

From Violence to Mobilization: War, Women, and Political Power in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

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From Violence to Mobilization: War, Women, and Political Power in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Abstract

How does war impact societies in its aftermath? How does war impact women in

particular? At its most fundamental level, war is an accelerated period of social change: it destroys social structures, dismantles institutions, and forces power relations to shift. This dissertation seeks to understand how violence can transform social structures, using the experience of women after violence as a lens through which to do so. Case studies of Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina animate the project. Drawing from ten months of fieldwork and interviews with 238 women in both countries, I illustrate how war can serve as a period of rapid social change that can trigger a reconfiguration of gender roles. I argue that war does this by precipitating three interrelated and overlapping shifts: (1) a demographic shift, due to the disproportionate death, conscription, and imprisonment of men and the massive displacement of people from their homes; (2) an economic shift, due to the destruction of infrastructure, agricultural capacity, and the arrival of international humanitarian aid; and (3) a cultural shift, due to the reconceptualization of women as legitimate public actors, as women juxtapose their “more peaceful” nature with men’s propensity for war. Then, these three shifts lead to a fourth: an increase in women’s political engagement. A focus on both informal and formal politics allows me to analyze the multifaceted and varied ways that violence restructured women’s lives and allowed for some women’s increased participation in public, political spaces. As the closing chapter shows, however, many of these gains were short lived, as international actors, the state, and revitalized patriarchal norms intervened to undermine and set back women’s progress.

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