

# Gender Discourses and State Practices in Civil war

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“ African state militaries, in contradiction to their mandate to protect civilians, often perpetuate violence against them during civil wars. ”

## FINDINGS

- Soldiers employ gendered rationalizations to justify abuses of civilian populations
- Gender as militarized masculinity becomes part of socialized soldier identity and enables soldiers to commit abuses
- Gender discourses solve a legitimation crises for states combating rebels with dysfunctional strategies
- Forms of colonial rule – direct versus indirect – may account for the speed at which the state is masculinized



Map of the DRC. Image source: [OkayAfrica.com](http://OkayAfrica.com)

**Abstract:** Dysfunctional state practices manifest themselves during civil wars when governments and national armies exploit and rape their civilian populations, failing to provide security from rebel violence. Dysfunctional state practices during civil wars are enabled by a history of gender discourses and beliefs. In the wars of the Democratic Republic of Congo and in the Sierra Leonean war, when army soldiers abused and raped civilians, they were enabled by gendered hierarchies, norms and beliefs, which they employed to legitimize and normalize their actions.

**Methods:** This research is drawn from qualitative secondary and primary sources. I utilized the fieldwork of anthropologists and political scientists such as interviews conducted with the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC) and the histories of Congolese political culture and Belgian colonialism. Similarly, I utilized ethnographic work on Sierra Leonean colonial history, Mende social institutions and the interviews conducted with the government sponsored paramilitaries named the Civil Defense Forces (CDF).

Map of Sierra Leone. Image source: Creative Commons License, [coloringpagebook.com](http://coloringpagebook.com)

**Arguments:** When states rape and abuse civilian populations, they employ the norms of militarized masculinities and patriarchal beliefs about women's subordination to rationalize and legitimize them. Particular forms of gender identity form the basis upon which states and soldiers act. Gender discourse are used to legitimize masculinized, non-participatory state structures and dysfunctional counterinsurgency strategies. These actions often impact the civilian population in destructive ways, and reinforce the actions of rebel militias along similar gendered lines.

## Congo's Kivus Conflict (2004-present)

- Belgian colonialism politicized Congolese masculinities and femininities through the concept of “évolué” and Christian patriarchal gender norms, which relegated Congolese women to ‘evolutionary’ inferiority and stratified Congolese masculinities along class and institutional lines - state-backed militarized masculinities were empowered over civilian masculinities

- Colonial commentators thought women in cities were “floundering, disoriented, vulnerable, and corruptible”. Therefore domesticity through social homes was used to reinstate women as the “base of evolution.”

- In February 1960 in Brussels, Lumumba state that the “evolution” of Congolese women has been neglected under the colonial regime: “We want progressively to make of the black girl an evolved civilized woman, equal to man so that our evolution of men and of women goes hand in hand”(33)

Congolese soldiers insist that Congolese women soldiers are evolutionarily inferior to Western women soldiers: “Our African women have not yet reached the same stage as you (white/European women) and hence they cannot perform all tasks within the army (35)

Like évolué class differentiation, Congolese soldiers are embedded in patronage networks which privilege senior officers and allow them to access Western wealth and modernity. Soldier are also empowered over civilian masculinities however, like those of male artisanal miners in Katanga, who seek ways out of their subordination to the militarized masculinity of Congolese soldiers.

Congolese soldiers justified looting from civilians and mines with reference to the need for material wealth. Rape was rationalized with reference to Christian patriarchal norms: poverty impedes men’s entitlement to women as the ‘head of the household’, women are unreliable like Eve and Delilah and women are ‘like flowers’ in a “battle that is like a desert” - drawing soldier’s lust.

## The Sierra Leonean war (1991-2002)

- British colonialism sought to strengthen Sierra Leonean chieftaincy and abolish slavery and polygyny. They were not as successful in completely reconstituting gender norms: *an experience of several years both here and at Sierra Leone has convinced me that European Governments by their present methods, are helpless to confer any permanent benefits upon the people of Africa.* – Governor Probyn (1904-1911) (51)

- Sierra Leoneans challenged the masculinized and clientelistic order: peasants in the northern region of Sierra Leon launched an insurrection against Paramount Chiefs and a women’s movement formed during decolonization

- By favoring the education of boys, the British entrenched patriarchal norms within Mende chieftaincy institutions which promoted the further masculinization of political power..

- Chieftaincy in Sierra Leone became defined by a masculinized clientelistic order, in which “everyone [was] linked in a relationship of patronage or clientship” to a “big person” (*kpako*) (53).

- State soldiers in the paramilitary (Civil Defense Forces/kamajors) and in the national army joined rebels in order to loot from the diamond mines. Commanders within the CDF also acted as “Big Man” patrons, providing their “clients” with food, shelter, and weapons, thus differentiating masculinities among soldiers. As the countryside became completely militarized due to the influence of the CFF, rural civilian boys began to join rebel groups.

- Soldiers rationalized their abuses with the framework of Poro (a Mende male initiation society) which linked looting with the need for economic survival and sexual violence (the use of girl soldiers as ‘wives’) with initiation into adult manhood.