

Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War

Written by Justyna Maciejczak

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'Cheaper Than Bullets': Sexual Violence as a Viable Strategy of Contemporary Warfare

Contemporary conflicts, often portrayed as 'new wars', are characterised by high levels of violence and inconceivable cruelty predominantly targeting innocent civilians (Kaldor 1998). Among many forms of violence, sexual violence has in recent years become a central focus of both academic study and journalistic writing. The prevalence of sexual violence in armed conflicts, and its systematic and widespread use against civilian populations, led many scholars to formulate a new concept that underscores the strategic use of sexual violence as a 'weapon of war'. This framework focuses on exploring how sexual violence becomes a viable part of the military strategy directly employed by armed groups to achieve political and military objectives, as in the case of ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia or Rwanda. But how can this theory be applied to wars that lack clearly defined political and military goals, such as those that seem to be motivated by greed rather than grievance?

This paper will argue that, in order to apply the concept of the strategic use of sexual violence to contemporary wars, the analysis has to shift its focus. Instead of asking about the effectiveness of sexual violence in pursuing *military agenda*, one has to study how sexual violence is employed to further interests of armed groups, including their *economic interests*. Secondly, the prevalence of sexual violence will be explained as a product of a specific socio-cultural context that renders sexual violence as an extremely effective weapon of war in particular settings. In other words, this essay will bridge the gap between competing theories of sexual violence that ascribe its prevalence to different factors such as gender inequalities, cultural beliefs, social norms, etc.

Sexual Violence as a 'Weapon of War'

There is little, if any, doubt that sexual violence constitutes 'a coherent, coordinated, logical, and brutally effective means of prosecuting warfare' (Gottschall 2004: 131). It is coherent in a way that it targets its victims, either selectively or indiscriminately, causing maximum damage in targeted communities through their exposure to most atrocious practices, e.g. gang rape, forced incest, sexual mutilation, etc. Regardless of the situations where the highest structures of military command give its soldiers explicit orders to commit rape, even in the absence of such instructions, testimonies of the survivors point out that the perpetrators seem to have planned the raid in advance and acted in a coordinated manner at the crime scene (Maedl 2011: 142).

Sexual violence, as other forms of conflict-related violence, is logical because it exploits local economic, social and cultural context in pursuit of strategic advantage by one military group over the other(s). Finally, it is very effective in producing concrete strategic results at a relatively low price. The fact that it is cheap and easily available, and at the same time it has a crushing and long-lasting effect on targeted populations, renders it an appealing tool of warfare, especially in conflict zones where the military actors do not have access to technologically advanced, expensive weaponry. Additionally, its efficiency lies in multiple functions of sexual violence in addressing and fulfilling physiological, psychological and social needs at individual and collective level. In other words, apart from achieving strategic goals in a military campaign, the use of sexual violence can bring additional benefits for its perpetrators, e.g. strengthen internal cohesion of units, boost group morale, serve as a prize ('spoils of war') for underpaid soldiers, release sexual, and psychological tension heightened in combat.

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There are various strategic outcomes of using sexual violence as a tool of war. According to Cheryl Bernard, it can: 1) facilitate ethnic cleansing by making people flee their homes; 2) demoralise the adversary; 3) signal the intention to break up the society; 4) inflict trauma and psychological damage on the opponent; 5) provide psychological benefits to the perpetrators; and 6) inflict a blow against a collective enemy if the attacked group has a high symbolic value (Bernard 1994: 35-39). Moreover, the strategic functions of sexual violence are closely interlinked with the features of the conflict itself. In ethnic wars, which often turn into genocidal wars, rape and other forms of sexual violence often become 'central technique in the technology of genocide', as we have seen in the case of Yugoslavia, Rwanda, or, most recently, Darfur (Cohen 2011: 7). It causes a mass exodus of ethnic populations from disputed territories, ensures that displaced people will not return to their homes in the future, and serves to mark women of opposing ethnicity as 'sexually contaminated' (Cohen 2011: 7).

However, not all civil wars can be classified as ethnic conflicts. In fact, the multitude of actors and agendas fuelling contemporary conflicts makes it often impossible to clearly label them as political, ideological, economic, social, ethnic, or religious wars. Many scholars in recent years have turned their attention towards studying economic motivations as main drivers of contemporary civil wars (Collier & Hoeffler 2000; Agbonifo 2004; Ballentine & Nitzschke 2003; Berdal & Malone 2000; Bodea & Elbadawi 2007). When exploring links between war economy and intensity of violence, Jeremy Weinstein theorises that in 'opportunistic rebellions', which attract more rent-seeking individuals than politically committed activists, indiscriminate violence is used against civilians to gain access to areas rich in lootable resources such as gold, diamonds, minerals, and timber (Weinstein 2007: 205-209). Rape and sexual violence in this case might have a direct purpose of clearing out resource-rich areas for illegal exploitation, or it might serve to terrorise, pacify and demoralise local populations to make them more complacent, and, hence, prevent them from obstructing illegal economic activities of military groups.

Furthermore, since sexual violence has become highly publicised, it might be used as a strategy of diversion in a way it arrests public attention, which focuses solely on the problem of sexual abuse. Such strategy of disinformation might actually help in obscuring illegal economic activities taking place concurrently, and thus prevent international community from undertaking actions aimed at disruption of these illegal activities. Though there is not enough evidence in support of this thesis, a glimpse at the map of contemporary conflicts reveals that some of the major civil wars associated with illegal extraction of lootable resources (DRC, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, CAR) have also witnessed widespread sexual abuses. The existence and nature of the links between illegal extraction of resources and sexual violence have not been fully determined. Nonetheless, it is an interesting area for future study that might shed more light on the dynamics of 'opportunistic wars'.

A Case Study of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Conflict in the DRC is an example of a contemporary war that has been dominated by the narrative underscoring the scale of sexual abuse perpetrated by numerous armed groups operating in the eastern part of the country. Provinces of North and South Kivu, as well as Ituri, have been exposed to high rates of violence since the beginning of the Second Congo War in 1998. The involvement of many militias, both local and foreign, fighting for the domination over the territory, which is known to be abundant in natural resources (tin, gold, coltan), resulted in rampant violence decimating local populations, just as described by J. Weinstein. Sexual violence has been so widespread that the DRC has been dubbed the rape capital of the world by the UN officials. Sexual violence has been also perceived as a 'particularly effective weapon to subdue, punish, or exact revenge upon entire communities' (Pratt & Werchick 2004: 7).

The analysis of reports that collect data about victims and perpetrators sheds more light on patterns which characterise the use sexual violence in the DRC. Firstly, sexual violence targets its victims indiscriminately. Though women and young girls dominate in the victim statistics, both males and females, including children and elderly, fall prey to sexual abuse. Sexual violence takes different forms and involves rape with the use of foreign objects such as knives, glass, rusty nails, stones, peppers, bottles etc. Gang rape, forced incest, sexual mutilation and sexual slavery are common features of the conflict. They usually take place in front of the witnesses, including members of the family, and take form of the public spectacle. Furthermore, the victims of sexual violence usually report having their houses pillaged, property damaged, and family members killed or abducted.

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The first observation stemming from this grim picture is that sexual abuse in the DRC is predominantly used instrumentally to terrorise targeted populations. According to victims' testimonies, perpetrators' objectives are to displace communities, instil fear within them, to punish them for the alleged collaboration with the enemy, transmit diseases (HIV/AIDS) and impregnate women with a view to disrupting the unity of targeted communities (Maedl 2011: 145).

Secondly, even though no substantial evidence points to the soldiers receiving direct orders to commit sexual atrocities, up to seventy per cent of the victims believe that the raids were planned in advance (Galloy, Sow & Hall 2005: 35). The raids on towns and villages, according to eye witnesses, are methodically executed in the presence of commanders who coordinate the actions of their militiamen, lending support to the claim that sexual violence is a part of military strategy.

Thirdly, the forms of sexual violence seem to be designed to cause maximum damage, with sexual mutilation and particularly brutal forms of rape affecting reproductive capabilities of women and girls, and often resulting in victims' deaths. Since these particularly atrocious forms of sexual abuse do not provide a direct sexual gratification for the perpetrators, and the victims are chosen indiscriminately, regardless of their age, the perpetrators' actions, at least in the majority of cases, are not motivated biologically and sexually, but rather seem to represent a scheme designed strategically, to instil terror in targeted populations. Furthermore, the social stigma and marginalisation that affect the victims contribute to the disintegration of family units and communities, making them more vulnerable and, hence, less able to defy and confront militias that prey upon them. Thus, armed groups are able to exert control over a conquered territory. As Sara Meger notes, 'Sexual violence has proven an effective tool ... effectively restricting freedom of movement and regular economic activity, giving the armed group the liberty to take over control of that economic activity without interference' (Meger 2010: 133).

In other words, in some opportunistic wars, as in the case of the DRC, sexual violence, like violence in general, is *employed strategically to further economic interests of the armed groups*, for which war economy is a source of personal gain. However, the prevalence of sexual violence, employed as a viable strategy by armed militias, is highly correlated with social and cultural factors defining given society, and thus depends on a local context that might encourage instrumental use of sexual violence.

Socio-Cultural Context

What makes rape and sexual violence such an effective weapon of war? How does it become so deadly in its consequences for the victims, and so beneficial for the perpetrators? If we define sexual violence in strategic terms, as a weapon of war, we have to turn to the definition of 'weapon' itself. 'Weapon' is a tool designed to inflict hurt and damage upon the adversary. In order to be effective, it needs to exploit the vulnerabilities of the target, be them physical, psychological or structural, and have long-lasting effects, rendering the target even more vulnerable, and, hence, prone to further abuse that would result in its defeat.

Sexual violence can be conceived of as an effective weapon of war because it exploits local context, i.e. socio-cultural narratives that serve as a basis for the creation of social norms and institutions that altogether guarantee social order at any level of human organisation. As Maria Olujić points out, 'the use of sexual violence in conflict is an effective war strategy because of pre-existing socio-cultural dynamics that attach concepts of honour, shame and sexuality to women's bodies in peacetime' (Olujić 1998: 31-32). This view is supported by Cynthia Enloe, who writes:

If military strategists (and their civilian allies and superiors) imagine that women provide the backbone of the enemy's culture, if they define women chiefly as breeders, if they define women as men's property and as the symbols of men honour, if they imagine that residential communities rely on women's work – if any or all these beliefs about society's proper gendered division of labour are held by war-waging policy makers – they will be tempted to devise an overall military operation that includes their male soldiers' sexual assault on women (Enloe 2000: 134).

Further support to this thesis can be found in testimonies of men and women of the DRC, who point out the significance of local customs in creating an environment that makes sexual violence a viable war strategy. In

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Congolese society, in which 'women are generally perceived as the core of the community, as they are the caregivers, child-bearers, nurturers, and workers for the community', sexual violence has a double impact (Meger 2010: 130). It is a physical as well as a symbolic attack on that community, which becomes polluted through violation of sexual integrity of women and girls. In patriarchal societies, such violation is equal to 'social murder', as the victims are perceived as 'spoiled goods' and rejected by their families and communities. Sexual violence constitutes also a message sent to husbands, fathers, brothers and other men in a given community, underscoring their failure to protect their women, households and community as a whole. Such communication serves the ultimate goal of splitting communities through infliction of shame and humiliation on their members. In the long run, sexual violence might effectively inhibit the ability of a given community to reproduce itself, thus it is equal to its extermination, which might play an important role in the agenda of armed groups seeking to exert total control over a disputed territory.

The analysis has focused so far on the socio-cultural dynamics of gender and traditional roles attached to being male/female in patriarchal societies, and thus accentuated the symbolic meaning of sexual violence targeting women and girls as community pillars. However, socio-cultural context has also a strong potential to explain the inversion of victim-perpetrator roles, i.e. the situation when males become victims, and women the perpetrators of sexual violence. Since masculinity is traditionally associated with power and domination, and femininity with submissiveness (hence victimhood), 'to rape a man or to sexually violate him is to assert a status of power and aggression, a model of "masculinity", to the perpetrator and to emasculate, feminise or "homosexualise" the victim' (Solangon & Patel 2012: 427). For males, the consequences of being a victim of sexual abuse are far-reaching and include social rejection and marginalisation. For perpetrators (be them males or females), sexual violence, apart from helping to further strategic interests, might also serve to preserve or promote their status in the hierarchy of a military group (Cohen 2007; Cohen 2011; Gerecke 2009; Wood 2006; Wood 2009).

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper focuses on the conceptualisation of sexual violence as a weapon of war, i.e. how it is employed by military parties to the conflict to further their strategic interests. The main assumption of this essay is that, contrary to popular opinion expressed by many contemporary scholars, who deem the concept of sexual violence 'weaponisation' valid when its use is systematic, widespread, and helps to achieve *military objectives of warfare*, e.g. elimination of enemy defined in terms of opposing ethnicity, the nature of contemporary armed conflicts calls for a more comprehensive approach towards sexual violence. Due to the fact that many of the contemporary civil wars are characterised by variety of factors, with 'greed' being a chief motivation in the so called 'opportunistic wars', sexual violence should be understood as a means towards achieving *strategic interests* of particular groups, be them political, military, ideological or economic. For instance, the analysis of the conflict in the DRC sheds more light on how sexual violence can be used instrumentally to break up communities, rendering them more vulnerable and thus enabling the military groups to cease control of the territory. The fact that the control of the territory is equal to the control of the revenue from the illegal exploitation of natural resources is a factor that needs additional consideration.

However, the conflict dynamics in the DRC, and the way in which sexual violence fits into its landscape, though might serve as a point of reference in studying strategic use of sexual violence, do not produce a universal model that could be applied across different case studies. Nonetheless, one of the main findings of this paper underscores the importance of socio-cultural context in explaining why in some war settings sexual violence becomes such an effective weapon of war. Hence, sexual violence, though barbaric, heinous and atrocious, is employed when its use makes strategic sense, i.e. is capable of inflicting maximum damage at a low cost and high pay-off. This is what makes it such a deadly efficient tool of warfare.

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