Sun City peace agreement and officially demobilized (and periodically remobilized) after the second Congo war formally ended; active and demobilized local militia fighters; active members of the FARDC and PNC state security forces; and the local civilian population. By asking active and former members from each of these armed group agglomerations⁴ about their social support networks, we were able to measure community integration and reintegration patterns. Using individual social network analysis enables researchers to map whom people consider their most trusted friends and acquaintances. In network parlance, this is called egocentric networks, or “ego-net” research. Social support networks provide a key source of mental and emotional wellbeing, as well as social influence, opportunities, and often material wellbeing for individuals (Walker et al. 1994). Measuring broader patterns across social support networks among community sub-groups (i.e. disaggregated by gender or armed group affiliation) provides community-level indicators of social integration and structural pathways for overcoming – or reinforcing – inequality and social cleavages.

The sampling strategy followed a hybrid design, borrowing from respondent-driven sampling (RDS) as discussed in Heckathorn and open-ended snowball approaches that pursue an unbounded number of referrals (2011). By adapting snowball methods, respondents were targeted from within a common social universe according to pre-defined attributes (i.e. over-sampling for armed group participants) without relying on a gatekeeper to provide us a list of names, which could be incomplete or biased in unclear and undetectable ways. It is a link-tracing design wherein initial “seed” respondents are identified from a hidden or covert network, as former and active combatants are; subsequently, some or all of their friends (“alters”) named in the social network survey become the subsequent wave of interviewees.⁵ We continued this cascade process until we approached saturation of the ex-combatant social networks identified in our seed set. The trends in the data are indicative of social support patterns across militia, ex-combatant, and military sub-populations in Masisi and Rutshuru territories, and potentially other

⁴ “Agglomeration” refers to cross-temporal spheres of affinity and collaboration between nominally discrete actors, i.e. groups and parties that tended to co-affiliate. It is almost impossible to generalize across mobilization pathways and armed group affiliations in isolation, as many respondents had participated in more than one armed group, and armed groups themselves have morphed and rebranded, fragmented and re-cohered over time.

⁵ Further details are provided in Stys et al. (2018).

parts of Eastern Congo more broadly, but like all observational data, are best assessed in social and political context.

Data and findings on women's social networks in North Kivu

The resultant ego-net dataset includes 97 ex-RCD women, 18 ex-“other armed group” women largely affiliated with local militias (while small, this number is larger than anticipated given the public perception that women are not active members of the mai-mai militia), and 37 civilian women never affiliated with any armed group. As discussed above, this is not a representative sample, but rather a link tracing design that aimed to reach saturation in hidden social networks, wherein many people's armed group affiliation is neither outwardly nor publicly apparent. Within the dataset of ego-nets from the 97 women we surveyed, the most important trend to emerge is the finding that ex-combatant women have larger social friend⁶ networks than do women who never mobilized for or joined an armed group. Former RCD rebel women in our sample have the largest social networks (nearly six close friends on average), of whom four out of five are female. Women formerly affiliated with other armed groups have slightly fewer people in their friendship networks on average, and slightly higher female-to-male ratios, than do the RCD affiliated women. Women who participated in the RCD, many of whom have gone on to establish careers and networks in the state security sector, have built much larger social networks than civilian women, who named just 5 friends on average, the vast majority of whom are female. Not only are civilian women overwhelmingly friends with other women, but they are also friends specifically with other civilian women most similar to them. Looking across the ego-networks, on average fewer than half of civilians would name as a friend or close contact someone who had any armed group affiliation, active or demobilized.

In network research the pattern of people having relationships with others with similar social or demographic characteristics is called homophily.⁷ Across social contexts, people are likely to spend time socializing and trusting those with whom they share common attributes. Compared to civilians, who have few close ties to active and demobilized combatants, within ex-

⁶ Close friends were referred to as *rafiki proche* in our surveys (Stys et al. 2018).

⁷ There is a methodological and empirical debate as to whether respondent-driven sampling methods might compound homophily findings in network research; while parameter estimates are outside the scope of this paper, see (Crawford et al. 2017) for a statistical discussion of how RDS methods can approximate representative social patterns.

RCD women's friend networks, nearly half of their close friends are other ex-combatants, two-thirds of whom are other ex-RCD. Ex-RCD respondents tended to associate more with other ex-RCD women than with their male counterparts – fully 70 percent of their ex-RCD friends are female. At first glance, this seems to indicate high levels of homophily, especially given that only 6 percent of alters are men from outside the armed group, the “most different” identity category from ex-RCD women. However, upon closer inspection, we also see that *other ex-RCD women* – the “most similar” category – comprise just over a third of RCD-affiliated women respondents' friend networks on average. Although most civilians in our sample are *not* friends with any female ex-combatants, the converse is not true: ex-RCD women report on average more than one in five of their friends are civilian women (mean number of alters = 6).

The demographic profiles of ex-combatant rebel (ex-RCD) women's ego-nets in eastern Congo indicate that female participants in armed conflict do struggle to integrate into civilian networks after war. Like their male peers, female former participants in armed groups draw on their wartime social networks for support. Among women in our sample, former insurgent (RCD) women have the lowest proportion of civilian friends. High levels of civilian friendships can be understood as a strong indicator of community level integration, as rural communities remain predominantly civilian despite multi-decade mobilization cycles. Conversely, lack of integration with local civilians may indicate lack of access to or rejection of dominant social norms, mutual trust, and social and political information from the residential majority. However, it is impossible to separate respondents' armed group affiliation from their other political and ethnic identities, which may also drive community (dis/re)integration and friendship patterns. Moreover, many of the ex-RCD women in our sample continue to be employed in the security sector, which may further compound divisions with civilian neighbors. What is clear is that former rebel women rely more on close relationships with other ex-combatants than with local never-mobilized civilians, suggesting either social marginalization or continued antipathy between the “host community” and demobilized ex-combatants who have returned from wartime deployments or simply disarmed in place. The relative dearth of close civilian friendships reflects ex-RCD women's social dislocation arising from three compounding factors: many years spent engaged with their own anti-state armed groups; increased likelihood of movement and having been displaced as a result of their armed group activity; and historic antagonism between

RCD/affiliates, many of whom are rwandophone⁸ (of both foreign and Congolese origin), and the Hunde community in Masisi and Rutshuru. Yet, what does this mean for women's "transformed" potential after participating in a major armed group in a protracted conflict setting?

Analysis and implications for women's wellbeing and gendered transformation

As a multidimensional concept, there are numerous ways to assess ego-net value as a measure of social capital—the relational resources upon which individuals rely for support, information, opportunities, and more. For example, ex-RCD women reported slightly larger networks and more diverse ties than non-combatant women. Following Granovetter's work on embeddedness and weak ties (1983, 1985), we might infer that ex-combatant women are therefore slightly more likely to get access to information about jobs, work, and other opportunities than are civilian women. For their part, civilian women are much more tightly embedded in gendered networks (i.e. overwhelmingly alike – homophilous – ties with other civilian women) with relatively strict social norms and stronger moral economy enforcement mechanisms. We can begin to see a potential trade-off wherein ex-combatant women break social norms and lose moral social capital associated with traditional gender roles, but gain weak ties and diversified networks that may enhance their livelihoods options *if* they are not economically "punished" by the local civilian community for their social non-conformity.

This helps take us beyond simplistic conceptions of stigma to understand people's social-economic strategies and tradeoffs in the uneasy social and relational context of protracted conflict. As Baaz and Stern write in their fine-grained qualitative study of women soldiers in the FARDC, "Women soldiers often described the army as a family—a family in which they were valued and to which they belonged. This is juxtaposed with the frequent accounts of their alienation and rejection from their own families in direct relation to their being 'failed' women, and then (later) 'strange' woman soldiers" (2012, p. 722). The social support networks identified in our selected communities show broadly similar underlying patterns as these women's testimonies. They help paint a picture of the long-term social structures women soldiers and ex-

⁸ *Rwandophone* refers to speakers of Kinyarwanda and is an umbrella term encompassing Hutu and Tutsi ethno-political groups (for historical background in North and South Kivu, see Stearns 2012; Stys 2015; Verweijen 2015).

combatants have to navigate. Network research of small traders elsewhere in Africa has found that larger ego-networks indicate greater socio-economic vulnerability and a lack of the vertical ties necessary for upward mobility (Kebede and Butterfield 2009; Kebede and Odella 2014). Armed groups can be understood as offering both unique social resources to (former) participants, while also potentially making women participants doubly dependent upon those war-related ties. Further research is required to examine the correlations between friend networks, usually conceived of as horizontal ties, and vertical links to institutions or power structures.

In our sample, civilian women and men alike – across respondents and their friends/contacts – tend to have more diversified livelihoods activities and employment profiles than do ex-combatants, who have a foothold in relatively fewer trades (namely, farming, small trading, and selling local alcohol). This could be caused by a number of different, potentially countervailing factors. As a survival strategy, livelihood diversification often indicates economic vulnerability and marginality. However, because the top trades are the same for both civilians and ex-combatants in our study, it may indicate civilians have a more robust set of options or economic “ins” than those available to ex-combatants. Women who work in the state security sector as soldiers and police officers (primarily former members and affiliates of the RCD in our field site) may face a social trade-off, where their profession provides slightly greater status and economic power, but at the expense of having socially “normative” friend networks. Cycles of conflict mobilization affect post-war socializing and livelihoods patterns in ways that may reinforce ex-combatant women’s affinity with other ex-combatants. Likewise, civilians’ own social experiences of conflict – such as displacement and victimization – likely reinforce ties with other civilians.

This presents challenges for post-conflict peacebuilding insofar as cleavages indicate continued latent potential for mobilization vis-à-vis high bonding capital within groups, and low bridging ties, either across armed groups or with the civilian population. Group-level cleavages also have the potential to exacerbate ex-combatants’ social isolation, economic marginalization, and related psychosocial stress. Overall, the widely divergent friend profiles that ex-combatant and police women turn to for support, compared to the types of friends civilian women most often rely upon, suggest that wartime experiences can have a dramatic effect on where and how

women – and men – gain social, economic, and emotional support during and after conflict. The disparities and cleavages in women’s social networks amidst and after conflict may help explain the surprising lack of societal, political, and economic gender transformation in Congo and other contexts, even after women have participated in armed groups in relatively large numbers. When women participants of armed groups demobilize, they are likely to rely upon and maintain different social networks than their civilian counterparts. Civilian women, if not connected to ex-combatant and armed group affiliated women, will rely on the same feminized networks of social and political support as persisted before the war. Moreover, their feminine gender roles and performances may become more normatively valuable in contradistinction to women participants in armed groups.

Mapping relationships and patterns of trust and reciprocity reveals how and why exchange dynamics concentrate power in mostly male hands, even as women join security sector forces in growing numbers. Unless social brokers are able to connect women across ex-combatant and civilian sub-populations, neither group of women is likely to benefit from the other’s wartime advances. As a result, role and network-based gains in gender equality secured in armed groups do not travel as widely outside the armed group networks. Similarly, political and economic gains made by civilian women may in some cases be achieved at the expense of women who participated in war and face post-conflict stigma. Social network approaches provide a useful tool for exploring these issues, because they enable researchers to measure gendered dynamics of post-conflict integration through relational ties across various political identity groups. Because network methods focus on interpersonal and intergroup relationships, they are well suited for analyzing issues related to intersectionality and the informal distribution of power and privilege. Going beyond the individual network level and conducting full system network research – for example, interviewing everyone in a village – would enable more robust causal inferences to be made about how relational ties affect the gendered distribution of goods and power in society. In Congo, personal networks have subsumed formal structures and governance mechanisms (Baaz and Olsson 2011, p. 235). This indicates the personal is political in ways perhaps more acutely visible than earlier generations of feminist research suggested.

Conclusion

As the preceding sections have laid out, women's participation in armed groups carries diverse and complex gendered norms and expectations. Women are often seen as becoming more masculine by occupying predominantly masculine spaces (war, the military) and roles (soldiers, commanders). However, while post-conflict political moments and peace processes present opportunities to change or contest political settlements, patriarchal power structures are remarkably resilient. Post-war reconstruction frequently re-enforces conservative or traditional gender relations, nudging women's participation toward the private and domestic sphere, while delimiting the transformative potential of women's violent or peaceful mass political mobilization (Berry 2018). This pressure to conform may fall particularly heavily on women who mobilized for armed groups, encouraging them to leave behind their militarized affiliations and identities and return to more socially conservative feminine roles (Baaz and Stern 2013b; Mackenzie 2012).

For individual women and for communities as a whole, gender relations are enacted always in social context, which means they are constrained and facilitated by social structures. In this paper, I have outlined how conformity and transformation are socially embedded processes that can be intimately affected by pathways of mobilization. Several political science studies have shown that social networks are a critical factor in recruitment into rebellion and in the operational effectiveness of armed groups more broadly (Wood, 2008; Parkinson, 2013; Staniland, 2014). Directing attention to gender dynamics in social networks reveals that social structures shape post-war support, wellbeing, and relationships in different ways for civilian and militarized women, whether ex-combatant or still mobilized.

This analysis has drawn on the case of Eastern Congo to illustrate the promise of social network approaches to analyzing these dynamics. In that case, communities experiencing militarization and protracted conflict are weakly integrated. Unsurprisingly, women's support networks strongly reflect the social pathways they have walked to survive war. Civilian women almost exclusively rely on and trust other civilian women. Conversely, women who have participated in armed groups have more male friends and a mix of civilian and armed-group affiliated female friends. Their wartime experiences seem to have broadened and diversified their social networks, but more research is required to know whether this gives them an advantage in a

conflict-affected community, or if it signals social stigma and alienation from the civilian community.

Social network approaches are a relatively new tool in the feminist toolkit, and they can be deployed in myriad ways to analyze the extent to which women interact and build relationships with other women, or with men, across social groups and from different conflict backgrounds. As a tool for examining social integration, ego-net research is a building block approach measuring the extent to which combatants and civilians trust and rely on one another after war, and whether gendered, ethnic, religious, or other social cleavages have been bridged within communities. The central claim of this article is that relationships are a central unit of analysis and theoretical driver for understanding gender norms and equality during and after war.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by a Poverty Alleviation Research Grant from the UK Economic and Social Research Council and DFID (ES/ M009130/1, Marks, Nugent, Eichhorn), with support from the DFID Political Settlements Research Programme funded by the Department of International Development, UK Aid (who bear no responsibility for the views herein). DRC data was collected by a talented team of Congolese enumerators and post-doctoral research assistant, all of whom we thank for their time and perseverance. Their names and responsibilities are detailed in the technical brief where possible; however, due to security concerns, some of our key collaborators remain anonymous at this stage. Thanks go to participants in the Folke Bernadotte Academy working group on 1325 and the Governance and Local Development conference held at University of Gothenburg in 2017, as well as two anonymous reviewers, for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

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