

Gender and the Violence(s) of War and Armed Conflict

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-Meda Chesney-Lind, University of Hawaii at Manoa

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Gender and the Violence(s) of War and Armed Conflict: More Dangerous to Be a Woman?

BY

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2020

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78769-116-2 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-78769-115-5 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-78769-117-9 (Epub)



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Taylor and Francis for granting me permission to reproduce parts of my previously published work.

Parts of Chapter 1 are based on the following article: Banwell, S. (2016). Ras-senschande, genocide and the reproductive Jewish body: Examining the use of rape and sexualized violence against Jewish women during the Holocaust? *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 15(2), 208–227. This was published by Taylor and Francis. The journal's website can be found here: www.tandfonline.com

Parts of Chapter 2 are based on the following article: Banwell, S. (2014). Rape and sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo: A case study of gender-based violence. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 23(1), 45–58. This was published by Taylor and Francis. The journal's website can be found here: www.tandfonline.com

Parts of Chapter 3 are based on the following article: Banwell, S. (2015b) Globalisation masculinities, empire building and forced prostitution: A critical analysis of the gendered impact of the neoliberal economic agenda in post-invasion/occupation Iraq. *Third World Quarterly*, 36(4), 705–722. Copyright © Southseries Inc., www.thirdworldquarterly.com, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandfonline.com> on behalf of Southseries Inc., www.thirdworld-quarterly.com

I would like to thank the USC Visual History Archive for the use of the Holocaust testimonies from their Shoah Foundation online archive. Thanks also to Maggie Paterson at Amnesty International for granting me permission to use the Amnesty International 2009 London Tube campaign.

For granting me space in my workload to write this book I would like to thank Sandra Clarke (University of Buckingham) and Professor Darrick Jolliffe (University of Greenwich).

I am grateful to Professor Sandra Walkate for passing on my details to Emerald Publishing when I first expressed an interest in publishing in their Feminism, Criminology and Social Change Series.

I would like to mention and thank the 2017/18 cohort of students on Crime in the City, Crime and the State for the debates we had about genocidal rape.

Thanks to Irene Barranco Garcia the Collaborations, Compliance and Copyright Manager at the University of Greenwich for her expertise and advice on copyright issues.

For making the publication of this book possible, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers who reviewed the book proposal and offered constructive

feedback on the outline of the book. Thanks to the supportive team at Emerald Publishing (Philippa Grand, Rachel Ward, Hazel Goodes, Katy Mathers, Alice Ford, Chris Tutill and Lauren Flintoft), it has been a pleasure working with you all. My particular thanks to Jules Willan and Helen Beddow for their guidance and reassurance throughout this whole process.

Thank you to my wonderful group of friends for your support and for checking in throughout this process (for the phone calls, and/or coffee/wine breaks, particular thanks to Opi, Mel and Emma).

Thanks to my friend and office pal Alex Fanghanel for her words of wisdom and her advice on how to write a book! And even though we never got around to it, knowing that you were on hand to cry over the sign, the signifier and signified kept me going!

I would like to give a special thanks to my incredible niece Jemima Duncalf, not least for reminding me to breathe, but for her encouragement and infectious positive outlook on life.

For being there from the start (when I was anxiously awaiting the reviewer's comments on the draft proposal), right through to the final stages – even through the most difficult of times – I thank my oldest friend Lizzie Rutter. Your determination, resilience and selflessness are inspirational.

Most of all I would like to thank Michael Fiddler, not only for his support, advice and encouragement throughout this process, but for reading through drafts of this book. Thank you for your honesty and for holding no punches when it came to providing feedback on early drafts of the various chapters of this book. Your suggestions for further reading – which often pushed me outside of my comfort zone (yes, I'm referring to semiotics, postmodern memes and the sign, the signifier and signified!) – made this a much stronger piece of work.

You have always described us as a team. For this I feel blessed and grateful.

Introduction

Stacy Banwell

The Securitisation of Wartime Rape and Sexual Violence

The question that appears in the title of this book is taken from the following statement: ‘it is perhaps more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier in armed conflict’. It was made by Major General Patrick Cammaert in a video clip on the *Stop Rape Now: UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict* website (Stop Rape Now, n.d.). He is the former United Nations force commander for the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). I will return to this statement shortly, for now let us review the *Stop Rape Now* website.

The site includes the ‘GET CROSS!’ campaign with the following caption: ‘[t]ake a stand against the use of sexual violence as a *tactic of war* by adding your crossed arm picture to our global campaign’ (Stop Rape Now, n.d., emphasis added). This global campaign is visualised through an interactive map. This is populated with crosses where individuals have uploaded images of their crossed arms. Other images of individuals (including celebrities) crossing their arms flash across our screens. Celebrities, such as Charlize Theron and Nicole Kidman, also feature in the video clips included on the website. They inform us about the use of rape as a weapon of war against women and girls. They also encourage viewers to develop their knowledge further and take action.

Others have also written about the *Stop Rape Now* website (Grey & Shepherd, 2012; Meger, 2016b). Departing from this work, I draw on Visual Criminology to unpack this campaign. Briefly, and in simple terms (a more detailed review is provided in Chapter 5), Visual Criminology is interested in the visual representations of crime and punishment. It unpacks the visibility of hierarchical classifications such as race, class, gender and sexuality as they relate to these phenomena (Brown, 2014; Brown & Carrabine, 2017; Henne & Shah, 2016). Beyond this, Visual Criminology is interested in human lived experiences and in interrogating the ethical and moral consequences of looking at images (Brown, 2017; Brown & Carrabine, 2017; Gies, 2017). Of relevance for my discussion here is the argument that visibility need not only be visual, it also includes narratives which seek to reify

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doi:[10.1108/978-1-78769-115-520201002](https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-78769-115-520201002)

and reproduce State power (Schept, 2016). In my analysis of this campaign, *Stop Rape Now*, a United Nations international organisation (comprising of 193 member States) is understood as a form of State power. And finally, on the subject of how power is conveyed through images, Hayward (2010, p. 5 as cited in Henne & Shah, 2016, p. 5) argues that images ‘can be used as both a tool of control and resistance’. These ideas are teased out below.

Notwithstanding the literal display of resistance represented by the crossed arms; symbolising condemnation of the use of rape as a weapon of war, global advocacy such as the GET CROSS! campaign – which focuses narrowly on wartime rape against women and girls – reproduces ‘master narratives’ which are then ‘presented as natural, universal, true, and inevitable’ (Bal, 2003, p. 22 as cited by Henne & Shah, 2016, p. 18). I believe as a tool of control, the visibility of this campaign (the images of the crossed arms, the captions and the video clips that accompany them) – that is, the narrative it produces, results in the securitisation and fetishisation of wartime rape and sexual violence.

Securitisation, to paraphrase Hirschauer (2014, pp. 5–6), involves a process of applying a specific existential threat component to a social problem – in this instance, rape and sexual violence. The State, international bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the media (referred to as securitisation actors) decide which groups are vulnerable to this security threat. Funding agencies, international institutions and donors are then persuaded, through discursive representations (by policymakers, activists and the news media), that exceptional measures are required to maintain peace and security.

Allied to securitisation is the fetishisation of wartime rape and sexual violence. This involves selective and sensationalist accounts of rape and sexual violence – particularly against women and girls – at the expense of other types of conflict violence. Here, rape and sexual violence are identified as the most dangerous forms of conflict violence (Meger, 2016a, 2016b). Not only does this obscure the complexity of wartime rape and sexual violence, and indeed the conflicts within which they occur, it also marginalises other types of violence taking place within and beyond conflict zones (Crawford, Green, & Parkinson, 2014). It also excludes the experiences of men and boys. This impedes wider efforts to address and combat the violence(s) of war and armed conflict (Baaz & Stern, 2013; Meger, 2016a, 2016b; Mertens & Pardy, 2017). Indeed, the statement made by General Patrick Cammaert is a perfect illustration of this gendered securitisation agenda: a policy narrative that prioritises the needs and experiences of women and girls while obscuring those of men and boys, thereby confirming the belief that it is they who are more at risk during war and armed conflict.¹

¹My criticism of this security paradigm should not be read as though I am suggesting that wartime rape and sexual violence are not worthy of attention (or recourses for that matter), nor do I want to diminish the impact these crimes have on victims and/or survivors. Rather, my goal is to draw attention to the implications of disproportionately focusing on rape and sexual violence at the expense of other types of conflict violence. At this point I would also like to acknowledge that the case studies and types of violence discussed in this book are based upon the experiences of those

Let us return to the visuality of the *Stop Rape Now* campaign and its role in reproducing hegemonic (read as western) discourses around violence and victimisation during conflict. Here, I will focus on the two video clips that are included on the website. In the first, we hear the story of a nameless victim who has been raped. We learn through Charlize Theron that the victim is female. She states: 'she could be your mother, your sister, your daughter'. The second video clip provides information regarding the prevalence and nature of wartime rape committed against women and girls. The brutal details of these acts are shared. While reference is made to the use of rape during the genocide in the former Yugoslavia, all other examples focus narrowly on wartime rape in Africa, omitting numerous other cases where rape has been used as part of warfare. In all of the examples, the victims are female.

I identify three elements within the visuality of this 'master narrative'. Firstly, this violence happens to 'other' women and girls. In order for us to empathise and take action, the victim has to be transformed from a generic marginalised 'other' to 'one of us'. Second, this violence happens elsewhere, specifically Africa, which evokes a colonial imagery '...of African backwardness and primitivism' (Dunn, 2003, p. 5 as cited in Mertens & Pardy, 2017, p. 958). The corollary of this: a powerful western organisation like the UN is needed to mobilise global support in order to 'rescue' these female victims and combat this violence. And third, by only referencing female victimisation, this campaign engages in 'visual essentialism': visual representations that reproduce essentialist depictions of gender and crime (Bal, 2003, p. 22 as cited in Henne & Shah, 2016, p. 18). This brief discussion of visual representations of the securitisation agenda acts as a preface to a more in-depth analysis provided in Chapter 4. For now, however, I want to unpack, in more detail, the implications of gender essentialism within existing accounts of war and armed conflict.

Gender Essentialism Within 'Stories' About War and Armed Conflict

In 2015, I was asked by the reviews editor of the *Journal of Gender Studies* to review *The Underground Girls of Kabul: The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys* by Jenny Nordberg. The aim of Nordberg's book is to examine what it is like to be an Afghan woman after ten years of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan: 'America's longest war and one of the largest foreign aid efforts of a generation' (Nordberg, 2014, p. 9 as cited in Banwell, 2015a, p. 587). In contrast to the more visible efforts of the international community to address gender inequality in war-torn Afghanistan, the book reveals that Afghans are using more clandestine measures. In a deeply patriarchal, segregated society, women resort to presenting themselves, and their daughters, as men/boys. As I wrote in my review: these women 'do this in the context of a nation that has a

we might refer to as cisgender male and female - referred to throughout as boys, men, male(s) and girls, women, female(s). Elsewhere I have written about the experiences of LGBT+ individuals. See the chapter on *Sex and War* in the forthcoming book *Sex and Crime* by Fanghanel, Milne, Zampini, Banwell & Fiddler.

long history of war, conflict, invasion, nation building and outside attempts to effect gender parity' (Banwell, 2015a, p. 587). Nordberg's book follows the lives of five Afghan women or, *bacha posh*; a colloquial Dari term meaning 'dressed like a boy' (Nordberg, 2014, p. 67 as cited in Banwell, 2015a, p. 588).

In Afghanistan, having a son enhances a family's reputation. A baby boy is regarded as a 'triumph', while a baby girl is regarded as a 'humiliation' or a 'failure' (Banwell, 2015a, pp. 587–888). Indeed, in conflict-affected societies – where security and infrastructure are lacking – sons provide financial and social insurance. Presenting girls as boys offers girls freedom and opportunity. However, this is for a limited period only. Before reaching puberty, the girl must return to being female in order to be married off and fulfil her childbearing responsibilities. Nordberg (2014) is convinced that this practice is not based on gender dysphoria, but rather is related to being female in the then war-torn Afghanistan. This then leads her to ask: would these women want to be male in other contexts?

This example can be interpreted in two ways. On a cursory level, it can be read as confirmation of male power, freedom and dominance, as well as the (perceived or otherwise) privilege and protection afforded to males. A more critical reading would argue that it is a reductive and essentialist comment on men and masculinity, specifically hegemonic masculinity. This is an interpretation that ignores the context specific ways in which *certain* men and *certain* masculinities are associated with power, freedom and authority. This first reading supports the gendered/essentialist assumption hinted at in the statement by Major General Patrick Cammaert: women are more vulnerable than men, especially during war and armed conflict. To be clear, my intention is not to diminish the oppressions and discrimination Afghan women faced (and indeed face), both at the individual and structural levels. Rather, my goal is to provide a nuanced understanding of women's victimisation, agency and resistance: one that challenges binary constructions of women as either always and exclusively victims or, as possessing complete agency for their actions. Both positions preclude an appreciation of the complexity and contradictions inherent within women's life choices and experiences.

The statement made by Major General Patrick Cammaert has been referred to a number of times so far in this Introduction. Below, as part of my review of the disproportionality thesis, I will dissect it in more detail.

Feminist writers within the fields of International Relations and International Security, and War Studies more broadly, have put forward the case that women are disproportionately affected by war and armed conflict (Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016; Cohn, 2013; Enloe, 2010; Lee-Koo, 2011; Raven-Roberts, 2013; Sjöberg, 2006a, 2006b; Sjöberg & Peet, 2011). This is also reiterated in numerous UN policy documents, most notably the eight UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) that make up the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda (see the special issue of *International Political Science Review* 2016 for a detailed examination of the WPS agenda). Furthermore, writers argue that pre-existing gender inequalities are exacerbated within and beyond the conflict zone, thus increasing females' vulnerability to various types of gender-based violence (GBV) (Baaz & Stern, 2013; Banwell, 2014, 2018; Davies & True, 2015; Henry, 2016; Leatherman, 2011; Manjoo & McRaith, 2011; Meger, 2010; Ohambe, Muhigwa, & Wa Mamba, 2005; Sjöberg, 2011, 2013; Skjelsbæk, 2001). For example, as Cohn

(2013) notes in relation to gendered divisions of labour, the domestic labour of rural women, such as fetching water or gathering firewood – activities that involve them travelling to isolated areas alone – increases their risk of attack in conflict-prone regions. Likewise, their role as primary caregivers for ‘children, the sick and the elderly leaves [them] more vulnerable because they are too encumbered to flee quickly’ (Cohn, 2013, p. 29).

Relatedly, this body of work has drawn attention to the ways in which pre-existing types of GBV are reproduced during war and armed conflict. As noted by the Peace and Security (GAPS) network:

[...] sexual violence is only one of many related forms of gender-based violence in conflict situations and should not be addressed in isolation...this violence is linked to gender-based violence against women and girls in peace time and is driven by the same underlying factors – namely women’s unequal status in society. (GAPS UK 2013, 1, emphasis in the original as cited in Kirby, 2015a, p. 509)

In all of this work, women and girls are considered the main victims of GBV prior to, during and in the aftermath of war and armed conflict (United Nations General Assembly, 1993, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2003). This leads to the conviction that they are disproportionately affected by the violence(s) of war and armed conflict. However, it is worth pausing to unpack the ‘taken-for-granted’ premise of the disproportionality thesis in more detail.² If, as it is noted, there is a high prevalence of violence against women and girls in peacetime, what does it mean when we say they are disproportionately affected by war, disproportionate to what? Disproportionate to women’s experiences of GBV during peacetime, which is already asymmetrical? On what basis do we make this claim and with whom, specifically, are we comparing them to/with? Do we make this claim because, making up the majority of civilians during war/armed conflict; compared with the higher numbers of male combatants, their suffering *is* disproportionate? Is it not logical then, based on their higher participation as fighters, to assume that males will make up the majority of casualties? In fact, ‘...statistics suggest that young men of military age are most likely to be killed in war, *whether as combatants or as civilians*’ (Chinkin & Kaldor, 2013, p. 167 emphasis added). Does our preoccupation with the unequal experiences of women and girls during war and armed conflict diminish our ability to acknowledge the suffering of male civilians and combatants? How do we interpret their victimisation? Finally, is there a difference between increased vulnerability to certain types of GBV (which can happen to both males and females) and being disproportionately affected by war and armed conflict?

²In the interest of full disclosure, when I began writing about wartime rape and sexual violence against women and girls, I too was blinded by this focus on disproportionality. However, after spending more time researching, thinking and writing about this topic – expanding my analysis to include the experiences of men and boys – I began to see how shortsighted this quantitative, comparative endeavour was/is.

Rather than overwhelm readers with these questions, perhaps a more fruitful exercise is to examine the ways in which war and armed conflict are gendered. To rework (and reduce) the questions to the following: how is suffering gendered? how does gender inform experiences of war and armed conflict? rather than ask, who suffers more? As noted by Collins (2017, p. 62 emphasis added): '[u]ndeniably, all civilian populations suffer during conflict [...] but war leads to *specific gender-related harms* making women's experiences of conflict very different from those of men...' For me the keyword here is different, not more (see also Cockburn, 2012). In this book, I trace the unique ways in which women and men experience war and armed conflict. Rather than pursue quantifiable, measurable differences, I am interested in unpacking the qualitative differences in how both genders experience war and armed conflict. I am more interested in understanding their material, lived experiences. To this end, where possible, I draw upon survivor testimonies³ and first-hand accounts (details are provided in the individual chapters).

Drawing on examples of women and men as both victims and perpetrators of conflict violence, the aim of this book is to answer these revised questions and provide a thorough analysis of the ways in which women's experiences of war and armed conflict might be, and are, different to those of men. Before we continue, I want to outline the value of exploring war and armed conflict through a gendered lens; explain why I have chosen the term violence(s) and finally, clarify the difference between war and armed conflict.

Examining War and Armed Conflict Through a Gendered Lens

In this book, various examples of the violence(s) of war and armed conflict will be explored through a gendered lens. What does this mean? A gendered lens means viewing the world through the prism of gender where gender is understood relationally and hierarchically and is mapped onto the normative binary pair relations: male/female, masculine/feminine. The former is traditionally associated with agency and power, while the latter is associated with passivity and weakness (I offer a new way of thinking about gender binaries in the Conclusion). According to Steans (1998, p. 5 as cited in Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015, p.11):

To look at the world through gender lenses is to focus on gender as a particular kind of power relation, or to trace out the ways in which gender is central to understanding international processes. Gender lenses also focus on the everyday experiences of women as *women* and highlight the consequences of their unequal social position.

³With regards to using the terms victim and/or survivor, I will use the terminology chosen by the individuals themselves and/or how they have been referred to in the literature.

Like many other writers, Steans (1998) appears to have conflated the term gender with women. A gendered lens should examine the everyday experiences of both males and females as they relate to the construction of masculinities and femininities in any given context. Applying this to the context of war and armed conflict, and to paraphrase Gentry and Sjoberg (2015, p. 137), a gender lens examines how gender is present, yet invisible in the lives of those who commit conflict violence and in the theories used to explain such violence. Below I offer two examples of the ways in which gender is used to (1) justify war and armed conflict and (2) inform the methods used during war and armed conflict.

Gendered Justificatory Narratives

Discourses that seek to legitimise war and armed conflict rely upon idealised and binary constructions of masculinity and femininity. This gender essentialism is crystalised through the immunity principle which draws upon notions of men as warriors and fighters and women as ‘beautiful souls,’ fragile beings who need protecting (Elshtain, 1982; Lobasz, 2008; Sjoberg, 2007; Sjoberg & Peet, 2011). This gendered interpretation of protection is used to encourage men to fight in ‘just wars’ (Sjoberg, 2011). Such gendered justificatory narratives have been used since the First World War (see Sjoberg, 2006a, 2006b, 2011 for other examples). They were also used during the Bush-administration’s global war on terror⁴ in Iraq and Afghanistan (Nayak, 2006; Shepherd, 2006; Sjoberg, 2006a; Stabile & Kumar, 2005; Steans, 2008). In both cases, President George W. Bush’s overarching narrative ‘...linked the fight against terrorism to a battle for the rights and dignity of women’ (Steans, 2008, p. 160). More recently, rape and sexual violence against women and girls in Syria has been used to inform such foreign policy agendas.

Gendered War-fighting

In terms of the methods used during war, men are celebrated and rewarded if they live up to the just warrior ideal and fight to protect their ‘beautiful souls’ – that is, their women. In both old and new wars (see below), women come to represent the nation, the centre of gravity (Cohn, 2013; Sjoberg & Peet, 2011). Men fight in wars to protect their nation. If men fail to fulfil this role, they are emasculated and feminised. Unpacking the logic of the woman-as-nation thesis, Sjoberg and Peet (2011, pp. 174–186) argue that wars are won by eliminating women who belong to the enemy group (see also Alison, 2007; Heit, 2009). This expulsion communicates to enemy masculinities that they have been incapable of protecting their women/nation. And while Sjoberg and Peet (2011) are not suggesting that it is only women who are attacked during war and armed conflict, they are suggesting a gendered dynamic to this victimisation. In their words:

⁴A foreign policy campaign created in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Belligerents attack (women) civilians for the same reason they claim protection for their own – because the ‘protection racket’ is an underlying justification for [S]tates, governments, and their wars. Insomuch as women are indicators, signifiers, and reproduces of [S]tate and nation, belligerents attack *women* to attack the essence of [S]tate and nation. (Sjoberg & Peet, 2011, p. 186 emphasis in the original)

Why Violence(s)?

I use the term violence(s) to acknowledge the multiple, diverse and complex nature of the violence that takes place within and beyond the conflict zone. In this book, through various case studies, structural, institutional (the US military), interpersonal and State violence(s) are explored. I also address genocidal and reproductive violence and structural and interpersonal violence(s) that can be linked to extreme droughts caused by climate change. Examining this range of violence (through a gendered lens) broadens the diagnostic framework. This extends – thereby enriching – our understanding of the nature, causes and consequences of such acts. Details of these violence(s), and how they are addressed in the individual chapters of the book, are outlined below.

Why Use the Terms War and Armed Conflict?

Globally, there have been 252 conflicts since the Second World War (Themnér & Wallensteen, 2013). These are formed of ‘interstate or internationalized intrastate conflicts’ (also referred to as civil wars) (Themnér & Wallensteen, 2013, p. 510). As established, historically male combatants comprise the majority of casualties (Leiby, 2009). However, with the changing nature of wars and armed conflict – where the State often deliberately targets civilians – the majority of casualties are non-combatants, both male and female. Indeed, by the end of the 1990s, approximately 90% of all casualties of war were non-combatants (European Security Strategy, 2003).

New wars – as envisioned by Kaldor (1999, p. 2) – encompass the following:

[...] a blurring of the distinctions between war (usually defined as violence between [S]tates or organized political groups for political motives), organized crime (violence undertaken by privately organized groups for private purposes, usually financial gain) and large-scale violations of human rights (violence undertaken by [S]tates or politically organized groups against individuals).

While there is considerable debate about the concept of new wars – for example see Rigterink (2013) for both a review of this literature and for an empirical test of Kaldor’s (1999, 2013) theory – I find that it is a useful way to categorise the different elements of war and armed conflict discussed in this book. Let us unpack this concept in more detail.