Women's Bodies Are Battlefields

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BETH SPEAKE, APR 25 2012

'Women's bodies are battlefields': How women's bodies are targeted in times of conflict, and how this relates to violence against women during 'peacetime'.

The targeting of women's bodies in times of conflict has come to light as a systematic strategy which has been used by different actors in many different contexts worldwide. Specific forms of violence, especially sexual violence, are used against women in what has come to be defined as 'gender-based violence', violence which targets individuals or groups of individuals by virtue of their gender. Thus, though it is clear that men are also the targets and victims of violence, it is the gendered nature of violence which marks women's experiences as different. Sexual violence against women during conflict often becomes the accepted norm, as militarisation and increased access to weapons result in high levels of brutality and impunity (IRIN, 2004, p.11). However, violence against women during conflict cannot be separated from violence against women during 'peacetime', and forms of violence, such as public rape, designed to humiliate communities, only function in a context where deeply held patriarchal views permeate society (Pankhurst, 2008, p.306). Furthermore, connections between militarisation and encouragement of violence against women during conflict cannot be separated from evidence showing the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault in the military, and high levels of domestic abuse in military families: men's behaviour towards women in one context must be linked to their behaviour towards women in another (Kelly, 2000). This essay will analyse the connections between violence against women in 'wartime' and 'peacetime', with reference to the case study of Guatemala, arguing that notions of wartime and peacetime violence are problematic, and that violence against women in both contexts is inextricably linked.

Sexual violence against women has been a part of conflict and war throughout history. However, it is only more recently that it has come to be recognised as a systematic strategy employed by actors during conflict (Copelon, 2002), and only in the last 15-20 has sexual violence come to prominence and gained recognition as an issue warranting attention and action from the international community (IRIN, 2004). Specifically, recent widespread use of rape in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and the Balkans, has contributed to the increasing attention paid by the international community and non-governmental organisations to the routine use of sexual violence and gendered nature of violence against women. The mass rape of Bosnian-Muslim women in the Balkans provoked international outrage and became a significant factor in the debate over the re-conceptualisation of rape and other forms of sexual violence as 'war crimes' (Copelon, 2002, p.195; Robertson, 2006, p.392). The rape of Rwandan women on 'a scale that surpasses the imagination' (Layika quoted in Kelly, 2000, p.54) also fore-grounded the issue. These situations both led, in part, to the International Criminal Court (ICC) declaring in 1998 that gender-based violence did indeed constitute a war crime (IRIN, 2004, p.5). However, this recent attention belies the widespread occurrence of rape in conflict for many centuries prior to this (Robertson, 2006). Historically, gender-based violence has been ignored and unpunished, implicitly condoned through the prevalent and widely held assumption that rape and sexual violence are an unavoidable and inevitable element of conflict (IRIN, 2004). Moreover, despite the recent attention to the issue of gender-based violence, enforcement of human rights law and international human rights treaties, particularly those laws dealing with 'women's rights', remains weak (McQuigg, 2007, p.474), and gender-based violence continues to affect great swathes of the world's population. Thus, despite the declaration to the contrary at the 1993 United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, women's rights still struggle to be seen as human rights (Moser, 2001, p.32).

Clearly, then, sexual violence against women in times of conflict is a topic which requires urgent attention and needs to be addressed by concerted, joint national efforts. However, sexual violence is by no means confined to times of war, and nor are the perpetrators restricted to the ranks of the 'enemy' (Bunch, 1990). Domestic violence against women, that is, violence which takes place against women in the 'private' sphere, perpetrated by a family member or partner (and which includes forms of sexual violence), is also a global problem which transcends differences of nation, social class, 'race', ethnicity, religion and age. An oft-quoted statistic claims domestic violence to be the biggest single cause of death for women aged 16 – 44 worldwide (for example, see Bunch, 1990; Amnesty International, 2011). Whilst the use of such statistics if often contentious, it goes someway to demonstrating the extent of the issue. As Kelly (2000) argues:

'The route to connection between women, across nationalist and other divisions, was agreement that the most basic, shared, threat was being killed by a member of one's own family. These routine, unremarked, daily encounters with violence and coercion were understood as powerful constraints on women's freedom' (Kelly, 2000, p.53)

Thus, the home is often a dangerous place for women (Pankhurst, 2008), and much violence against them takes place not in times of conflict but in 'peacetime'. Furthermore, post-conflict situations often have strong continuities with conflict, with levels of violence against women often prone to rise following the formal cessation of hostilities (Pankhurst, 2008, pp.2-4). This raises fundamental questions about what 'wartime' and 'peacetime' mean for women, and how violence in each context is related to the other. As the Integrated Regional Information Networks 2004 report 'Our Bodies – Their Battle Ground: Gender-based Violence in Conflict Zones', states:

'The extreme violence that women suffer during conflict does not arise solely out of the conditions of war; it is directly related to the violence that exists in women's lives during peacetime. Throughout the world, women experience violence because they are women (…) They are subjected to gender-based persecution, discrimination and oppression, including sexual violence and slavery.' (IRIN, 2004, p.11)

It is clear, therefore, that in the context of widespread, pervasive violence against women, the conventional distinctions between war/peace and public/private (Kelly, 2000) must be challenged. Violence against women transcends these boundaries, and to confront it, the connections between violence against women in different contexts must be examined.

Sexual violence against women happens in many different contexts, and the literature reveals several different levels of analysis, 'layers' of theorisation. There are also many different ways in which rape is conflict is justified and characterised. The first, and perhaps most obvious, level of analysis of sexual violence is that pertaining to the rape of women in conflict by combatants. Over recent years, mass rape has been documented in many different countries, including Bosnia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo: for example, between 20,000 – 50,000 women in Bosnia were raped by Serb forces; in Sierra Leone, it is estimated that 50% of the surviving female population have been subjected to sexual violence (IRIN, 2004, pp.3-5). Numerous authors have theorised as to why widespread rape of women, perpetrated by soldiers, combatants and rebels, occurs in war. Arguably the most common categorisation of sexual violence against women during conflict is as 'war booty', with enemy women being seen as legitimate targets for sexual abuse by victorious forces (Pankhurst, 2008, p.305). In addition, the rape of 'enemy women', as well as being seen as a 'reward' for combatants, has also been characterised as a military strategy which seeks to undermine and humiliate the male opposition forces. In this way, rape, particularly public rape, is used to mock the enemy men's inability to protect their women (Pankhurst, 2008, p.306). Other theories suggest that sexual violence against women is used systematically as a male bonding exercise, whereby men affirm one another as men through the humiliation and objectification of women (Kelly, 2000, p.59), and which raises the morale of the combatants and acts as a motivation for fighters. This can be clearly illustrated by the industrialisation of sexual slavery by the Japanese military during the Second World War: up to 400,000, mainly Korean, women were kidnapped or deceived into the so called 'comfort stations', and were raped repeatedly to 'motivate as well as reward' the Japanese soldiers (Copelon, 2002, p.201). This pattern, albeit on a smaller scale, has been repeated in a number of conflict situations, with brothels being set up around army bases to 'service' soldiers, based on the assumption that military men *need* 'sexualised rest' (Kelly and Radford, 1998, p.75). In these contexts, then, sexual

violence against women is explicitly promoted by the military, and by extension, the state.

A further 'layer' of theorisation links the sexual violence against women in conflict to militarisation (Hollander, 1996). High levels of sexual harassment and rape *within* the military, and high levels of partner and child abuse within military families, cannot be separated from the state sanctioned sexual violence against women described above. Research undertaken by the US army, published in 2003, reported that 'severe aggression' against partners and spouses was three times higher in military families than in civilian ones (IRIN, 2004, pp.11-15), and that following the demobilisation of soldiers there is often a spike in domestic violence, suggesting that many combatants have difficulty making the transition to peacetime non-violent behaviour (Pankhurst, 2008, p.7). However, debates continue over whether this violence is due to soldiers' experiences of traumatic violence during conflict, or whether it can be more clearly linked to the culture of violence and inherent sexism which permeate the military forces (Pankhurst, 2008, p.7; Kelly, 2000). Sexual harassment and rape of female colleagues by male soldiers is commonplace, and routinely tolerated in the military (Kelly and Radford, 1998, p.74). A recent report suggested that a female soldier serving in Iraq for the US military is more likely to be sexually assaulted by a fellow soldier than killed by enemy fire (SHARP, 2011). This research arguably demonstrates the problematic connections between militarism and violent masculinities, illustrating that 'the battlefield' and the home cannot be artificially separated, as men's behaviour towards women in one setting is manifestly linked to their behaviour in another (Kelly, 2000). This evidence suggests that soldiers' transition to non-violent behaviour following demobilisation or cessation of formal combat is compromised by a number of different factors. Among these, the explicit patriarchal and heterosexist attitudes prevalent in the military, must be recognised.

However, at a more fundamental level, another 'layer' of theorisation links the sexual violence against women in conflict to the concept of patriarchy: crucial to understanding the links between violence against women in conflict and violence against women in all other contexts is an examination of the discriminatory structures and beliefs which permeate our societies, and the positions (both literal and symbolic) which women hold in them. Deeply held patriarchal beliefs and strong patriarchal social relations are necessary factors in engendering high levels of sexual violence against women, and to the 'success' of rape as a strategy to humiliate and undermine male opposition forces (Pankhurst, 2008, p.306). Rape of enemy women in conflict can be seen as being *aimed* at men, through the use of a woman's body as a vessel (IRIN, 2004, p.7), violating both men's honour and their exclusive right to sexual possession of his woman as his property (Copelon, 2002, p.196). Thus, the rape of women as a strategy designed to humiliate men and the community 'reflects the fundamental objectification of women. Women are the target of the abuse at the same time as their subjectivity is completely denied' (Copelon, 2002, p.203). However, the fact that rape is fundamentally violence against women – against their body, autonomy, integrity, security, and self-esteem – is often obscured (Copelon, 2002, p.197). Crucially, though, it must be recognised that rape that gets recognition as a war crime is not necessarily any more 'brutal, relentless or dehumanizing than the 'private' rapes of everyday life' (Copelon, 2002, p.204).

The issues discussed in the preceding sections of the essay can be directly illustrated with reference to the situation in Guatemala, where the extreme and widespread levels of violence and brutality against women during the civil war can be seen both as an effect of the deeply patriarchal nature of Guatemalan society prior to and during the conflict (Jackson, 2007), and as a cause of the continuing extreme violence against women, and the acceptance of gender-based violence, in the country today.

During the 36 year long civil war (1960 – 1996) an estimated 200,000 people were murdered[1], which along with the extreme brutality of the violence committed make it one of the bloodiest in Latin America to date (Human Rights Watch, 2008). Carey and Torres (2010) document some of the methods of torture used against civilians, describing the public evisceration of pregnant women, people being burned alive, and systematic decapitation of victims (Carey and Torres, 2010, pp.156-157). Furthermore, the official report of the Guatemala's Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), '*Guatemala: Memory of Silence'* (1999), attributed responsibility for 93% of the human rights violations to the army or armed forces acting under their direction such as the Civil Patrols, clearly demonstrating the widespread use of state-sanctioned violence. However, although men also suffered a great deal of violence and torture during the civil war, the forms of violence used against them were much less often related to their sexuality (Hollander, 1996, p.46). The methods of violence and torture used against women on the other hand, including

forced nudity and rape, the targeting of sexual organs, and specific forms of torture related to pregnancy and childbirth, were truly gender specific (Hollander, 1996, p.69). Mass rape and sexual mutilation formed a key part of the army and civil patrols strategy (Amnesty International, 2002, pp.34-36). Moreover, the torture can be interpreted both as direct violence against women, and as well a form of symbolic violence. The public rape of women, in front of their loved ones and the community, and the removal of the foetus from the body of a pregnant woman, were often precursors to mass assassinations – signifying the 'symbolic appropriation of the community's future' (Carey and Torres, 2010, p.157). Furthermore, during the civil war, the violence also had a particular racialised characteristic. In Guatemala, indigenous people form 43% of the population, and Mayan women were specifically targeted for sexual violence (Beltran and Freeman, 2007). The report by Guatemala's Commission for Historical Clarification estimates that 88.8% of those who suffered sexual violence were Mayan, and that the majority of abuse and torture took place in the early 1980's in the indigenous rural highland regions of Guatemala, demonstrating the racialised nature of the violence (Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification, 1999).

However, the violence endured by women in Guatemala during the internal armed conflict did not end with the signing of the peace accords in 1996 (GHRC, 2009), and women are currently being killed at nearly same rate as in the time of genocide during the late 1980s (Carey and Torres, 2010). A recently acknowledged phenomenon, now commonly referred to as 'femicide', the killing of a woman *because* of her gender, has been proliferating in Guatemala (and in Central America more generally) since the official end of the civil war in 1996. It was estimated that in 2007, two women were violently killed each day (Instituto del Tercer Mundo, 2007, p.256). As was the case during the civil war, men are also killed at an extremely high rate in Guatemala today as high levels of criminal violence continue (Hudson and Taylor, 2010). However, the brutality and methods exhibited in the femicides are totally distinct and set them apart from other murders. Most men murdered in Guatemala are killed without any intimate physical contact between perpetrator and victim, whereas women bear scars of sexual abuse, torture and mutilation, and the majority of the victims are raped before their death (Center for Gender and Refugee studies, 2006, p.9). This fundamentally challenges the notion of 'peacetime' for women. As the Guatemala Human Rights Commission conclude:

'*It is impossible not to relate the violence during the internal conflict with the current wave of brutal murders of women, given that thousands of men were trained to commit acts of gendered violence and subsequently reintegrated into society'* (GHRC, 2009, p.4)

Furthermore, as Hollander (1996) argues, in generally militarised social environments, or in situations of state terror, such as was seen in Argentina and Guatemala, 'the parameters for misogyny widen as entire societies are permeated by antagonistic attitudes towards women' (Hollander, 1996, p.61).

However, femicide and high levels of rape and domestic violence can also be seen as evidence of the continuing gender-based aggression which is prevalent in many Central and South American countries where patriarchal society and misogynistic culture persists (Beltran and Freeman, 2007), irrespective of the legacies of internal conflicts. Femicides, arguably, are the 'tip of the iceberg' in cycles of gender-based aggression imposed by patriarchal societies (Prieto-Carrón et al., 2007). Women in Guatemala are vulnerable due to a deep-rooted patriarchal culture of machismo, where misogyny is widely tolerated and violent deaths are arguably used in some ways as an intimidation tactic to 'keep women in line' (Jackson, 2007, p.8). The *public* violence of femicides – bodies of victims are left in public spaces in an estimated 85% of cases (GHRC, 2009) – serves as a means of spreading fear among women and thus represents an attempt to control their behaviour and mobility (Carey and Torres, 2010, p.150). Many authors and activists have characterised femicide as a backlash against women who have stepped out of traditional 'women's' roles, for example by earning and independent living (Prieto-Carrón et al., 2007, p.29). Furthermore, women in Guatemala are not only victimised through the high levels of sexual violence and murder, but are also often victimised as rape and domestic violence victims, or as relatives of murdered women, by police and other state services such as health providers, many of whom continue to hold sexist views about 'appropriate' behaviour for women (Beltran and Freeman, 2007, p.12). Thus, gender-based violence is a problem distinct from both the high levels of criminal violence in Guatemala, and the impact of the civil war, and should be treated as such by the authorities.

However, it can be argued that state inaction and complicity in Guatemala has actually facilitated and encouraged femicides (Prieto-Carrón et al., 2007, p.36). The civil war normalised violence and rape, and several experts have argued that it was 'the genesis of both femicide and the state's complicity in it' (Carey and Torres, 2010, p.144). Furthermore, the men who committed sexual atrocities against women have rarely been brought to trial, with devastating consequences. As Beltran and Freeman argue:

'*The state's failure to bring to justice those responsible for the atrocities perpetrated during the war or to fully implement the commitments regarding women's rights contained in the Peace Accords has left a terrible legacy that continues to foster much of the discrimination and violence that threaten the lives of Guatemalan women today.'* (Beltran and Freeman, 2007, p.7)

Moreover, the state's inaction and complicity in the years since the civil war have further exacerbated the situation. The state of Guatemala is a signatory to the international Convention of Belem do Para, which is the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women. They have also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (McQuigg, 2007). Further, in 2008, the Guatemalan congress passed the Law Against Femicide and Other Forms of Violence Against Women, finally recognising femicide as a punishable crime (GHRC, 2009). However, convictions remain woefully low and the number of killings continues to rise (Carey and Torres, 2010). Murders are committed with impunity: prosecutions are so rare as to be practically non-existent: in 97% of the femicide cases arising during 2006, no arrests were made (Prieto-Carrón et al., 2007, p.31). The failure of the government to act to implement laws and honour their obligations with respect to the women's rights conventions means that not only are they are failing to meet their international responsibilities, but they are also perpetuating a culture of impunity by letting those who rape, torture and murder women go unpunished (Beltran and Freeman, 2007). Furthermore, the state has often dismissed the violence by claiming that the women killed are involved in gangs or 'maras', and that the femicides are simply violent acts connected with criminality and drug trafficking (GHRC, 2009, p.4), denying a wider social problem.

Clearly, however, femicide in Guatemala must be understood beyond individual violent acts: violence against women has become 'a constitutive – rather than aberrant – feature of the social fabric' (Carey and Torres, 2010, p.144). The disappearances and killings of women are arguably a manifestation of a continuum of gender-based violence that takes different forms, from verbal harassment to domestic violence, rape, and murder, but are all mutually reinforcing (Beltran and Freeman, 2007, p.11; Kelly, 2000). While the violence of the 36 year long civil war has played an important role in creating long term acceptance of high levels of violence, it is not the only factor which has led to the growth of femicide in the country. Arguably, Guatemala is a 'quintessentially misogynistic culture' (Jackson, 2007, p.8), with sexist attitudes pervading popular culture, state institutions and social relations. There is widespread societal acceptance and perpetuation of strong gender bias and 'machista' attitudes, and with tradition dictating that a 'woman's place' is in the home, and victim blaming is common where women are seen to have stepped out of their sphere, for example by taking paid work in a factory (GHRC, 2009, p.5; p.12). These social attitudes are enshrined in Guatemalan legislation: for example, until 2006, marital rape was not a crime punishable by the penal code; a rapist could be exonerated if he agreed to marry his victim (unless she was under 12 years old) (GHRC, 2009, p.6); and domestic violence is still not considered a punishable crime unless the bruises are visible for ten days or more (GHRC, 2010). Furthermore, throughout the twentieth century the state not only condoned gender-based violence, it has used institutionalised patriarchy combined with the use of violence as a tool of control over the population, and the military actively promoted violence against women (Carey and Torres, 2010, p.161). As Carey and Torres (2010) state:

'*Femicide as the socially tolerated murder of women in Guatemala relies on the presence of systemic impunity, historically rooted gender inequalities, and the pervasive normalization of violence as a social relation.'* (Carey and Torres, 2010, p.160)

Thus, the situation in Guatemala, in particular the recent growth of femicide, illustrates the relation between violence against women in 'peacetime' and in times of conflict: in Guatemala, the torture and murder of women cannot be attributed solely to the legacy of the civil war, but rather 'examining the social support networks of gender-based violence compels us to confront the potential horrors of patriarchy' (Carey and Torres, 2010, p.162). While

systematic sexual violence has been a part of conflict, worldwide, throughout history, it is only in recent years that it has gained attention and been internationally recognised as a potential 'war crime' by the International Criminal Court, and that international treaties have attempted to legislate against violence against women. However, international human rights legislation enforcement remains weak, and gender-based violence often still struggles to be seen as a human rights abuse (Moser, 2001). Moreover, international attention to violence against women during conflict, while welcome, does not even begin to address the complex interlinkages between violence against women during conflict, and the violence that takes place against them during 'peacetime'. The targeting of women's bodies in conflict is both an effect and a cause of the acceptability of violence against women. It functions to subordinate women further, and creates a climate where violence becomes more accepted and is committed with impunity. Thus, gender-based violence during conflict cannot be analysed as fundamentally different from violence in 'peacetime': violence against women in the context of armed conflict simply intensifies already existing attitudes and behaviours (Kelly, 2000, p.55). As Rehn and Sirleaf state: 'violence against women in wartime is a reflection of violence against women in peacetime' (Rehn and Sirleaf,2002, p.11).

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[1] In terms of population size, the numbers killed in the conflict were extremely high (see Luciak, 2008)

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Written by: Beth Speake
Written at: University of Leeds
Written for: Polly Wilding
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