

Sexual Violence and Conflict in Africa:
Building a Research Collaboration

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Abstract: Fostering research collaborations between African-based researchers, civil society organizations and policy makers is at the heart of this project. The topic of sexual violence linked to armed conflict is currently the focus of increased scholarly research and internationalized policy responses. This climate of heightened activity has underscored the need for good quality research, from multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral research teams. This project centered on a two-day meeting in Bujumbura, Burundi, 21-23 February 2013, designed to facilitate research contacts between African-based civil society activists and researchers from universities and other institutions, and to lay the groundwork for multi-disciplinary research collaborations on the theme of economies of sexual violence. The workshop, and resulting network, has helped to stimulate new research collaborations on sexual violence and economic sectors, such as

mineral extraction, and on research design and methodology issues relating to women and post-conflict economies.

Keywords: sexual violence, conflict, fragile states, conflict economies; research design and ethics; gender

The Research Problem

This project emerged from a 2010 workshop at Carleton University attended by over 70 African, Canadian and American civil society actors and academics all working in the area of conflict sexual violence. Among the results of that meeting was a specific recommendation for a networking meeting in Africa to facilitate research collaborations between African CSOs and university and other researchers. This recommendation stemmed from observations that existing research was primarily generated and often executed by scholars and activists from the global North, and that multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral research teams are needed to explore the complex dimensions of conflict sexual violence. Yet, anecdotal observations had shown that a number of barriers exist to the dissemination of research produced by African researchers, including CSOs and the productive collaborations between African CSOs and researchers. It was also noted that there were comparatively fewer continental university researchers working on conflict sexual violence issues, and that opportunities for forging cross-sectoral research collaborations were limited.

These findings dovetail with more recent scholarly and 'grey' literature (produced by CSOs and activists) on conflict sexual violence that map how internationally-funded and directed interventions tend to be premised on a narrow focus on rapes enacted by one group to harm members of another, overlooking perpetrators and victims of sexual violence that do not fit this understanding. Consequently, international programs aimed at violence amelioration or access to justice for victims, for example, often overlook sexual violence committed by government forces, civilians, and female combatants both during and after conflict. The narrow policy focus on rape as a 'weapon of war', it is argued in this literature, has drawn disproportionality from research generated in the fields Law and Human Rights, missing the complex economic, social and geo-political contexts that shape the use of sexual violence in specific conflicts (Baaz and Stern 2013; Autesserre 2012). Scholars and activists argue strongly for a broader approach to the study and policy response to sexual violence, urging both an exploration of the inter-relationship between conflict economies and sexual violence (Peterson 2008), and more robust research methods and strategies (Cohen, Green, and Wood 2013). The need for multi-disciplinary research teams has been particularly noted (Rowley et al., 2012).

To foster connections between CSOs and academic researchers, and to stimulate high quality research on conflict sexual violence, Doris Buss, Joanne Lebert, and Blair Rutherford, organized a two-day workshop in Bujumbura, Burundi, 21 -23 February 2013. Seed funding from IDRC enabled the three organizers to secure an additional grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Government of Canada 'connection' grant, to expand the numbers of participants at the Bujumbura meeting.

As the planning for the Bujumbura network meeting progressed, the three organizers sharpened the focus of the workshop to explore two key areas: research methodology and design, and the economic roles and structures that shape the use of sexual violence in specific country contexts. The inclusion of a discussion and training component on research methodology stemmed from demands for good research practice on women and conflict zones that draw from a variety of research methodologies.

The second area of focus, on the economies of sexual violence, reflected the need for a multi-disciplinary interrogation of the social, political and economic conditions that shape sexual violence during and after-conflict. This second issue also allowed for a preliminary discussion of the intersections between certain economic sectors, such as mineral extraction, and forms of gendered violence and insecurity.

Objectives

The aims of the project were: (i) to stimulate research collaborations on the political economy of conflict and sexual violence; (ii) foster research connections across university and civil society divides, and across linguistic (French-English) divides; (iii) begin a consideration of the barriers to knowledge flows and uptake by policy makers and researchers; and (iv) increase understanding of best practices in research design and ethics when studying conflict-affected societies.

Methodology

Reflecting the recommendations and experience of the 2010 workshop on sexual violence and conflict held at Carleton University, a two day, bilingual (French-English) workshop was held in Bujumbura, Burundi, at which researchers and civil society organizations, from across the continent, could meet and bring their varied experiences to the discussion. Burundi was selected as the location for the workshop because it could support a bilingual workshop, had good transport links to the rest of the continent, is home to the Secretariat of the ICGLR, thus facilitating good linkages with policy makers, and was accessible to researchers and CSOs in the Great Lakes region, an area of continuing instability, characterized by high rates of sexual violence, and which has attracted substantial international intervention aimed at addressing conflict sexual violence.

Project Activities

- a. *Two Day workshop, Bujumbura, Burundi:*** Over 50 researchers, civil society organizations, and at least one intergovernmental body (ICGLR, see below) participated from across Africa, including from Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Mali, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. University participants included both senior, established academics in African universities as well as graduate students,

approximately nine in total, from a variety of disciplines. Two Canadian graduate students, who assisted in organizing and preparation for the workshop, also attended and participated in workshop discussions and post-workshop follow-up activities.

- b. Establishment of a research network:** The ‘Women and Conflict Economies’ network links researchers and civil society organizations in Africa to emerging developments, new research and funding opportunities. The Network has a website (womenandconflicteconomies.com) which is updated regularly by Professors Buss and Rutherford. The website format has had an uneven uptake, though the network itself appears to be the subject of heightened interest on social media. For example, there have been over 600 views of the videos of the workshop posted on youtube on the website. Professors Buss and Rutherford are currently reworking the website format, discussed further in the final section of this report.

The Network addresses a gap identified by African-based civil society organizations about the need for research connections between African CSOs and researchers. It also helps to position researchers to conduct larger projects with broader impact because it lays the groundwork for the connections needed for multiple partner research. The building of such CSO-academic networks is rare, even while the need for such networks is widely underscored by funders.

Project Outputs

1. Capacity:

- a. **Two-day workshop** held, at which over 50 African-based researchers and CSOs participated, and were introduced to issues relating to research methodology challenges and best practices for field research on vulnerable populations and conflict zones;
- b. Over 50 African-based researchers and CSOs participated in, and **provided information** on current issues relating to resource extraction and women’s vulnerability to violence, including sexual violence;

2. Research:

- c. **Summaries of workshop presentations** and discussions, in French and English, prepared and uploaded to the WomenandConflictEconomies.com website for open access, and attached here;
- d. **Four new research projects** followed from the Burundi workshop and have extended the collaborations between Network members:

- “Women's Livelihoods in Artisanal Mining Sectors: Rethinking State-building in Conflict-Affected Africa”, \$430,450, SSHRC Insight Grant, 611-2012-0106, which is a collaborative project with Blair Rutherford (PI), Buss, Bujumbura-participant Aisha Ibrahim, University of Sierra Leone, Eileen Alma, Coady Institute, and Joanne Lebert, Partnership Africa Canada);
 - “Women and Post-Conflict State-Building in Sierra Leone and Kenya: Researching Economies of Gendered Insecurity”, \$40,000, a collaborative project with Rutherford, Buss, and two other Bujumbura participants: Aisha Ibrahim, University of Sierra Leone and Sarah Kinyanjui, University of Nairobi; Canada-Africa Research Exchange Grants, AUCC; awarded 2013;
 - “Women in Artisanal and Small Scale mining in Central and East Africa: Empowerment Challenges and Possibilities”, \$999,592, (Jennifer Hinton (PI), with Rutherford, Buss, Lebert and Partnership Africa Canada, Development Research and Social Policy Analysis Centre (DRASPAC), Kampala, Uganda), *Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women*, IDRC, Department for International Development, UK, Hewlett Foundation. Shortlisted for final consideration, selected subject to clearances and approvals, May 2014.
- e. Several participants ***have broadened their own research directions to examine political economy dimensions of sexual violence*** as a result of the workshop, including Canadian graduate student Holly Dunn, who reports (see below) that she gained new research contacts for her Phd research, and broadened her area of focus to include ethical and methodological challenges in research gender-based violence in post-conflict settings, directly as a result of the Burundi workshop discussions, and Makerere University Professor Mbabazi, who writes:
- *“It was one of those mind-changing workshops that I attended last year...Conducting research in conflict and post conflict settings has since become my added area of interest with regard to research. I would like to re-connect with some academics in the region to investigate and document some experiences of what it is like to conduct research in conflict scenarios. This will add knowledge to research methodology and help students who intend to carry out research in conflict contexts. Shortly after the Bujumbura workshop I wrote a chapter that will be published in the upcoming book edited by Doris Buss (et al) one of the organizers of the workshop. This has challenged me to stay active and in close useful connection with the networks I made with the participants... In a nutshell, the Bujumbura workshop never left me the same! It remains extremely beneficial and I will forever be grateful for having a participant.”* (Christina Mbabazi, Makerere)
 - *“The workshop reinforced my desire to pursue research on gender-based violence in conflict, which I am now doing through the political science doctoral program at the University of Minnesota. My dissertation will explore post-*

conflict justice and gender-based violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR). Through my RA position and participation in the workshop, I gained contacts and potential research partners that are located in both the DRC and CAR. Forming these relationships was invaluable to my future research, given the difficulties of conducting fieldwork in these countries. Additionally, I am currently working on a research project that stems directly from the ethical and methodological concerns of researching gender-based violence in post-conflict settings that were voiced by scholars and civil society representatives at the workshop. Working with leading scholars, such as Doris Buss and Blair Rutherford, and great research practitioners like Joanne Lebert, allowed for regular interdisciplinary engagement, which has greatly shaped my approach to research and academics. Clearly, participating in this project enhanced and advanced my understanding of gender-based violence in conflict contexts, and has greatly influenced my academic direction.” (Holly Dunn, former Research Assistant and current PhD student at University of Minnesota).

4. Increased **collaborations, access to funding and employment:**

- f. The workshop discussions unfolded at the same time that Lebert, through her work at Partnership Africa Canada (PAC) received funding from Irish Aid to conduct a study on gender, violence and the artisanal gold sector in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Burundi workshop connected Lebert and Congolese university researchers and Congolese civil society organizations, affording a rare opportunity to meet in person in Africa with existing and potential collaborators and to discuss mutual research interests. The connections made at the Burundi workshop led to Lebert hiring three workshop participants - Ariane Badesire (Catholic University, Bukavu), Bibiche Salumu Laumu (Université de Kisangani), and Odile Bulabula Mbila (Réseau d'Innovation Organisationnelle) – on women's roles and experiences of violence in the artisanal gold sector in South Kivu and Orientale provinces, DRC.
- g. Two CSOs – Heartland Alliance International and *Réseau d'Innovation Organisationnelle* (RIO) **formed a research partnership** on women's exploitation and mining, helping each to raise its profile and secure funding from US donors (See below);
- h. In addition to the above two collaborations, the Burundi workshop also led the Congolese CSO – RIO – to **a collaboration** with L'Université Evangélique en Afrique on “RDC entre la balkanization et la mondialisation: responsabilités sociétales, environnementales et éthiques des industries extractives” (see Mbila email excerpt below)
 - *“Je voudrais par ce message vous témoigner les bénéfices tirés de l'atelier organisé à Bujumbura en date du 21 au 23 février 2013 par PAC et l'Université*

Carleton. En effet, à part que ça m'a personnellement permis d'entrer en contact avec beaucoup d'autres chercheurs, ça été une occasion de renforcer les connaissances sur les réalités en rapport avec les violences sexuelles. Compte tenu de mon centre de d'intérêt en matière de recherches, les résultats des études pratiques sur les aspects en lien avec l'impact de l'exploitation des ressources naturelles m'ont beaucoup intéressés. L'atelier a également permis de découvrir d'autres pistes de recherches. Au cours de mes discussions avec certains partenaires avec qui nous étions ensemble lors de cet atelier, il y a un grand souhait qu'une telle initiative soit renforcée." (Prudence Bararunerestse, Observatoire de Lutte contre la Corruption et les Malversations Economiques).

- *"...As a director of a human rights organization in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, I greatly benefited from this experience and connected with local actors and NGO advocates on child protection and human trafficking. Following the presentation of Ms. Odile Bulabula on sexual violence in the DRC, I followed up with her and her organization, Réseau d'Innovation Organisationnelle (RIO) in Bukavu. My organization, Heartland Alliance International, submitted and won a successful proposal on women's protection and leadership in the DRC, thanks to RIO's research and support. We awarded them a sub-grant to carry out the project in vulnerable territories of Uvira and Fizi. I also recommended USAID and U.S. Department of State anti-trafficking researchers speak with Odile to benefit from her expertise on sexual violence in mining sites in the DRC and expand their baseline study to consider how women and girls are sexual exploited in the mining industry. These connections were directly attributed to the Workshop..." (Emily Bishop, Heartland Alliance International)*
- *"...I participated in the first conference, which took place in Ottawa, Canada. The conference brought together researchers and civil society activists. I was impressed by the fact that there were researchers on Africa that lived in the United States and in Canada, as well as researchers and civil society activists from Africa. The conference brought together Francophone and Anglophone researchers and civil society activists, and this participation enriched the discussions...We left Ottawa determined to use the new knowledge and skills in our work in East Africa. Doris, Joanne and Blair wisely organised a follow-up conference in Bujumbura, Burundi, and this enabled more African researchers and civil society activists from the Great Lakes Region to give presentations and discuss their work. The interaction between African and Canadian researchers as well as civil society organisations added value to the discussions. These two unique workshops have helped me to make some valuable connections, which are very important for the work we do in ensuring that UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security works effectively for the women of the Great Lakes Region. We were able to able to identify new and important issues that are already useful in our work... Our*

research and activism have improved because of their initiative.” (Jessica B. Nkuuhe, Femmes Africa Solidarite)

5. Explore increased **dialogue with policy makers** and uptake of research

- i. Through Lebert and Partnership Africa Canada, the organizers involved the 14-member, intergovernmental organization, the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, in the Bujumbura workshop, facilitating contacts and engaging policy makers in conversation about research design and ethics, and gender violence and the resource extraction sector.

Project Outcomes

The range of outputs outlined above suggests that some learning, capacity and relationship outcomes may result. However, it is still too early to determine if these are in fact outcomes. The medium and long-term work of the network may be one factor that could positively impact on the durability of these outcomes:

- Increased awareness by African civil society organizations and researchers of the importance of political economy dimensions of sexual violence, and particularly the significance of the extractive sector;
- Increased awareness by African civil society organizations and researchers about the potentials for CSO-researcher collaborations;
- Increased attention to research design and ethics by both civil society and university-based researchers working in conflict-affected areas;
- Increased connections between researchers, CSOs and regional policy makers at the ICGLR.

Overall Assessment and Recommendations

The two-day workshop in Bujumbura was successful in achieving its aims over the short-term and did so with a small budget and a short organizational window. (The SSHRC funding was secure only 2 months prior to the workshop date). The attached financial reports account for all workshop expenses, but exclude salary costs, included in the original budget, which are in-kind contributions. Some of the costs of the workshop were also reduced because the event was based in Bujumbura allowing the organizers to take advantage of connections of the personnel at the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR).

As the testimonials attest, in person meetings on the continent can have exponential impact. The workshop itself could have been better designed to increase this impact. First, more advanced reading and preparatory materials may have helped lay some common

groundwork, allowing for more indepth work earlier on the first day. Second, the research ethics and design section should have been given more space on the agenda. This topic was of particular interest to all participants and the discussion went on well past the closing time for day one, and only ended because the interpreters were exhausted. There was clearly a thirst for more information, more discussion, with tremendous learning potential for everyone.

The post-workshop network-building work is challenging. We decided on a webpage to allow access for all participants to upload their reports, updates, and engage in discussion. The website has not been as well used as we had hoped. We are currently employing a graduate student to explore other digital platforms for the network.

Despite the disappointing use of the website (to date), the network's sustainability is enhanced by the newly funded projects, involving different network members on research related to (conflict) economies, sexual violence, and women's roles in extractive sector. Our medium term goals are to enhance the sustainability of the network by establishing regional training hubs on gender and conflict economies. The AUCC-funded project - *Women and (Post-)Conflict State Building* – is a the first step in establishing Freetown and Nairobi as two such training hubs. Future efforts are needed to build on this momentum and to begin building a similar site in francophone Africa.

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