

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AS A WEAPON OF WAR?

PERCEPTIONS, PRESCRIPTIONS, PROBLEMS
IN THE CONGO AND BEYOND

MARIA ERIKSSON BAAZ
AND MARIA STERN



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Sexual violence as a weapon of war?

Perceptions, prescriptions, problems in the
Congo and beyond

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Abbreviations and acronyms

COIN	counter-insurgency
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FAC	Forces Armées Congolaises (Armed Forces of Congo)
FAPC	Forces Armées du Peuple Congolais (People's Armed Forces of Congo)
FARDC	Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo)
FMLN	Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (El Salvador)
ICTR	International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
INGO	international non-governmental organization
IR	international relations
MLC	Mouvement pour la Libération du Congo (Movement for the Liberation of Congo)
MSF	Médecins sans Frontières
NGO	non-governmental organization
OCHA	(UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PRIO	Peace Research Institute Oslo
RCD	Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (Congolese Association for Democracy)
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SSR	security sector reform

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF

Daniel N. Stern (1934–2012)

Svante Eriksson (1944–1995)

Introduction

It has to be understood that this is a security problem, not just men behaving like men. It's not an inevitable consequence of war – it's something that is planned. It can either be commanded, condemned or condoned. We need to say that we can stop it. It's not inevitable. (Margot Wallström, cited in Crossette 2010)

Finally, the international community has recognized conflict-related sexual violence as an important global security problem. Indeed, the notion that rape is a weapon of war that warrants global attention has become commonplace in media reporting and policy analysis. Despite the often horrific violences it documents, the prevailing and now familiar story of wartime rape is a story that fills us with hope. While we may be intermittently confronted with terrible images of rape survivors in ghastly conditions on our television screens or in the newspapers we read, we are nonetheless slightly comforted. After years of silence and neglect, the ills of rape in war are finally being named. Redress for victims of rape has become a high priority, and, we are reassured, the systematic and widespread scourge of sexual violence will someday be halted, or at least seriously hindered. Sexual violence as a weapon of war has at long last begun to receive the attention it warrants, given the suffering its victims endure and the societal harms it occasions. Indeed, we are confident that a crucial key to further understanding and eventually redressing conflict-related sexual violence has been obtained through its being recognized as an acute and serious global security problem, as a 'weapon of war'. Yet, in the midst of our horror over the atrocity of rape, the sense of feminist success that rape and its sufferers are rendered visible, and the relief that *something* is finally being, or about to be, *done*, we feel a growing unease. This unease is the subject of this book.

First, let us explain the success. While the history of rape in war is as long as the history of warring itself, until recently it has been largely ignored. Rape was generally treated as if it were an 'unfortunate by-product' of warring (Seifert 1994), warranting little if any attention in the 'high politics' of global and national security. However, after far too many centuries of silence and neglect, the pressing issue of sexual violence in war has now finally been recognized in the wake of the international recognition of the mass rapes during the armed conflicts in both Rwanda (1994) and Bosnia-Herzegovina

(1992–95). Much policy and media attention has since been paid to the scourge of conflict-related sexual violence, particularly the role of sexual violence in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Hence, since 1993 there has been a marked shift in the ways in which sexual violence has been framed in the global policy debate. Dominant understandings have moved from perceiving rape in war (if remarked on at all) as a regrettable but inevitable aspect of warring, to seeing it as a strategy, weapon or tactic of war, which can be prevented. Indeed, several United Nations Security Council Resolutions¹ and the appointment of a Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict have confirmed the United Nations' commitment to combating conflict-related sexual violence.

The notion that rape is a (systematic) weapon of war whose use can ultimately be hindered depends upon a narrative or a frame of understanding which assigns particular meanings to rape in war, as well as to rapists and the victims/survivors of rape. The story told and retold about rape and its subjects in the media and policy reports, as well as in much academic writing, makes good sense. Indeed, the compelling and seemingly cohesive narrative of rape as a (gendered) weapon of war is revolutionary in its global appeal and exemplary in its successful call for engagement to redress the harms of rape – especially in the case of the DRC.

Yet this triumph also elicits our concern. Simply put, our fear is that the dominant framework for understanding and addressing wartime rape has become so seemingly coherent, universalizing and established that seeing, hearing and thinking otherwise about wartime rape and its subjects (e.g. perpetrators, victims) is difficult. In other words, this dominant framework reproduces a limited register through which we can hear, feel and attend to the voices and suffering of both those who rape and those who are raped. Despite its progressive appeal, political purchase and success in bringing attention to many who suffer, the newly arrived accomplishment of recognizing rape as a weapon of war thus may also cause harm.

Ours is surely not a unique concern.² On the tails of accomplishments like the UN Resolutions noted above come also a host of problems and dilemmas. Any framework for understanding and redressing complex problems, such as sexual violence in war, is bound to be limited and limiting. That said, in order to move or peek beyond these limits, we need to explore them: how have they been constructed? What purposes do they serve? Indeed, it is the call to explore the limits of the prevailing ways of thinking about sexual violence in war which prompts us to write this book. Our critical inquiry, however, is not intended to be damning, but instead it is offered as a contribution to a healthy and considered reflection of the contemporary politics of framing

sexual violence in war (Butler 2009). Hence, in this book, we critically engage with dominant understandings of, as well as policy solutions aimed at redressing, sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict settings. In short, the book explores the main story of Rape as a Weapon of War: its underlying assumptions, ontologies, composition and limits.

What interests us is the ways in which rape is imbued with meaning in the governing discourse about sexual violence in warfare through certain 'grids of intelligibility'.³ These grids of intelligibility circumscribe what can be said about rape in war, as well as what kinds of subjects can exist in the main storyline of Rape as a Weapon of War. In the global frenzy to frame 'the disaster' of sexual violence in comprehensible terms, we argue, nuance and complexity are sacrificed and violences are both produced and reproduced (Dauphinée 2007; Zizek 2009).

In different ways in the following chapters, we therefore query the seemingly cohesive and certainly compelling narrative of wartime rape, unpack its prevailing logics, explore its limits, and examine its effects. In so doing, we address some of the dilemmas and thorny issues inherent in the success of the 'arrival' of sexual violence on the global security agenda. While the majority of the book (Chapters 1–3) is preoccupied with interrogating and unpacking the dominant narrative about wartime rape as a 'weapon of war' as articulated in academic, policy and media texts, the last chapter also explores some practical interventions that have emerged in light of this narrative. Hence, we not only query how the discourse of Rape as a Weapon of War is constructed through, among other things, the exclusion of potential stories and voices, we also interrogate the ethico-political implications of interventions aimed at combating this violence.

Our critical reading as a whole rests upon explorations in several interwoven, overlapping and related registers. We will return to a description of each chapter below. Here, we first outline the moves the book makes in broad strokes.

The following two chapters are explicitly about the storylines that fill the Rape as a Weapon of War discourse with meaning. We begin our journey by exploring the interconnections between sex, gender and violence as a way of querying the underlying logics, or narratives, upon which the Rape as a Weapon of War discourse rests. In particular, we explore two deeply intertwined, generalized narratives: the story of sexual violence in warring as rooted in nature and biological urges (the 'Sexed' Story, as we call it) and the 'Gendered' Story which has supplanted it in terms of appeal and purchase. As we shall see throughout the book, the 'Gendered' Story explicitly overlaps with and performs important functions in the story of Rape as a Weapon of

War, while the 'Sexed' Story informs the Rape as a Weapon of War discourse through its exclusions and racialized spectres. Indeed, the dominant framing of Rape as a Weapon of War cannot be understood outside the 'Gendered' Story (and, again, the excluded 'Sexed' Story). The 'Gendered' Story will show that it is the gendering of the perpetrators and victims of war which constructs rape as weapon via its power and efficiency. Moreover, the storyline of rape in war as gendered (rather than 'sexed') performs a crucial function in reversing the idea of rape as an unavoidable consequence of war. Importantly, we query the assumptions (or ontologies) that underpin this understanding of sexual violence as gendered (instead of sexed) and ask who and what is silenced or dehumanized?⁴ What other voices whisper in the margins of the central attraction? What stories can we hear and not hear?

Another entry point into our interrogation of the dominant framings of wartime rape is through a more specific unpacking of the discourse of Rape as Weapon of War and the crucial notion of 'strategicness'⁵ upon which this discourse rests. The strategic use of rape is often presented as somehow self-explanatory through its implied universalized storyline of gender and warring. What sorts of assumptions are needed to make this claim/explanation possible? And why is this framing of sexual violence so seductive and so prominent? What kinds of subjects does it produce and exclude?

As we argue throughout the book, the pervasive aspect of the Rape as a Weapon of War discourse rests, largely, on its promises of change and the policy implications it offers in writing rape in war as preventable; as an abhorrent condition that can be treated. After years of silence and portrayals of rape as unavoidable, this narrative promises a brighter future for sexually abused women (and men) in conflicts. The Rape as a Weapon of War discourse is decidedly policy friendly, lending itself to the necessary reductionism for arriving at viable policy goals, which can also be placed in a results-based framework. Hence, in the urgency to redress sexual violence within global security policy, a framework for understanding that is seemingly cohesive and universal emerges that – more often than not – poorly reflects the realities of the complex warscapes⁶ in which it is applied. Furthermore, through its universalizing narrative, the discourse may conceal and exclude subjects and accounts that could improve understanding of or add additional knowledge about how and why sexual violence in warring occurs, as well as what it may mean to those who are subjected to it.

As is apparent from the preceding discussion, this book explores stories, or ways of framing rape, rather than offering explanations for why sexual violence constitutes a common act of violence in many conflict settings. However, while we unpack dominant understandings (rather than provide

explanations for why rape takes place), we also invite the reader to consider some alternative understandings of sexual violence. By highlighting that which is excluded and silenced in the prevailing storyline – by revealing its lacunae and its limits – we draw attention to additional ways of understanding sexual violence that are relevant in warring contexts but have been excluded by the dominant discourse. Drawing upon insights collected from the sociology of violence and the military, as well as research conducted in the DRC (see below), we highlight frameworks for understanding violence, as well as aspects of military structures that are silenced in the dominant story of rape. In some contexts, such as the conflict in Bosnia, sexual violence in war seems to be best understood as a conscious strategy to fulfil political and military goals; in some military structures, orders are effectively enforced down the chain of command so that such a strategy is (more or less) effectively implemented. However, we discuss how sexual violence can *also* reflect the opposite: the breakdown of chains of command; indiscipline, rather than discipline; commanders' lack of control, rather than their power; the micro-dynamics of violent score-settling, rather than decisions of military and political leaders engaged in defeating the enemy.

As noted above, our exploration into the underlying logics and scaffolding of the Rape as a Weapon of War discourse emerges out of a concern with the ways in which a generalized story of rape in war limits our abilities to analyse and redress instances of sexual violence in specific warsapes, as well as to attend to the people whose lives are circumscribed by such violence. We therefore also contemplate the politics of humanitarian engagement. In particular, we consider the ethics and dilemmas of trying to combat sexual violence and to alleviate the plights of the victims of sexual violence and ask the following questions: What does the new-won attention to wartime sexual violence fail to deliver to women (and men) in post-conflict settings (in this case the DRC)? What relations of power are concealed in the politics of solidarity and humanitarian work? And finally, what are the politics of applying such a critique in such a highly charged setting, where lives are highly vulnerable and precarious?

Learning from the DRC: the so-called 'rape capital of the world'⁷

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), long known by many as 'the heart of darkness' (Conrad 1990 [1902]), has been redubbed the 'rape capital of the world'.⁸ Indeed, the DRC has become infamous globally through reports on the alarmingly vast amount of sexual violence that has accompanied devastating armed conflicts. While other forms of violence have also been committed on a massive scale, it is sexual violence which has attracted the lion's share of

attention, especially among ‘outside’ observers. This *singular focus* on sexual violence has been reflected in the number of reports, articles, news clips, appeals and documentaries dealing specifically with the issue of rape. Other forms of violence – mass killings, systematic torture, forced recruitment, forced labour and property violations, etc. – are committed on a massive scale but receive far less attention and resources.⁹ Sexual violence has been described as the ‘monstrosity of the century’ (Li Reviews 2008), ‘femicide’, a ‘systematic pattern of destruction toward the female species’ (Eve Ensler, cited in Kort 2007), ‘incomprehensible’ (Nzwili 2009), the ‘worst in the world’ (Gettleman 2007), etc. Numerous journalists, activists and representatives of diverse international organizations and governments have made pilgrimages to the DRC to meet and listen to survivors first hand. Arguably, with this attention, ‘rape tourism’ has been added to what has come to be known as ‘war zone tourism’ (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2010).

While this book explores broad questions, fears and concerns about the framing of sexual violence in warring more generally, it is grounded in extensive first-hand research in the DRC warscape. Throughout the book, we therefore draw upon the site of the DRC as examples of, or points from which to pose questions about, the more general renditions of wartime rape. We want to emphasize, however, that our intent here is not to offer a comprehensive understanding of wartime rape in the DRC. Our analysis draws upon – and problematizes – our knowledge of the DRC warscape, but goes beyond the DRC as a case. It is therefore relevant for understanding the framing of sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict settings more generally. Furthermore, the considerable attention paid to sexual violence in the DRC, which is reflected in the interventions of various international actors, renders the DRC a particularly good case from which to learn. Our knowledge of the workings of the armed forces and the problematics of sexual violence in the DRC therefore provides a fruitful point of departure from which questions can be posed both in general terms and in relation to other specific conflict settings.

The references to the DRC that appear throughout this book emerge from several interrelated research projects that we have conducted. In particular, we draw from a research project exploring gender in the military, which is based on interviews with soldiers and officers in the Congolese national armed forces (FARDC).¹⁰ The interviews addressed how the soldiers themselves saw their role in the armed forces, as well as in relation to civil–military relations. We asked them about their understandings of what it meant to be a ‘good soldier’, and of masculinity and femininity in relation to soldiering. In particular, we focused on the reasons that soldiers gave for why rape occurs and on what they told us rape is or means. We did so in order to query some of