Fused in combat: gender relations and armed conflict

Judy El-Bushra

Introduction

Do gender relations change through conflict? How might conflict itself be fuelled by aspects of gender identity? A research project carried out by the Agency for Co-operation and Research in Development (ACORD) that combined oral testimony with more conventional research methods concluded that conflict has undoubtedly given women greater responsibilities, and with them the possibility of exerting greater leverage in decision-making processes and increasing their political participation. The research also sheds light on the role of 'ordinary' citizens (in contrast to military and political leaders, who are usually the focus of conflict analysis) as 'actors' responding to crisis, and describes how gender identities are woven into a complex web of cause and effect in which war can be seen as a 'conflict of patriarchies'.

The research holds lessons for both gender analysis and conflict analysis, and highlights the need for interventions addressing the cycle of violence in proactive ways. This paper focuses on conclusions relating to gender analysis and the implications of using an open-ended and discourse-based research methodology. The implications of the findings for conflict analysis and for policy and programme design are discussed in the original reports.[1]

Methodology

The project 'Gender-sensitive Programme Design and Planning in Conflict-affected Situations', carried out by ACORD during 2000 and 2001, aimed to enhance gender awareness in development projects in contexts affected by conflict. Field research was carried out in Sudan, Somalia, Uganda, Mali, and Angola, and desk studies were used for Eritrea and Rwanda. Using oral testimony and PRA as its main research methods, the research describes the experiences of 'ordinary'

women and men in armed conflict and aims to identify the link between gender relations and conflict through their eyes.

Methodologically, the research addresses four questions. First, what methods are appropriate for understanding the experiences of men and women in conflict, given the sensitive nature of these experiences and the possible consequences of disclosure to informants? Second, what methods enable non-academic researchers, namely staff of development and humanitarian agencies, to acquire insights into the complexity of social change in conflict, given their pressures of time and other responsibilities? Third, how can such agencies combine 'extracting' research findings for planning purposes while at the same time affording dignity and 'ownership' to the informants, given that the nature of the subject under study is potentially deeply personal or politically risky? Finally, ACORD's previous research on gender and conflict had pointed to the weakness of conventional social science analysis in developing an understanding of people's behaviour in conflict, for example the lack of attention paid to the affective domain and its relationship with the economic and political domains (El-Bushra 2000). The methods adopted therefore needed to be susceptible to analysis that uses a broad framework.

Drawing on the experience of the Gulu programme in Uganda, a long-standing collaborator of the Panos Institute's Oral Testimony programme,[2] the ACORD project's researchers[3] decided to adopt oral testimony (OT) as their main research method, complemented as appropriate by PRA and standard survey methods, and by data from secondary and official sources. The project collected around 125 testimonies from the five locations. In addition, a desk analysis was carried out of testimonies already taken for other purposes in Rwanda. PRA exercises included focus group discussions, some structured around social exclusion analysis,[4] and transect walks. Research teams in each of the localities analysed the testimonies and other material, with the whole being synthesised at a joint analysis workshop involving all five of the main case studies. The principal elements of this joint analysis are presented below.

Panos Institute (2001:1) defines OT as ' … the result of free-ranging, open-ended interviews around a series of issues, drawing on direct personal memory and experience'. No formal questionnaires are used; the 'narrators' are encouraged to give their own views and inter-pretations as a reflection on the events they perceive to have affected their lives. Interviewers do not direct the narrators, though they can

start by asking open-ended questions and allow people to follow their own train of thought thereafter.

OT brings out the narrators' personal experiences, memories, and perceptions of reality, enabling them to identify what is important and true for them in their specific context. These have a validity of their own, whether or not researchers agree with them or believe them to be 'true'. The opportunity to give testimony may give narrators the courage to address sensitive political and social topics that are difficult to address through other methods: it therefore gives a voice to the powerless and to those who are too often ignored or spoken for, and hence can become a tool for empowerment.

OT proved its worth as a method capable of eliciting deep insights into the perceptions of people whose lives have been battered by conflict, and researchers (all ACORD staff) viewed it as a method that provided an important resource for programme development, highlighted previously unaddressed issues, and pointed out new programme directions. Almost all respondents were keen to take part in the project, wanting their stories to be told.[5] There were problems, however, with the method. First, not all the interviewers felt able to approach the task in an open-ended way. The aim of OT is not so much to gather data but to build a relationship between the interviewer and the narrator within which issues can be explored and understanding enhanced. Such open-ended research is relatively new in the experience of operational NGOs, who generally carry out research to finesse an existing programme plan. It therefore requires a change in researchers' expectations of what the research can yield, and in turn puts a premium on experienced staff (often the ones in charge of most other responsibilities) as interviewers.

Second, analysing OT material presents unusual difficulties, since the material is unpredictable, broad ranging, and susceptible to many different interpretations. In addition, it is the whole interview (including the context and the style of discourse) which needs to be analysed, not just the factual information contained in the text. The emotive content of OT is at once its strength and a problem area for analysis. Analysis is therefore a lengthy process, involving alternations between intense discussion and letting the material 'lie fallow' in the researchers' minds. Indeed, the use of OT is inconsistent with linear notions of the research process: it works best in a context in which the design of research questions, data collection, data analysis, dissemination, and, finally, application are seen as elements in a circular and iterative whole.

It is too early at this stage to comment on the 'empowerment' potential of OT. The issue of appropriation is a major question in development research and requires a separate debate. What would the project have looked like if it had been designed in collaboration with respondents from the beginning? Although some instances of participatory research are found in development work, they tend to be small in scale and designed in response to local dynamics. More extensive sharing of experience on the methods of participatory research, between agencies and between the practitioner and academic communities, would be beneficial.

A thumbnail sketch of the case studies

Uganda

The war in Acholiland, northern Uganda, began in 1986 and since then has been waged between the Ugandan armed forces and a succession of rebel groups who have in general terms worked for the moral regeneration of the Acholi community as well as against the Ugandan government. Human rights abuses of the population have been recorded on both sides. About half the population of Acholiland now lives in 'protected villages' or camps for displaced people, where self-sufficient agriculture is no longer possible because of lack of space. The war has resulted in gross impoverishment through the loss of livestock and land. The traumatic experiences to which the population has been exposed (including intimidation, torture, harassment, killings, captivity, inhumane displaced living conditions, sexual abuse of different kinds, and duress in captivity or in hiding) have brought intense suffering to individuals and have in turn rendered Acholi society vulnerable to breakdown. Out-migration from Acholiland (both within and outside Ugandan borders) is extensive and reflects popular disaffection with both warring parties. A particular feature of this conflict is the alienation of youth (both male and female), many of whom decide to join the military of either side in response to abuses they have experienced or in the absence of other prospects.

The main research objective of the ACORD project was to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of armed conflict in Acholiland (1986–2001) on gender socialisation processes, and of the ways in which the latter have contributed to the dynamics of the war, with a view to initiating a debate on the sort of society Acholi men, women, and young people would want to have. In the perception of the majority of informants, Acholi cultural identity (including values, beliefs, and

practices), which was once strongly maintained by social systems ensuring adherence to accepted norms, has become eroded. Though this erosion may have begun early on during the colonial era, the armed conflict has exacerbated and hastened the process of social breakdown.

The war has led not only to the material impoverishment of Acholiland but also to the breakdown of previously well-regulated relationships both between men and women and between generations. Elements of Acholi cultural practice that have proved beneficial in promoting improved relations and resolving conflicts have been eroded through state-formation processes. There is widespread resentment amongst adults of 'modern' influences, including the current favourable economic position of women and moves towards guaranteeing the rights of women and children. Testimonies show how frustrations and tensions caused by people's inability to fulfil their expected roles generate further sources of conflict, gripping Acholiland in a vicious circle of violence.

Angola

Angola has been divided by conflict since independence in 1975, in a war in which struggles for political control were particularly exacerbated and prolonged during the Cold War by proxy warfare between the two superpowers over Angola's rich mineral resources. Fighting has been bitter and has resulted in massive displacement as well as loss of life and resources. Agricultural production has suffered significantly and the informal sector in towns is the economic mainstay for a largely uprooted and proletarianised population, of which an estimated 80 per cent is not formally employed.

The Angola study took place in Viana, a settlement housing a high proportion of the war-displaced population on the outskirts of Luanda. It examined the social, economic, political, cultural, ideological, and psycho-emotional dimensions of the conflict as experienced by individuals and also at the household and community levels. The findings reveal that, while everyone without exception is affected by conflict, individual experience appears in addition to be influenced by gender and other factors. The timing of displacement is one such factor, with the more recently displaced more affected than those displaced prior to the recent, more violent phase of the conflict in Angola.

Although there was evidence of increased polarisation between groups on the basis of political affiliation and ethnic origin, as well as of the loss of traditional kinship networks and the rise of individualism,

the findings also revealed a tendency towards homogenisation through, for example, the adoption of a common language, Portuguese. Similarly, traditional forms of saving (known as the *kixiki*) have been collectively revived by women from different ethnic backgrounds as a means of survival under harsh economic conditions.

Women are bearing the main financial burden of providing for the family while men are being forced into taking on responsibility for children and domestic chores. However, this gender role reversal has not been accompanied by an ideological shift, and for the most part women's status outside (and even, in many cases, within) the household remains subordinate to that of men. Men appear to be experiencing more difficulty than women adjusting to the new situation. Patriarchal norms underpinning gender identity are at the heart of the problem, as they not only aggravate men's sense of failure and frustration, but also allow both men and women to be used as pawns in the pursuit of thinly disguised political objectives.

Sudan

Civil war has ravaged Sudan for most of the country's 46 years since independence in 1956, resulting in enormous loss of life and resources (especially in the south) and in severe political, social, and economic crisis throughout. The south of Sudan is effectively divided into separate administrations controlled by the government and by different rebel groups, respectively. In addition to an estimated two million dead from fighting and famine in the south, large numbers have been displaced to the north or to other countries.

The Sudan case study was based on material collected in displaced communities in Juba and in Khartoum, exploring their livelihoods and survival strategies and the impacts of these on gender roles and relations. Among the social and psycho-social impacts of the war are the fragmentation of households, displacement, demoralisation and trauma, intergenerational mistrust, and discrimination against the displaced and the younger generations, with very limited opportunities for schooling or employment. The shift from subsistence farming to an urban cash economy has brought about increased dependence on women's work in petty trade, along with reduced living standards. Domestic violence has increased, as have destructive coping strategies like violent crime and sex-work, which in turn exacerbates the spread of HIV.

The findings of the study emphasise changes in gender roles caused by conflict, displacement, and poverty, as well as in certain aspects of

people's values and attitudes. Testimonies describe how gender identities are contributing to the aggravation of conflict among political players at both the national and local levels.

Mali

The conflict in northern Mali broke out in 1991 between the state and rebels representing the Azawad movement for Tamasheq independence. Although it quietened after the signing of the National Pact in 1992, fighting broke out again that year, this time between factions within the north, with the army attempting to keep the peace. This second round, which lasted until 1994, deepened splits both between ethnic groups and within them, and hastened a long-term process whereby hierarchical divisions within northern Mali's highly stratified societies progressively broke down.

Communities in the area found themselves impoverished after losing their livelihoods, assets, and resources (land, animals, equipment, etc.) in the war, although some people managed to learn and engage in new activities. The conflict affected the quality of relationships between sedentary communities and nomadic groups, and has resulted in the massive displacement of populations, the creation of slums on the outskirts of urban centres, and flows of refugees to neighbouring countries. These displacements in turn have led to family breakdown, changing or disappearing sites of residence, and changes in nomadic settlement patterns. Refugees, women, and young people, in particular, have had their way of life influenced by other cultures.

Conflict aggravated the erosion of traditional ways of life, already affected by economic and environmental crises. Some of the changes that have taken place within the country involve changes in gender roles and relations, as well as in relationships between former masters and former slaves, with many of the latter becoming completely independent. Nomadic women have become less subdued and more involved in the management of economic activities and in decision making at household and community levels. However, ideologies of superiority and masculinity remain unaltered.

Somalia

The Somalia study was carried out in the Lower Shabelle region, the location of bitter fighting between clan factions during the last ten years of civil war. Though some attempts at resolution have taken place at the national level, tensions remain high among local groups in the Lower Shabelle, in large part because issues of access to and control over

resources between local clans have not been solved. One of the findings that emerged from the research is that the international community needs to invest in peace at both local and national levels.

The conflict had a devastating impact on both individuals and groups in the Lower Shabelle. Individuals suffered death, injury, rape, trauma, and the loss of family members and possessions. The different clans present in the area gained or lost power and influence according to the fortunes of the war: generally those who had previously been powerful became even more so, except for the Hawiye, who saw their power rise considerably in the local political structure as a result of the clan's national ascendancy. Groups such as the Bantu and the Brawaanis, already the victims of discrimination, became even further disadvantaged as the few resources they once held began to whittle away.

Gender roles have changed significantly, with women taking on more economic responsibilities (often becoming the sole bread-winners for the household) and entering occupations such as money trading which were previously the preserve of men. Men, on the other hand, have lost access to their resources and with it their customary role of providers for the household. However, there appears to have been little change either in the traditional exclusion of women from community decision-making structures or in the ideological basis for this discrimination. If the state succeeds in re-establishing its structures, it is unclear whether women's enhanced economic autonomy will increase their scope for influence, or whether gender ideologies will become further entrenched when men have the opportunity to return to their former positions.

How do respondents describe the impact of conflict on their lives?

The case studies, describing the experiences of the respondents in armed conflict and their assessment of how their lives have changed as a result, reveal appalling human suffering, loss of livelihoods, erosion of social relations, and loss of faith in the future. Testimonies call overwhelmingly for peace. As a displaced male community leader from Khartoum, Sudan, put it: '[i]f all the people in the camp were out in this big yard, and you asked them what they need, they would all say "PEACE". But who listens?'

Ordinary people are knowledgeable about the factors – local, national, and international – that foment conflict, and they make

considered and proactive adaptations to bewilderingly rapid change. Testimonies also demonstrate how violence leads to, and is fuelled by, poverty and the denial of rights:

> 'They claim that we are the ones who sent our children to the bush, is that true? We did not send those children to the bush. The children got disgruntled with the present way of doing things, that is why they went to the bush. It was harassment inflicted upon the people that caused the going to the bush.'
> (Interview with a man from Bungatira, Uganda)

Men view women's increasing power within the household, and their own parallel disempowerment, in various ways, depending on their context. Male respondents in Somalia and Angola, for example, accept their dependence on women passively, acknowledging that women's resourcefulness and industry have pulled them through crises. In Rwanda, conflict blurred previously sharp role distinctions: 'Women can do whatever men can do, while men can no longer do whatever they want ... All people have become the same.' In Mali, sedentary communities declare no change in household decision making, while the previously pastoralist Tamasheq men view women's increased responsibility for family affairs positively. In some cases, notably in Sudan and Uganda, this shift in roles has contributed to increased alcoholism among men and to domestic violence.

Women also view their situation in different ways. For instance, Tamasheq women in Mali are excited about new possibilities opening up for them:

> 'Frankly, since these events we women are no longer ashamed, we are no longer cold in the presence of men. I'm aware that the men are not all that happy about this, it makes them nervous, furious, and none of that was done in the past. We came back [from exile] because we were promised consideration and respect. The most notable impact for me was that I learned to read, cook well, that wasn't possible [before].'
> (Interview with an elderly woman in Agouni, Mali)

However, women in Rwanda speak of the desperate 'solitude' accompanying their new-found autonomy. In other cases, women deplore the burden of work, the breakdown of services, the deterioration in social relations, and the risks to women's health and security implicit in new livelihoods and new expectations of behaviour:

'Women are almost competing with men. This war is an advantage to women in some ways because they have learnt a lot about business, while on the other hand it is a disadvantage because you get a number of schoolgirls dropping out.'

(Interview with a divorced woman in Juba, Sudan)

Do gender relations change as a result of conflict?

Both the violence of warfare and its consequences – displacement, impoverishment, demographic imbalance – have given rise to changes in gender roles at the household level in all cases studied. This has led in turn to limited increases in women's decision-making power and political participation: however, the ideological bases underpinning gender relations appear to have remained unchanged or have even been reinforced.[6]

Consistently across the case studies, women take on increased economic responsibilities within the household. Reasons for this change include:

- inaccessibility of economic resources that men previously controlled (e.g. agricultural land in Uganda);
- displacement into urban cash economies where women's income-generating opportunities are greater than in rural areas (Sudan, Angola);
- exposure during displacement to different ways of life and new skills (Mali); and
- growth in the proportion of female-headed households (to around 30 per cent in Sudan and Mali).

The degree of change has varied. For sedentary communities in Mali, for example, reduced access to resources for both men and women means that neither can fulfil their gender roles adequately, while in Somalia, women have often taken over the role of principal breadwinners:

'I maintain my husband plus his father in Mogadishu. He is unemployed. What else can he do if the government service is not available? He has retreated to the house and the mosque, he doesn't come out. He and his father sat and waited for me just like my children for the 10 years of the civil war.'

(Interview with a woman in Kurtunwarey, Somalia)

Women have gained increased respect and decision-making power within the household as a result of men's growing economic dependence on women, although this trend is less consistent and more contested throughout:

> *'I think people's thinking has changed. We came to Khartoum with different perceptions and traditions. Our old customs and traditions prohibited men from entering certain places such as the kitchen. Men also thought that women could not think, were useless, and had no right to have their voice heard. All these are things of the past; they have changed. This is one benefit of the war, if wars have benefits. All family members have to work, both women and men. We cannot maintain the division of labour because there is no room for that.'*
> (Interview with a separated displaced woman in Khartoum, Sudan)

> *'Now we obey our women. Women sell tomatoes, maize etc., and men are supported by their wives. They are taking us through this difficult time. There is no other support we are getting. Nobody is bringing us food. That is how we are living.'*
> (Interview with a male elder from Brava, Somalia)

> *'The difference now is that women have caused a lot of problems. Suppose you do not give her what she wants, she will just sit there and watch. So the problems are on men. If there is money she will go to the market but if not she will stay hungry. In the past women used to struggle in every way to look after the home. They had the responsibility to care for the family. That is different nowadays, so the men are in trouble.'*
> (Interview with a man from Pabbo, Uganda)

Changes in marriage practices are particularly evident in the Uganda and Rwanda studies, with the general trend being greater freedom of decision making for women about marriage partners and stronger legal rights to property. In this context, there may be a connection between marital status and openness to notions of women's autonomy. For example, the Rwanda study noted that married women and their husbands are generally more 'traditional' in their outlook than women who have lost their partners.

The case studies provide evidence that, for both men and women, sexuality can become an economic strategy or can secure protection in times of stress. Women marry soldiers, resort to prostitution, or re-marry frequently. Men often seek to marry women who are richer than them. Young people may be prey to the advances of 'sugar-daddies' and

'sugar-mummies'. Militarisation and access to guns enhances young men's capacity to take sexual partners forcibly. Long-term consequences may include family breakdown and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

Gendered power structures have changed as a result of conflict, though to a limited degree. Women's increased economic power, highlighted above, has sometimes enabled them to exert greater influence and become more involved, mainly within the household but in some cases also outside. Examples exist of women taking political roles at community and national levels (Sudan, Uganda), or becoming involved in trade (Angola, Somalia):

> 'I ... made good money from the farm. I then ventured into business. I collected US dollars from Mogadishu and brought them to Kismayo. I bought US$100 at 630,000 shillings in Mogadishu and sold at 880,000–900,000 shillings in Kismayo. My capital was then between US$600–900. After some time in this trade my capital rose to 21 million shillings. It was then that I thought of buying a shipload of dates together with seven men. I gave the money to the men who had a new ... station wagon. I told them that I would proceed to Mogadishu and make arrangements for the stores. But some people got information and waylaid the men, killing two and seriously injuring the third, who later died in Nairobi. The money was taken. I remained with only 50,000 shillings out of my capital of 21 million.'
> (Interview with a businesswoman from Kurtunwarey, Somalia)

Changes of consciousness among women have resulted in the formation of women's associations (e.g. in Rwanda). However, in general, changes in gender roles at the micro level have not been accompanied by corresponding changes in political or organisational influence. *De facto* gains have not been translated into *de jure* changes in women's status: women have taken on responsibility but have not been granted power. (The studies were carried out at the community level and did not set out explicitly to trace linkages with national trends, where women's increased involvement in politics and formal reconciliation mechanisms is observed more frequently. In general, however, the studies would support the view that there is in practice little linkage between local and national processes of policy reform and reconstruction.)

Women's direct involvement in armed struggle was limited largely to Eritrea, where both women and men joined armed forces as fighters as well as support personnel. Women were also involved in the

genocide in Rwanda. These examples of challenges to essentialist stereotypes do not appear to have had a significant impact on attitudes towards women in general, nor to have gained them additional respect or led to long-term changes. Indeed, the Eritrea study describes the difficulties of supporting female ex-combatants in the post-war period, many of whom had become destitute and socially isolated as a result of their participation in the armed forces.

In addition to seeking to understand changes in men's and women's everyday behaviour and relationships, the research also sought to investigate possible changes in the ideals and values which underlie this behaviour. Has conflict changed accepted concepts of masculinity (what it means to be a man in a particular social context) or of femininity (what it means to be a woman in such a context)? Do the values with which parents educate their girls and boys change as a result of war, and do social institutions such as the market or the state reinforce these changed expectations in men's and women's behaviour? The conclusion reached by the research teams is that conflict does not appear to have led to shifts in gender identities, but rather to growing tensions between people's ideals (of masculinity and femininity) and the practical reality available to them when their lives are restricted by violence, displacement, impoverishment, and personal loss. Trying to live up to people's expectations imposes increasing stress on both men and women. The Uganda team's analysis, for example, indicates that:

> [i]n the internally displaced camps, men have lost the power to provide for and protect the family, or to exercise authority, leadership, or control over resources (including wives and children). The resultant frustration may be channelled into aggressivity in various highly destructive forms.
> (Uganda case study: 27)

In fact gender ideologies do not appear to have changed, and may rather have become further entrenched. Stereotypes persist, backed by values that can be seen in proverbs, songs, and other socialisation methods. It could be argued that although gender roles have changed, they have done so in line with existing gender ideologies. Women's increased economic responsibilities thus result from, rather than challenge, the notion of women as pillars of the family:

> 'If you see him arrive and you beat the kids, quarrel, and ask "How much up-keep money do you give to feed the family?", you are provoking the

situation. That is why women are the walls of the house and men are the
roofs. If women understand all this, families will stay well.'
(Interview with a female politician from Juba, Sudan)

Furthermore, the gap between what role the men play and what role
they ideally should play serves only to underline the ideal, rather than
transform it. However, we cannot conclude that there is no scope for
lasting change: changes in consciousness among women and men are
in evidence and can potentially be built upon: many respondents
declared that things will never be the same again.

To what extent do changes in gender relations brought about by
conflict represent positive opportunities for change? Which changes
are to be deemed 'positive', and by whom? Respondents were divided
about whether they preferred their present life to that of the past.
In Malian Tamasheq and Maure communities, for example, few people
doubted the value of women acquiring new skills and ideas as a result
of displacement: indeed, men and women of all ages considered their
old life to have been characterised by isolation and ignorance. On the
other hand, in Uganda there was a 'rights backlash' in which respondents
blamed 'the West' or 'television' or 'education' for trends they perceive
to have rendered children and women uncontrollable as a result of
rights and equality policies:

> *'What makes most women not submissive to their husbands is the issue*
> *of gender equality or women's rights ... Women who are educated and*
> *employed are the worst group of people because ... after they get pregnant,*
> *they throw out the man. They have enough money to look after themselves.'*
> (Interview with a chief from Paibona, Uganda)

This they saw both as a product of conflict (an aspect of the resistance
of Acholi culture to its incorporation into the Ugandan state) and as a
factor contributing to future conflict. The widespread desire to return
to old values poses problems for development policy makers and
strategists. The desire to reclaim one's cultural identity may constitute
a 'people's definition of durable peace', and the thwarting of that desire
may be a key factor behind violent resistance. Satisfying that claim may
contribute to a reduction of tension; on the other hand, those same
cultural values may include elements which reinforce the subordin-
ation of women, children, and relatively powerless men, and may also
conflict with international human rights standards.

These findings raise questions about the assumption, often made
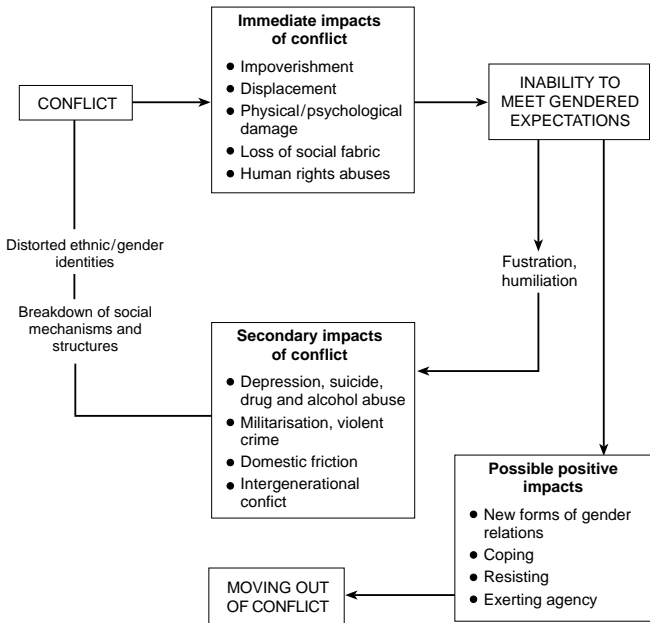by development practitioners, that women's increased economic

responsibilities during and after conflict can lead to their empowerment. While there is no doubt that this may happen in individual cases, these gains tend to be scattered and temporary – the process of women being sent 'back to the kitchen' is as frequent as the empowerment scenario. The *ideological* basis sustaining traditional gender relations seems resistant to change even when its outward manifestations are reordered. Interventions aimed at taking advantage of rapid change in conflict and post-conflict situations to encourage transformations in gender relations may therefore be unrealistic. Conflict may create some space to make a redefinition of social relations possible, but in so doing it seems to rearrange, adapt, or reinforce patriarchal ideologies rather than fundamentally alter them.

How have gender identities contributed to conflict?

The research undertaken for this project generated some insights to begin addressing this question, but further analysis is required. Figure 1 is an impact flow diagram indicating some of the possible causes and effects the research team members teased out from their analysis. One important caveat is, of course, that this interpretation of the contribution of gender identity to cycles of violence remains tentative. The case studies describe violent struggles over the control of resources (land, trade, women, children, labour, natural resources, cultural identity, and access to state power). The view from the field is that war is a conflict between patriarchies or established power structures. Violence both generates and is generated by poverty, humiliation, frustration, loss of livelihood, failures of governance, political manipulation, and breakdown of intercommunal relations (trade links, shared labour/production arrangements, intermarriage, etc.). Gender differences within and between groups are threaded through all these. Distorted and threatened gender ideologies encourage aggressiveness and revenge.

The Uganda study lists the following among internal causes of the conflict: erosion of the negotiating power of Acholi culture in general and traditional leadership in particular, which weakens the mechanisms for conflict resolution; the value placed on aggressiveness in the socialisation of children; and impoverishment and the consequent frustration felt by both men and women at being unable to provide for and protect their families, i.e. to fulfil their gender roles – in other words, ' ... aggressivity and militarisation represent both a vision and a strategy to restore the possibilities of ethnic and gender identity'

Immediate impacts of conflict
- Impoverishment
- Displacement
- Physical/psychological damage
- Loss of social fabric
- Human rights abuses

CONFLICT

INABILITY TO MEET GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

Distorted ethnic/gender identities

Breakdown of social mechanisms and structures

Fustration, humiliation

Secondary impacts of conflict
- Depression, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse
- Militarisation, violent crime
- Domestic friction
- Intergenerational conflict

Possible positive impacts
- New forms of gender relations
- Coping
- Resisting
- Exerting agency

MOVING OUT OF CONFLICT

(Uganda case study: 27). This same sense of frustration leading to violence and militarisation appears in the case of Sudan, where researchers concluded that gender and other identities link at the ideological level to fuel ongoing violence. Some respondents made such a link explicitly, emphasising gender-based conflict, or, as one of the respondents put it, a struggle of

> *'man against man fighting for position. This dismantled societies and sent them into wrangling, wrangling, wrangling ... Nowadays you find that there is a lot of quarrelling in families, quarrelling about the care of children. This is how I noticed gender-based conflict between men and men, between women and women, and even between children and children.'*
> (Interview with a male politician in Juba, Sudan)

Conflict appears to exacerbate tensions and inequalities between generations. Cycles of violence perpetuate themselves over generations: the impact of war on future generations, with the vision of a permanently militarised society as children grow up in violence, poses a massive challenge. Respondents believed that the influence of elders

is declining. Conflict may also generate or exacerbate intergenerational splits by forcing (perceived) distortions in gender identities among the young, paving the way for socially unacceptable and destructive behaviour on their part. Institutionalised socialisation processes (such as the Acholi firesides, for example) fall into disuse, partly as a result of the inability of parents to fulfil their gender roles, and this contributes further to intergenerational tension:

> '*In the old days the Acholi people would teach their children around the fireplace in the evenings. These days that doesn't happen anymore. As a result, many children are now thieves, and women no longer have respect for their husbands. Parents can no longer effectively teach their children because of the life they are experiencing at the camps ... So the children behave the way they like and as a result parents feel helpless ... Girls put on slit skirts and short skirts, exposing their private parts ... This is very shameful.*'
> (Interview with a woman from Pabbo, Uganda)

Similarly, war erodes local-level inter-communal relations, even if it originates elsewhere. Northern Mali is a case in point, where inter-communal differences have erupted into outright mistrust, and relations have not improved even after the cessation of hostilities:

> '*The biggest lesson I've learned? The crumbling of the age-old very solid links which used to unite the red skins and the black skins: the fragility of the confidence between them, because even today when there is calm, we still don't have confidence in each other.*'
> (Interview with a Songhoi male ex-fighter from Kano, Mali)

> '*I don't believe in my country like I did. I understand now that I was wrong about it. I also understand that people can change face as and when they want; that's why I always keep to myself because I don't trust anyone.*'
> (Interview with a married Tamasheq woman from Ebang-Sorho, Mali)

In the case of Somalia, previous power hierarchies between the leading clans have been rearranged according to the fortunes of the war at the national level, while discrimination against the 'minority' clans has been accentuated further. Conflict exacerbates the powerlessness of the poor and of the targets of discrimination, whether they be male or female.

Conclusions

The negative impacts of conflict are felt by all – men, women, children, and the elderly. People's ability to recover from the shocks of war is determined, at least in part, by their position in evolving power structures: in this sense, women are more likely than men to have to struggle to survive. However, this applies equally to members of minority or subordinate groups. The research carried out for this project thus confirms the importance of embedding gender analysis in a cultural and social context, and of seeing gender as an analytical lens through which wider social relations can be understood. It further indicates that if gender analysis is to 'dismantle patriarchy', as one workshop participant put it, it needs to set aside the narrow focus on women's autonomy with which it is often associated and instead adopt broader, more inclusive parameters. This would permit context-specific analysis of the various gender identities to which both men and women are expected to conform, and of the relationship of both to violence and militarisation.

The research has confirmed the hypothesis that one of the impacts of conflict is a clear change in gender relations, with women taking on greater and more extensive responsibilities at the household level while men substantially relinquish theirs. However, the institutional changes which would provide women with decision-making power consistent with these new and more responsible roles have been slow in coming. A particularly important finding, and one which has implications both for policy and for the design of assistance programmes, is that the ideological underpinnings of gender relations have barely been touched at all and may even have become further reinforced through conflict. The expectations of development practitioners that conflict provides opportunities for the radical improvement of the position of women need some rethinking. This does not mean that change is not possible, or that attempts to influence change should not be made: the implications are, rather, that radical change will be difficult to bring about in the short term, and that it will require dialogue and debate around fundamental values.

The efficacy of oral testimony for conducting research in contexts that require sensitivity to personal feelings and security has been validated. However, it also raises a number of methodological questions. First, the use of testimonies in this project has not produced neat answers; rather, it has illustrated the breadth and variety of people's perceptions of change. In relation to gender dynamics,

there is no doubt that change is happening, but how should this be interpreted? Are we seeing fundamental or superficial change? Do people see their lives as being better or worse than before, and how far is their interpretation of this question coloured by their gendered experiences? How far are the interventions of development agencies coloured by *their own* perceptions and values?

There is a potential conflict between the open-ended process involved in OT and the needs of development research to explore relatively precise questions. In focusing analysis on our research questions, discarding extraneous material, and quoting selectively, have we distorted the voices of the respondents? The methodology of OT as a developmental tool needs further elaboration.

The research has begun a process of hypothesising the relationships between gender and conflict, a complex subject that requires further in-depth study. Issues for future enquiry include constructions of masculinity and its relation to militarisation and the state. The complex linkages between gender and other factors of difference, notably ethnicity and age, in a context of rapid social upheaval, is another. Further research might also explore the scope for lasting transformation in gender ideologies resulting from changes in gender roles and identities, as a basis for developing NGO interventions and strategies. Are new or alternative masculinities and femininities emerging, and, if so, should they be encouraged? Finally, the voices of young adults and children have not been adequately heard in this research and should be incorporated in the future.

Notes

1 The research report and annexes can be found on the ACORD website (www.acord.org.uk).

2 Staff of ACORD's Gulu programme contributed the Uganda section of Olivia Bennett *et al*. (1995). Panos' approach to oral testimony projects is described in Panos Institute (2001).

3 Judy El-Bushra, Asha El-Karib, Angela Hadjipateras, Ibrahim Sahl, with Idah Lumoro (Uganda), Ibrahim Nur (Somalia), Norma Fodul (Sudan), Fadimata Aya Toure (Mali), and Mariana de Souza and Tyiteta Avelina (Angola).

4 ACORD has adopted a framework for social-exclusion analysis developed originally by Organisational and Social Development Consultants (OSDC), and it has applied this framework in strategic planning and research processes.

5 The security of respondents and their testimonies was recognised as an important concern throughout the project. Some respondents in Somalia asked to be interviewed in the ACORD offices rather than in their homes. In Uganda, transcripts indicate that some resisted what they saw as

pressure to come up with controversial opinions. Otherwise, most respondents were willing to be interviewed.

6 The project defined 'gender relations' as combining:

- *gender roles:* the activities that men and women are expected to carry out within a given household or community, differing according to socio-cultural context;

- *gender identities:* expected or idealised characteristics and behaviours of different sexes, further distinguished by other categories such as age, ethnicity, economic class, and social status;

- *gendered power structures:* social institutions which control resources (e.g. the household, the community, the school, the state) when examined from the point of view of how men and women respectively gain access or membership to them, contribute to them, are influenced by them, and receive or are denied support, status, resources, or protection from them; and

- *gender ideologies:* the system of values which underpins gender roles and identities and which validates gendered power structures in a system of social relations, framed within a particular culture.

References

Bennett, O., J. Bexley, and K. Warnock (eds.) (1995) *Arms to Fight, Arms to Protect: Women Speak Out About Conflict,* London: Panos Institute.

El-Bushra, J. (2000) 'Transforming conflict: some thoughts on a gendered understanding of conflict dynamics', in S. Jacobs, R. Jacobson, and J. Marchbank (eds.) *States of Conflict: Gender, Violence and Resistance,* London: Zed Books.

Panos Institute (2001) *Giving Voice: A Practical Guide to Implementing Oral Testimony Projects,* London: Panos Oral Testimony Programme, Panos Institute.