Political Agency, Victimhood and Gender in Contexts of Armed Conflict: Moving beyond Dichotomies

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Abstract

In this article, we nuance the relationships between political agency, victimhood and gender during armed conflicts. Dominant narratives often spotlight individuals as either passive victims or as active agents. These representations are especially pronounced for sexual violence against women in conflict, where gendered conceptions of victimhood and agency remain particularly salient. Recent scholarship challenges this dichotomized way of thinking, showing how victimhood and agency sit alongside each other. We extend this growing body of scholarship by proposing a relational conception of agency that helps us better understand exactly how victimhood and agency intersect and can even be co-constitutive. Specifically, we propose that conceptualizing agency as relational – to others, to contextual structures, to own vulnerabilities and prior victimization – is particularly well-suited to overcome inadequate dichotomizations, and to illuminate the spectrum of political agency, ranging from formalized politicized spaces to more mundane forms of agency within the quotidian. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork in Colombia and Uganda, we empirically tease out these complex intersections in a context of (gendered) vulnerability.

Introduction

How do experiences of victimization and agency intersect in the lives of conflict-affected individuals? And how are these intersections gendered? In this article, we build on and extend recent literature which critiques a lingering tendency of categorizing war-affected communities in general, and women as victims of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) in particular, as *either* victims *or* agents (Alison 2003; Krystalli 2019; Parashar 2009; Utas 2005). Specifically, we propose a relational conception of agency (Burkitt 2016) for studying the dynamic interplay between these two states, arguing that this conceptual frame illuminates how victimhood and agency not only *intersect* but can, at times, also be *co-constitutive*. This relational approach pays careful attention to different kinds of individuals' interactions: with others; with structural factors, and specifically gender; and with contextual vulnerabilities.

Dichotomous conceptions of victimhood and agency remain particularly pronounced in the context of gender-based violence, where those affected – paradigmatically women – are especially likely to be presented as passive victims without a voice in need of (white) patriarchal protection (Steans 2021). Challenging these framings, more recent work has begun to re-conceptualize victims of gender-based conflict violence as agentive actors who resist and/or actively engage with and respond to their experiences of sexual harms (Cubells and Calsamilia 2018; Kreft 2019; Touquet and Schulz 2020). Yet, throughout these discussions and framings, a dichotomous understanding of victimhood and agency nonetheless often persists, where individuals are understood to occupy *either* a victim *or* an agent space (Steans 2021; Mardorossian 2014).

In recent years, however, a growing body of scholarship has begun to show that such binary categorizations and silo-ed empirical treatments are problematic because they obscure the dynamic linkages between agency and victimhood, which are also shaped by gender (Alison 2003; Mardorossian 2014; Parashar 2009; Steans 2021). We are indebted to and think in connection with those scholars who have begun to recognize that women's lived realities in contexts of armed conflict cannot be understood in such simplified and reductionist terms (Baines 2015; Krystalli 2020; Thomson 2013; Utas 2005).

Yet, while prior research has sharpened our ways of thinking about victimhood and agency as sitting alongside each other (Krystalli 2019), we arguably still require greater clarity about exactly *how* we can better conceptualize and understand the variable intersections between victimhood and agency, and how they play out empirically across different contexts. This

requires an approach that is sensitive to the interactions and contextual factors that shape the socio-political spheres in which conflict-affected individuals exert agency. To this end, we propose a conception of agency as relational – to others, to contextual structures and power differentials, to vulnerabilities (Burkitt 2016), and also to prior victimization – as a promising way to find a "middle-ground that does not see the lives of [conflict-affected] women in terms of binary constructs" (Parashar 2009, 244). Putting forward this relational conception nuances the literature's engagement with agency, and serves as our primary conceptual contribution. Empirically, our approach helps us to illustrate that agency and victimhood can also be co-constitutive: Victimization and vulnerabilities can give the impetus for political agency in the first place, while exerting political agency that defies existing power structures can result in renewed violence and victimization.

To empirically illustrate our arguments, we leverage insights from our qualitative fieldwork with conflict-affected communities in Colombia (Kreft) and Uganda (Schulz). Bringing these two different cases together in the analysis enables us to demonstrate the wider applicability and scope of our argument across different contexts. The analysis sheds light on various facets of how violence-affected women in Colombia and Uganda navigate being victims and agents simultaneously.

While we emphasize that the intersection and co-constitution of victimhood and agency apply to individuals of all gender identities,[1] we focus here specifically on women subjected to conflict-related sexual violence. The reasons are two-fold. First, women are commonly perceived as the paradigmatic victims in war, while sexual violence is often viewed as particularly stigmatizing, silencing and inhibiting. This allows us to position ourselves explicitly in opposition to essentializing discourses that are not mirrored in empirical reality, and thereby to further nuance and contextualize the growing literature that examines women's agency under the constraints of gender-based violence in war (Utas 2005; Baines 2015). Second, given the salience of gendered hierarchies and generalized violence, the empirical focus on conflict-affected women is particularly suitable to tease out exactly how structural gendered factors shape both victimization and agency, and how this necessitates a relational understanding of agency. Proceeding with this particular focus, however, we are mindful that these dynamics also unfold in relation to how gender shapes male sexual violence survivors'

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[1] By further manifesting hetero-normative understandings of gender, the gendered dichotomy of victimhood and agency further invisibilizes the lived realities of persons with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities and expressions (SOGIESC) (Daigle and Myrttinen 2018), as well as the vulnerability of men (Schulz 2020).

experiences of vulnerability and agency (Touquet and Schulz 2021); and we are mindful of the dangers and pitfalls of overly focusing on sexual violence against women, which may serve to fetishize this type of violence (Meger 2016) and which potentially obscures other, more structural forms of gendered discrimination (Eriksson-Baaz and Stern 2013).

In teasing out the interrelated and co-constitutive dimensions of victimhood and agency in the context of (gendered) structural constraints, we further show that political agency is best understood as existing on a spectrum extending from informal and quotidian spheres to more formal and institutionalized spaces, e.g. in the form of organizations that advocate on behalf of victims. As such, our theorization and empirical analyses extend and nuance current understandings of gender, victimhood and agency in contexts of conflict by providing a concrete conceptual framework for overcoming the victim/agency dichotomy and for recognizing the potentially co-constitutive dynamics between these two states.

Victimhood, Agency and Gender: Beyond Dichotomies

Throughout scholarship on armed conflict, victimhood and victimization serve as important political and analytical categories, signifying the perpetration of harm and the entitlement to justice and redress (Jacoby 2015; Krystalli 2021; Rudling 2019). Yet, across scholarly and policy discourses, there long has been, and in many ways still is, a lingering tendency to portray victims as "generally lacking 'power', 'inner force' […] or agency" (Dahl 2009, 393), and to conflate victimhood with passivity, dependencies and weakness (Meyers 2011). These representations are particularly pronounced within the context of gender violence (Baines 2015; Edström and Dolan 2018; Kreft 2020) – whereby victimhood is typically coded feminine and agency considered a masculine trait (Åhäll 2012; Enloe 2004). As Jill Steans recently noted, particularly "in the context of war and other militarized settings, accounts of [gender-based violence] survivors as essentially passive victims of sexual violence […] are regularly encountered in mainstream media reports [and] in international policy documents […]" (2021, 3).

Yet, for over a decade, scholars across disciplines have critiqued these essentialist scripts of women as passive victims, arguing that they erase and negate the agency of gender-based violence survivors (Buss 2009; Parpart and Parashar 2019). Feminist scholarship has traced the emergence of an "actors not victims" trope, as a counterweight to equations of victimhood with passivity (Dahl 2009), which views women who have been subjected to domestic and sexual violence as capable actors with the ability to transform their lives (Mardorossian 2002).

Focused specifically on conflict-affected settings, scholarship in recent years has paid increasing attention to the ways in which conflict-affected populations in general (Andrabi 2019; Menzel 2018; Ketola 2020), and women in particular (Baines 2015; Berry 2018; Kreft 2019; Thomson 2013), respond to and engage with such experiences of violence and victimization by exercising various forms of agency.

In parallel, the concept of resilience – emphasising how some individuals, communities or societies do well despite enduring adversity, and how they resist numerous shocks and stressors – also gained traction within conflict transformation discourses globally (Clark and Ungar 2021), as well as with specific reference to CRSV (Krause 2018). Much of the existing resilience literature, however, aligns with neoliberal understandings of peacebuilding, primarily individualizing the responsibility for being resilient and managing adversity, while neglecting broader structural processes that give rise to victimization in the first place (Kirmayer et al. 2011). In light of these limitations of the resilience concept, and in an attempt to better foreground the structural factors, in this article we instead focus on a broadened understanding of relational and political agency, as conceptualized further below.

Specifically with regards to gender, the progress of recognizing women's agency has manifested both in scholarship (Coulter 2009; Parashar 2009) and policy-making – not least through the UN's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) architecture, in which highlighting women's agency and active peace-building roles occupies a central space (Kirby and Shepherd 2016). To illustrate, scholars such as Buss (2009) or Mertus (2004) show how providing testimony in international criminal courts can constitute an important form of agency for women in conflict settings by way of breaking the silence surrounding their otherwise marginalized experiences. Erin Baines (2015; 2017), meanwhile, analyzes in rich detail women's political agency in conflict-affected Northern Uganda. Existing literature has moreover theorized and empirically illustrated women's collective civil society mobilization against CRSV and gender-based violence as a particular form of exercising agency (Kreft 2019, 2020; Berry 2018; Zulver 2019). Illustrating the bandwidth of women's agency in war, prior literature further shows how women take on fighting roles and commit violence (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; Henshaw 2016) by making "material and ideological contributions to militant activities and political violence" (Parashar 2009: 235).

Too often, however, attending to this agency leads to a pitfall of setting up a dual framework of casting the lived realities of conflict-affected women through a victim/agency dichotomy (Meyers 2011; Krystalli 2019; Parashar 2009). These binary views shine through in particular

when conflict-affected individuals who have turned to activism are described as having moved "beyond victimhood to agency" (Manchanda 2001), towards becoming "agents of positive change", leaving their victimization behind in an assumed linear process (Andrabi 2019: 8). Take, for instance, the recent report of the UN Secretary General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, which describes a "survivor's […] exceptional journey from victim to activist" (2020, 6), thereby assuming a problematic and linear transition and upholding a dichotomous juxtaposition in which victims/survivors can only occupy one space at a time, seen as either victims or agents. In many ways, such conceptions and portrayals of agency mirror the neoliberal cooptation of agency by humanitarian, peacebuilding and transitional justice bureaucracies (see Shepherd 2017, 33-34) as critiqued above in relation to resilience. With our broadened and relational conception of agency (see below), we seek to move beyond such limiting neo-liberal understandings of agency.

As Jill Steans notes, deploying heroic stories of activist-survivors "to evidence agency can obscure how lived experience is structured by material inequalities and unequal power relations […]" (2021, 4), meaning that celebrating women's agency often runs the risk of downplaying their victimization and vulnerabilities. Earlier feminist research on domestic violence similarly articulated some of these critiques, emphasizing how in the process of recognizing women's agency, the (legal and psychological) element of victimization – of having been unjustly harmed and violated by another actor – is obscured (Dahl 2009; Mardorossian 2002). Thus, shifting towards a survivor frame that idealizes agency runs the risk of erasing the victimization experience, precisely because agency is treated as the inverse of victimhood, which entrenches an empirically inaccurate dichotomy between victimhood and agency (Leisenring 2006; Schneider 1993).

Women's experiences at the intersections of victimhood and agency
Over the years, however, feminist scholars (Alison 2003; Parashar 2009; Krystalli 2019) have cautioned that breaking out of such dichotomized ways of thinking and carefully conceptualizing the heterogeneous interplays between victimization, vulnerability and agency is both normatively and empirically important, to paint a more holistic picture of women's lived realities in times of war (Baines 2015). Therefore, "thinking beyond simplistic narratives and/or binary constructions of victims/agents requires […] that the agency of survivors is rendered visible without obfuscating the structurally unequal power dynamics that pervade militarized settings" (Steans 2021: 4). Almost two decades ago already, Miranda Alison took

note that "the debate over whether […] women are agents or victims […] strikes me as an unnecessary and unsophisticated binary" (Alison 2003, 52). As such, existing studies show that women's experiences in situations of (prolonged) victimization are very complex, with pain, suffering and harm sitting alongside different expressions of agency and resistance (Schneider 1993; Krystalli 2019; Kreft 2019).

Illustrating these intersections, Roxani Krystalli's (2019, 2021) careful work on post-peace agreement Colombia unearths the ways in which political agency is inextricably linked to victimhood as a political category that denotes the experience of violence and harm, and from which derives a demand for legal redress. As Krystalli emphasizes, "taking victimhood seriously requires moving away from a view of it as always synonymous with vulnerability or lack of agency or as entirely reduced to the experience of victimization" (2020, 1). Introducing the concept of victimcy, Utas (2005) illustrates another facet of the victimhood-agency nexus: how under conditions of severe insecurity and disempowerment, women combatants can exercise agency to ensure their own protection by strategically emphasizing their victim status in certain situations and towards certain actors. Utas thereby reveals "the complexity of women's strategies, roles, and options as they front conflicting challenges and opportunities in war zones", collapsing "the often gendered opposition of agency and victimhood that typically characterizes the analysis of women's coping strategies in war zones" (Utas 2005, 403). Considering these crucial insights, it is therefore essential that we treat both victimhood and agency as "interrelated dimensions of women's experience" (Schneider 1993, 395) – and of the human experience in general.

As such, we are indebted to existing literature which has critiqued dichotomous representations of agency/victimhood, and which instead shows how both can frequently co-exist on a spectrum. Importantly, both are heavily shaped by structural factors and power relations and in particular by gender as a social force, which create possibilities and impose constraints on exercising agency and on being vulnerable to victimization (see below). However, we arguably still require greater clarity about how exactly to conceptualize and empirically examine these various intersections between victimhood and agency. For this, we propose a relational conception of agency (see next section) that allows us to draw out the dynamic and fluid intersections and mutual constitution of victimhood and agency in a nuanced way and that takes seriously the structural factors shaping both.

Conceptualizing Political Agency: A Relational Approach

Discussions around agency are becoming more ubiquitous in scholarship on IR, including on conflict, violence and (in)security. Whilst scholars often diverge in their definitions and conceptions of agency, the notions of deliberate choice, intent and resistance are often at the core (Archer 2000). In its broadest sense, agency – seen as inherent to the human condition – thereby refers to the capacity to act, centrally composed of autonomy and intention and shaped by structural factors (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Haslanger 2016). In dominant theorizing, certainly in IR and political science, agency is thereby typically preserved as an individual possession (Archer 2000).

Such a view on agency, however, has been increasingly criticized by scholars across disciplines, amongst others for depoliticizing and individualizing agency or negating the importance of socio-political structures (Mahmood 2001; Ketola 2020). In light of these critiques, we instead draw on relational sociology and, understand agency "as a relational rather than an individual phenomenon" (Burkitt 2016, 323). Such a conception recognizes that "agency emerges from our emotional relatedness to others as social relations unfold across time and space" (*Ibid.*). In this reading, agents are always "located in manifold relations", and can be thought of as "interactants", who are "interdependent, vulnerable and intermittently reflexive possessors of capacities that can only be practiced in joint actions" (*Ibid.*), rather than autonomous, sovereign and singular actors. Echoing these conceptions, we thus understand agency as a relational and "temporally embedded process of social engagement, [that is] informed by the past […] but also oriented towards the future" (Emirbayer and Miche 1998, 963). This emphasis on relationalities thereby resonates with feminist moral theories which conceptualize "persons as relational and interdependent, rather than as self-sufficient independent individuals" (Held 2006, 13).

Importantly, by focusing on inter-dependencies, a relational understanding acknowledges that agency is often rooted in, as well as sits alongside shared vulnerabilities. Similar to agency, vulnerability is typically seen as fundamentally human and constant, and "something we cannot ever entirely avoid" (Gilson 2014, 2). Despite this universality, however, critical scholarship also lays open the ways in which vulnerabilities, like agency, are shaped by multiple power formations along intersectional lines, including gender, race, class or (dis)ability, which "render certain populations more vulnerable than others through the unequal distribution of

risk and harm" (Browne, Danely and Rosenow 2021, 5). Feminist scholarship in particular demonstrates the extent and ways in which women and girls are rendered particularly vulnerable to numerous forms of violence, arguing that the vulnerability of women to (sexual) violence is rooted in patriarchy (Enloe 2004; Kreft 2020). Such analyses also show how victimhood and victimization are immediately linked to and rooted in (gendered) vulnerabilities.

In a similar vein, critical scholars across disciplines critique how vulnerability is typically treated in a narrow and reductive sense, as a problem to be solved (Gilson 2014, 2). Through this approach, vulnerability is often attached to those who are seen as underprivileged, oppressed or marginalized, which in turn "risks misrepresenting them, locating power external to their own action" (Butler 2021, 33). The result of these narratives is the critiqued binary framework of agency vis-à-vis vulnerability/victimhood, which we seek to overcome in this article. What is needed instead, according to critical scholars, is an understanding of vulnerability "as a constitutive and potentially generative component of embodied life that underpins our very capacity for relations with others" (Browne, Danely and Rosenow 2021, 7; Gilson 2014, 2), to "understand the ties that we have to one another, and to elaborate a politics on the basis of those ties" (Butler 2021, 32). As Butler, Gambetti and Sabay (2016) argue, vulnerability itself can be a condition for agency (see Gilson 2021, 90). This is the goal that we align with and further seek to expand on conceptually and empirically in this article, and which a relational conception of agency (and vulnerability) makes possible.

Such a relational understanding also clarifies that agency is not a purely individual trait, but rather that it is located in manifold relations to others as well as to broader structures. Importantly, relationality points towards the existence of opportunity structures and "choice architectures" which "structure the possibility space for agency" (Haslanger 2016, 117). As Björkdahl and Selimovic remind us, agency "is not exercised in a vacuum but rather in a social world in which structure shapes the opportunities and resources" to act (2015, 170). These structures are intersectionally conditioned, depending amongst others on gender, age, race, class, socio-economic background and physical (dis)abilities, which in turn (re-)produce multiple power relations, manifestations and inequities which influence the forms, dimensions and capacities of agency that individuals can exercise in different contexts. Of particular relevance for our argument here is that these structural factors are heavily gendered, governed by gender hierarchies and relations (Mahmood 2001), whereby agency is typically portrayed

as a masculine trait (Åhäll 2012) and femininities are equated with an absence of agency (Enloe 2004).

These different structural factors that govern agency are also spatially and temporally contingent. As Anne Menzel argues, "agency [is] not a general characteristic which actors either have or lack, but a quality that actors' doing may have *in a specific context*" (2018, 4). In essence, a conception of agency thus needs to be relational and situational, i.e. it needs to recognize that individuals and communities are able to exercise agency in certain contexts but less so (or not at all) in others, or at least that they exercise agency in different ways depending on the context they find themselves in.

In many ways, such a relational and situational conception concurs with ideas of political agency in a broader sense (see Baines 2017) that is "located in the social world that the embodied individual encounters in multiple different subject positions […]" (Häkli and Kallio 2013, 191). Moving beyond narrowly formalized understandings of politics and "the political" (see Scott 1990) – as troubled by feminist scholarship in particular (Hirschmann 1989) – we focus on forms of the political and agency that emerge both in (semi-)institutional settings, as well as widely in a myriad of "interactions and relations among and between persons" (Baines 2017 14). This broadened conception of political agency is underpinned by a relational understanding of politics, according to which a whole variety of actions and gestures can enter the realm of the political, when individuals recognize and assert "themselves as particular subjects, in relation to others, to the structures in which they are situated, and to subject positions that may be imposed on them" (Elwood and Mitchell 2012, 4). Political agency as employed here thus broadly involves a wide range of choices, actions (or non-actions) and strategies in different political (or politicized) spheres and spaces, employed by individuals and groups. Importantly, such a broadened conception helps us to understand agency not simply as 'a synoym for resistance to relations of dominance' (Ketola 2020, 2; Mahmood 2001, 203), and to disentangle agency from a narrow equation with resistance or resilience, which in turn allows us to 'fruitfully rethink agency in post-conflict contexts' (Ketola 2020, 2), broadening the spectrum of agency in a more holistic maner (Touquet and Schulz 2020) and moving beyond neoliberal cooptations of agency.

Gendered Political Agency on a Spectrum: Reflections from Colombia and Uganda

To demonstrate how this relational understanding of political agency can help account for the complex inter-linkages between victimhood and agency, including their mutual constitution, we draw on empirical insights from our respective research in Colombia and Uganda. Importantly, we understand these two sites not as 'cases' in the traditional sense in which we test out our empirical claims, but rather as spaces in which knowledge is produced – in this case about the intersections between agency, victimization and gender – by and through our interlocutors, and from which we generate theoretical insights. By bringing these two sites together, we do not apply a rigid comparison as such, but rather intend to empirically demonstrate the spectrum and range of varied manifestations of agency across different contexts. Our approach is thereby inspired by Lee Ann Fujii (2017, 664), who highlights the value of focusing on "diverse settings not as a paired comparison but because different contexts can 'illuminate' different pathways […], thereby helping to sharpen theoretical claims" (also see Krystalli and Schulz 2021, 10).

Thus, drawing from empirical material in both cases enables us to foreground how our arguments apply across time and space. In addition, we leverage also our diverging approaches to data collection and analysis, in terms of our interlocutors, the formats in which we interacted with them, and also our different epistemological perspectives. While these produce dissimilar empirical foci and distinct narrative styles, we propose that these differences serve as a strength, rather than an inconsistency, illuminating the breadth of the phenomena we discuss here.

Across the two cases, we follow the broadened and relational conception of political agency offered above, and analyze different forms of agency situated at different political levels; directed towards our interlocutors' self and relationally towards others; as well as embedded in relation to gendered structures, politicized power relationships and their persistent gendered vulnerabilities – thereby covering a broad spectrum of what agency is, and how it is relational.

The reflections from Colombia draw on interview-based fieldwork carried out in 2017 and 2018 in different parts of the country (a total of 34 interviews with 30 individuals) to examine how women mobilize around conflict-related sexual violence in civil society (Kreft 2019,

2020).[2] The fieldwork formed part of a larger, mixed-methods research project that examined domestic and international responses to conflict-related sexual violence against women. The women interviewed were active in women's organizations and victims' associations, which can be seen as forums in which women come together as interdependent interactants with the common goal of confronting violence and discrimination against women. Through their activities, they relate not only to each other, but also to the (other) victims with whom they work and to various state and societal interlocutors, while positioning themselves explicitly in opposition to armed actors as well as structurally-entrenched discrimination and violence.

The empirical material from the northern Ugandan context is based upon research conducted since 2011, over a period of nineteen months in total. This involves ethnographic participant observation, focus group discussions with a range of conflict-affected communities, as well as various key-informant interviews. Although my most recent research focused specifically on wartime sexual violence against men (Schulz 2020), during the course of my research I regularly engaged with a range of conflict-affected communities – including female survivors of gender-based violence, formerly abducted persons from the LRA, as well as political, cultural and religious leaders across the region – from which the reflections on political agency within the quotidian presented here draw. The overall methodological process was underpinned by a relational approach to research, as laid out by Lee Ann Fujii (2018), emphasizing the importance of developing closely-knit relationships with and between research participants. Such a relational approach appears particularly suitable for teasing out the relational elements of survivors' experiences of victimhood and agency.

The analysis to unfold is structured along those two case sites, focused first on more formal and public forms of victims' political agency in Colombia and then on more quotidian forms of political agency in Northern Uganda, and specifically within the context of abduction into an armed rebel group. Although each section begins with highlighting the women's vulnerabilities and victimization and then their forms of agency, we are purposeful to paint a more nuanced picture. As such, we illustrate how across these two sites, these two states do not contradict each other, or simply sit alongside one another; but are also often mutually constitutive – forming the common analytical framework we put forth here.

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[2] In reflecting on our respective research processes and findings throughout this section, we revert to using 'I' for each of us respectively, but stick to 'we' in relation to the broader observations and arguments we put forward collectively throughout the article.

Formal Political Spaces: Women's Civil Society Activism in Colombia

This empirical section focuses on forms of political agency that take place in (semi-)formal political spaces in Colombia, understood here as civil society organizations that seek socio-political transformations. This political agency comprises e.g. political advocacy, influence-seeking in political fora, restructuring decision-making institutions, amplifying women's voices, achieving (gender-sensitive) justice for victims, and seeking to transform socio-political norms and practices. That is, in terms of the full spectrum of political agency that forms the theoretical backdrop for the paper, this section examines the more formal political spaces in explicit pursuit of socio-political goals. Political agency thus understood signifies defying the political status quo, through the socio-political transformations that victim-activists actively seek, but also through the act of engaging in political activism itself.

Out of the 30 civil society representatives I (Kreft) spoke with, six were themselves victims of sexual violence perpetrated by armed actors and 13 had been displaced by the war.[3] While acknowledging that, of course, not all those who have been subjected to conflict-related sexual or gender-based violence will mobilize politically, our conceptual approach explicitly allows for the notion of victim as "a determined and angry (although not a pathologically resentful) agent of change" (Mardorossian 2002, 767). Accordingly, the interviews with Colombian civil society activists illustrate that victimhood and political agency are indeed inextricably linked. At a fundamental level, victimization in a distinctly gendered type of violence – which conflict-related sexual violence is – politicizes victims' experiences. As such, it has the potential to also politicize the victims themselves, in the sense that they mobilize politically, i.e. that they mobilize in civil society in explicit pursuit of socio-political transformations. As one activist says:

> *There's a category that is sexual violence, and we work a lot with this more subjective approach that looks at how women live and what they experience. . . . There are women who have a position as victims, they recognize and identify as having experienced this violence, and from this place they present to the world. Some do activism, and they take active part in this whole machinery of organizations of victims of the conflict.*

This can be understood as a process in which an individual's victimization in an act of harm leads to identification with, and feeds into, a "grievance-based identity" of victimhood

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[3] This number reflects self-disclosure, either during the interviews or in public, as a victim of conflict-related sexual violence. Interviewees were at no point during the interview asked about any personal experiences with sexual violence, so it is possible that the actual number of victims among interviewees is higher. Further, a few interviewees disclosed (also) victimization in sexual violence outside the armed conflict.

operating at the collective level (Jacoby 2015, 518). More specifically, women mobilize politically, as I have argued elsewhere, in response to the collective threat that conflict-related sexual violence constitutes to them as a social collective (Kreft 2019). An important part of this mobilization is activism aimed at transforming patriarchal norms and practices – i.e. gendered power structures – that facilitate the perpetration of sexual violence in the first place. Within the civil society forums examined here, women thus (inter)act as interdependent agents capitalizing on strength in numbers. Their political agency is anchored in their common lived reality as women, which includes (the threat of) male violence, a phenomenon so ubiquitous that many activists describe it as "normalized" in Colombian society.

Central to women's semi-formal political agency is the political significance of victimhood in Colombia. As Krystalli (2019, 10) states, *victim* becomes a "political status and category that different actors vie for, reject, wield, or contest." A victim-activist[4] brings this to the point. When explaining that a focus on victimhood is necessary for the state to take note of and respond to conflict-related sexual violence, she says: "[sexual violence] is a crime and therefore I do not refer to myself as a survivor. . . It is a crime and . . . I have a right to justice being done."

Only victimhood, in short, is viewed as a useful politico-legal category for making claims on the state and seeking justice. This understanding of victimhood is entirely decoupled from passivity or helplessness, with which the term victim is often infused or conflated in popular tropes (Mardorossian 2002, 768). Victimization signifies the unjust suffering of harm at the hand of another, and from this derives its political nature, particularly so in the context of armed conflict. As such, victimhood is closely intertwined with and motivates political agency of the type exercised by Colombian women's organizations and victims' associations. Political agency that seeks redress for victimization and the undoing of patriarchal norms and structures that give rise to sexual violence in the first place thereby explicitly defies existing gendered power relations. That is, gendered power relations and the harms they harbor for women breed the expression of collective agency, while at the same time imposing constraints on this agency.

Accordingly, we can observe nuances within the formal and public expressions of political agency among civil society activists in Colombia. Most fundamentally, victims' civil society activism against CRSV occurs simultaneously under the persisting weight of prior

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[4] In this section, I use the term "victim-activist" to denote activists who are also victims of conflict-related sexual violence. When I use the term "activist" only, by contrast, I refer to representatives of women's organizations regardless of their victim status.

victimization and under the constraints of contextual vulnerability. For one woman who was a victim of conflict-related sexual violence, for example, the path to activism included two suicide attempts, for another being homeless and struggling with hunger and addiction over an extended period of time. The women victims interviewed were all displaced by the conflict, some lost family members and virtually all their worldly belongings; they experienced poverty and marginalization before they became activists – and also thereafter. How victims of sexual violence are generally perceived in a patriarchal context plays an important role in these processes. A recurring theme in the interviews was that families and social circles, state institutions and society at large frequently dismiss victims, stigmatize them, try to silence them, even blame them for their victimization. In many ways, victims of CRSV find themselves singled out and marginalized in the gendered power hierarchy. As one victim-activist says: "we always carry that mark and people say 'there go the raped women.'"

In this context, the sexual victimization, and its mental and psycho-social consequences, are never simply "left behind" when victims turn to activism. The lingering emotional effects of their victimization became apparent during the interviews, when the victim-activists universally articulated or displayed emotions of anger, fear, frustration or grief about the topic of conflict-related sexual violence and their own experiences. One activist who was raped by armed actors stated bluntly: "Sometimes I think of what happened to me, and I cry, and I say 'my God, I am filth, I feel dirty, I feel tainted.'" Another victim-activist recounted how she remains filled with rage at the armed actors who raped her and killed her husband and will never forgive them – an emotion magnified by the neglect of victims she perceived in the peace process. Here too, the notion of being sidelined in socio-political power constellations is salient.

Socio-political and gendered power imbalances also shape and magnify inhospitable contextual vulnerability, a recurring theme in the interviews. Various threats to political agency in the form of mobilizing for socio-political change arise in a context of armed conflict and high levels of societal violence. Several interviewees brought up the assassinations of social leaders, which skyrocketed after the signing of the 2016 peace agreement between the government and the FARC and have persisted at high levels since. Many noted, too, that armed actors strategically perpetrate (sexual) violence to punish women, particularly activists, for "transgressing" traditional gender norms and fighting for peace (see also Zulver 2021). One woman, who co-founded a victims' association in a rural area, had survived several assassination attempts herself. Others mentioned a variety of threats and violence against

themselves and their organizations or associations throughout years of activism. As Sandvik (2018, 251) notes, on Colombia, such "gendered violence can operate as an obstacle to organising, because it deters or ends mobilisation. Threats and acts of violence are often sexualized in form, targeting women's bodies and contesting their presence in the public sphere." In these processes, the presence of arms is a key tool to assert power and socio-political hierarchies, aided by and reinforcing those structural forces that uphold gendered hierarchies. In almost universal agreement, the interviewees mentioned harmful patriarchal norms and structures as one of the gravest threats to women's safety generally and to their activism particularly, because these give rise to and normalize (sexual) violence against women in the first place. The constraints this imposes on women's agency are thus both physical, in the form of violence, and social, in the form of norms and values that delegitimize anti-patriarchal activism.

With gender as a structural force shaping both victimization in CRSV and the political agency in response to this violence, the activists' collective political agency – whether it seeks to transform gender norms or consists of providing support to victims – is *directly relational* in different dimensions. It is relational to (other) victims, but it is also immediately relational to structures (e.g. patriarchy), institutions steeped in these structures (e.g. the justice system) and actors (e.g. prosecutors and judges) embedded in these institutions, which jointly create and magnify the contextual vulnerabilities in which the activists operate.

The combined weight of prior victimization (or even the consistent exposure to others' victimization) and these contextual vulnerabilities, underpinned by gendered power imbalances, thereby affects the ways in which activists exert political agency. Activists may oscillate between more and less agentic at different points in time – two interviewees noted that they withdrew entirely from activism for a while because being constantly exposed to suffering adversely affected their mental health. Political agency may also be inherently reluctant from the start. Thus, a woman who was a victim of CRSV recounted how when she was first approached and invited to join a victims' association as an activist, she declined for fear of repercussions in light of the widespread assassination of social leaders. She told the activist seeking to recruit her "I do not want to do it," to which the activist candidly responded "no, neither do I." And yet, this second woman dedicated her life to activism, *inter alia* traveling all over the country organizing workshops with and for other victims. The first woman also joined in the end and persisted, despite struggling with the emotional toll of her

victimization and of her continued engagement with sexual violence in her activism because, in her words, "it is beautiful to work for those people who really need it."

The point here is two-fold. First, the activism that neither woman really *wants* to do but both do anyway is borne from their experiences of victimization. As previously discussed, victimization can politicize victims' experiences and lives. This can create a sense of purpose or moral obligation that they feel it impossible to escape from, even though it may mean that their activism always remains painful and, in some way, reluctant. In fact, it is precisely the context of persisting vulnerability – in which the threat of victimization in (gendered) violence always looms large and in which patriarchal structures create insecurity for women in general – that necessitates their continued activism in the first place. These are the conditions under which what Zulver (2019) termed "high-risk feminism" – i.e. collective agency focused on survival in, and even outright resistance to, a violent and gender-unequal context – emerges. Second, politicization takes place not just at the individual, but also at the collective level (and in gendered ways). Others experience victimization in conflict-related sexual violence as well, and it is this *shared victimhood* that becomes the locus for political agency and claim-making via women's organizations or victims' associations – you do not only advocate on behalf of yourself but also on behalf of others who "really need it." In this sense, the political agency described in this section is exercised by interdependent interactants, it is situational (Menzel 2018), dependent on spatial and temporal factors (Häkli and Kalli 2013), and it transcends stereotyped narratives of the traumatized and the resilient victim (Rudling 2019).

The narrative of a linear progression *from* victimization *towards* agency, in the course of which victimhood is left behind, would likewise be misguided. The empirical examples from Colombia show not only that victim-activists' agency derives, at least in part, from their prior victimization; victimhood is also viewed as an important political category, a prerequisite for seeking justice, and thus a cornerstone of political agency. In addition, victims who exercise political agency carry the emotional burdens of their own victimization with them and encounter an additional layer of contextual vulnerabilities on top. The latter take the form of ongoing low-scale conflict and hostile patriarchal structures, which both form the contours of, and encumber, their political agency. Gender is a powerful structural force that interferes at

every stage, shaping victimization (patterns), political agency in response to violence, and the overall context of vulnerability in which this agency is exercised.[5]

Political Agency in the Quotidian: Names, Naming and Resistance in the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)

To demonstrate the spectrum of possible forms and manifestations of agency, we proceed by directing the focus to political agency exercised on the micro-level, outside the realm of institutions and formalized political spaces, in forms that are more quotidian, though not any less political. Taking inspiration from Erin Baines (2015, 2017), and building on the conceptual model of agency as a relational phenomenon offered above, I (AUTHOR 2) hone in on forms of political agency as "the actions, words, or gestures that contest one's status as a person or a nonperson within the web of human relationships that makes life meaningful" (Baines 2015, 317). As such, I focus on a range of forms of political agency in the quotidian as exercised by a young Acholi woman abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel group in Uganda. This political agency is aimed at navigating her and her family's security, her survival and her escape. Agency as understood and operationalized here thereby includes multiple politicized choices, actions and strategies, at times in the form of seemingly mundane acts, in relation to others, wider power relations and structures, as well as persistent vulnerabilities.

To examine these forms of agency, I follow the story of Akello[6], who as a girl was abducted by the LRA, and who during the course and in the wake of her abduction and time in the rebel ranks made several overt political choices that position her as a relational, interdependent yet at the same time vulnerable person with agency. Importantly, Akello was abducted as a child, and thus made several of her agentic choices from that particular subject position, which in many ways can restrict her capacity for agency. As Häkli and Kallio (2013) note, children's agency is often marginalized, yet they exercise numerous forms of agency in different contexts. Jenny Kitzinger (2015), for instance, documents various ways in which children resist in contexts of child abuse and exploitation – thereby exercising agency in contexts of extreme vulnerabilities and victimization. In Akello's particular context, her actions and choices, to be explored in full below, always manifested in relation to other human beings, her surroundings

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[5] While the empirical examples provided here are of (cis)women, it is reasonable to expect that gender as a structural force reinforcing cis-heteronormative hierarchies is in operation at similar, if not higher, levels for trans and non-binary individuals.

[6] The names referred to here– are not her real names, but are pseudonyms. In doing so, I respect my interlocutor's choice of not wanting to be named in this article, to have her identity protected. Both pseudonyms have been chosen by the interlocutor herself – which in itself can be seen as yet another form of her agentic choices within the context of unequal power constellations in research relationships.

and circumstances, as well as her underlying and ever-present vulnerabilities, heightened as they are in contexts of war and insecurities.

Akello was born in 1990, in a small village in the north-eastern part of Acholiland, Northern Uganda. She attended the local primary school, and as a curious child she loved learning and spending time with her friends on the lengthy way to and from school. One day in 1999, however, Akello did not make it home from school. On the way back – the new term had just started – a group of rebels from the LRA stopped Akello and her friends on the way, just minutes before they reached their homestead. Whilst three of the children were lucky and managed to flee, Akello and two other girls had no chance of escape. The three children, all nine and ten years old, were taken captive by the LRA, as were tens of thousands of children across the region during the war (Stewart 2017), to serve as porters, soldiers and forced wives. As noted by Erin Baines, "young girls abducted by rebels were forced to marry their tormentors and often became pregnant" (2015, 321) – a fate that would also characterize Akello's experience.

The rebels demanded to know the girls' names, what clans they came from and where their homes were. Akello paused for a moment, and then told them that her name was *Acan Mercy*, and that her home village was still a long walk from here. This practice of creating, or taking on, an alternate identity – which Akello did – was not unique, but rather a common practice of protection among children and teenagers abducted by the LRA (Apio 2007), as well as by other rebel groups elsewhere globally (Coulter 2009). By not revealing their actual name and home, it was hoped, the rebels would not be able to identify and then attack and harm their relatives and loved ones. In case of escape or rescue from the rebels, the children would also be able to return to their actual homes without having to fear retaliation attacks by the rebels or being recaptured and abducted anew.

Whilst Akello's strategy of taking on another identity is nothing unique, what makes this instance particularly illustrative for this examination here is the reasoning behind it. In fact, taking on this alternate persona and name was the first explicit form of relational and political agency Akello exercised in the context of her abduction. When we sat down and spoke about her experience – in the green and lush compound of a hotel in Gulu, whilst sharing cold soft-drinks, in June 2018 – she explained to me that she chose that particular name on purpose:

> *Acan Mercy was the name of a girl I knew from some village in the surrounding area. She was abducted twice by the LRA in the years before. But both times, she managed to escape. From the first time, she returned*

home, but was unlucky and they caught her again, from her school. But even that second time, she managed to escape, after only a few days of being with the rebels, before they even gave her to any commander to become the wife. After that, the family moved somewhere else, where they were safer from the rebels. So by borrowing her name and her identity, it was my hope that I would take on that good omen from that name, and also manage to escape, even twice if it had to be.

Akello thus acted very strategically and agentically in that moment, by choosing for herself an alternate identity, to protect herself as well as her loved ones in the future. Her choices and actions in this moment and this context are also immediately relational: towards her family, whom she is seeking to protect from any possible retaliation attacks; towards Mercy, whose name, persona and good omen she sought to inherit in order to protect herself; as well as towards the rebels, from whom she thought to protect herself and her family. As such, the relationality of her actions is what makes this form of agency inherently political, as "interactions and relations among and between persons" (Baines 2017, 14).

The structures that both necessitated and demarcated Akello's agency in this moment, and the circumstances of her abduction within the context of a civil war, are of course heavily political and gendered (see Baines 2014), steered by stark power discrepancies. This context then also defines her choices and actions as political in nature. In a similar vein, the practice of "forced marriage" within the LRA, which Akello was subjected to, must itself be considered a political project – of "imagining a 'new Acholi nation'" (Baines 2014, 1) – that is fundamentally gendered (*Ibid*.). In that respect, Akello's actions within this context become inherently political, and are shaped by the gender-based hierarchies that structure these conjugal relations and cohesions (Kiconco and Nthakomwa 2018).

Clearly, the heavily gendered and politicized context of her abduction into the LRA, as well as relations amongst abductees and between abducted children and the commanders, are characterized by clear power differences and inequalities. As others have aptly demonstrated, these relations within the LRA are structured by hetero-normativity, patriarchy and patrilinearity (Baines 2014; Kiconco and Nthakomwa 2018). In this particular incidence, then, the nine year old abducted girl is positioned in relation to older, powerful men with guns, who have seemingly every possibility to exercise control over her. And yet despite these clear power discrepancies along different lines, which install various constraints and limitations on her ability to act reflexively and exercise control or power over her circumstances, Akello nevertheless did manage to exercise different forms of agency – showing us how even in

circumstances marked by the starkest power inequalities, women and girls must be viewed as actors with the capacity for agency.

During her nine years in captivity, Akello also exercised different forms of agency. Not unlike other women in the LRA – as increasingly documented by a growing body of writing (Baines 2015, 2017), including by women who were directly affected themselves (Amony 2015) – Akello carved out possibilities of agency for herself in various contexts and under different circumstances, always dependent on the respective situation and spatial and temporal contingencies. As work by Erin Baines demonstrates (2015), for instance, women in the LRA would confront their "husbands," would refuse orders from co-wives, or would refuse to have sexual intercourse with their commanders – thus acting agentively in relational and politicized terms.

An extraordinarily powerful example is the narrative account of Evelyn Amony (2015), who upon abduction spent ten years in the LRA and was forcibly married to rebel leader Joseph Kony. Although her experience is clearly characterized by violence, vulnerabilities and victimization, Evelyn also engaged in various forms of resistance. For instance, she writes in her narrative account: "I stayed for three months without doing anything for Kony. I never made him even a cup of tea when he came to my home. I never greeted him or responded when he talked to me" (2015, 52–53). Whilst her experience was clearly marked by extreme vulnerabilities and forms of victimization, Evelyn also exercised agency to take some control over her situation, even in a context marked by severe power differentials. In great detail, Evelyn describes how she often counselled her so-called husband and his second in command, Vincent Otti, as well as how she confronted Kony about his actions and with her sorrows and concerns (Amony 2015).

Akello's account is similarly characterized by such seemingly small acts of resistance – of refusing to have sex with her commander, or of not carrying out tasks as given to her by her fellow co-wives, exercised situationally within specific moments; all of which must be understood as forms of agency. Again, the forms of victimization as well as these acts of resistance and agency that Akello is able to exercise are heavily shaped by the numerous relations and hierarchies within the LRA and within these forced marriages, characterized by conjugal slavery and gender-based violence. Central to these inherently hetero-normative and patriarchal power relations is, of course, gender as a social force, installing numerous limitations on Akello's choices and characterizing her experience of abduction, sexual violence but also agency.

At the same time, it also becomes clear that despite these possibilities for and examples of political agency, Akello's account – as that of other women abducted by the LRA – is characterized by experiences of extreme violence, of inherent vulnerabilities, forms of victimization and gendered harms. Thus, rather than being positioned as *either* actors *or* victims, the experiences of Akello and other women abducted by the LRA show that it is not a question of either/or, but that political agency and vulnerabilities co-exist alongside one another. Furthermore, Akello's forms of agency (for instance of choosing that alternative identity for her) are immediately rooted in, arise from and are linked to her experience of victimization and vulnerability – and at the same time are characterized by incredible bravery, resistance and courage. In other words, if it were not for the victimization that came through her forced abduction, she would not have to act as politically and strategically as she did. At the same time, both the context of her initial abduction, as well as her experience within the LRA – of being forcefully given to a commander, of being forced to have sex with him and, as a result, giving birth to two children – are of course heavily gendered. These gendered relations and hierarchies within the rebel ranks (Baines 2014; Stewart 2017) thereby also shape both her possibilities for exercising agency, by largely restricting them, as well as her ensuing vulnerabilities.

After being with the rebels for nine years, Akello finally managed to escape, in the midst of an ambush of the Ugandan government against the rebel forces. "Even though it took too long until I finally managed to escape, I think it was also due to this name that I became free. After all, I am now sitting here with you in freedom, and I attribute it also to the good omen attached to the name," she explained to me. Like most former abductees, she passed through a return and rehabilitation centre in Gulu town, before being re-united with her family in her home village – for whose safety she did not have to fear, because of her strategic move as discussed above. In the years following her return, she eventually moved to Gulu town, where she joined a support group for women abducted by the LRA and with children born as a result of rape whilst in captivity (Stewart 2017). In this group, women come together and meet on a regular basis, to collectively talk about their shared lived realities, to support and counsel each other, and to engage in different income-generating activities or to teach each other new livelihood skills. These groups thereby constitute spaces in which the women can exercise different forms of political agency not unlike the women in victims' associations in Colombia, by advocating for affected women's needs and priorities and by engaging with and responding to their experiences and resisting their after-effects – as interdependent interactants and relationally

towards each other within the group setting, as well as relationally towards shared vulnerabilities and experiences of victimization. The spectrum of agency exercised by Akello, and other women in similar situations, thus spans from quotidian acts of resistance within the rebel ranks, or choosing an alternate persona, to more collective forms of political activism aimed at enacting socio-political change, both for herself but importantly also relationally for other women in similar situations.

In sum, these empirical reflections from Uganda illustrate the ways in which women abducted by the LRA exercise numerous forms of gendered agency, and how these are shaped both by gender and persisting vulnerabilities. Whilst Akello was able to exercise pockets of agency during her time with the rebels – for instance, by taking on an alternate persona, to protect herself and her family – as well as in the aftermath, her experiences over this extended period of time were nevertheless also characterized by violence, victimization and vulnerability. Akello's experience during abduction and within the rebel ranks was, as unpacked above, continuously characterized by stark power inequalities that put numerous constraints on her possibilities for agency. Yet, these circumstances show that even in contexts marked by such power discrepancies, women can still exercise different forms of agency, and cannot be understood as passive subjects stripped of any choice or possibilities for (political) actions, if we conceive of agency in a relational and broadened sense. What is more, it was Akello's victimization, in this context the forceful abduction, as well as continuous sexual violence and exploitation, which shaped and conditioned her agentic choices and strategies – showing how in this context agency and victimization not just coincide alongside each other, but instead condition one another.

Conclusion

What do these different examples tell us about the relationships between victimhood, political agency and gender? In this article, we have shown how the experiences of conflict-affected women in Colombia and Uganda cannot be made intelligible through dichotomized notions of *either* being victims *or* being active agents. Instead, these experiences teach us that agency and victimhood are not mutually exclusive, but rather sit alongside each other and can be co-constitutive – or in other words, these spheres intersect relationally. As such, through a relational understanding of agency, we have traced how across the two case sites, victims/survivors and victim-activists exert political agency that is relational: 1) to others, pro-socially as part of civil society organizations, but also in opposition to armed actors that

threaten or perpetrate violence against them; 2) to structures, specifically gendered hierarchies and patriarchy; 3) to ongoing or past victimization, including their after-effects; and 4) to persisting vulnerabilities, including an ongoing conflict context and the threat of future violence. In both Colombia and Uganda, women subjected to SGBV thus exercise different forms of such political agency – ranging from their engagement in (semi-)formal civil society spaces to more quotidian forms of agency and resistance.

Our empirical material reveals how especially in contexts of armed conflict, the circumstances in which individuals and communities live can easily become politicized as they are affected by conflict dynamics, which creates multiple arenas in which political agency can be exercised. Although the two cases are vastly different – in terms of conflict dynamics, socio-political contexts and gender orders – the ways in which experiences of victimization and agency co-exist and how they are shaped by gender are remarkably consistent. The two case studies thus illustrate how patriarchal norms and practices shape perpetration of SGBV, how women experience this violence in the context of contextual vulnerabilities, and how gendered power structures demarcate the scope for political agency. The expressions of political agency are thereby to a large extent also a tenacious response to *persistent* and *ongoing* gendered vulnerabilities. In other words, without the contextual vulnerability that upholds a constant threat of future victimization, there would be no need for much of the political agency aimed at survival and protection of loved ones or at transforming patriarchal relations or violent conflict in more formalized spheres.

Agency, in short, does not exist in a vacuum, but it is shaped by contextual factors, structures and other agents, which in different ways can catalyze or constrain the possibilities for agency. Likewise, adopting a relational perspective to conceptualize agency also illustrates how agency cannot be understood as a quality an individual possesses (or does not possess) in a fixed sense, but rather as a phenomenon that evolves, changes and is context-dependent and variable. As such, a relational understanding of agency enables us to challenge the victim-agent dichotomy and empirically elucidate the interplay of gender, victimization and vulnerability in an area – conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence in war – where the scope for agency is often overlooked or else treated as "exceptional" and as a movement away from victimhood.

In this way, we bring greater conceptual and empirical clarity to feminist IR scholarship, which has increasingly troubled the dichotomous framings of agency, victimhood and gender (Alison 2003; Parashar 2009; Krystalli 2019). This ultimately enables us to break out of and instead nuance the dualisms and dichotomies that continue to infiltrate discourses around victimhood,

agency and gender in times of war. Understanding that agency and victimhood are not mutually exclusive, but instead co-exist and can be co-constitutive, moves beyond essentialist and dichotomous representations of conflict-affected communities, and women as victims of sexual violence in particular, as *either* victims *or* agents. More carefully situating such political agency in relation to other actors, structures, vulnerabilities and prior victimization forms a firm basis for better understanding its various successes, challenges and failures, and nuances an engagement with agency and gender with implications for scholarship across international relations, gender and armed conflict.

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