



War, Society, and Sexual Violence:

A Feminist Analysis of the Origin and Prevention of War Rape

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Armed conflict is a predictor of sexual violence against women Hynes 2004 . Rape in war is not a new phenomenon but the intensity of the violence inflicted upon victims appears to be on the rise Farr 2009; Gottschall 2004; Hargreaves 2001; Hynes and Cardozo 2000; Hynes 2004 . Prior to the 1990s theorists ignored war rape as a side-effect of conflict or as isolated acts of individual soldiers motivated by sexual desire Høglund 2003 . Heightened attention generated by the efforts of female reporters activists and scholars to document the sexual violence committed as part of the civil wars in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia prompted international outrage. This outrage redirected scholars to understand the origin and dynamics of war rape Gottschall 2004; Gunhammer 2005; Høglund 2003; Hynes 2004; Jennings and Swiss 2001; Seifert 1996; Shanks and Schull 2000 .

War rape is a complex dynamic encompassed by layers of meaning which vary between conflicts. However many feminist scholars are beginning to argue that a common thread underlies most if not all manifestations of war rape. Popular explanations for war rape range from sociobiological theory undergirded by male sexual desire to strategic or genocidal theory that posits rape as a ‘weapon of war.’ These theories are inadequate in their explanatory power and insufficient when it comes to exploring ways to prevent war rape.

In contrast feminist theory points to the gendered social political and economic hierarchies that produce misogynistic cultural norms which are exacerbated in the chaos of war Baaz and Stern 2009; Caprioli 2000; Farr 2009; Seifert 1996; Turpin 2003 . Understanding war rape involves an analysis of the social structures that precede and situate the conflict and an awareness of how war reifies and celebrates militant masculinity Baaz and Stern 2009; Henry 2006; Turpin 2003 . War rape is an extreme manifestation of cultural and political norms that stratify gender and commodify women. Preventing war rape flows from reconfiguring the entrenched social norms that provide the fertile soil for sexual violence to occur.

Throughout this essay the terms “war rape” and “sexual violence” will be used interchangeably primarily because acts of war rape often coincide with additional forms of sexual violence. According to a United Nations Development Fund for Women report released in 2002 sexual violence against women in war includes being raped at home or in public often in front of family members; deliberate HIV infection to ‘contaminate’ the enemy population; sexual slavery and sex trafficking; and forced impregnation or abortion Hynes 2004 . Rape includes forced penetration with a penis or other foreign object such as a stick or weapon as well as genital stabbing and can be perpetrated by a single combatant gangs or by a series of combatants in the form of sex trafficking of women and girls between soldiers. War rape frequently results in serious physical and psychological harm and can be accompanied by torture or indeed regarded as torture [Høglund 2003; Seifert 1996] and death Farr 2009 .

Similarly for the purpose of this essay “war” and “armed conflict” will be used interchangeably and generally defined as political conflicts which involve at least one state or sub-state armed group Farr 2009; Melander 2005 . Hence armed conflicts include both civil and international disputes. This definition is deliberately broad in order to include small scale conflicts within the analysis – such as the recent spate of violence and retaliatory rapes committed by Guinean armed forces against female political protestors Quist-Arcton 2009 . Moreover in line with Hynes 2004 an important aim of this essay is to broaden the popular conception of war to include sexual violence and shed light on war-related discourses concerning social and economic institutions and gender construction in both peace and war. Appropriate use of personal narratives can help to illustrate these connections.

Personal narratives are often difficult to read but it is through them that we can approach an understanding of the lived suffering of thousands of women Farr 2009 . Doug Henry 2006 refers to personal narratives as “privileged forms of knowledge” P.382 . By this Henry 2006 differentiates between knowledge derived from lived experience and knowledge derived through academic study. He further explains that one must be careful not to cloak human suffering in academic language or transform an understanding of violence into a rationalization for violence. Personal narratives remind us to be vigilant of that boundary including the following experience told by a rape survivor from the Ugandan civil war:

I was 30 years old and married when I was gang-raped. I had temporarily separated from my husband amidst fleeing and insecurity when the village was attacked by government

soldiers. I ... ran into the bush where I met my first ordeal. Six soldiers found me hiding and raped me one after another. Before I had recovered I was again gang raped at a military check-point. This time I was raped by 15 soldiers. This left me shattered. I was once again torn to an extent that I could not control my biological functions. The cervix was dislocated and the uterus started hanging out. Whenever I am bathing I have to push it back in. (Turshen 2000:819)

The above narrative touches upon multiple themes packaged into war rape: the tendency for modern conflict to play out on the battlefield of women's homes and bodies (Farr 2009; Hynes 2004; Henry 2006; Turpin 2003); the vulnerability of women to rape in "flight" when they seek protection in refugee camps or neighboring towns (Farr 2009; Hynes and Cardozo 2000; Shanks and Schull 2000; Turpin 2003); and the abject dehumanization of women that are appropriated as sex objects in the most heinous manner.

In modern warfare civilians increasingly find themselves caught in the frontlines of battle (Seifert 1996). Estimates of the civilian death toll range from 75 – 90% with the majority being women and children (Farr 2009). The proximate convergence of combatants and civilians prompts Kathryn Farr (2009) to describe war rape as "site-ubiquitous" meaning that it occurs anywhere, including homes, streets, road blocks, border check-points, detention centers, and refugee camps (p.6).

Numerous obstacles prevent a complete understanding of the amount of sexual violence in any particular conflict. During war legitimate agencies cannot always be situated to collect data or receive reports (Farr 2009). A significant barrier to reporting stems from women's internalization of guilt and shame as a result of cultural views that blame women for men's sexual deviance (Hynes 2004). The strong stigma associated with rape causes many women to fear being rejected by their husbands and community (Hynes and Cardozo 2000; Hynes 2004; Jennings and Swiss 2001; Mukamana and Brysiewicz 2008). Methods for data collection also vary considerably. Statistics on war rape generally overlook variations between number of victims and number of incidents which is important in light of the fact that many women are often repeatedly raped. Rapes of women who are also killed are frequently missing from the data. Fully 25% of the indigenous Shan women raped by the Myanmar armed forces were also killed (Farr 2009).

As a result figures for the prevalence of war rape vary widely. Nonetheless they are still useful for understanding the scope of the violence – and for refuting claims that war rape is committed by a few rogue soldiers (Hoglund 2003; Quist-Arcton 2009). For example:

- Estimates on the number of Muslim women raped by Bosnian Serbs during the civil war in the former Yugoslavia

- range from 20,000 to 60,000 (Hoglund 2003; Seifert 1996);
- Estimates on the number of Rwandan Tutsis raped by Hutus in 1994 range from 250 000 to 500 000 (Hynes 2004; Mukamana and Brysiewicz 2008);
- Figures for the number of women raped by Soviet forces in 1945 Berlin range from 20 000 to 100 000 (Gottschall 2004; Hoglund 2003; Hynes and Cardozo 2000) and 120 000 to 900 000 (Seifert 1996); numbers increase to two million if one considers all of Eastern Germany (Turpin 2003);
- From 1971 – 1972 Pakistani soldiers raped approximately 200 000 Bangladeshi women (Gottschall 2004; Seifert 1996; Turpin 2003); and
- Approximately 94% of surveyed households reported sexual violence during the Sierra Leonean civil war (Hynes 2004).

Until recently, the international community remained silent on the prevalence of war rape (Farr 2009; Shanks and Shull 2000). Anna T. Hoglund (2003) points to the public/private paradox of war rape: the sexual aspect of the violence coupled with cultural taboos confines war rape to the personal or private realm yet its pervasiveness within and across conflicts places rape firmly within the scope of "public" violence. To ensure women's protection and women's justice this paradox must be cast off (Hoglund 2003). The Bassiouni Report produced by a United Nations investigator for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) represented a groundbreaking attempt to document war rape and formed a critical part of the ICTY's ability to prosecute rape as a war crime (Gunhammer 2005).

Acknowledgment and documentation of war rape is the first step toward its prevention. Scholarship on the subject traces an arc from explanations that focus on individual behavior to feminist explanations that point to how cumulative social practices and institutions shape the collective and individual psyches that perpetrate war rape.

Traditional discourse viewed the rape of enemy women as the "victor's reward" or as a property crime violated against men (Hoglund 2003; Pistono 1988). Article 27 of the Fourth Geneva Convention adopted in 1949 states that "women shall be especially protected against any attack on their honor in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault" (Hoglund 2003:355). Depicting rape and sexual violence as an attack on a woman's honor rather than an attack on her body suggests that women have no recourse against attacks on their bodies – and that they do not "own" their bodies. The traditional view of war rape reifies an essentialist portrait that depicts aggressive and sexualized males sully 'pure' women. It reinforces cultural customs that prize women's sexual purity and which are strongly correlative with gender inequalities.

Jonathan Gottschall (2004) embraces the sociobiological

view which explains war rape through a combination of male sexual desire and environmental influences. This perspective claims that sexual desire underlies war rape since anecdotal evidence suggests that young reproductive-age women are the primary targets. He further argues that war rape must be “natural” because of its cross-cultural manifestation and prehistoric origin Gottschall 2004:134 . When soldiers refrain from raping women sociocultural forces are preventing them from acting on their otherwise “natural” inclination to rape.

Thwarted or repressed sexual desire may form a *component* of some incidences of war rape what Farr 2009 refers to as “opportunistic” rape but it does not account for the massive scale of war rape p.14 . Rape makes a literal and symbolic statement that denies a woman her personhood. In each case something else functions to undergird soldiers’ belief that it is acceptable to rape women by force. Sociobiologists may be confusing sexual desire for a motivational factor when it is more an operational necessity. Moreover research suggests that women and girls of all ages are victims of war rape. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo DRC females aged five to 80 suffered gang rapes and had their genitalia punctured with foreign objects Hynes 2004 ; in Liberia 50% of women aged 15 to 70 experienced rape or physical abuse during the 1989 – 1997 civil conflict Hynes and Cardozo 2000).

Ruth Seifert 1996 responds to the sociobiological view with rape studies that consistently show that desire for power and domination over the victim trumps sexual desire as the motivation to rape. Michael Kimmel (2008) argues that cross-cultural studies provide evidence that gender inequality is the primary predictor of gender violence which clearly includes sexual violence by men against women. Thus sexual violence is not hinged on biological drives but on social constructions of gender and sexuality. In the context of war sexual violence tends to be enacted by groups with multiple layers of personal and collective meaning Seifert 1996 .

The scope of war rape documented in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia prompted scholarly and popular discourse to frame war rape as strategic military policy. Rape as a weapon or strategy of war represents an important paradigm shift that places sexual violence at the center of scholarly discourse regarding war ethics and the perils faced by females in modern conflict. Framing war rape as an instrumental act versus an essentialist or incidental act is the gateway through which we can deconstruct the mechanisms which underlie its use Buss 2009 .

In 1975 Susan Brownmiller first drew attention to the instrumental use of rape in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. Brownmiller writes that “[m]an’s discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries” Buss 2009:148 . Brownmiller later qualified some of her controversial statements

and alleged that even though not all men rape all men benefit from the actions of rapists because women’s fear of being raped prevents them from challenging the patriarchal order Pistono 1988 . Brownmiller’s theory is evident in the recent spate of retaliatory rapes in the West African nation of Guinea. On September 28 2009 members of the Guinea armed forces reacted to women’s political protests with rampant and violent rapes in broad daylight. One woman reported being told by a soldier who raped her that “a woman’s place is in the home” and that the rapes were intended to intimidate women into surrendering their shred of political power to the men in charge of the country Quist-Arcton 2009 .

In the former Yugoslavia the war rape committed by Bosnian Serb soldiers exemplifies sexual terrorism since the primary although indirect targets were the male enemy soldiers. Rape became a way to humiliate enemy forces through their inability to protect the community Farr 2009; Gottschall 2004; Shanks and Shull 2000 . From Yugoslavia to the DRC extensive war rape destroys the social fabric because raped women are frequently ostracized by their communities Shanks and Shull 2000 . Still locating proof of war rape’s official sanctioning is extremely difficult. The clearest evidence comes from Rwanda when Hutu leaders gave explicit orders for their soldiers to rape Tutsi women Mukamana and Brysiewicz 2008 . As a result the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda ICTR the court charged with prosecuting war crimes committed during the 1994 civil war characterized the widespread rape of Tutsi women as “genocidal rape” Buss 2009 .

However Doris Buss 2009 cautions against ceasing our analysis of war rape at the point of genocidal or strategic rape. By framing rape as a weapon that one side uses against another we enact a “rape script” that “naturalize[s]” sexual violence and ignores rapes that contradict the rape script Buss 2009:155 . According to the record for the ICTR genocidal rape is defined as a crime against a particular group: Tutsi women. It therefore renders some of the sexual violence invisible; for example the rape of Hutu women Tutsi men and boys and young Hutu boys who were punished for resisting acts of violence. Although these rape dynamics did not occur along the same magnitude as did the rapes of Tutsi women it is troubling that the victims were ignored by the ICTR Buss 2009 .

The concept of strategic or genocidal rape is an improvement on sociobiological theory but it still misses the deeper truth that cultural norms about women’s bodies and women’s sexuality underlie the use of rape as a viable or effective weapon. Consistent with Mukamana and Brysiewicz 2008 it is the “public ownership of women’s sexuality that makes it possible to translate an attack against one woman into an attack against an entire community” (P.383).

Macro-level social systems that subordinate women become

misogynistic when internalized and acted out with sexualized brutality. Seifert 1996 emphasizes the hostility towards women that becomes evident when the most vicious forms of war rape concentrate on the uniquely “feminine” parts of the body: women whose breasts are sliced off stomachs slashed open and vaginas brutalized during or after the rape. The 200 000 women and girls kidnapped by the Japanese armed forces for sexual slavery during World War II were mutilated to prevent pregnancy thus making them constantly available and were referred to as “war supplies” Hynes 2004:438 .

Parallel with this dynamic is the appropriation of women’s bodies as symbols for the larger tribal/ethnic/religious or political collectivity Buss 2009; Turshen 2000 . Women’s bodies are targeted for sexual violence as combatants attempt to wreak havoc on the existing social fabric and inscribe a new social and political ideology Buss 2009; Henry 2006 . A consistent theme throughout is the abrogation of women’s full selfhood and the characterization of women as property – whether they “belong” to their husbands fathers communities or the enemy Turshen 2000).

A recent and revealing study connected the extant economic and political conditions with entrenched cultural norms and the gendered strain produced by prolonged armed conflict. Maria Baaz and Maria Stern 2009 analyze war rape and masculinity through interviews with members of the Congolese state armed forces one of the main perpetrators of rape in the fragile country’s long civil war. The soldiers identified two types of rape “lust rape” and “evil rape” Baaz and Stern 2009:500 511 .

Lust rape is associated with male sexual desire and viewed by soldiers as more excusable than evil rapes. However the interviews drew attention to a deeper motivation that is reflected by the soldiers’ feelings of failure to embody the prescribed expectations of militarized masculinity. The idealized portrait of the masculine soldier combines sexual potency with the provision of material wealth for the family. Women are expected to provide sexual favors in return for material goods meaning that their sexuality is defined in service of men and for a price. In the context of a dysfunctional and corrupt military institution soldiers often go unpaid which leaves their families bereft of support and women with little obligation to satisfy their husbands’ sexual desire. Hence the ideal militarized masculinity is unattainable given the conditions in which the soldiers live Baaz and Stern 2009 .

Persistent poverty “fueled by war and backed by patriarchal or racist rationalizations” breaks down social control mechanisms that usually guard against massive sexual violence Farr 2009:22 . Drawing upon beliefs that women ought to sexually fulfill men rape serves to reinforce their masculinity as the sexually potent fighter. That women do not own their sexuality or control over their bodies is exemplified in an account given by one soldier

who claimed that a rape victim should have agreed to have sex with at least one or two of the soldiers who gang-raped her. In peace-time rape is considered an aberration; in war it is normal Baaz and Stern 2009 . This war-normative view of rape is not confined to the DRC; similar sentiments were reported by local villagers in the Côte d’Ivoire Farr 2009 .

Evil rape is viewed as distinct from lust rape because as one soldier cogently reflects: “If it is only lust then why do you sometimes kill her ” Baaz and Stern 2009:511 . Evil rape is born from anger that is then directed at the enemy population through its women often committed in the fog of drugs and alcohol. But the soldiers’ themes of poverty frustration and sense of powerlessness that underlie evil rape are the same as those that underlie lust rape even though they are interpreted differently by the soldiers interviewed. The explanations for both types of rape are molded out of particular gendered discourses which combine unattainable ideals of masculinity sexualized femininities failing socioeconomic institutions and a corrupt military all within the context of a bloody and protracted civil war that has claimed 5.4 million lives Baaz and Stern 2009 .

The research conducted by Baaz and Stern 2009 is extremely useful for highlighting how larger societal processes often get obscured in the analysis. Meredith Turshen 2000 agrees that sexual violence has social political and economic roots. In her assessment of war rape committed during the Ugandan civil war Turshen 2000 points to the history of colonial practices that engendered regional and ethnic rivalries. Hostilities are further complicated by present-day transnational entities that mandate “structural adjustment” programs divert money away from essential social programs interfere in the political process and sell weapons Buss 2009; Farr 2009; Turshen 2000 . The recent war in Uganda pits the Ugandan government forces in alliance with the rebel Sudanese People’s Liberation Army against the rebel Lord’s Resistance Army which is allied with the Sudanese government. Women are targeted as the wives and mothers of enemy soldiers punished as gendered vessels for factional reproduction. This twisted logic also provides the indefensible justification behind appropriating women in the sexual service of the enemy group. The commoditization of women is indicated in the following narrative from Uganda:

In the dawn of peace governments have to determine how to provide justice for past atrocities while ensuring that the concept and practice of justice is enfolded into future governance; what law professor Martha Minnow eloquently calls “steering a path between too much memory and too much forgetting” Franke 2006:813 . The importance of prosecuting rape as a war crime should not be underestimated; but prosecution’s preventive strength is limited Hargreaves 2001 . A feminist theory of war rape emphasizes the structural arrangements that form the

foundation for sexual violence and so reconstituting these arrangements assumes critical importance.

Numerous authors agree that gender inequalities are a predictor of armed conflict (Caprioli 2000; Farr 2009; Melander 2005) which in turn predicts sexual violence (Hynes 2004; Kimmel 2008). Mary Caprioli (2000) tests this hypothesis using the Militarized Interstate Dispute dataset which maintains records of 2187 international disputes involving 159 states. Her study design calculates gender equality in terms of social equality (determined by fertility rates which are closely linked with female social status), political equality (with respect to the percentage of women in parliament and the number of years since women were given the right to vote) and economic equality (indicated by the percentage of women in the labor force). The dependant variable (state militarism) was assessed using a hostility level that ranged from one (absence of state militarism) to five (outright war). Using sophisticated statistical analysis Caprioli (2000) presented her findings in a digestible two-state comparison. Her findings are summarized in Table One.

Although the results are premised on international disputes, they offer important guidance for mitigating both civil and cross-border disputes. The domestic inequalities that Caprioli (2000) cites are analogous to those that render women vulnerable to war rape in many conflict configurations. A comparable study conducted by Erik Melander (2005) focused on intrastate conflict and found similar results.

TABLE ONE: Impact of Gender Equity Variables on State Militarism		
	Two-State Comparison	
Independent Variables	Change in Independent Variable	Effect on State Militarism
Political Equality		
Years of Suffrage	Double the number of years	4.94 times less likely to use violence
% Women in Parliament	Five percent decrease	4.91 times more likely to use violence
Social Equality		
Fertility Rate	One third decrease	4.67 times less likely to use violence
Economic Equality		
Percent Women in Labor Force	Five percent increase	4.95 times less likely to use violence
Source: Caprioli, Mary. 2000. "Gendered Conflict." <i>Journal of Peace Research</i> 37:51-68.		

Understanding the constellation of factors that produce war rape is vital for the enactment of sound policies. The policy implications that follow from Caprioli's study stress the need for stronger incentives to increase women's political participation (especially in light of the fact that most states contain a disproportionately small number of women in politics). The Melander (2005) study also shows a connection between women's political participation and gender equality. The connection did not appear to be predicated on a particular quota of female representation and was strengthened by the presence of institutional democracy (Melander 2005).

In Uganda women perform 80% of the agricultural labor but own as little as 7% of the land (Turshen 2000). Therefore in certain regions programs that advance women's property rights will help secure their economic independence (Jennings and Swiss 2001; Turshen 2000). Most importantly improving females' access to education increases their social status and economic independence (Melander 2005). Implementing structural reforms may not prevent every instance of war or war rape but it will undoubtedly help to repair the broken and failed systems that provide the fertile soil for misogynistic sexual violence to occur on a massive scale.

At their core egalitarian societies are modeled on norms of respect and reject the hierarchical structures that privilege or subordinate certain groups. In large part this is why heightened gender equality is a predictor of internal and international peace because it typically functions alongside general social equalities. This suggests that a grass roots approach to challenging gender inequalities must work alongside policy enactment. Policy mandates will only be successful when they are accompanied by efforts to change popular cultural norms and customs (Melander 2005).

Sally Engle Merry (2006) reminds us that privileged groups will resist the major social adjustments necessary to prevent gender and sexual violence. To that end (and in line with Melander 2005) local non-governmental organizations are essential to the task of using local language to challenge local customs. To advance human rights language concerning the rights and protection of women must be encased "within local contexts of power and meaning" (Merry 2006:1).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Sierra Leone (TRC) constituted in 2002 is one example of how local activists can

challenge the deep-seated gender inequalities that contribute to rampant and violent war rape. The final report produced by the TRC embodied the feminist perspective and found that sexual violence was predicated on women's traditionally low social status combined with men's perception of women as property and symbols of collective honor. In response the TRC mandated that women occupy 30% of parliamentary seats and struck down a variety of gender discriminatory laws concerning the right of women to inherit property Franke 2006 . Hopefully this effort by the TRC to spearhead important change will be backed up on the local level in particular to promote education for women and girls.

War rape is an act of unspeakable violence but it is an act that draws its power from the social cultural political and economic structures that frame our existence as gendered creatures. The sociobiological perspective peers through a very narrow lens at but one element of the individual and offers no evidence to explain why that individual crosses the line from consensual intercourse to rape. Strategic rape theory offers greater yet not full explanatory power; but as a stand-alone theory it offers little in the way of prevention.

Feminist theory attempts to defuse war rape at its source and tells us how. The analysis shows that gender inequalities increase the likelihood of armed conflict and that armed conflict frequently results in sexual violence against women. It enlarges our sphere of understanding concerning the relationship between society war and gender violence. Mitigating gender inequalities not only reduces the potential for armed conflict but also reduces the likelihood that when conflict occurs it will result in sexual violence. It is not a linear but a multi-faceted relationship. Importantly the application of a feminist analysis of war rape extends beyond sexual violence in highly patriarchal societies and can be utilized to examine more nuanced gender inequalities. Making needed changes will not be easy; they will be resisted. But resistance is perhaps a sign that we are on the right track.

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