Interview - Anne-Kathrin Kreft

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other young scholars.

Anne-Kathrin Kreft completed her PhD in June 2019 at the University of Gothenburg with the Dissertation "Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Threat, Mobilization and Gender Norms." Her research focuses primarily on the intersection of gender-based violence and gendered forms of political agency, but she also works on international responses to armed conflict and on women's rights. Anne-Kathrin has published in the Journal of Peace Research, the Journal of Conflict Resolution, International Peacekeeping and Comparative Political Studies. She tweets @Anne_Kreft.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

The idea that women actively mobilize against conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) goes against the grain of common perceptions of women and victims in war. The study of the resilience and resistance of victims, families and communities affected by CRSV is a very new research agenda. Thus, it was a bit tough at first to keep at it and situate my work in the discipline. In the academic literature I frequently encountered the claim that CRSV invariably has negative consequences for women's political agency, and some reviewers were skeptical of my theoretical propositions. Nonetheless, as I moved through the first two years of my PhD program, I had the pleasure to read wonderful research by Aili M. Tripp and Marie E. Berry on women's political and civil society mobilization during armed conflict. This work, along with fascinating feminist scholarship on women's perceptions of and responses to domestic and sexual violence gave me the concepts and tools necessary to develop a more coherent causal story of the relationship between CRSV and women's political mobilization.

Throughout my PhD, I was in the fortunate position to enjoy the unconditional support of my three wonderful supervisors – Ann Towns, Lena Wängnerud and Inger Skjelsbæk – who cheered me on and believed in my research even when I had doubts about its feasibility or even, occasionally, its merit. More than anything else, however, the impressive strength, resilience and bravery of the Colombian women activists I spoke with kept me on track while I was working on the oftentimes challenging topic of CRSV and violence against women. Contributing in some way towards amplifying their voices and stories was a major motivator in my work.

How has discourse around Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) changed? What caused this shift?

The biggest change we have witnessed in the past thirty years is the shift from silence and neglect of the issue of CRSV towards global mobilization of political, humanitarian and security actors against the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. Humanitarian actors were actively involved in bringing about this change in attention to discourse on CRSV. Reports of women being systematically raped in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s sparked outrage and brought much-needed attention to the issue. Since the milestone Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security passed in 2000, the United Nations Security Council has passed a series of resolutions regarding CRSV specifically, the most recent one in May 2019 (although this was controversial due to its failure to acknowledge the right to sexual and reproductive health). Where before sexual violence perpetrated by armed actors was considered unavoidable

collateral damage, it is now understood and confronted as a strategic element of warfare, used systematically to control, subjugate, humiliate or destroy the enemy.

Overdue as this unprecedented attention is, scholars have started pushing back against what they perceive as an oversimplification of the rather complex phenomenon of CRSV. Not all – some would argue not even most – sexual violence in conflict is used strategically as a weapon of war. Often, sexual violence is perpetrated opportunistically by "rogue" armed actors who think or know they will get away with it. When it is not actively challenged by military commanders, sexual violence may even become established practice within armed groups or units – a sort of norm that new recruits are quickly socialized into. These variations in the modes of CRSV have not taken hold in the global policy discourse, which still adheres strictly to the singular focus on sexual violence as a weapon of war.

How does the understanding of CRSV among Colombian women compare to that of international actors? What are the implications of the differences?

In my PhD research, I examined specifically the work and perceptions of women mobilized in Colombian civil society. Women's organizations and victims' associations are politically important and influential actors in Colombia who engage with state and government actors and the interested public in different ways. For example, it was as a result of the pressure of a handful of women's civil society organizations that CRSV was included in the peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and exempted from amnesty provisions in the peace agreement. I was interested in better understanding this civil society mobilization.

In interviews with about 30 representatives of women's organizations and victims' associations operating in different parts of Colombia, I wanted to find out how women perceive the nature and the causes of CRSV. Overwhelmingly, the perspectives of the women civil society actors align with the critical feminist understanding of CRSV. That is, the women perceive CRSV to exist on a continuum with everyday sexual violence, as a highly gendered violence. A recurring theme in the interviews is that sexual violence is an exercise of power and male dominance, a violent manifestation of patriarchy, anchored in the objectification of women and men's entitlement to women's bodies. In war, the presence of arms exacerbates this violence and the gendered fear that it induces. In addition, several of the civil society actors pointed out that armed actors may capitalize on the position of women in the patriarchal society and instrumentalize sexual violence in order to attack men and communities. In this logic, armed actors attack the male enemy by targeting "his women." Thus, sexual violence can be used as a weapon of war – but only because of what this violence signifies in a patriarchal context.

This perspective diverges markedly from the globally dominant weapon of war discourse, according to which sexual violence is a product of war and war strategy. As a result, the global response to CRSV is primarily predicated on CRSV as a problem of law or a war crime. Women's organizations and victims' associations in Colombia, meanwhile, concentrate their activities in victim support but, importantly, also in trying to change patriarchal norms and gender imbalances. For example, they work in schools or sports clubs to promote norms of gender equality, they seek to enhance women's representation and influence in the peace process and in politics, or they provide capacity-building support to sympathetic state institutions. It is, in other words, not enough to tackle CRSV in isolation from sexual and gender-based violence in society because both share a common basis in gender inequality.

What role can the accounts of women's' collective mobilization play in changing gendered stereotypes in armed conflict?

There is a tendency to view women in war as bystanders or victims, and to view victims as passive and lacking in agency. Especially in the case of CRSV, many people have a hard time imagining reactions that transcend trauma and withdrawal. Even women who are not themselves victims of CRSV are commonly assumed to be silenced by the fear that this violence generates. But this is not the full story of what happens in situations of armed conflict. Scholars of gender and conflict have long shown that women frequently assume new roles in their families and communities. They take on jobs and tasks that were previously reserved for men. They become active or even assume leadership positions in civil society and politics in the turmoil of war and its aftermath. Colombia is a particularly interesting case because of the sheer volume of women's organisations, social movements, victims' associations and local self-help

groups that have formed during and often in response to the war. But research on gender and conflict has shown that these developments repeat over and over in all parts of the world.

In part, such processes are driven by changing demographics. In war, men are more likely to fight – whether joining armed groups voluntarily or being forcibly recruited – and to be killed. Especially in high-intensity conflict, this causes an absence of men in families and communities and pushes women into new roles. This transforms gender roles. Another driver of women's expanded socio-political mobilization and activism is conflict violence itself – violence that targets women's communities and families, but also violence that targets women. Sexual violence in particular can be understood as a violence that targets women *as women* – their bodies, their sexuality, their very personhood and their right to sexual autonomy. Sexual violence can therefore make gender salient and spark mobilization around a broader range of women's issues.

I hope that research like mine and others' helps draw attention to, and improve our understanding of, women's collective mobilization against conflict, violence and for women's rights. One explicit ambition of my dissertation was to break up this artificial dichotomy of victimization and agency, whether it operates at the individual level for victims of violence or at the collective level, i.e. for women as a group, who are targeted in gender-based violence. Victimhood is not the antithesis of agency; the two can and do co-exist. Resistance is often borne from collective victimization or being targeted as a group. Drawing out the relationship between violence, victimization and agency, with a critical appraisal of their gendered dimensions, will hopefully help do away with misguided perceptions of the passive role of women in war. Of course, it is important to bear in mind that men and boys are also victims of CRSV and that women can also be perpetrators. Changing gender stereotypes in armed conflict obviously needs a broader focus than just the experiences of women as victims and civil society actors.

How can fieldwork on a sensitive topic affect a researcher's emotional wellbeing? What can academia do to support researchers engaging with this type of fieldwork?

This is something I have thought about quite a lot and that I have discussed with other researchers, most recently at a workshop I put together at the Conflict Research Society (CRS) conference in Brighton. Fieldwork on a sensitive topic can be mentally and psychologically taxing in different ways, both because of the subject matter itself and because of the overall conditions of carrying out fieldwork in a conflict-affected or fragile context. I think everyone can imagine that spending a considerable chunk of your time reading about CRSV, speaking with victims and activists working closely with victims, and then engaging in depth with the interview transcripts has an effect on you. Add all the revelations coming to light during the peak of the MeToo movement on top of that, and it may become difficult to get your brain to process anything beyond stories of sexual violence and assault. There were periods during my PhD research when 90% of what I engaged with on a daily basis related to sexual and gender-based violence. Unsurprisingly, that was when my mental wellbeing reached a low point. That means, it was not necessarily during fieldwork that it hit me hardest, but when I was closely reading secondary research or my interview material over extended periods of time back home.

Then there is the situation of fieldwork itself, where you find yourself in an unfamiliar setting, often largely unprepared because in many departments fieldwork preparation is just not a thing. Especially for PhD students or other "newbies", this adds another layer of stress: in addition to worrying about things like research design, getting access to research participants, interview techniques or doing your work ethically, you also worry about safety and how you will handle the entire experience. Your fieldwork location may be considerably less safe than what you are used to, and you will have to adjust to a new awareness of safety and precaution. In Colombia, my local colleagues and interlocutors frequently reminded me to be cautious, not to go out after dark and certainly not alone. These things constantly keep you on edge, which is both mentally and physically exhausting. Your normal support network – family, friends and colleagues – are thousands of miles away. And of course, you wouldn't want to constantly offload the weight of your research on them anyway.

So what can academia do better? The first thing would be more comprehensive fieldwork preparation. While it may not be feasible for every department to implement this locally, how about joining forces with other departments and putting together workshops that extend over a few days? Where fieldwork preparation does exist, it tends to focus on

the logistics and mechanics of getting access to respondents and on “collecting your data.” Questions of ethics are touched upon more and more frequently, but matters of safety and wellbeing are rarely discussed. There is a certain stigma attached to experiencing negative psychological reactions while researching difficult topics, and the most honest conversations I have had with people have been informal. What academia also needs is therefore more open and honest dialogue about researcher mental wellbeing, as well as more open and honest methods sections in the output we produce. Peer support, too, is immensely important. Other field researchers were probably the most important source of support while I was in Colombia (alongside my fantastic research assistant, but that is of course a luxury that not everyone enjoys).

What are you currently working on?

At the moment it’s mostly applications. I hope to carry out a postdoc project on the backlash against women’s civil society mobilization in post-conflict settings next. But I am also working, with my colleague Mattias Agerberg, on what I think is a very interesting paper on gendered notions of protection and public support for intervention in armed conflict. In survey experiments we ran in the U.S., the UK and Sweden, we find that people are most likely to support foreign interventions in armed conflicts with prevalent sexual violence. Our results also indicate that people generally think women are more likely to be victims and less likely to be combatants or civil society activists during war than men, and especially so when sexual violence is widespread. We can thus show that gendered notions of victimization, agency and protection are still pretty strong. There is also quite a bit of interview material from my fieldwork in Colombia that I am delving into further, and I am involved in projects on women in diplomacy and on preferential trade agreements and women’s rights too.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

I would say, first of all, work on what truly interests you, even if there is some resistance from others. You’re the one who has to keep up the motivation, and that’s a lot harder to do if you settle on a PhD topic or a research agenda that you’re not passionate about. Relatedly, figure out what works for you. I often say, maybe a bit oxymoronically, that my number one piece of advice is to take all advice people give you with a grain of salt. Especially at the beginning of a PhD, there will be many people who provide all sorts of well-intentioned, and sometimes unsolicited, advice – be it on study and reading habits, on how and when to write, on how to choose or develop research topics. The important thing to remember is that what works really well for others may not necessarily work for you. If something feels off, don’t do it. Trust your instincts. Sometimes that may even mean going against the advice of supervisors or other mentors who mean well.

The other bit of advice goes especially to those working on sensitive or difficult research topics, those who are planning to do fieldwork in conflict-affected or fragile contexts or those who are substantively isolated in their departments: build peer networks. Throughout my PhD program I have received an incredible amount of support and input from other junior scholars I met during fieldwork, through the Research School on Peace and Conflict, at conferences and on Twitter. Build up your own little support group – it doesn’t even matter if you’ve never actually met in person. You can vent to each other, turn to each other for help or advice. And don’t hesitate to reach out to other junior scholars whose work you like. They will be pleased to receive positive feedback in the isolating environment that academia often is, and it may turn into a lasting connection.