

# Possibilities & Challenges of a State of Exception

Sub-themes of contemporary crisis management and peace- and state-building discourses are the “gender and conflict” and “women and peace” discourses. Since the gender boom of the 1990s, there has been a steady growth of research and development of toolboxes addressing gendered experiences of war, gender-based violations during conflict and women’s contributions to peace processes.



Women’s experiences of conflict and of the postconflict period are often different from those of men. Women’s responsibilities during both conflict and peace tend to be different from those of men and that does have an effect on how women experience conflict and the often equally turbulent transitions after conflict. Therefore, it is certainly important for those (like me !) working in conflict zones to learn about and try to understand the gender dimension of conflict, if for no other reason, so to avoid perpetuating discriminatory practices.

In my view, there are some disturbing undercurrents in the compassionate and well-meaning “gender and conflict” and “women and peace” discourses. I want to draw attention to two such undercurrents : First, it is relatively easy to get policy traction for conflict-related issues. The 1990s “violence against women” discourses were largely a result of the public outrage due to violations committed towards women during the wars in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. However, it is easy to get policy traction for conflict-related issues because conflicts are “states of exception”, and what applied to conflict does not have to apply to peace. Hence, it is easier to get recognition for violence against women during conflict than it is for violence against women in general. What is then often forgotten is that violence is a constant

in many women's lives and that the post-conflict phase often results in an increase in sexual and domestic violence.

Second, all conflicts demand real and symbolic victims. Women and children are often described as primary victims of conflict. And it goes without saying that women and children are victimized during conflict, but they tend also to be forced into a symbolic victimhood. Women and children are the ones that need protection. The so-called privilege of protection can become a curse as it may rob women and children of their agency. A key challenge, as I perceive it, for contemporary crisis managers and peace-builders is then to recognize gendered differences of experiences of conflict, but without allowing the gender analysis to distort our compassion, engagement and understanding of individual women' and men's situations.