

Reflections from Ethiopia

Masculinities and Militarism Training

By Jane Kato-Wallace and Noah Yesuf



Introduction

Over the past few decades, there has been a fair amount written about the importance of addressing and challenging harmful masculine norms in the context of ending violence against women and girls, health, and even early childhood development. Doing so, it is argued, directly challenges the power dynamics that drive and perpetuate these inequalities. Prominent feminist academics have also applied this critical analysis to better understand the driving forces behind militarism and conflict. Based on their foundational work, we can make conceptual linkages on how militarized authorities exploit the most violent versions of masculinities to justify the use of force, recruit young disillusioned youth, and commit grave human rights violations, among other actions. There are also organizations aiming to draw attention to the role that militarized masculinities play from a peacebuilding perspective. For example, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) has a Mobilising Men for Feminist Peace programme that conducts research, produces videos, and creates networks of like-minded organizations to draw attention to the ways in which violent, militarized masculinities norms interact with structural factors to fuel conflict and even influence peacebuilding dynamics. However, less attention has been paid to how to translate these concepts and issues to concrete action, grounded in the reality of civil society organizations.

As part of the Strengthening Civil Courage (SCC) Programme, a four year human rights and peacebuilding programme funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ABAAD developed a Militarized Masculinities: A Training Manual to Challenge and Mobilize Men for Feminist Peace, a set of training tools to guide experienced gender and masculinities practitioners on how to lead an exploration of the conceptual linkages between militarization, masculinities, and gender equality with organizational partners. The training that was developed was informed by civil society organizations working in this field, experts, and through pilot testing with human rights organizations from Ethiopia, Lebanon, and Yemen. This brief detail the learning based on the lessons learned from the most recent training with the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center and DefendDefenders.

The Ethiopian Context in Brief

Ethiopia is currently grappling with a complex militarized context marked by ongoing armed conflicts and escalating violence across the country. Despite the recent withdrawal from a two-year armed conflict in the northern region, Ethiopia continues to face significant challenges related to insecurity and armed confrontations in the Amhara region. The aftermath of the conflict has left a lasting impact on the nation, with lingering tensions and unresolved grievances contributing to a fragile security environment.

The resurgence of violence in various parts of Ethiopia has further exacerbated the militarized landscape, with armed attacks becoming increasingly prevalent and the proliferation of armed groups recruiting young people into their ranks. The recruitment of youth into these armed groups not only perpetuates cycles of violence, but also reinforces militarized masculinities that glorify aggression and conflict as means of asserting power and control. This militarization of youth poses a significant threat to the country's stability and hinders efforts towards sustainable peace building and reconciliation. The prevalence of armed conflicts and the rise of militarized groups in Ethiopia underscore the urgent need to address the root causes of militarization and violence in the country.



Training on Militarized Masculinities

With the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC) and DefendDefenders, ABAAD led a 4-day training from January 31 to February 3, 2024. The Ethiopian participants came from a variety of backgrounds. They were lawyers, women and human rights defenders, students, and professors. Led by Jane Kato-Wallace, Gender Technical Advisor, with support from Hassan Joumaa, Project Coordinator, the purpose of the training was for participants to have a better understanding of how masculinities are central to the militarization process, guide them in a process of self-reflection and re-examination of their own views regarding masculinities and militarism, and become aware of the entry points they already have to engage men and boys in feminist peace. A small grant would also be given by ABAAD to a member of EHRDC to pilot an approach to address militarized masculinities in their work in 2024 as a follow up to the training.

The training aimed to be experiential and learner-centered from the very beginning. It began by debating gender roles in conflict (e.g. “Do you agree or disagree with the phrase – ‘Men who refuse to go to war are not manly’”) and understanding the power dynamics that underpin gender inequality. One participant in the debate said, “Because we live in Ethiopia, most of our history is expressed to us, as a man, is a person who has fought in war.” This debate led to an engaging discussion on men’s perpetration of violence – how much of it is fueled by men’s biology versus social conditioning? Many participants at the beginning of the training believed that most of men’s violence is rooted in their biology because how else would it explain why the majority of men are the instigators of conflict?

This debate was then followed by other experiential learning activities such as one that asked participants to explore how gender roles shift in peace time (e.g. men are breadwinners) versus war (e.g. protecting the family in an emergency) and how conflict fuels more extreme (violent) versions of masculinities.



Each interactive activity was punctuated by a PowerPoint presentation reinforcing key concepts or providing an overview of research related to the activity. In discussions where links between militarization and masculinities were being made, participants reflected on how militarization also invades their institutions where schools become military camps, telecom companies cut off access to the internet to support a military regime, and religious groups and organizations lend their moral support sometimes to governments but also to armed separatist groups. Such reflections led to an interesting discussion on the process of militarization and how – like gender socialization – it is a process that begins in childhood with many push and pull factors that range from affecting a man directly at an interpersonal level to structurally (e.g. economic inequality, exclusion, etc.). One participant reflected on how he'd play games called 'Police and Thief.' Another participant stated,

“Being a child of military parents and helping my parents as a shepherd, I used to play lots of games that portrayed militarization.”

The training also looked at the long-term consequences of war for men and women such as mental and physical trauma. The training culminated in a final activity that asked participants to develop pilot projects that combat militarized masculinities utilizing an entry point that made sense for their particular organizations to take on. Participants developed project ideas such as ones focused on “Desensitizing the media about militarization masculinities” to highlight stories on the radio and commercial spots about peaceful masculinities. Another focused on working with parents through community dialogues and trainings with communities to raise awareness on the effects of militarized masculinities on young children, and offer alternatives.

Besides PowerPoints and experiential learning activities, other tools used to conduct the training included using films such as from the series “Power on Patrol” by WILPF’s Mobilizing Men for Feminist Peace programme to provoke discussion and reflection. Handouts were also developed for participants to understand the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors that drive men and boys to join militaries or militant groups, as well as help them design pilot programmes to address militarized masculinities in the context of their work



Lessons Learned

Overall, the training was a success with participants sharing that the training was eye-opening while also being practical. They also particularly appreciated the time for personal reflection and group discussion and reported that the training met their original expectations. The analysis of pre and post-tests, results were:

- Participants showed a notable shift from **17%** to **100%** in their ability to explain how cultures of militarism are perpetuated by patriarchal norms.
- Confidence in using strategies to reach young men most at risk to militarism increased from **39%** to **100%**.

There were several lessons learned from this training with Ethiopian partners.

More simplification of concepts needed

Despite the overhaul of revisions from the first to the second training that aimed to simplify key concepts, integrate more interaction and group reflection, and orient towards taking action, participants still struggled to understand the connections between gender, masculinities, and militarization. For this reason, the trainers changed PPT slides to repeat concepts, integrate additional stories, and seek support from those participants with a gender background to put the concepts into their own words and use local examples in Amharic.

A bigger focus on the structural forces that drive militarized masculinities is needed

In the revision of the training programme, a focus on the structural drivers of militarized masculinities was given but could have been more deeply explored. For example, a stronger focus on structural forces would allow for a discussion about partnerships that might address some of the root causes/drivers of men's involvement in conflict i.e. partnerships with environmental organisations to stop land dispossession and extractivism, or work on the arms trade treaty.



Training tools need to be contextualized. While some films shown in the training resonated, others did not because it did not necessarily match the Ethiopian context. For example, one participant stated in reaction to the “Power on Patrol – Cameroon” film:

“Nowadays community and religious leaders are not considered as powerful as they used to be. However this time, people are tired of such leaders because we don’t see them bringing that much change and influence.”

The challenge is that this topic and training is quite new, so finding relevant stories can be challenging. However, such a reflection was important to further tailor trainings in the future.

Participants were eager to know more beyond militarization and masculinities

It was gratifying to know that participants (many with little gender background), wanted to know about the gender field because it meant that these topics were sparking their interest in how gender influences their lives more broadly. For example, one person asked, “Are there some natural behaviors that are given to men and women that are beyond gender?” Another requested a session to learn about the connection between feminism and gender diversity (LGBTQI rights and issues). However, it was a struggle to both address the main goals of the training while also taking time to explore these issues. We often had to set aside some of the questions for sake of time using a “parking lot.”

Ending the training with practical application helped to strengthen learning and open participant eyes to ways they can practically address militarized masculinities

While there was some hesitance from participants on how to address such a sensitive topic, once participants were able to contextualize them to their work on community-based peace building efforts, conducting research, working with media, partnering with universities, it became clear what practical action looks like to challenge militarized masculinities from a strengths-based approach.

In all, experiences like these show how engaged and action-oriented training is possible on militarism and masculinities in a complex setting.



