

Do weak states undermine masculinities?

The study of socially-constructed masculinities and their relationship to violence reflects a healthy concern not to reduce the equation between men and violence to simple biological determinism. To suggest that violence is an inevitable outcome of social constructs of masculinity is also too static. Can flawed nurturing processes fully explain the capacity of individuals and indeed whole societies to shift between 'cultures of violence' and 'cultures of peace'? Or does the state, through its actions or inactions, shape those cultures and the responses of individuals within them?

Masculinities can not be used as a silver bullet to explain away a wide range of violent behaviour. The crucial question to answer is 'when do men become violent?', by examining the political and economic context of men's lives. Is violence the outcome of failed politics? If so, is stronger politics the answer? Such investigations would add enormously to debates about 'weak states' and 'complex political emergencies'.

Uganda is widely regarded as a model of the 'African Renaissance', yet eighteen months of field work by the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD) in northern Uganda suggests that whilst the form of the state in the north is strong its key function of citizen protection is weak. Most people have moved to 'protected villages' with a military presence, but rebels raid with impunity, seizing men, women, children, and properties at will. Men, therefore, live in conditions in which it is virtually impossible to fulfil 'masculine' roles as providers and protectors, husbands and fathers. The research also witnessed widespread human rights abuses committed by the state, through its armed forces and police, including rape, killings, extra-judicial executions.

Findings indicate that:

- State inaction in the face of human rights abuses had eroded men's self-respect, resulting in widespread feelings of fear, intimidation, humiliation, frustration and anger, often expressed in violence against self and the social sphere, in the forms of alcohol abuse, suicide attempts and domestic violence.
- The impossibility of seeking redress through formal channels prompts some men into passive or active resistance to the state further prolonging war.
- The threat to masculine roles and identities brought about by a weak state causes violence, rather than 'masculinities' per se.

Weak states are damaging, on the one hand demanding that individuals surrender their power to the state whilst on the other failing to keep its side of the bargain - providing protection. Men surrender the role of 'self-defence' to the state: if it is weak and fails them, the men suffer damaging consequences to their self-esteem and 'masculinity'.

The policy implications for NGO interventions in peace building are challenging: clearly, peace education aimed at tackling socialisation is not the solution. Further key policy implications include:

- NGOs need to question and understand the political and economic context which undermines what are mostly non-violent constructs of masculinity.
- The state's right to the monopoly of violence, political and human rights theory has it, derives from its capacity to protect its citizens, yet persistent inaction in the face of assaults on its people disqualifies the state from enjoying that monopoly.
- Holding the state to account rather than the individual, based on analysis of political context rather than social constructs, is a delicate but important area for 'apolitical' NGO involvement.

If men need help, it is to recover their dignity, their voice, and their 'masculinity'.

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