

Humanitarian Efforts Must Save Women and Children First! (Or Maybe Not?)

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The call for “women and children first!” has been established as a basic tenet of refugee protection in order to safeguard those perceived as the most vulnerable during conflict. But does this call accurately reflect reality? Anne-Kathrin Kreft and Mattias Agerberg counter this perspective with the glaring statistic that while women and children are given top billing in refugee protection, most civilian casualties are in fact men. In the world calling for more gender equity, the authors call into question whether the pendulum for gender equity only swings in one direction—in favor of women—and if this is fair. In their APSR article (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000345>), the authors examine whether society holds what they refer to as an “anti-male” bias when it comes to refugees and test if this public bias can be altered with more information about the vulnerability of men in conflict.

The authors begin their case with the previously mentioned disproportionate statistic of civilian men who die in conflict yet despite this striking proportion, women and children are considered most vulnerable and worthy of protection as refugees when fleeing conflict. Kreft and Agerberg suggest this imbalance is due to “gender essentialism” in society where women and children are unquestionably considered as the victims of conflict while civilian men are left out in the cold. Even more, the authors suggest that gender essentialism goes beyond elevating the victimhood and vulnerability of women and children to also produce an anti-male bias that strips civilian men of their victimhood and innocence during conflict.

They argue this misaligned view is rooted in a public misunderstanding of who is most at risk and most vulnerable during civil war. In this context, they also challenge the traditional notion that women are more victimized in war by gesturing to recent research that documents women’s agency, from their capacity for violence to their participation as combatants during civil war (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43654918>). To test their theory that society devalues the victimhood of men in conflict, the authors develop and run three



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experiments using US respondents. Across these, they find that men are indeed considered less innocent, less vulnerable, and less deserving of protection than women in the court of public opinion.

In the first experiment respondents were asked to estimate the breakdown of civilian deaths by sex in the Syrian conflict. The authors find that respondents notably underestimated male deaths, estimating men to be 57% percent of civilian casualties. However, according to conflict data, an estimated 88.6% of civilians killed in Syria have been men. After the estimation exercise, half of respondents were provided the actual statistic. All respondents were then questioned as to whether they felt the civilian victims in the Syrian war were innocent bystanders of war, and if they supported increasing aid and accepting more Syrian refugees. Those respondents who were given the actual statistic, considered the casualties less innocent and were more hesitant to increase the number of admitted refugees or humanitarian funding.

In the second experiment respondents were given two versions of a hypothetical news article about a hypothetical civil war, with the principal difference between the two being the victims were mostly male or mostly female. Like the first experiment, respondents were then asked about how innocent they perceive the victims and their perspectives on increasing humanitarian support and visas for them. In line with the first experiment, the authors find that when victims in the article were primarily male, they were again considered less innocent and less worthy of refugee assistance.

In the final experiment the authors test whether the public has a bias against male, particularly younger male, refugees. To test for this bias, respondents were presented with groups of randomized refugee profiles that varied in age, sex, nationality, and education level. The authors found that the higher the proportion of men in the group, the less likely respondents would want to accept the refugee group into the US. For instance, respondents were 11% less likely to prefer a group that was 75% male than a group with no male refugees. In a more extreme case, respondents were 33% less likely to prefer a group composed entirely of male refugees than a group with no male refugees—indicating respondents are indeed inclined to more sympathy for female refugees than male.

Through their three experiments the authors make an important contribution to our overall understanding of public attitudes towards civilians in war and refugee policy. While civilian men are more likely to be killed in civil war, they are last

in line when it comes to deserving help according to the public. These results indicate an embedded societal sentiment that civilian men are less worthy of protection and less innocent in conflict. This contracted compassion towards men is likely linked to an important point the authors make—the public notion that men should not remain civilians during conflict, and that their “natural” masculine role as the warrior is to pick a side and engage in conflict rather than elude it. However, while being a man almost automatically makes one eligible for combat, this does not mean that all men want to become combatants.

This is an important distinction the authors point out: given our modern understanding of gender, it should be considered acceptable for male civilians to not want to engage in conflict, or even experience fear and seek protection just as female civilians. But instead of being considered vulnerable victims of conflict, male civilians who choose to flee rather than fight are eyed with suspicion as covert combatants disguised as citizens, or worse, with contempt as deserters who ran away from their duty. Both instances would imply that they are less worthy of protection than female refugees, who are generally prevented from becoming combatants and participating in conflict yet this story is to be explored.

This article signals the need for more nuanced work on how social gender roles affect public opinion. For example, there continues to be palpable social and legal imbalances between the sexes in society (<https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/>

[indices/GII](#)) and war continues to be overwhelmingly enacted and fought by men as every country still struggles with women’s representation in government (<https://www.npr.org/2022/01/25/1075624771/mexico-has-become-a-world-leader-of-gender-equality-in-politics>). Together, this gives the impression that men have the most say when it comes to civil war and—as the adage goes—with great power comes great responsibility. It is possible that men who flee are perceived as avoiding this responsibility and are thus unworthy of protection, but this needs to be further explored.

The article points at differences in public perceptions of war victims based on gender. To build on this understanding, future research could examine why male refugees are deemed less deserving by society and how to cultivate a more inclusive understanding of victimhood which expands social conceptions of vulnerability during conflict. Moving beyond a male/female dichotomy is important as arguing for the legitimate deservingness of one group could mean diminishing the legitimate deservingness of the other. Doing so would highlight blind spots in refugee protections for policymakers and help make the case that services should be expanded—not divided—to protect the wider and more diverse body of vulnerable peoples. ■

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