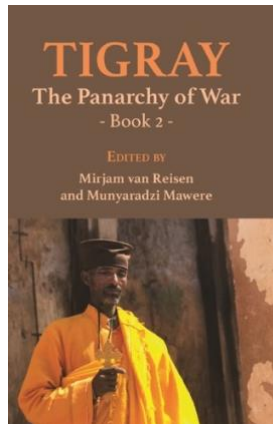# Imagining a World without War:
The Activation of Gender as a Critical Concept

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Julia Duncan-Cassell

Chapter in:
Tigray. The Panarchy of War. Book 2.

Contents

Chapter 1

Imagining a World without War:

The Activation of Gender as a Critical Concept

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It is the manner of speaking that breaks the mind.

Abstract

To what extent is a theory of gender relevant in documenting war? Departing from the work of Sirleaf and Rehn (2002), and following Moi (1989), this study reflects on the activation of gender in war. Demonstrating the need for conceptual clarity on gender in the documentation of war, the relevance of this is tested in the context of the Tigray war. For this, the semiotic landscape of images and texts from the war were analysed. The activation of gender in war often remains invisible, as a hidden operator, and the documentation of it may confirm stereotypes activating feminine images associated with weakness and masculine images associated with dominance. This chapter discusses the relevance of gender theory in understanding and documenting war. It emphasises the importance of recognising gender dynamics, noting that war often involves hierarchical structures that dehumanise and silence the 'other,' leading to dominance and suppression. It stresses the importance of recognising everyone's agency in war and the potential for women to lead peace initiatives. An agentic, imaginative approach is needed to avoid aggravating the situation for those dehumanised in a violent situation.

Key words: gender, war, conflict, sexual violence, agency, peace-building, Tigray war, Ethiopia, Eritrea

…a world that would realise the deepest desires of all the inhabitants of those lands to live together in freedom, non-violence, equality, and justice. This hope no doubt seems naive, even impossible, to many. Nevertheless, some of us must rather wildly hold to it, refusing to believe that the structures that now exist will exist forever. For this, we need our poets and our dreamers, the untamed fools, the kind who know how to organise.

(Butler, 2023)

Introduction

Remarkably, the first verb of the seminal book on how gender operates in war is: 'imagine'. "It is hard to imagine a world without war". This is the first sentence of the book: *Women, War and Peace* by Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, written in 2002, and this is still true. The stark realities of war and the impact of atrocities committed during war often do not leave a lot of space to consider how we imagine a world without war. The space to reflect on the mechanisms that operate war are often reduced to strategic, tactical, military and political domains, wrapped in cognitive perceptions of what is and not of what could be.

In the modern landscape of war, Rehn and Sirleaf provide a solid empirical description of the gender dynamics in war and peace. Hence, it is more striking that in their opening sentence, they draw immediate attention to the question of how we 'imagine' war and peace. Rehn and Sirleaf unearth how women are not embedded as active agents in the collective that constitutes war. Rehn and Sirleaf envisage documentation of war in which agency is attributed to all genders that are in the war situation. Their objective is, first, to give visibility to women in time of war.

Nevertheless, the relationship between the notions of gender and war is complicated by the activation of gender in war. During war, as during any part of life, one could say, people are not 'in position', but they are 'in action'. The capacity to act, based on perception, is 'agency': the human ability to understand the world and act upon that understanding (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Agency is an ability that

is mediated by language, through which we define what 'is', and through language we present thought in a performative manner. This, Gee formulates in the question: "What practice (activity) or practices (activities) is this piece of language being used to enact?" (2011, p. 18). By 'practice' Gee refers to "a socially recognised and institutionally or culturally supported endeavour that usually involves sequencing or combining actions in certain specified ways" (Gee, 2011, p. 17). Gee recognises an agentic capacity to change action patterns, as humans possess the ability to think before we act, which is really the ability to imagine (Gee, 2011, p. 80).

Gender is a relevant construct to study the action of war through the representation of the actors in it. The term refers to the dynamics of power that are inherent in the contestation of space. While gender may be associated with the binary division of a male/female body, in the extreme situation that is war, gender my play out in the more radical extremes of gender duality. The binary division of the concept of 'men' and 'women', associated with its essential meaning as opposites, has an enhanced relevance in a war situation, where the idea of 'male' is linked to fighting, defending and protecting, while the idea of 'female' is associated with a vulnerable object to be protected. Being a 'women' is associated with being a victim of the violence resulting from the performance of war. This extends to sexual violence (Krystalli, 2020).[1] These meanings are performative.

However, the conceptualisation of gender roles, where women are undisputedly and only seen as the victims and men as the perpetrators, has limitations in explaining how gender operates in situations of war and conflict. Biological genders cross those lines. Women participate in war and situations of violence as commanders,

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[1] Krystalli (2020) has pinpointed gender-based victimisation as a dominant approach guiding action by the international community: "As is evident in the United Nations Security Council resolutions that constitute the Women Peace & Security agenda, and in the programmatic interventions that have stemmed from those resolutions, the construction of victimhood often relies on associations of vulnerability with femininity. In this context, 'woman' often becomes synonymous with 'victim', which can become synonymous with violation and lack of agency". Shepherd (2020) proposes an alternative approach which attaches meaning to the inclusion of gendered notions in peace-building.

soldiers, strategists, and negotiators. Men participate in war and situations of war as victims of violence and war crimes, including sexual violence, which often goes undocumented and underreported, remaining invisible because of the shame it engenders in the victim. This is indicative of the observation that gender operates in war and situations of violence and that there is a need to better understand how and why.

Accordingly, the research question examined in this chapter is: *To what extent and how is a theory of gender relevant to document and analyse war?*

This chapter is a theoretical reflection aiming to help the work of researchers on documenting the Tigray war, which took place from November 2020 to November 2022.

Sexual violence in the Tigray war

A recent article published in *The Guardian* discusses how rape was used as a weapon of war in Tigray many months after the Peace Agreement was negotiated (Johnson & Kassa, 2023). Johnson and Kassa (2023) report that incidences of sexual violence against women aged 8 to 69 were documented in medical records. In several articles, Human Rights Watch documents how women in Tigray were victims of the war (Human Rights Watch, 2021a). The reports describe women as "pleading with them [the soldiers]" or "conflict-related sexual violence on women and girls" (Human Rights Watch, 2021a; Human Rights Watch, 2021b; Varia, 2021). An article by Amnesty International says:

> *It's clear that rape and sexual violence have been used as a weapon of war to inflict lasting physical and psychological damage on women and girls in Tigray. Hundreds have been subjected to brutal treatment aimed at degrading and dehumanizing them.* (Amnesty International, 2021)

The reports of the sexual violence perpetrated against women document cases from elderly women to young girls who were raped under often brutal circumstances (Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024; Kidanu & Tefera, 2024). A range of articles have cited the sexual violence that occurred in the Tigray conflict, with women as victims being at the centre of these stories. In the documentation of sexual

violence allegedly perpetrated in the Tigray war, women were held in servitude and brutally degraded, often with a public dimension to it so that it was consumed by an audience, with the perpetration of sexual assault to gain total control over women and their bodies (Kidanu *et al.*, 2024). A quick scan of the reporting on the war in Tigray shows that reports on the evolution of the war have generally followed gender-typical lines with women reported on in the context of being victims.

This raises two important questions. If these allegations of widespread violence against women are true, which in this chapter we do not doubt, why is this violence particularly perpetrated on women? Why are women sought out as the victims on whom violence is perpetrated in dehumanising and degrading ways? Secondly, why are the acts of violence perpetrated on women gaining more attention in the documentation than violence perpetrated on men and boys?

The gendered image of the victim versus the criminal in media

Studying the gendered discourse in the media, Gregoriou and Ras (2018) explore the issue of violence in human trafficking. They find that women were overwhelmingly referred to as the victims and that the gendered association in the discourse, in turn, defined how human trafficking is defined, as a crime perpetrated specifically against women. In research on the representation of human trafficking for ransom in the context of migration in media, citing Gregoriou and Ras (2018), Vdovychenko (2019) concludes that the gendered definition of who can be victims of human trafficking has real-life consequences. She finds that: "As a result, the (male) smuggled migrant is criminalised, whilst the (female) trafficked migrant is assigned victim status" (Vdovychenko, 2019, p. 504). It may then be hypothesised that the invisibility of the gender politics underpinning the representation of biological women and men in situations of war and enslavement such as human trafficking, causes misrepresentation. In the war in Tigray, Eritrean refugees, many of whom were biologically male, were forcibly transported, recruited, and involuntarily deployed by the Eritrean military (Melicherova & Van Reisen, 2024). In other instances, Eritrean soldiers, biologically male,

reported that they were told that they were being forcibly transported to the border of Tigray to work on farms (Smits & Wirtz, 2024), but they were deceived and forced to participate as soldiers in the war in Tigray (Smits & Wirtz, 2024).

It follows that it should not be assumed that violence is only perpetrated on women and girls. The reports from Tigray include extrajudicial and mass killings of boys, young men and men in an apparent attempt to ensure that they would not join the war (Human Rights Watch, 2021a). However, while searching for studies about the Tigrayan conflict, almost any mention of victims is connected to the way in which women were victims of violence during the war.

Methodology

The methodology used in this research is first of all reconsidering the use of 'gender' as a conceptual reference in the documentation of war. Secondly, a small case study is undertaken which identifies 'gender'-references in the semiotic landscape of war, specifically the war un Tigray.

Deconstruction

In order to reflect on the way in which gender is activated in war, this chapter is loosely structured in reference to a text called "Feminist, Female, Feminine" by Toril Moi (1989), which creates a clear distinction between the feminist project, the concept of the female body and the concept of the feminine attributes. Moi explains, "there is no pure feminist or female space from which we can speak" (Moi, 1989, p. 118). Applying the thought process used in her text, we attempt in this chapter to reflect on how a theory of gender matters for the documentation of war. In this chapter, 'gender' is approached as a 'travelling concept' (Mieke Bal, 2002), assuming specific meaning in time and space.

Derrida (1997, 1967) developed a way of thinking on how to investigate concepts, which he called deconstruction. Deconstruction considers how the binaries of gender create a world of meaning. In trying to deconstruct the meaning behind the dominant discourse based on binary oppositions, the effect of this structure on the

experience of gender can be explored. Butler (2006) provides a footnote to the potential limitations of any project of deconstruction, noting that deconstruction always pairs with reconstruction: "Destruction is thus always restoration – that is, the destruction of a set of categories that introduce artificial divisions into an otherwise unified ontology" (Butler, 2006, p. 152). Actioning and imagining are two sides of the same coin.

In this chapter, a small deconstruction exercise is carried out to investigate the crossing of gender classifications in the Tigray war. This exploration is intended to put the attempt of a theoretical review to the test in terms of establishing the relevance of a theory on how gender is activated during war. By contrasting observations that demonstrate frictions in gender conceptualisations, the relevance of deconstruction is tested.

Tigray is a regional state in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. It was invaded in 2020 by military troops of the Ethiopian federal state and neighbouring country Eritrea, as well as militia from Amhara Regional State. For the small deconstruction exercise in this chapter, a desk study was executed on the discussion regarding the relevance of gender in the documentation of the war in Tigray. The images in a video containing stark and unusual gender images, which were identified by several persons as surprising and relevant in examining the gender dimensions of the war, were observed and interpreted by asking viewers what they saw.

Exploring the semiotic landscape of images
Conversations with resource persons were held on this question. A small explorative case study served to explore the relevance of awareness of the activation of gender-categories in the documentation of war. Ethnographic data was collected for a small case study. A corpus of 361 photographs of Martyrs' Commemoration Museum was established, and duplicates and blurred images removed, consisting of pictures taken by one of the authors on 3 February 2020 and 292 pictures of graffiti left in the museum collected and verified by authors on 22–24 April 2024. A corpus of 83 photographs concerning the Emperor Yohannes Primary and Secondary School was obtained and cleaned to ensure

the quality of the images (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024b). The data was captured on 27–28 December 2020 by the director and deputy director and by two of the school teachers on 15–17 April 2021. The pictures were verified by the Tigray Education Bureau and cross checked with their pictures taken on 24 November 2023 of the graffiti left in the school. The pictures were verified by the authors on site on 24–25 March 2024. Graffiti with explicit sexualised content was selected for this study. Pictures of tattoos were taken and sent on 8 May 2024. Video material and pictures were collected from various sources as part of ongoing discussions on the topic, which included interviews, pictures and conversations within the context of discussing the material collected and reviewed.

Overcoming biological essentialism

De Beauvoir (1949) said "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 273). The conceptualisation of De Beauvoir is often used as the basis of a differentiation between biological sex and social gender. Moon (2019) states that the moment we are born and identified as 'boy' or 'girl', we are becoming it and are socialised to conform to this identification. De Beauvoir (1949) identifies that the notion of socially-defined gender has both subtle and apparent power relations. Toril Moi, in her 1989 work, critiques biological essentialism as a limiting and reductive approach to understanding gender. In her feminist theoretical writing, she distinguishes between essentialism and social constructionism, aligning herself more with the latter, which views gender as shaped by cultural and social factors rather than innate biological traits.

Moi argues that essentialism reinforces patriarchal ideologies by insisting that biology determines fixed roles for men and women. In this framework, women are often portrayed as naturally passive, nurturing, or emotional, while men are seen as rational and dominant. These stereotypical traits, according to essentialists, are rooted in biology, but Moi critiques this as an oversimplification that ignores the complexities of individual experiences and historical context.

A key point in Moi's argument is that biological essentialism limits the potential for social change because it treats gender differences as

natural and immutable. By contrast, she emphasizes the need for a more nuanced understanding of how gender is produced through social practices, institutions, and power relations. This is part of her broader argument against totalizing theories of identity and her support for a more fluid, dynamic conception of gender.

To get a better grip on the aspect of power dynamics, Moi (1989) proposes that an alternative set of terms and definitions is necessary. Moi distinguishes between three terms that are all intricately related, yet not equivalent, but often perceived as such. These are 'feminism', 'female' and 'feminine'. While 'feminism' refers to a political term, and 'female' to a biological term, 'feminine' relates to a set of culturally defined characteristics (Moi, 1989).

The terms feminine, female and feminist have often been compared with and equated to each other, with the assumption that they are mutually determined. The implication that gender is connected to the biological features that an individual has, rather than being culturally embedded, is rejected by writers such as Oyěwùmí (1997). In her book, *The Invention of Women*, Oyěwùmí discusses her view of biological determinism, the way in which this term is rooted from a superior, western, colonisation-based discourse:

> *… I argued that the biological determinism in much of Western thought stems from the application of biological explanations in accounting for social hierarchies. This in turn has led to the construction of the social world with biological building blocks. Thus the social and the biological are thoroughly intertwined. This worldview is manifested in male-dominant gender discourses, discourses in which female biological differences are used to explain female sociopolitical disadvantages. The conception of biology as being 'everywhere' makes it possible to use it as an explanation in any realm, whether it is directly implicated or not. Whether the question is why women should not vote or why they breast-feed babies, the explanation is one and the same: they are biologically predisposed.* (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. 35)

The distinction between the biology of 'females' and the cultural phenomenon of 'femininity' is based on the binary opposite categories of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' and should be considered more broadly than its association with (biological) sex (Tyson, 2006; Brown, 1995):

The difference between sex and gender posited by Anglo-American feminists does not exist. Patriarchy defines and controls the way we relate to sex (female) and gender (feminine) as if they were the same thing. (Tyson, 2006, p. 103)

The definition of the construct of gender as having an absolute link to biological sex needs further investigation.

The performative of the 'feminine'

Butler (2006) writes that gender has become 'troubled'. Butler agrees with Moi and others that the feminine and masculine have 'performative' meanings, which are reinforced not only by discourse but by the acts of people creating these gender norms. It is counterproductive that sex and gender have been distinguished as if the concept of biological sex exists naturally, without its social context in space and time (Moon, 2019). This feels futile, says Butler (2006), as every individual is born within the context of sex being related to gender. Thus, separating the two terms only creates an illusion that the sex and the gender are not related, when they are in fact culturally and socially marked, even if this is not due to any natural or inherent link. Butler says:

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. (Butler, 2006, p. 10)

Brown (1995, p. 201) refers to Karant and Ferguson (1986) in observing that a distinction between 'femininity' and 'femaleness' is drawn from the complexity of women's experiences as subordinates (the site of production of 'femininity') and as caregivers (the site of production of 'femaleness'). The categories are performative, they emerge from a social context and shape it. Butler points out that "as a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (Butler, 2006, p. 4). This causes a serious problem for gender theory, says Moi:

For if we now have deconstructed the female out of existence, the very foundations of gender theory (and the feminist project) have disappeared. (Moi, 1989, p. 128)

Toril Moi suggests, if gender is deconstructed to the point where it loses its significance, the feminist project risks losing its foundation. The performative quality of gender underscores the observation that female leadership does not automatically dismantle the patriarchal structures that sustain gender-based violence. Taking the example of Liberia, we observe that while the symbolic representation of women in leadership is crucial, only structural changes can address the root causes of gender-based violence. The high rates of gender-based violence highlight the need for comprehensive approaches that go beyond political representation. These approaches must involve legal reforms, community education, and the empowerment of women and girls at all levels of society. Addressing gender-based violence requires challenging the cultural and social norms that condone and perpetuate violence, as well as providing support systems for survivors.

If gender is performative in a social dynamic, which is always characterised by power and subordination, then creative imagination can route an escape. As the work of creating and redefining gender is never finished, for gender norms to hold in a changing society, they must be constantly repeated and adapted. This means that over a longer term, gender norms are intrinsically open to change. We can never get them exactly 'right', and if we stop doing them, or do them differently, we participate in changing their meaning. This opens possibilities for the concept of gender to change (Butler, 2006).

Hierarchy in binary opposites to signify 'what is'

Moi (1989) draws on Julia Kristeva (1984) to analyse the construction of a symbolic order based on the terms femininity and masculinity, which are linked in that the meaning of one of the terms does not exist without the other and it is only through the feminine that the masculine can be constructed as such. It is only through the intangible illusion that one signifier is weaker than the other, that masculinity can acquire such tangible power. Spivak (2010) translating Derrida, an Algerian-French scholar, observes:

It is this longing for a center, an authorizing pressure that spawns hierarchized [hierarchical] oppositions. The superior term belongs to presence and the logos; the inferior serves to define its status and marks a fall. (Spivak, 2010, p. xix)

Discourse that links concepts in terms what 'they are' and what 'they are not' inescapably produces an understanding of the power dynamics, which relate to the dominant centre of authorising thought, which governs the imagination of the concepts. "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other", concluded de Beauvoir (1949, p. 16).

The limitation of defining as one uniform construct of 'what is' intrinsically requires hierarchy in thought processes. Given that all meaning cannot be derived from the mind of a single person, it travels across as a social enterprise to try and signify what is being referred to. Hence, a concept never corresponds fully with the 'being' it refers to and is a placeholder for what it is in view of what it is not. This signifying performance is both social and cultural.

Despite the different approaches to gender and feminism, the stark contrast between the 'feminine' and the 'masculine' is always prominent. Many scholars have noted the way in which femininity and masculinity have been set against one another in binary opposition. The masculine is associated with presence, rationality, logic, and strength while the feminine is associated with invisibility, emotion, the absence of logic and, hence, weakness.

Symbolic order of the gendered society

Moi (1989) again draws on Julia Kristeva (1984) in finding that the symbolic order of current society is not just marginalising women, but marginalising femininity. It is through the association of women with the term 'feminine' and men with 'masculine' that women are constantly marginalised. Society ostracises 'femininity' as a whole, which means that men with feminine (or any alternative) traits or aspects are also be marginalised when they do not fulfil the imagined symbolic idea of what constitutes a masculine male. By associating

the female with femininity, and all the terms that are affiliated to it, and the feminine to various ways of being, an identity is produced and replicated: "We remain glued to this idea that men are programmed to dominate, and therefore, certainly, the women are to be dominated", states Lecoq (2021, p. 307).

If we apply this school of thought to the situation of war, the inability to defend and protect is demonstrated in each act of violence perpetrated by the other side and exerts who is the dominant party in the situation. In this way, 'women', who are identified as caretakers of what is vulnerable, are associated with the victims and subjected to the men involved in the war, who have been trained to exert power over others. Through the perpetration of sexual violence against women, the perpetrator is the conqueror acted out in a symbolic position of dominance.

The structure of the meaning is rearranged in the social process that takes place:

> *Everything that "means" something (and in a singular way, scientific discourse itself in its "transparency") has the function of silencing. And what it silences returns to haunt it, in a minor but irreversible subversion of its discourse.* (Baudrillard & Hildredth, 1981, p. 68)

Hence, the engagement in discourse should not be regarded as a deterministic process, without any volition, as human agency is exercised in the process (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Whatever the case, within the documentation and reporting of war within the available discourse, an idea of a collective consensus emerges on the role of 'men' and 'women' in war, which is likely to reproduce the original binary dyads of meaning and their associations. These associations populate, recreate and enhance the singular discourse through which we understand what happens in the situation. The symbolic underlying nature of the violence that aims to establish dominance is arranged within a discourse, the meaning-production in particular time and space. In this discourse, exclusion and silencing are important factors.

Effeminisation of 'the other'

Considering the totalitarian state, Arendt (1968) illuminates the perverse normalisation of total exclusion. This normalisation of the exclusion of the 'other' is so radical that, in Arendt's consideration, it does not require Arendt to apply a gender lens. While Arendt (1968) does not specifically address the question of gender, her contribution is the analysis of how power is maintained in a totalitarian state by the normalisation of a fictitious world that replaces and supersedes any other reality at any cost. She finds that the ruler of a totalitarian state must realise the double task of establishing a 'fictitious world' of the revolutionary movement as "a tangible working reality of everyday life" and preventing "the new world from developing a new stability" (Arendt, 1968, p. 391). This almost absurd contradiction is necessary as the endless search for stabilisation will allow the institutions and regulations to balance the power of the totalitarian ruler.

Following the line of thought of Arendt, Guillaumin (1995) shows that 'gender' and 'race' both tend to be 'naturally' affixed to the body, as if they were generated within the natural body and not in its cultural conception. Juteau-Lee explains this as follows:

> *The unquestioned acceptance of 'race' as a given biological or social category, Guillaumin writes in 1972, is based upon a mode of apprehension of reality shared by a whole culture. This way of apprehending the world, where 'race' constitutes a category of perception, is precisely what constitutes racism as an ideology. This perceptive and signifying system engenders the idea of 'race', leading to the categorization of human beings into discrete, endogenous, and empirically based categories; it is more diffuse than the theory which it precedes and makes possible.* (Juteau-Lee, 1995)

In the captivity of existence limited by biological constraints, the dominant can best escape this order and be free. The racial and sexual categories follow the socially constituted and naturalised identification, which are then justified by arbitrary markers. Hence, the establishment of social categories precedes the signifier and, because a social category exists, the signifier is operative.

Lugones (2007) explores the reach of the colonial/modern gender system "into the construction of collective authority, all aspects of the

relation between capital and labour and the construction of knowledge" (Lagunes, 2007, p. 206). She criticises some of the more known feminist writers for overlooking the intersectionality between gender and race, as well as sexuality and class, and especially how coloniality plays a significant role in the establishment of gender as a means of organising societies. Gender and race have, thus, been naturalised as something that is biological and inherent:

> *The invention of race is a pivotal turn as it replaces the relations of superiority and inferiority established through domination. It reconceives humanity and human relations fictionally, in biological terms.* (Lugones, 2007, p. 190)

It is through the hegemony of Western knowledge that was spread in the colonies that these modes of power could be spread, naturalised and internalised. Lugones reflects on Oyěwùmí's work, which effectively shows how the gender system was imposed on Yoruba society as a means of organisation. The question at the centre of Oyěwùmí's work is whether Western patriarchy is 'valid' in studying gender relations in a transcultural setting. According to Lugones (2007):

> *Oyěwùmí understands gender as introduced by the West as a tool of domination that designates two binarily opposed and hierarchical social categories where women are always defined in relation to men, the norm.* (Lugones, 2007, p. 197)

Through a gendered production of knowledge, such as the introduction of colonial thought-systems, a new image can be created of gender and race, which reshapes the identities of existing groups of people (Lugones, 2007). This is internalised and perpetuated further in society (Lugones, 2007)

Where is the space for change in this thought-structured design of the social world? This is in no way a predetermined situation, but the outcome of a social process, says Guillaumin (1995), and it becomes inescapable only in the structure of the thought process. Arendt and Foucault both locate change in the unstable network of practices, implying that where there is power, there is always resistance too. Just as there is no absolute centre of power, there is no absolute centre of resistance. Resistance is rather inherent within power relations and

their dynamics; it is "the odd term in the relations of power" (Foucault, 1976 [2020: 96]).

While power relations permeate the whole body of society, they may be denser in some regions and less dense in others. In the dense setting of an entirely controlled situation, non-totalitarian social instances that are interpreted independently outside the totalitarian fiction are the greatest threat to the autocratic logic that is activated to shape the situation. The creation of constant instability provides the friction in which a daily non-totalitarian instance is repressed and integrated in the dynamic of realisation of totalitarian power (Arendt, 1968: 392).

The placing of a particular group outside the order of things is critical for understanding the operation of categories in war. Within the order of constant instability that is normalised, the social construction of the 'other' is placed outside the natural order and associated with pathological characteristics. While Arendt does not specifically address this as a gender question, others have pointed to the effeminisation attributed to such categories of 'other', such as in Hitler's Third Reich in the case of Jews and homosexuals, who were seen as 'less' and 'ill' (Honkasalo, 2016), which is a constituent part of the fictitious distortion normalised in everyday life. This work highlights the activation of gender in the 'othering' of groups that are identified as the problem in the totalitarian project, and semantically associated with the lower label in the gender dichotomy, which functions as an underlying constituent of the symbolic order through which the social is imagined.

In effeminisation, the concept of the 'male' is taken as the dominant label. Effeminised beings are persons associated with characteristics and ways of behaving linked to femininity, as the lower extreme of the gender dichotomy and imagined as appropriate for the female body. In the dominant male-female dyad, effeminisation refers to the classification of a social group as lower than the dominant male.

The state as a gendered symbol of authority

Reinforcing and controlling social gender attribution within a social structure, the state operates to enforce this, from a position of dominance, argues Brown (1995):

> *Beneath the thin exterior of transformed reformed gender identity and concern for women, the state bears all the familiar elements of male dominance. Through its police and military, the state monopolises the institutionalised physical power of society.* (Brown, 1995, p. 202)

Brown (1995) illustrates that the state has specific structures and institutions that augment the way in which women can interact with specific parts of the state, including the police and military:

> *Through its monopoly of political authority and discourse, the state mediates the discursive, semiotic and spatial terms of women's political practices. Thus while the state is neither hegemonic nor monolithic, it mediates or deploys almost all the powers shaping women's lives – physical, economic, sexual, reproductive, and political – powers wielded in previous epochs directly by men.* (Brown, 1995, p. 202)

It is through the state institutions, which shape and reshape the marginalised position that the feminine holds in society, that gender roles are internalised and reproduced across civil society, creating an inescapable echo that reflects these gendered ideas over and over. As a result, women belong even less. Women have become a national good through which to repopulate, says Lecoq (2021, p. 250). Beyond than just creating a gendered civil and political society, the State itself also has characterisations of gender that create the identity of the country as strong or weak. The idea of rationality as an underpinning of the State, associates it with the separation from an embodied existence in a masculine representation. The State itself, especially when conceived as powerful, is seen as having more masculine characteristics. It is through the idea of the State as a rational entity that is powerful and authoritative that the State receives its legitimatisation. A profound understanding of this, is required to escape it (Brown, 1995).

While the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as Liberia's first female president in 2006 marked a historic milestone not only for Liberia but

for the entire African continent, this is both a breakthrough and an inadequate achievement in relation to the observation that the state is associated with masculine authority. While, as Africa's first elected female head of state, Sirleaf's presidency was celebrated globally as a significant step towards gender equality and women's empowerment, and this was further reinforced with the election of Jewel Taylor as Vice President in 2018, recognition of women's leadership must be complemented by a shift in political and societal norms to result in a re-imagined, new and different world.

Crossing gender classification in the Tigray war

The review of the conceptual framework to explain the activation of gender in war prompts us to seek the relevance of it for reporting on the Tigray war. The Tigrinya language acknowledges some fluidity of gender concepts in its language. A boy who has feminine characteristics is called *gual gualo* (ጓል ጓሎ) and a *wod-wodo* (ወድ ወዶ) is a girl who has masculine or boy-like characteristics or behaves 'like a boy'. These are categories that present slightly outside the 'natural' order, as it is perceived by at least some of the young men asked about the meaning of these words:

> *R: We don't know about the new appearance of the world nowadays. We live a natural life.* (Interview with D, male, Eritrean, between 25–35 years, interview by Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 17 September 2023)

The reference to 'natural life' expresses that Tigrinya-speaking people are not acting outside what is considered the norm – the normal state of humanity – and, therefore, are fully eligible to be part of the 'in-group' of human beings. This association with the 'natural' and 'normal' is even more relevant, given that discourse associated with Tigrayans, prior to and during the Tigray war, sought to dehumanise Tigrayans as an unworthy 'out-group' (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024b). The association with 'natural life' seems to also suggest an explanation that society conforms to what is regarded as 'normal'.

As a result of the analysis on reporting on the Tigray war, five themes were identified: (i) silencing of gender dynamics in the war; (ii)

effeminisation through sexual violence to depict the 'abnormal'; (iii) symbolic ordering to reference the winner group; (iv) Operation Mothers of Tigray; and (v) the symbol of the 'mother' as source of peace-building authority.

Silencing

How is this repertoire of gender classifications activated in the Tigray war? Baldwin (2020) queries the relevance of a focus on gender in the analysis of the war in Tigray. "What has gender got to do with it?" Baldwin asks, when the war in Tigray started in November 2020. She answers the question herself: "A whole lot. Gender is the stage and language of militarism in Ethiopia and is deeply entangled with the representation of Civil War memory throughout the country" (Baldwin, 2020). Baldwin recognises that women participated in the Tigray People's Liberation Movement (TPLF) – and still do – as well as in other liberation movements in the region. Trying to come to grips with the gender dimension of the war, Baldwin (2021) wrote the following in a short post-script:

> *In November 2020, a new war was launched on Tigray by the federal government of Ethiopia, rooted in the legacies of this civil war. The TPLF has once again become an underground guerrilla movement, drawing heavily on its liberation history. There are widespread reports of extreme and systematic abuse of women and girls in Tigray by state soldiers, including weaponised rape and sexual violence. The particular and remarkable place of women in Tigray's history is certainly one reason why women are being deliberately targeted in this attack. As aid and communication lines to the region remain unstable and members of the TPLF are being sought out and arrested, veteran women's testimonies are in danger of being lost in this new wave of violence against Tigray and those who played a part in its history.* (Baldwin, 2020)

Her observation speaks to the friction that emerges in the attempt to maintain control over the story by entertaining apparent contradictions in the fictitious story created as a contestation over space, which takes place in the meaning creation of power: "The particular and remarkable place of women in Tigray's history is certainly one reason why women are being deliberately targeted in this attack" (Baldwin, 2020). This statement speaks to the process of dislocating the female as a source of power in the Tigray war as a

normalisation of a new dominant order established through the Tigray war.

This normalisation happened, for instance, when Prime Minister Abiy made a public statement in the Ethiopian Parliament which could be understood as justifying the targeting of women through rape (23 March 2021).[2] This Tiktok video takes an excerpt of his original video in which he states that the Northern Command (Ethiopian military units stationed in Tigray) were "not only attacked" but "humiliated" and that "the women were raped but the country was attacked by woyane [derogatory term for the Tigray population]".[3]

The 'natural' order of women as victims of sexual violence in the war is also normalised in the propaganda from Eritrea, which states that in Tigray-culture rape is normal and predates the war (Madherom, 2022). The process of naturalising this order involves hierarchical institutional interpretation from above, silencing the experiences of women who survived sexual violence:

In a leaked audio of UN representatives and chiefs of mission in Ethiopia, participants are heard sanitizing, rationalizing, and discrediting the voices of survivors of the genocidal rape in Tigray. The participants went further to discredit the testimonies of service providers by denying the fact that the safe house was raided. Alarmingly, a UN official participating in the meeting referred to the reports of CRSV as "media hype." Former Minster of Ministry of Women, Children and

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[2] Tiktok video posted by: @MhretabMHB on Telegram and Tiktok: https://www.tiktok.com/@mhretabbirhanu6/video/7387429018003344645?_d=secCgYIASAHKAESPgo8hoRR%2Bql5KES2YnJLyUZDJ8CnoWSpFWHEkx57MeZ2C0QcrkCyjZmCFCr%2F%2FnrgCqGzVZL%2Fdo3qIy4mcf5oGgA%3D&_r=1&checksum=a1cda6b8e68a6a84ece79e53d113555f0099b648fab02e21e3e4860909 (20 July 2024).

[3] He appeared to say: "የነሱ ሴቶች ቢያንስ በወንድ ነው የተደፈሩት፤ የኛ ወታደሮች እኮ በሳንጃ ነው የተደፈሩት" (translated as: "Their women are lucky they are raped by males; our soldiers were rapped with knives")
(https://www.facebook.com/DrZtseatSA1/posts/3768728319915113/, 2024).
This was understood to justify the rape as a strategic tactic of war[3], for instance: Takeaway from Abiy Ahmed's parliament speech: "The ongoing act of Rape against Tigray women may be proportional to TPLF's anticipatory action against the Northern Command" (@henokgabisa, 2021)

The framing and reduction of narratives that engage with gender in the Tigray war aggravated the silencing of Tigrayans, to the extent that their viewpoints were not heard (which was aggravated by the siege), not available and not relevant. This perpetuates the notion of their lack of human agency to understand and represent the situation on own merit.

Effeminisation in the war in Tigray by sexual violence

Between Ethiopia and Eritrea, on the one hand, and Tigray, on the other hand, the 'other' is created as a discourse through derogatory terms such as 'agame', 'Woyane', and 'junta', in a gendered and racialised form, despite their ethnic and historic similarities (Geb & Tesfa, 2024; Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024; Tesfa *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024b). Sexually explicit and degrading words and phrasing was connected in 11 instances of graffiti that link sex and sexuality to demean Tigrayans, referred as Woyane and junta, and referencing the TPLF (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024b). Graffiti taken from the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School and from the Martyr's Commemoration Museum, show stark genderising messages. These two locations served as quarters for soldiers of the Ethiopian federal army. The graffiti was systematically collected and analysed (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a).
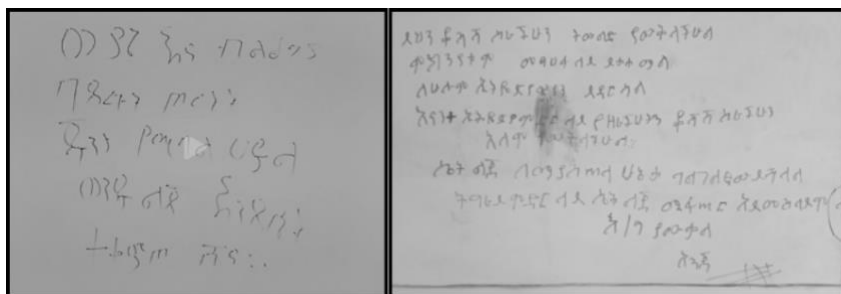
Figure 1.1. Graffiti Emperor Yohannes School. Explicit sexualised content 1 (Tesfa, Van Reisen and Medhanyie, 2024)

A graffiti (Figure 1.1.) text captured from the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024) in Amharic reads:

ይህን ቆሻሻ ስራችሁን ትወልድ ያውቀላችሁል

ምክንያቱም መጽሃፍ ላይ ይታተማል

ለሁሉም ኢትዮጵያውያን ይዳረሳል

እናንተ ኢትዮጵያ ምድር ላይ የዘራችሁትን ቆሻሻ ስራችሁ አለም ያውቀላችሁል።

ሴት ልጅ በሚያስጠላ ሁኔታ ባልገለጸው ይሻላ

ትግራይ ምድር ላይ ሴት ልጅ የሚፈጠር አይመስለኝም

እ/ ግ ያዉቃል

እንጂ

This translates as:

The generation will know this dirty work of yours

Because it is going to be published in book

It will be distributed to all Ethiopians

So that we will let the world know the dirty deeds that you saw on Ethiopia.

I don't want to mention women in a disgraceful way

But I think women will not be created in Tigray.

We will see with God's help. (Tesfa et al., 2024)

Another graffiti found in the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024) and written in Amharic reads:

ወያኔና ብልጽግና ባደረጉት ጦርነት ጁንታ የሚባል ሃይል ወንዱ ልጅ እንደ ሴት ተቀምጦ ሽና

Which translates as:

In the war between Woyane and Prosperity Party, the Junta force was peeing while sitting as women. (Tesfa et al., 2024)

Another graffiti in Amharic found in the school (Tesfa *et al.,* 2024) reads:

> ለማንኛውም እሂ ትምህርት ቤት ነው የs*x ትምህርት ማስተማርያ የሽፍትና የ አዳር ቤት ነው.

> ምድረ 666 ወየኔ ትምህርት ቤት ከፊትኩ ብሎs*x ቤት ከፈተ ይገርማልየወየኔ መጨረሻ እሂ ነው ምድረ s*x ቆሻሻ ሁሳ ዚጋከማስተማር ይልቅ ኮንደም ትሰበስባለህ እንጉን ብሎ መምህር s*x ኮንደም ፌት ኢየትህ እንተም ትጠቀግለህ ወየኔ

This translates as:

> *Is this a school, anyways? This is rather a sex education school where people spend the night. This is the land of 666, [this is a symbol that stands for condemned Satanism in the Ethiopian context]. It amazing that Woyane opened a sex education pretending it to be a school. This is Woyane's dead end. You, the garbage, collect condoms instead of schooling citizens. How on earth can you be considered as a teacher. You, like your grandfather, are used to condom. You're Weyane.* (Tesfa et al., 2024)

The following graffiti captured from the Martyrs' Commemoration Museum (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a) written by soldiers in Amharic reads:

> እናት ትብዳ ውሻ ልጅ የቀን ጅብ

Which translates as:

> *Mother fu** the bitch of dog daylight hyena. (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a)*

> እናት ትብዳ ውሻ ልጅ የቀን ጅብ::

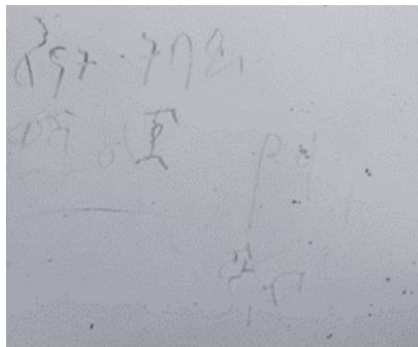> *Mother fu** the bitch of dog daylight hyena.*

Figure 1.2. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: sexually explicit degrading texts
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

Another graffiti – among many with similar content, found in Amharic language written by soldiers deployed in the building (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a), reads:

ወያኔ ሕይወት ቅጥህን ተበዳህ እስከመጨረሻ የማትረሳው ብዬ!!

Which translates as:

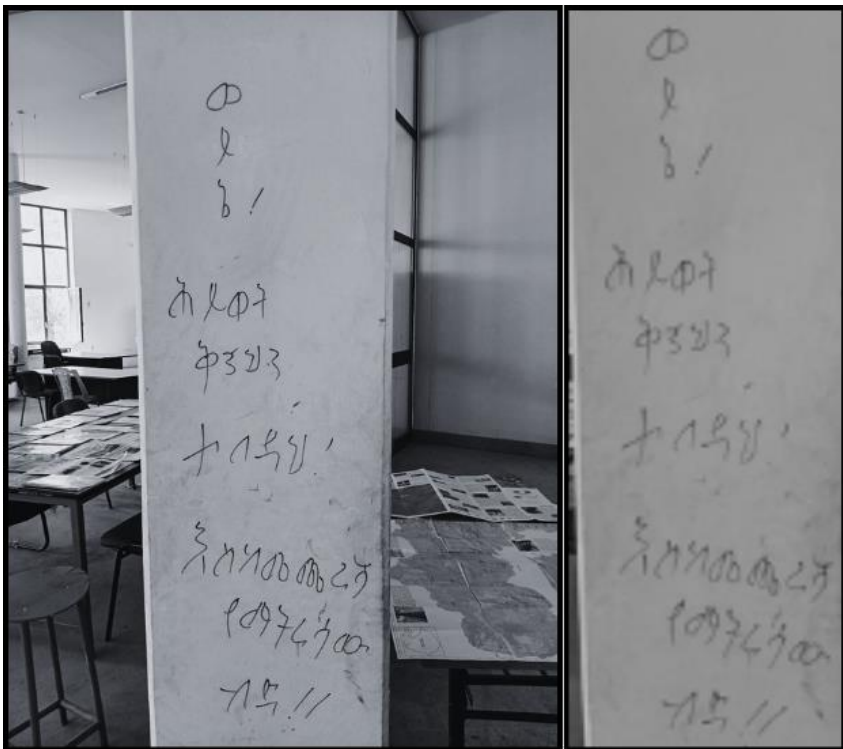*Woyane fu**ed in the a** that she will never forget!! (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a)*

Figure 1.3. Graffiti Emperor Yohannes School. Explicit sexualised content 2 (Tesfa, Van Reisen and Medhanyie, 2024)

A shocking text was retrieved by doctors from the womb of a victim of rape, allegedly committed by Eritrean military in Tigray (Van

Reisen et al., 2024; Kidanu & Tefera, 2024). The text reads (Figure 1.3):

Deki Erena ['we Eritreans'] are always Heroes

That is how we do! And we will still keep doing this. We want the womb of Tigrayan women to be unfertile.

We are still intact to revenge you what you have done us in the '90s.

On the backside of the same message, it reads:

We Eritreans, people from Asmara are Heroes

How on earth can you forget what you have done to us in 09. Even if you do forget it, we will not forget. From now onwards any Tigrayan will not give birth, will not have a baby from a Tigrayan.

We shall make sure you know and we will show you how unforgiving we are. So, don't leave any [Tigrayan] woman alive from now onwards: just kill them all. (Van Reisen et al., 2024; Gebru Kidanu & Tefera, 2024).
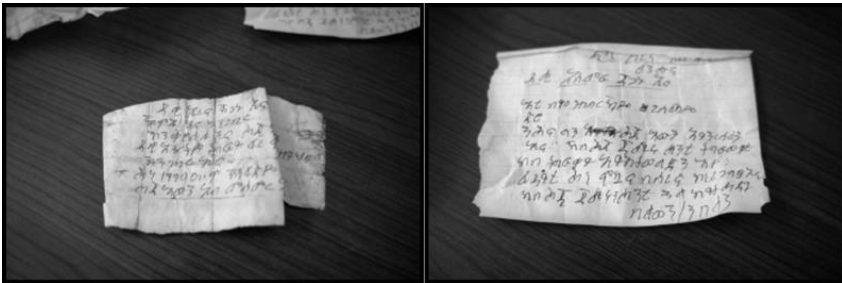
Figure 1.4. Message wrapped in plastic removed by doctors from the womb of a young female who was raped in the Tigray war
(First published by
https://x.com/XimenaBorrazas/status/179542778393570968) (Retrieved from patient's file, saved under special protection) (Van Reisen et al., 2024; Kidanu & Tefera, 2024)

Together with the piece of paper wrapped in plastic, the doctors removed other objects, such as stones, which had been put in the young woman's womb. The text reads in no uncertain terms that the women in Tigray were identified in terms of their biological

reproductive capacity and targeted to cause infertility so that the Tigray community will not be sustained.

How can we understand such texts? The friction between reality and fiction of the 'other' as 'unworthy' helps the assertion of totalitarian power over those subjected to it. This friction affirms that 'the impossible is possible', as a symbolic foundation for the magical attribution of power to underscore its heroic mission and to imagine the victorious reality that will result from the war – or at least that is imagined as such.

The performative nature of such language is self-evident by the observation that the message "Deki Erena ['we Eritreans'] are always Heroes" (Figure 1.3) was forced into the woman's womb. That type of act was not a single incident, but was widespread, particularly in the first phase of the war, as shown by the evidence on sexual violence reported in the European External Programme with Africa (EEPA) Situation Reports (almost daily reports on the war from 17 November 2020 till the end of 2022). The EEPA Situation Reports include 327 entries on sexual violence in Tigray during the period November 2020 to November 2022. Analysing these entries, per timeline, the majority of incidents were reported at the beginning of the war.

Table 1.1. Types and timelines of sexual violence reported

Criteria	January-June 2021	July-December 2021	January-June 2022	July-December 2022	January-June 2023
Sexual abuse	144	11	1	22	9
Rape	124	9	2	13	10
Victims of sexual violence needed or received treatment	40	1			3

Criteria	January-June 2021	July-December 2021	January-June 2022	July-December 2022	January-June 2023
Sexual violence as a weapon of war	34	9		5	3
Gang rape	29	3		2	1
Arbitrary execution and killing	27	1	1	9	4
Other forms of violence	27	4		4	
Physical abuse	26			2	2
Abduction	17	3	1	6	6
People forced to watch sexual violence	10	1			
Fear of stigma	9			1	
Violence against pregnant women and miscarriages	8	1		1	1
Forcing relatives to commit incest	6				
Cruelty	6	1		1	1
Sexual violence led to unwanted pregnancies and abortions	4				
Victims of sexual violence were forced to have sex in exchange for	4				

Criteria	January-June 2021	July-December 2021	January-June 2022	July-December 2022	January-June 2023
basic commodities					
Victims of sexual violence were threatened to not report	2				
Victims were held in sexual slavery	1	1			4
Victims were held incommunicado	1				
Human trafficking				1	
Type of sexual violence not indicated	50	1		4	1

The analysis shows that the sexual violence went in parallel with other crimes which confirms the conclusion by Kidanu & Tefera (2024) that such crimes are potentially atrocity crimes and committed with the intent to dehumanise or potentially commit genocide. Kidanu & Van Reisen (2024) found that members of the Eritrean military were the majority of perpetrators of the sexual violence reported, followed by Ethiopian military and other military. Tigray being under siege left many of these egregious incidents unreported or reported with delay. The analysis of the timeline shows the sexual violence perpetrated with impunity under the complete siege and communication blockade at the beginning of the war. These acts caused extreme fear, and disarray in Tigray (Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024).

The impact of the perpetration of sexual violence in Tigray, to establish the symbolic ordering of Tigray women as unworthy based

on gender-specific norming, and to establish Tigrayans as of a lesser kind, is all the more powerful as there are strong common cultural roots between Tigray and the Tigrinya dominant ethnic population of Eritrea. Such similarity makes the Eritrean soldiers being among the perpetrators of the sexual violence significant from the position that gender-based effeminisation has the potential effect of creating vulnerable out-groups:

> *These attacks were directed against the Tigrayan people, an ethnic minority in Ethiopia, and took place in a climate of impunity precipitated by a war declared by the Ethiopian federal government. Women and girls, as well as boys and men in Tigray, have been subjected to rape, often perpetrated by groups of armed men. There have been numerous reports of sexual slavery, with women and girls held captive for days or weeks. Survivors have been told during the course of these attacks that the perpetrators seek to impregnate them, with the intent of eliminating the Tigrayan bloodline. Moreover, instances of extremely violent and brutal enforced sterilization by armed groups have been reported.* (Mahderom, 2022)

The involvement of the Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers in potential ethnic cleansing or genocide could create an out-group of Tigrayans, otherwise culturally close to the Eritrean and Ethiopian populations. This intent, to 'other' Tigrayans as lesser than Eritreans or other Ethiopians was further emphasised by statements made by leaders that sexual violence would have been part of Tigray culture, while denying the perpetration of the sexual violence by soldiers:

> *Most dangerously, high-profile individuals, reporters, and government spokespeople have actively and deliberately spread disinformation about pre-war gender-based violence (GBV) in Tigray to minimize and justify the weaponized CRSV [conflict-related sexual violence] committed by the Ethiopian government and its allies. This line of argument contends that there was a "culture" of sexual violence in Tigray prior to the war, suggesting that the weaponized rape unleashed on the Tigrayan population is somehow more justifiable and less horrific as a result. The implications of this argument are clear: survivors and advocates should not raise alarm, demand justice, or request support because this is just a "normal" part of the life of Tigrayan women and girls.* (Mahderom, 2022)

Mahderom alleges that in a similar mode of disinformation an Eritrean leader of the Eritrean government based in Sweden shared

information of a victim of sexual violence, who was falsely portrayed as a fighter, which she was not: "Officials such as the Head of Public Affairs of the Eritrean Embassy in Scandinavia, Sirak Bahlbi, shared doctored and false images claiming Mona Lisa was a fighter"[4] (Mahderom, 2022). The incompleteness and incoherence of the discourses on the sexual violence that was perpetrated in the war creates the perfect confusion on which the totalitarian equilibrium thrives.

Symbolic ordering to reference the winner

The dissonance between the political empowerment of women and the everyday reality of violence and discrimination reflects a broader issue in gender theory: the distinction between symbolic and actual change. A good example is the persistent issue of gender-based violence in Liberia, which remains alarmingly high, with many women and girls experiencing various forms of abuse, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and harmful traditional practices, despite work at the leadership level and all levels to overcome this. Judith Butler's concept of performativity can be applied to understand this situation. The performative nature of gender norms means that they are constantly reproduced through social and cultural practices. Despite the presence of female leaders, the deep-seated norms that perpetuate violence and discrimination against women continue to be enacted and reinforced at multiple levels of society. This needs persistent work as well as creativity.

The dissonance between empowerment and the persistence of gender-based violence equally emerges as a theme in the war in Tigray. 'Game over, Woyane' and 'we won' were important messages sent by the Eritrean soldiers as they were leaving the Tigray in 2023 (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a). How pertinent the analysis of women as actors in the Tigray war is shown by a video released by the Eritrea regime's media, Merih Media (MM) (2023), which juxtaposes the victimhood of women in Tigray to demonstrations of masculinity by

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[4] The doctored material was shown on Twitter/X: https://web.archive.org/web/20220925221332/https://twitter.com/sirakbahlbi/status/1367327732351270916?s=46&t=bHBHPQ0GoTTiveFPbYNX-Q Mar 4, 2021 by @SirakBahlbi.

Eritrean women. The video shows (young) women, possibly even underage girls, in combat positions in the training camp Sawa.

The video by MM (2023), was sent to the authors by several persons from the Eritrean community and we were curious to understand what they thought of the content. We, therefore, decided to ask them. A respondent immediately identified the purpose of showing the women as part of nationalistic propaganda in favour of Eritrea's participation in the war in Tigray:

I: What is the purpose of this video?

R: Eritreanism...!!!

I: And why do they show so many women?

R: That means Eritrean women are shown as strongly willing to participate with the Eritrean Army and ready to defend their Enemy. You know their Enemy is America, Tigray and NATO. We are not lucky that our people are living in a dark area. PFDJ [People's Front for Democracy and Justice] (shaebya ሻዕቢያ) [the Eritrean regime] is not a simple regime to create a dark place, I never see anything as cruel like PFDJ. (Interviewee MVR06, interview by Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 17 September 2023)

Another person explains the video as follows:

I: And why to show so many women?

R: Because they don't know right from wrong, underage women are the ones. They are putting them in front of the camera. They care about their political consumption. They are not people who can distinguish between right and wrong. (Interviewee MVR06, conversation with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 17 September 2023)

Figure 1.5. Women in military training, Eritrea
Source: Merih Media (2023)

Figure 1.6. Women in a military parade, Eritrea
Source: Merih Media (2023)

The pictures demonstrate a clear position of nationalistic state domination presented in a military patriarchal order, with the women performing 'masculine' activities. These are portrayed with strong phallocentric symbolism, in which an image of strength is derived by association of symbols of masculinity.

This symbolic representation is 'unseeing' or denying the reality of Eritrean women, who suffer from sexual violence, enslavement, and inhumane treatment in the Sawa camp. The military training is part of

indefinite forced conscription. Women can only escape it by becoming pregnant, and many choose this as a way out, if they can. Many are forced to provide sexual services to high-ranking military and experience sexual violence (Van Reisen, Saba, & Smits, 2019). The lack of any correspondence of their lived reality of these women to what is shown in the propaganda film of women in Sawa camp can be described as a totalitarian fiction.

The propaganda video also constitutes a counterpoint to the stories of women being victims of sexual violence in Tigray, demonstrating the dominance of power specifically through a contestation of space constructed along genderised symbols. If the propaganda video, picturing the female Eritrean fighters in Sawa, is seen as an implicit coded response to the allegations of rape of Tigray women by Eritrean soldiers (among others), the contradiction of the Eritrean women in powerful military uniforms and the narrative of women of Tigray who are raped by soldiers (and by Tigrayan men as part of their 'culture') produces a perfect totalitarian symbolic order. The totalitarian leader has a justification for the war, to save Eritrea and the world from the 'un-human Tigrayan people'.

The pictures of female fighters are not limited to women in Eritrea. It is building on a history of showing strength through female fighters. Prior to the war, the Tigray Martyrs' Commemoration Museum boasted pictures of female fighters, including of Tigray women fighters, showing their strength together in the war against the then Derg regime.

Figure 1.7. Photograph exposed in the Martyrs' Commemoration Museum, Mekelle, Tigray of the second Conference of Tigray Women Fighters Association (1980 EG)[5]
(Photograph by Van Reisen, 3 February 2020)

The relationship within families regarding decision to join the fighters was complicated, as expressed by this interviewee:

> *This is Kibrom, a wounded fighter from Atsbi. His mom was also a fighter in the 17 years of struggle for liberation.*
>
> *When the Tigray war started, his mom told him she prefers him to go fighting than he staying home and got killed by the enemy.*
>
> *He did so.*

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[5] EG likely stands for Ethiopian Gregorian calendar. Ethiopia uses its own calendar system called the Ethiopian calendar, which is about 7–8 years behind the Gregorian calendar commonly used worldwide. In this case, "(1980 EG)" could refer to the year 1980 in the Ethiopian Gregorian calendar, which corresponds to 1987/1988 in the Gregorian calendar.

Yes, many fighters have joined the struggle to defend their mothers and sisters, but mothers also tried to save their children from a vain death. They rather see their children go to war for a cause than stay home and killed in their homes.

It was an irony that the battlefield was safer in the eyes of the mothers for young men than their own homes. (Interview KGK01, interview by Kidanu, WhatsApp, 7 May 2024)

Another interviewee projected a decision to join the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) as directly influenced by the sexual violence perpetrated on Tigray women.

After hearing stories of women getting raped in different parts of Tigray, a friend of my little brother couldn't take it anymore. He decided to join TDF [Tigray Defence Forces], to protect his mother and sisters " before the enemies come knocking at their door". (Interview KGKO2, conversation by Kidanu, WhatsApp, 7 May 2024)

The symbolic ordering that drives the sense of imagined winners of the war is certainly activated by gender, and images of women as fighters are relevant to giving the appearance of strength.

Operation Tigray Mothers

The humiliation through the systematic and sadistic rape and sexual violence of Tigray women in the war was deeply felt in Tigray society. The Operation Tigray Mothers (ወፍሪ ኣዴታት ትግራይ-) lasted from 12 to 27 July 2021 and was initiated shortly after the TDF secured control of the regional capital, Mekelle. A Tigray Media House spokesperson, Dade Desta, stated on 12 July 2021:

Operation Mothers!

The military operation to liberate Tigra's southern parts is named after Mothers of Tigray: the coinage gives a good feel as sweet as victory itself, ringing bell about ꝫ untold excesses Tigrian mothers had to endure at the hands of these barbaric forces. (@DadeDesta, 12:07/2021)

According to a resource person: "Operation Mothers not only sought to highlight their suffering but also aimed to celebrate their resilience and tenacity in the face of adversity" (Information received by MVR03 by MvR, WhatsApp. 8 May 2024). The Code Name

Operation Tigray Mothers was widely recognised as being a response to the sexual violence perpetrated on women in Tigray, as an attack on Tigray as a whole: "Because they are the ones who produce the evil children. Women are to blame" for all the evil that, which, in this dehumanising logic, justified the attacks (with possible genocidal intent) against the women of Tigray (Resource MVR04, WhatsApp, 8 May 2024). Another resource person stated:

> *It was named for the obvious honour of Tigrayan Mothers who bear most of the war's burden in all aspects.*

> *I believe there was some sense of avenging for the suffering of the mothers who were raped, killed and displaced as well.* (Interviewee KGK05, interview by Gebru Kidanu, WhatsApp, 7 May 2024)

The reason why the attacks on women were felt so profoundly is because these attacks on targeted the very foundation of society:

> *1st level – obvious mothers are the givers and nurturers of life*

> *2nd level – women, mothers are hold families together, and they hold communities together. They are the ones who visit the sick, and who attend to the multiple social needs of the family, the extended family, and the community. Welfare when you do not have welfare.*

> *3rd – the life giving and affirming role is such that women do not butcher animals nor do they bury the dead. At burials, women are usually in line behind the men who do the actual burying.*

> *Therefore a targeted attack on women, is an attack at the very fabric of society.* (Resource person MVR04, interview by Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 8 May 2024)

Following Operation Tigray Mothers, the attack on Tigray women went in an overdrive when Ethiopian government advisor Daniel Kibret wrote that all Tigrayan mothers were possessed by a "devil spirit", which was published by the Ethiopian Press Agency, which is a government outlet.[6] A resource person explained the post as

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[6] Published on Twitter:
(https://twitter.com/yaddib/status/1473343437881503746?s=48&t=tdNle6Wzo0AqYsLUupnnQQ) at 6:23 PM, · Dec 21, 2021 by @YaddiB.

follows: "The post refers to possession by an evil spirit who then perpetuates evil in the world" (Resource MVR04, WhatsApp. 8 May 2024) and "Evil spirits – devil, witches, they only produce evil people, weeds to be removed. The devil has to be exorcised" (Resource person MVR04, WhatsApp, interview by Van Reisen, 8 May 2024). These attacks are hardly veiled comments that could be interpreted as invoking or fuelling a discourse with genocidal intent.

During this period and in view of the physical and emotional attacks to break women as the backbone of society, there was a sense in Tigray that daughters, sisters, sons, brothers and partners fought hard to protect the women of Tigray. The operation, in honour of the mothers, passed the message that there was a force building to make sure that peace would be restored, and to remind mothers that they were not alone, their losses were not in vain and that in their name Tigray would win. The emotion was that the Tigray forces would protect, restore dignity and wipe the tears. Operation Tigray Mothers was felt to be one of the game changing operations in the Tigray war, in the name of mothers, and, therefore, it made a big mark on the war.

The mother as the highest authority in war and peace

Mothers are a reference point for gender in Tigray, where mothers are highly revered and respected:

> If you are called 'mother', it means you are caring, loving and you support unconditionally like a mother. A mother – or Ado – has a huge meaning in our culture. Adey, Adeway, Mama, Mami, Abshay are words used to address your mom in different parts of Tigray. (Interview MVR05, interview by Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 17 September 2023)

The image of the 'Mother', as the highest authority, is endowed with powers of leadership, to call back the fighters and end war. Prasch (2015) analyses how the image of mothers was constituted with the highest political agency to bring the gruesome civil war in Liberia to an end. She states that the "militant maternal protests positioned the activists as coherent political agents empowered by their literal and symbolic participation in Liberian performances of African motherhood" (Prasch, 2015, p. 187). She adds that the success speaks

to the potential of militant maternal protests in countries where women are excluded from political involvement.

Many young people in Tigray have placed a tattoo in reverence to their mother:

> *I joined to protect my mom and I love and missed her so much when I was away, I decided to get the tattoo because it kept me close to my mom and home. Many of my comrades have made similar decisions to get tattoos with names of their mothers.* (Interviewee KGK07, WhatsApp, Conversation with Kidanu, 7 May 2024)

Many members of the TDF mentioned that the reason for joining the army was because they saw their mothers and sisters being raped. And this was such a painful experience that they tattoo themselves with a reminder of why they were there, who they wanted to protect, and who would be waiting for them when they won. There are a lot of members of the TDF with tattoos on their bodies like 'Mami love', 'Mama', 'Adey', or 'Alemey' to symbolise their love for their mothers. Others have placed tattoos that carry their mother's name. The tattoo in Figure 1.7 (right) reads 'Aberash', which is the name of the mother of the person with the tattoo.

Figure 1.8. Tattoos placed on young people in Tigray
(Photographs collected by Gebru Kidanu, 8 May 2024)

Associating 'mother' with 'home' reverts the order associating the state with masculine attributes. In many places, including in the Horn of Africa, being called 'the mother of…' is the highest sign of reverence and demonstrates the power that women have in the social order. The tattoo – printed in English because it is shorter than in Tigrinya, but also because of fear, according to the person who placed it: "they were also scared of being identified as Tigrinyans; of course, we were not going to go around telling people where we are from at

that time" (Interview KGK08, interview by Kidanu, WhatsApp, 7 May 2024).

The ascendancy of Sirleaf and Taylor as mothers of the nation to the highest political offices in Liberia can be seen as a powerful symbol of progress in a traditionally patriarchal society. Their leadership challenged the entrenched gender norms that have long relegated women to subordinate roles. Sirleaf's presidency brought international attention to the capabilities and potential of female leaders in addressing national crises, such as the Ebola epidemic, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction (Sirleaf, 2014). However, despite these symbolic victories, the reality on the ground in Liberia tells a more complex story about gender equality and the status of women. The persistence of gender-based violence (GBV) in Liberia underscores the challenges that remain in translating symbolic leadership into substantive societal change.

The tattoos from Tigray honouring the mothers of Tigray, speak to the Ubuntu proverb 'Without a Mother, there is no Home', which prompts Van Stam (2014) to reflect on the mother as a most important authority in war and peace: "when mother is not in the village, there is no home", he says, inviting us to investigate the image of the 'Mother' in the 'home of peace' (Van Stam, 2014).

Conclusion

Sirleaf and Rehn reflected on gender as a relevant aspect of war and peace. Hence, the questions: to what extent and how is a theory of gender relevant to document and analyse war, and which voices are represented, who can speak and on what, are important building elements of how war unfolds. The imagination of war is critical for the performative creation of it. Hierarchy, the domination of positions held, is a critical factor in what performative action determines the discourse of the war. The aggressor versus the defender situates on a spectrum of power or dominance, and so does the conqueror and the victim. During war, aggression can be directed at the total silencing of the other, which results in a dehumanising performance in which the 'other' symbolically ceases to exist. The cessation of existence as a human quality is enslavement, by which

body, mind, and space are colonised, with the aim to control movement, communication, and the determination of whose existence is recognised under what conditions. In gender-based sexual violence, the aggressor exercises physical force on the body of another person, thereby activating genderised conceptual categories.

The way in which 'gender' is activated in war, documented and talked about mirrors the real-world and shapes its reflection. The recognition of this is relevant to analyse war dynamics. Gender is activated to create positions of power in a war-society, in which the existence of some is contested as unworthy. The realisation that gender is not like the radical concepts of what constitutes 'masculine' and 'feminine' is essential to map out a road to peacebuilding that rebalances power. In a patriarchal (post-)colonial hierarchically structured world, in which nationalistic projects provide the basis for contestations of power and the justification of violence, 'gender' is not a neutral concept, but inevitably activates notions of dominance and suppression.

In this study five themes were identified as particularly relevant to the activation of gender in the Tigray war. These are: (i) silencing of gender dynamics in the war; (ii) effeminisation to depict the 'abnormal' (iii) symbolic ordering to reference the winner group; (iv) Operation Tigray Mothers and (v) the symbol of the 'mother' as source of peacebuilding authority. From the analysis it follows that to address gender in war, there must be a transformation in the symbolic order that redefines femininity and masculinity in more equitable terms. This involves challenging the binary opposites that position men as dominant and women as subordinate. Such a transformation requires sustained effort at all levels of society, including education, the media, and cultural practices.

The leadership of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (2006–2018) and Jewel Taylor (2018–2024) after the civil war in Liberia represents significant progress in the struggle for the participation of women in Liberia, in Africa and globally. However, the persistent high rates of gender-based violence in the country indicate that symbolic victories must be complemented by substantive changes in societal norms and

structures. Liberia's experience underscores the complexity of achieving gender equality in a context in which deep-seated cultural and social norms continue to perpetuate violence and discrimination against women. As Butler and other gender theorists suggest, the performative nature of gender means that norms are continually reproduced – but they can be challenged.

What women do, matters. How women do this, and whether this is similar to or different from what we imagine to be 'feminine', may have great variety. Relevant documentation of war can start with the recognition that everyone has agency in war to interpret and define it. When women become leaders for peace, and society searches the pathways to peace, the balance of power can be changed. In as much as each person in every community involved in the war is called to help bring about peace and to understand how war can be overcome, the agency of everyone to understand the world as belonging to all beings, and act upon that understanding, should be imagined.

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Authors' contributions

Luana Stocker wrote the first theoretical outline of this chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen restructured the chapter and edited it. Luana Stocker edited all the subsequent versions. Gebru Kidanu edited several versions, and she was in charge of adding much of the empirical work of the chapter to test the theoretical argument. This empirical research was connected to the work carried out on sexual violence in the Tigray war. Julia Duncan-Cassell reviewed the last chapter, discussed it with others, and added text to clarify the arguments and to link the argument to the experiences in Liberia.

Ethical clearance

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on content and editorial decisions'.

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