

Beyond Passive Victims and Agentic Survivors: Responses to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

Written by Anne-Kathrin Kreft and Philipp Schulz

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Quoted below are the words of a woman living on the outskirts of Colombia's second-biggest city, who was raped several years previously by armed actors; and of a male survivor of sexual violence from Northern Uganda, who was raped by Ugandan government soldiers in the late 1980s. Today, both of them are local activists, engaging in advocacy and working closely with victim-survivors of (conflict-related) sexual violence. This article draws on our research with conflict-affected communities in Colombia and Uganda. In Colombia, the word 'victim' is widely used by civil society organizations and activists whereas in Uganda, 'survivor' is the more commonly preferred term by conflict-affected communities themselves. We do our best to use the preferred terminology when we speak about the respective context. When we make general observations across contexts, we use 'victim-survivor'.

Sometimes I think of what happened to me, and I cry, and I say 'my God, I am filth, I feel dirty, I feel tainted.' And they say that one forgets, but one never forgets. Yes, the intensity goes down, but one never completely forgets ... And now here I am, doing this [activism] because it is beautiful to be fighting for the people who really need it (female activist in Medellín, Colombia).

Prior to joining this [male sexual violence survivors'] group, there was too much stigmatization from the community, which made us really suffer and kept us in silence. But since forming this group, we now know how to better deal with this. There is still stigma and we still suffer, and some of us even in silence, but at least we have learned to somehow cope (male sexual violence survivor in Gulu, Northern Uganda).

At first glance, their activist lives would strike most observers as surprising, if not exceptional, in light of their prior victimization and the lingering effects articulated in the statements above. This is because (political) activism sits uneasily with prevailing perceptions of passive, traumatized and silenced victims of sexual violence. What is more, the above quotes also do not reflect the counter-narrative of agentic survivors who have turned to activism and 'left their victimhood behind' in the process. That is because the lived experiences of victim-survivors of conflict-related sexual violence rarely fit neatly into one single box, or story-line of *either* victim *or* agent.

In this article, we explore the complex intersections of victimhood and agency among victim-survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, in an attempt to move beyond simplified and often even harmful dichotomies. In doing so, we draw on our respective field research experiences from Colombia in Uganda. In Colombia, Kreft conducted four months of research in 2017 and 2018, carrying out, inter alia, 31 interviews with representatives of women civil society activists. In Uganda, Schulz conducted research over a period of 9 months, between 2015 and 2018, in close collaboration with the Refugee Law Project (RLP) and based on a relational and care-based approach to research. Based on these research insights, we propose that a more nuanced understanding of the complex linkages between victimhood and agency is crucial for better understanding and supporting the activism of victim-survivors in conflict-affected settings.

For over twenty years, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) architecture has served as the foremost global instrument to address conflict-related sexual violence and strengthen women's socio-political agency in conflict settings. Its foundational United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 signified the growing recognition that war

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is inherently gendered. In the preceding years, global awareness of conflict-related sexual violence had increased significantly after civilians were systematically raped in the wars in Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere. Conflict-related sexual violence has since become a prominent – if not *the* prominent – WPS issue.

But as tends to happen when a phenomenon, in particular such a violent and stigmatized phenomenon as sexual violence, becomes the object of often sensationalist coverage, simplified and essentializing narratives abound. Those affected by conflict-related sexual violence are typically presented as ‘victims without a voice,’ resulting in a ‘disempowering narrative of silenced, isolated, and wholly marginalized survivors’ deprived of any agency, power and control. Academics such as Roxani Krystalli have viewed with skepticism the tendency to dichotomize victimhood and agency. Yet, this uneasy dichotomy remains particularly entrenched in perceptions of the victim-survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, including in the silos of protection and participation in the WPS agenda itself.

Victimhood and agency: Problematic assumptions and dichotomies

In part this is because the victimhood-agency dichotomy is gendered, contrasting the victimized woman in need of (patriarchal, white) protection with the agentic man, who assumes the role of either perpetrator or protector. It does not help that sexual violence had long been normalized as collateral damage or the victor’s prerogative in war (domination over the adversary’s women), and simultaneously stigmatized or even taboo (attracting very little attention or outrage prior to the 1990s). It is therefore not surprising that in the policy arena and the public domain, conflict-related sexual violence in particular evokes the image of the woman as the silenced victim devoid of power and agency.

By no means do we mean to downplay the horrendous crime that conflict-related sexual violence is, or the many debilitating effects it carries for victims. A plethora of physical, psychological and social consequences have been documented, ranging from permanent injuries and disabilities via depression and suicidal intentions to social ostracism and an increase in domestic violence. These consequences are real and severe, and they deserve appropriate policy responses. What we seek to challenge, however, is the false notion that victimization in conflict-related sexual violence, as stigmatized as it is, invariably produces passivity and voicelessness.

The sustained activism of the Korean ‘comfort women’ and their fight for recognition and compensation, as well as Nadia Murad’s public engagement and advocacy are only the most prominent examples of victim-survivors’ agency. In fact, associations of conflict-related sexual violence victim-survivors exist in contexts ranging from Bosnia to the DRC, from Uganda to Colombia. Women’s socio-political agency in conflict-affected settings, as peacemakers in their communities, as civil society activists and as political heavyweights in peace negotiations, is attracting increasing global attention, including within the WPS framework.

But all too often, these forms of agency are either portrayed as exceptions to the norm, or are framed as linear processes of moving from victimhood towards agency. At a minimum, these narratives see women turning to activism *despite* their victimization. At worst, it is implicitly (and often even explicitly) assumed that agentic women have overcome their victimhood status. Take, for example, the 2020 Report of the UN Secretary-General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, which describes a ‘survivor’s ... exceptional journey from victim to activist’. The report proclaims that ‘women are powerful agents of change. They are not just victims of war, but vectors of peace and progress.’ Such language, however, reinforces the dichotomous and mutually exclusive view of victim and agent.

Challenging the dichotomy

By no means do we intend to downplay the extraordinary agency that victim-survivors of wartime sexual violence exercise around the world, as importantly highlighted in the UN Secretary-General’s report. Quite the contrary: we wish to direct the spotlight to victim-survivors’ agency in conflict settings, also in an effort to move beyond perceptions of this agency as ‘exceptional’. But we seek to do so in a nuanced way that emphasizes its lasting interrelationship with victimhood. What we wish to challenge, specifically, is the problematic binary view of *either* agent *or* victim. Because: Neither of the two tropes – the passive, silenced victim or the agentic survivor who has

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escaped the shackles of victimhood – are always and necessarily an accurate reflection of reality, as our field research with conflict-affected communities in Northern Uganda and Colombia shows. As such, our challenge to pervasive dichotomizations operates both at conceptual and empirical levels.

Conceptually, treating victimhood as the inverse of agency unduly conflates two very different things: having been subjected to harm, and the (in)capacity to make decisions and act. The inverse of victimhood is the absence of victimhood; the inverse of agency is passivity. These are two separate dimensions that cannot simply be projected onto each other in order to fit misconceptions of how a victim should respond to violence. Victimhood and agency, in short, do not constitute a one-dimensional dichotomy; they are two independent spectrums that can, and do, covary in different configurations. Some victim-survivors fall towards the more passive end of the spectrum, while others are highly agentic. Of course, the capacity for any individual to exercise agency is heavily shaped by structural factors, including gender or socio-economic status. Individuals may also move along the passivity-agency axis over time, depending on context and social environment, expressing high levels of (political) agency under some circumstances and in some spaces while being more passive and silent in others.

Another problematic assumption that underpins the victimhood-agency dichotomy is its underlying gender binary. Juxtaposing female victims with male perpetrators/ protectors not only diminishes the scope for women's agency, it also elides men's amply documented victimization in conflict-related sexual violence. Whilst the portrayal of the passive, disempowered and silenced victim deprived of agency appears particularly pronounced for women and girl victim-survivors of sexual violence, this representation frequently applies to their male counterparts, too.

In the existing yet limited body of literature on wartime sexual violence against men, male victim-survivors' experiences are predominantly analyzed with a focus on vulnerabilities, amongst others examining how sexual and gender-based violations impact upon male victim-survivors' masculinities, commonly described as 'emasculatation'. The underlying assumption is that this perceived loss of masculinity translates into a deprivation of their agency too, given that agency is seen as a masculine trait. The gender binary also, of course, entirely erases the experiences of persons with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions (SOGIE), who face high levels of discrimination and violence in both war and peacetime.

In the following, we illustrate the different manifestations of political agency, and its linkages to victimhood, based on research we carried out with women civil society activists in Colombia, several of whom are victims of conflict-related sexual and other forms of violence themselves, and with female and male survivors of conflict-related gender-based violence in Northern Uganda.

Forms of political agency

The interviews in Colombia were carried out with representatives of women's civil society organizations and victims' associations operating in the three biggest cities (Bogotá, Medellín and Cali), but also in smaller urban or rural areas. Colombia boasts a particularly vibrant civil society sector, with several nationally operating women's associations, such as *Casa de la Mujer*, *La Red Nacional de Mujeres* and *Sisma Mujer*. Some of these women's organizations formed as a direct reaction to the armed conflict, like *La Ruta Pacífica de Las Mujeres*, which emerged in response to war-time violence, especially sexual violence, against women in 1996. Another example is *Iniciativa de Mujeres Colombianas por la Paz*, which was established in 2001 in reaction to the absence of women in the peace negotiations between the government and the FARC. The most prominent victims' associations specifically for conflict-related sexual violence are *Corporación Mujer Sigue Mis Pasos*, *Red de Mujeres Víctimas y Profesionales* as well as the campaign *No Es Hora de Callar*, initiated by journalist Jineth Bedoya Lima, who had been kidnapped and raped by armed actors while covering the armed conflict.

Many of the women in these organizations and associations are victims of the armed conflict that has plagued Colombia since the 1960s, including of sexual violence perpetrated by armed actors. Their individual experiences, as well as the activities of the victims' associations, are testament to the fact that victimhood and political agency co-exist. The women's organizations and victims' associations document cases of conflict-related sexual violence, they provide psycho-social and psycho-legal support to victims of this violence and accompany them in court cases, they

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work with children and youth to overcome harmful gender norms and practices, they raise awareness and engage in advocacy campaigns, they provide capacity-building support to state institutions, they are involved in the drafting of legislation, and they generally dedicate their time to changing gender inequality and improving women's rights in Colombia.

Similar dynamics can be observed in Northern Uganda, where several groups and associations of diverse conflict-affected communities exist, including specifically for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. One prominent example is the Women's Advocacy Network, which brings together over 900 war-affected women (and some men) to advocate for justice, accountability and recognition for gender-based violations committed during the more than two-decade long civil war in Northern Uganda. In 2014, WAN petitioned the Ugandan parliament for greater acknowledgement and redress for their experiences of sexual violence, and the network's chairperson, Evelyn Amony, addressed representatives at the United Nations to speak about the plight of women abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel group and of children born as a result of rape within the rebel ranks.

In addition, several groups of male and female sexual violence survivors exist, such as for instance the Men of Courage association specifically comprised of men who were sexually violated by government soldiers in Northern Uganda. In this group, survivors engage in peer-to-peer support, conduct joint income-generating activities and organize mutual saving schemes, to support one another and create safe spaces for healing and recovery. By collectively engaging with their experiences, harms and vulnerabilities on their own terms, survivors in these groups thereby exercise different forms of agency and thus immediately refute the stereotypical picture of the ever-vulnerable, passive and helpless sexual violence victim.

These are just a few examples of the ways in which victim-survivors of conflict-related sexual violence across these vastly different contexts, Colombia and Uganda, engage with their experiences and thus exercise different forms of agency. And there are, indeed, a wide variety of different ways and forms in which victim-survivors' agency manifests – ranging from formal and public spaces to more informal and quotidian expressions within the everyday.

The lingering force of victimhood

Our discussions with activists and victim-survivors across these two cases also reveal that these various forms of agency and activism do not in any linear way imply having 'overcome victimhood'. Despite being in a position to engage with their experiences and exercise certain forms of agency, the lived realities of the victim-survivors we worked with are also characterized by persisting vulnerabilities, and at times cycles of (re-)victimization.

For instance, several of the male sexual violence survivors from Northern Uganda who openly spoke about their experiences were often subjected to stigmatization within their communities, and at times even within their families. What is more, in Uganda, crimes of male rape are often equated with homosexuality, which is criminally outlawed and socially considered unacceptable. Openly speaking about government-perpetrated human rights violations in this current socio-political context thus often means that survivors are verbally and at times even physically attacked, and at risk of further antagonism.

Continued emotions of anger, fear, frustration or grief were also evident in the words and demeanor of victim-survivors in both settings. Some even articulated feelings of shame, even though they were rationally aware that they are not at all to blame for the violence exercised upon their bodies by armed actors. As the Colombian victim-activist quoted in the introduction of this article said, recalling the crime of sexual violence continues to make her feel that: 'I am filth, I feel dirty, I feel tainted.' Pervasive patterns of victim-blaming and stigmatization, which are recurring themes in the interviews, thus leave their traces even on those who are aware of, and dedicate their lives to, challenging precisely these harmful patterns and practices. As another victim-activist from Colombia says: 'we always carry that mark and people say "there go the raped women"'.

Neither is engaging in civil society activism a simple and straightforward choice. For some activists in Colombia, the stories and pain they were exposed to on a daily basis led to depression or even extended withdrawal from activism. Some of the victim-activists told stories of very reluctant activism indeed. They reported being torn between, on the

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one hand, fearing the emotional consequences and physical threats associated with doing this kind of work – in an environment of frequent assassinations of social leaders – and, on the other hand, feeling a sense of obligation to other victims of conflict-related sexual violence. The interviews in Colombia sometimes evoked a sense of responsibility or purpose borne, perversely, from victimization.

Victimization as a driver of agency

Indeed, what we both observe in our research is that victimization can be a driver of political agency. Rather than mobilizing *despite* their experiences (or the threat) of victimhood, many victim-survivors mobilize precisely *because* of it, and fueled by persisting vulnerabilities. The Colombian and Ugandan victims' and survivors' associations in particular are a prime example of such patterns: they are organized and led by, composed of, and work for victims of conflict-related (sexual) violence, with activities that span data collection, awareness-raising, mutual support and political advocacy.

In prior research, one of us (Kreft) has theorized such patterns as mobilization in response to the collective threat that sexual violence in conflict constitutes to women – certainly aided by a global WPS framework that lends legitimacy to this kind of mobilization against CRSV as a war strategy. As noted, we can also observe similar mobilization patterns in self-help and survivors' groups in Northern Uganda, including among men.

Especially in the Colombian context, victimhood has become a powerful political tool, a political category on whose basis claims for redress and reparations can be made on the state. As one victim-activist stated assertively 'You will not find – at a single moment, in a single statement, in a single place – ... that [I identify] as a survivor, because it is a crime and because I have a right to justice being done.' In Colombia, victimhood thus usually entails the criminal-legal notion of having suffered wrongful harm at the hand of another – a concept that the (agentic) survivor-frame disregards. In other contexts, such as Uganda, this may be perceived differently, and conflict-affected communities and individuals themselves often prefer the terminology of 'survivor'.

Illustrating the powerful force of victimhood as both a political category and a mobilizational factor, another activist from Colombia explained

we emphasize ... the difference between position and condition. There are women who have a position as victims, they recognize and identify as having experienced this violence, and from this place they present to the world. Some do activism, and they take active part in this whole machinery of organizations of victims of the conflict.

It is victimization in sexual violence, as well as the threat of such victimization by being a member of the targeted collective of women in this particular context that acts as a driver of political mobilization. Cross-national statistical analyses further demonstrate that these mobilization patterns are not limited to Colombia: in conflict-affected countries experiencing higher levels of sexual violence, we also observe greater women's civil society mobilization and more women's protest events.

Lessons learned and ways forward

As our reflections from Colombia and Uganda show, the links between victimhood and agency are complex, simultaneously strong and tenuous. Victimization can serve as a driver of political mobilization (although of course it does not do so for all, or even most, victims). But conceiving of victim-survivors' political agency as a departure from victimhood is a wrongful dismissal of their continuing pain and vulnerabilities as well as the immense courage and energy that their persistent activism requires. Such portrayals, in short, do not do justice to the complex and multi-faceted realities of conflict-affected communities' experiences.

We therefore need to rethink the relationships between victimhood and agency in conflict settings, and in particular in the context of sexual violence. Rather than two dichotomous categories, victimization and agency can co-exist in various configurations, prompting us to recognize that someone can both be a victim of violence and suffering its after-effects whilst also exercising political agency. Most dominant narratives in scholarship and policy-making alike,

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however, fall into that tendency of considering either someone's agency or their victimhood – as the example from the UN Secretary-General's report on sexual violence referred to above shows.

What we need to capture the co-constitutive forces that victimization and agency can be, we argue, is an approach that conceptualizes agency as relational – centered around people's relations to one another, towards their prior victimization, towards structural factors and towards the contextual vulnerabilities that demarcate the spaces in which they exercise their agency. Such an understanding of agency – in contrast to the more individualistic understanding of agency that dominates political thinking – recognizes the intrinsic inter-linkages between different experiences, helping us to move beyond the salient dichotomization of victimhood and agency and instead realizing their fluidities and variations.

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda certainly recognizes both: sexual violence victimization and the agency of conflict-affected communities, and of women in particular. However, we contend that the WPS agenda would benefit from more explicitly recognizing the intersections of victimhood and agency, rather than falling into a tendency of silo-ing the two as separate pillars. This would paint an even more holistic picture of the gendered dynamics and experiences of political violence and armed conflicts around the globe. Indeed, recognizing the intrinsic relationships and complexities between victimhood and agency can foreground more textured and nuanced stories of the lived realities of those affected by conflict-related sexual violence, beyond universalizing narratives and storylines.

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