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Reforming Masculinity? The SSR-Induced Change of Violence-Centred Masculinities in the Liberian Security Sector

HENDRIK QUEST

The main endeavour of this article¹ is an inductive one: I analyse how security sector reform (SSR) in Liberia has contributed to institutional changes of masculinity within the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) and the Liberian National Police (LNP). With this, I seek to unearth SSR-related factors that are relevant for the change of violence-centred masculinities in post-conflict security institutions more generally. Thus, the article addresses two highly related issues, (1) gender and SSR and (2) the way masculinities change during post-conflict reconstruction. SSR tries to generate effective security and justice institutions, which are made accountable by civilian oversight (Hänggi/Scherrer 2008, 488). Several contributions have shown that SSR impacts on gender relations in the security sector and beyond (Bacon 2015; Kunz 2014; Mobekk 2010; Wilén 2019). However, much of this research remains silent when it comes to how masculinities in the security sector are influenced by SSR. Questions concerning the interaction between post-conflict reconstruction and mas-

culinities have gained prominence as well (Cahn/Ni Aolain 2010; Messerschmidt/Quest 2020; Porter 2013; Quest/Messerschmidt 2017; Schroer-Hippel 2011; Streicher 2011; Theidon 2009). Yet, the findings on what affects the change of masculinities remain scarce. That is why I employ an exploratory approach in my analysis. For the analysis of the Liberian case, two differentiations are crucial: Firstly, I need to distinguish between institutional practices before SSR started and those that emerged during SSR. As the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which ended the civil war in August 2003, included some clauses on SSR, it is sensible to use practices during the war as a baseline for an assessment of whether changes have occurred. SSR was still ongoing when I conducted my research in 2017; hence I only differentiate between before and after August 2003. Secondly, to account for these changes, I need to distinguish different configurations of masculinities. By violence-centred masculinities, I mean institutional constructions that further direct physical violence, be it in the form of organised military violence or as unorganised violence against other individuals. Peace-compatible masculinities describe institutional constructions that are conducive to peace and non-violence.

In my framework, change means that practices move along continua between violence-centred and peace-compatible masculinities. I analyse how SSR has changed practices on three security sector-related continua (acceptance of women and femininity, construction of the ideal soldier/police officer, and institutional approach to sexual violence) and identify central factors for this development.²

Practice theory and the analysis of masculinities

I employ a practice-theoretical framework that guides the research on masculinities by distilling masculine practices from relevant strands of literature. The central premise of practice-theoretical approaches is that even the most complex social structures or processes can be reconstructed by observing practices (Bueger/Gadinger 2015, 453). I understand practices as “knowledge-constituted, meaningful patterns of socially recognized activity embedded in communities, routines and organizations that structure experience” (Adler 2008, 198). Practices are always gendered, and gender identities do not exist prior to or outside of performative acts in which specific gender roles are created, enacted, and reinforced (Butler 2015, 185). Additionally, there is always a practice of masculinity that gains hegemony due to its ability to legitimize the “dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 2005, 77). In this vein, we can grasp masculinity and femininity as ‘gender projects’ that shape social practice and can also transform it (ibid., 72). Consequently, hegemonic masculinities within the military and the police might change, depending on the wider context and the evolution of institutional cultures.

As security sector institutions are frequently male-dominated, they always produce different configurations of masculinity (Hearn 2012), which, nevertheless, can vary a lot as most components of these institutional masculinity constructions are not

determined by issues of efficiency (Seifert 1993, 220ff.). Based on earlier works (Messerschmidt/Quest 2018), I deem it feasible to conceptualize masculinities in the security sector as three continua ranging from violence-centred to peace-compatible complexes of institutional practices. These three continua, which are deduced from the literature on gender, masculinity, and security sector institutions, are (1) acceptance of women and femininity, (2) institutional construction of soldiers/police officers, and (3) institutional approach to sexual violence.

For the first continuum, the overarching question is whether there are practices that either devalue femininity or, in contrast, promote the acceptance of women and tasks traditionally regarded as feminine as part of the institution's work. At the violence-centered end of this continuum are practices such as the regular association of weakness with femininity (Barrett 1996, 133), using gendered or racialized insults (Whitworth 2004, 161), as well as the construction of physically challenging tasks as tests of manhood (Woodward 2000, 651f.). At the peace-compatible end of the continuum are practices such as linking peacekeeping tasks, like the ability to control the use of force and being impartial, (Duncanson 2009, 70) with masculinity.

The second continuum concerns the institutionally strengthened image of how members need to be in order to be perceived as legitimate parts of the institution. Here, violence-centred practices include rebuking any forms of individual or emotional expression (Keats 2010, 294), trying to eradicate "expressions of gender 'otherness'" (Morton 2014, 199), and linking masculinity with physical fitness, toughness, and heterosexuality (Dittmer 2009, 242). Peace-compatible practices that are mentioned in the literature encompass having training (and the related masculinity) geared to something else than combat, e.g. technical rationality (Barrett 1996, 138f.).

The third continuum deals with the question of whether the respective institution is permissive or repressive when it comes to sexual violence. At the violence-centred end of this continuum are practices like normalising sexual assaults against women within the military (Maxwell 2009, 112), viewing women as sexual objects (ibid., 115), and a culture of non-intervention towards sexual exploitation and abuse of local populations by members of peacekeeping missions (Higate 2007, 111f.). The peace-compatible end of this third continuum is constituted by practices that reinforce the idea of zero tolerance toward sexual violence, such as having clear disciplinary and penal proceedings like for example in the German armed forces (Bundesministerium für Verteidigung 2004, 2ff.), annual reporting on sexual violence to civilian oversight bodies, such as the US Congress and Senate in the case of the US armed forces (United States Department of Defence Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office 2018) and the framing of sexual violence as an impediment to military efficiency (United States Department of Defence 2010, 5).

All these practices constitute examples of how practices on the respective continua might look like and thus guided my research in Liberia. The framework helped me to determine whether the practices I observe belong to one of the three continua and if so, to clarify whether they are centred on violence or not. In this understand-