

Understanding War-Related Violence in Southern Sudan: Beyond the Gender Lines

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This article examines the case of the second civil war of Southern Sudan (1983-2005) and the nature of its violence. It analyses war and post-war violence in southern Sudan – with a particular focus on gender-based violence - and questions the conceptual framework utilized by the international community to categorize and respond to this violence.

Southern Sudan suffered through two civil wars which were often referred to as the “longest running civil war in Africa”. Coinciding with the 1989 UN deployment of Operation Lifeline Sudan (a consortium of various UN agencies and NGOs), the notion of gender expanded both in academia and in aid work, emerging as a field for international consultants. Having little means of protecting civilians from physical harm, UN and NGOs were limited to “soft” actions, consisting often of “studies”. One of the major topics often addressed in the reports of numerous agencies, was violence, in particular gender-based violence. In many reports dealing with Southern Sudan, gender was considered as both the cause and the effect of violence. However, the categorization of victims of violent conflicts through the prism of gender-based differences ignores social afflictions that often bypass gender lines. Therefore, based on 24 months of field research during 2009 and 2010, this paper argues that, contrarily to the common conceptions of gender differences and violence, similarities observed in the ways men and women understand and represent violence reveal that gender can be a restrictive concept when analysing war-related violence. These similarities include the shared violent experiences by men and women and shared understandings of violence and of its gendered as well as non-gendered dimensions.

In accordance, and somewhat paradoxically, an increased attention to experiences and understanding of violence across gender lines can help us to better conceptualize the role and place of gender in war and post-war related violence as well as the social changes it entails.