

Sexual Violence and War

Written by Rosie Walters

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ROSIE WALTERS, DEC 8 2023

This case study is an excerpt from McGlinchey, Stephen. 2022. *Foundations of International Relations* (London: Bloomsbury).

Sexual violence has for centuries been seen as an inevitable by-product of war. Although rape is seen as a crime that invading male fighters commit against women, states and international organisations fail to fully understand the gendered power relations that cause rape. As already explored, states are built around gendered norms that see strength, aggression, leadership, rationality and intellect as masculine traits and weakness, passivity, subservience, irrationality and emotion as feminine. This is crucial to our understanding of sexual violence in conflict. It is not a 'deviant' behaviour sparked by the extreme situation of war, but rather a continuation or escalation of gendered violence towards women and men in peace – much of which takes place inside the home.

Three aspects in particular are frequently neglected:

1. Rape is often committed by men against men
2. Women also commit sexual violence in war
3. The most prevalent form of sexual violence against women in conflict is domestic violence by a partner or relative.

The crucial point here is that sexual violence is about power, control and humiliation. For men – and sometimes women – to subject their male enemies to sexual violence is seen as the ultimate humiliation, because it forces them into the passive, helpless, feminine role of victim, stripping them of their masculinity and/or 'contaminating' them with homosexuality. According to gendered norms, men have power as the head of the family, and they dominate women and children in the public and private spheres. Becoming a victim of sexual violence for some men – as well as a physical and psychological trauma – is a devastating loss of that control. A survey in the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo found that 24 per cent of the men interviewed had experienced sexual violence (Kirby 2015). Rape, then, is systematically used in some conflicts as a means to humiliate enemy combatants and this is tied up with how we see the roles of aggressor and victim.

Initiatives to combat sexual violence in conflict have largely missed these gendered power relations. Take, for example, the United Kingdom's 2012 Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI), which was launched by Foreign Secretary William Hague and UN Special Envoy Angelina Jolie (pictured). It brought together the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Department for International Development (DFID) and Ministry of Defence (MoD). While the initiative did try to engage with feminist analysis of sexual violence, a report by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) (which reviews UK government aid spending) found that the PSVI had no coherent strategy for how to tackle its root causes – the gendered power relations that already exist before conflict. For example, the ICAI reports that while DFID incorporated PSVI initiatives into its programmes tackling violence against women and girls, attempting to address the causes of intimate partner violence in both peacetime and war, this led to it neglecting the issue of sexual violence against men and boys. Meanwhile, the FCO attempted to address sexual violence against men, women, boys and girls, but focused only on conflict zones, thus neglecting how it is linked to gendered power relations in peace time. It concludes that 'from the beginning, there was no strategic vision or plan driving the work of the initiative' (ICAI 2020, ii).

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A further blind spot in this initiative is how qualified the UK is to lead it. For example, the UK's initiative included sending a team of British police, forensic experts and lawyers to war zones to help to investigate sexual violence and bring perpetrators to justice. Yet, the UK government's own statistics from 2019 showed that just 3.5 per cent of sexual offences reported to UK police in the previous year, and just 1.5 per cent of rape cases, resulted in a charge or court summons (Home Office 2019). If we start to think of wartime sexual violence as a continuation – or escalation – of peacetime sexual violence, we begin to question why states and organisations based in the Global North think that this is a problem they can solve on behalf of people in conflict-affected countries in the Global South, when they cannot control it within their own borders.

Here we see that sexual violence is also understood in racialised terms. From the first European voyages of exploration to the Global South, through colonisation and decolonisation – and then recent understandings of poverty, famine and conflict – men in the Global South have consistently been represented in the Global North as violent, primal and prone to acting on basic instincts, while Southern women have been depicted as helpless victims of these men. Claims to be saving women of the Global South from their men has been used to justify any number of interventions, from colonial domination to the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, despite the many horrific cases of abuse of those same women by militaries and peacekeepers from the Global North.

A focus on the threat of invading forces and sexual violence also speaks to nationalist and patriarchal views of women's bodies. In many cultures and religions, a great deal of importance is placed on the sexual purity of women (especially before marriage), their sexual monogamy once married and men's certainty that their children are indeed their children. The sexual activities (or lack thereof) of women are understood to reflect the honour of entire families. That is why the punishments can be so severe when women break the rules, such as in the case of honour killings. In nationalist discourses, women's bodies are seen to represent the honour of an entire nation. Rapes by invading troops, then, are seen as an attack on the honour of the nation, an insult to individual men whose partners' or daughters' purity has been tainted, and a threat to the ethnic, cultural and religious purity of the next generation. Here we see the real problem in focusing only on sexual violence in conflict and neglecting the issue of domestic violence both in peacetime and conflict: there is only widespread concern for the safety and rights of women when violations of those rights are perceived to affect men, and the nation as a whole. This consideration also builds more layers into the understandings of religion and culture explored in the previous chapter.

Returning to the ICAI report, it concludes that the main success of the PSVI initiative has been in 'making the UK a leading voice in the international effort to address conflict-related sexual violence' (2020, 15). This resonates with a feminist and postcolonial analysis of the UK's Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative, which might lead us to question whether the whole outcome has been to position the UK as a protector of Southern women on the global stage, without much evidence to suggest that position is justified. The UK certainly succeeded in gaining attention for its claims to be combatting sexual violence against women. What it actually achieved in terms of protecting women, and men, is less clear.

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