

# **The Rape of Men :**

## *Eschewing Myths of Sexual Violence in War*

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Rape is a tool of war used against women, men, and children designed to brutalize and dominate the victim. Underpinning every act of sexual violence is a struggle for the supremacy of gendered identities; in conflict, these power relations heighten in response to the high-stakes nature of war. Those targeted are usually done so as part of a strategy to destroy a particular ethnic or religious group. The horrific reports emerging from the former Yugoslavia have forced the international community to address the mass numbers of women being raped in armed-conflict every year. However, sexual violence is a gendered issue affecting men, women, boys, and girls. Dangerous implications exist if the full gamut of sexual violence is ignored. Specifically, the rape of men has been shrouded in secrecy, hidden from national and the international consciousness.

Normative frameworks for conceptualizing gender and violence have constructed a veil of secrecy surrounding male rape. Values embedded in the institutions of global civil society, coupled with cultural constructions of gender, bolster this. Gender analysis discusses rape primarily in terms of women being victimized by hegemonic forms of masculine gender oppression. While valid, this paper argues for a more inclusive perspective that fully recognizes wartime rape as profoundly damaging to both men and women. Male rape remains deeply taboo, protecting traditional gender norms by fostering a culture of

silence. Men are afraid to come forward, restricted by the stigma of homosexuality that emasculates and estranges them from the state. Male rape falls within the objectives of feminism and ought to be included among academic conversations.

Despite common belief, male rape permeates all corners of the globe. Documented cases have been reported in Chile, Greece, Croatia, Sri Lanka, El Salvador, Iran, Kuwait, the former Soviet Union, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the former Yugoslavia.<sup>1</sup> Cases are often extreme in nature and gravity. In the former Yugoslavia, the Bosnian-Serb policy of ethnic cleansing involved systematically extinguishing the masculinity of non-Serb men. Victims were castrated and sexually mutilated, forced to rape other men, and forced to perform fellatio and other sex acts on guards.<sup>2</sup> In Southern Sudan, reports have emerged of boys being held as slaves and subjected to sexual abuse at the hands of government soldiers, including violent gang rape.<sup>3</sup> The destruction of masculinity is vital to the domination of a national group. Masculine sexuality and violence are inextricably linked; any analysis of violence and conflict would be remiss to ignore such a central feature of war.

Statistical analysis of male rape is ambiguous at best. Nonetheless, the number of documented cases is telling. Sandesh Sivakumaran notes, “sexual violence against men takes place in nearly every armed conflict in which sexual violence is committed”.<sup>4</sup> Garnering international attention is difficult without knowing the full extent of the issue. Vague estimations plague accurate data collection, but a reasonable conjecture suggests the problem is even more prevalent than the numbers suggest. Confronting the issue adequately requires further examination. This progressive transition has been marred by the working assumptions of heteronormativity continuing to govern instruments of international politics.

For example, analysis of gender, violence and conflict typically casts men solely as aggressors and perpetrators, and women, conversely, as nonviolent victims. Traditional characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity claim discursive legitimacy and proliferate gender stereotypes, which have become embedded in the operational attitudes of global civil society. Influential human rights forums possess the ability to mobilize political will and resources but instead contribute to the non-recognition of male rape by failing to engage it. The absence of the issue is abundantly clear. One review found that out of 4076 nongovernmental organizations addressing wartime rape and other forms of sexual violence, only 3% mentioned the experience of males, and only as a passing reference.<sup>5</sup> Human rights bodies have exacerbated ignorance significantly by inadequately recognizing the full scope of gender-based violence. Every resolution, policy and initiative pursuing a one-sided mandate that includes women and excludes men reifies heteronormative assumptions making it more difficult for male rape to generate sincerity.

Language illustrates these internalized beliefs and reflects the deficient understanding of gender ubiquitous in the international arena. One example is U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325. It states, “[e]xpressing concern that civilians, particularly women and children, account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict”.<sup>6</sup> It further asserts that states have a willingness to “incorporate a gender perspective into peacekeeping operations...and include a gender component”.<sup>7</sup> Evidently, a “gender perspective” is equated with the well-being of women and girls. The framework for understanding gender and violence therefore establishes a victim hierarchy that shifts attention away from male victims and removes them from the “gender component”. Speaking only to women and girls justifies the exclusion of males from the policy-making process.

Since phrases enshrined in legislation affirm gendered assumptions, some suggest the gender-neutralization of language. Phil Rumney advocates for gender-neutral terminology in order to integrate sexual assaults “beyond the male-on-female paradigm”.<sup>8</sup> However, gender neutrality insufficiently addresses the egregious nature of sexual violence, which necessitates the formal recognition of male-on-female *and* male-on-male rape as separate but interrelated crimes. Consider Article 7(1)(g) of the *Rome Statute* of the International Criminal Court (ICC), establishing “[r]ape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity” as a crime against humanity.<sup>9</sup> Slanted wording renders men invisible as victims of sexual violence. Thus, language employed by national and international bodies must address the existence of male rape alongside the rape of women. These examples highlight the narrow presumptions continuing to guide contemporary political agents. The perception of sexual violence in armed conflict remains one of domineering men victimizing women unilaterally. Global civil society has thus far utilized an incomplete understanding of gender furthering alienating male victims with gender selective terminology. A balanced perspective is impossible without accepting the existence of sexual violence against men in reports, policies and practices.

If national and international actors possess the capacity to mainstream gender inclusiveness, then movements and conversations informing these institutions must incorporate sexual violence against men under the umbrella of gendered analysis. Discourses of gender and violence have kept the topic off the international agenda by excluding men from rights-based advocacy work. In *Gender Inclusive: Essays on violence, men, and feminist international relations* Adam Jones argues that men are visible as agents of violence and effaced as victims within

feminist discourse. He asserts, “let it be stated plainly: *‘including women’ excludes men*...men remain ‘absent subjects’, entering the narrative only indirectly and by inference, if at all”.<sup>10</sup> Jones’ argument is doubly true when dealing with sexual violence. Not only are men effaced as victims of violence, they are also thought to be invulnerable to rape, an alien phenomenon to normal manifestations of heterosexuality.

Moreover, feminist rhetoric has obfuscated frank conversations about male rape by portraying masculinity strictly as a hegemonic expression tied to the conquest of women. Jones contends,

Feminist attempts to incorporate the gender variable into IR analysis are constrained by the basic feminist methodology and all feminists’ normative commitments...whereby (elite) male actions and (hegemonic) masculinity are drawn into the narrative mainly as independent variables explaining ‘gender’ oppression.<sup>11</sup>

The gender variable is a multidimensional element of international relations in which the masculine and feminine are subjected to repressive forms of sexualization. Recognizing the complexities of gender construction is imperative to the mitigation of rape warfare; by including women and excluding men, “gender” becomes synonymous with “women”, further fragmenting the place of men in serious discussions about victimhood and sexual violence. Human rights advocates have a responsibility to lobby the institutions of the state and supranational organizations in order to facilitate an expanding consciousness of gender and violence.

Thus, the women's movement has unintentionally cast other forms of sexual violence outside of the male/female paradigm to the periphery. Harmonizing a balanced gender perspective into the canon of feminist analysis demands active self-assessment. Sandesh Sivakumaran advances the notion that male/male rape should be placed in the foreground. Foregrounding does not imply the prioritization of one paradigm of rape over another, but instead "simply seeks the recognition of the multiple dimensions of the problem and invites a more nuanced consideration of the issues".<sup>12</sup> International relations requires scrutiny with a gendered lens, and in turn, the dominant perspectives driving gendered analysis must also be critically evaluated. As Charlotte Hooper argues, "[w]hat is completely inadequate... is the straightforward grafting of a 'gender variable' on to mainstream analysis".<sup>13</sup> Gender constructions are complexly interrelated and mutually reinforcing. The rape of men constitutes a challenge to traditional feminist discourses to broaden the notion of gender-inclusiveness it seeks to imprint on to international relations.

Inadequate awareness is only partially explained by the feminist disposition. Perhaps the most difficult obstacle involves dispelling the myth that heterosexual men are invulnerable to rape. Animosity hinders open conversations from taking root, reflecting the deeply entrenched views about masculinity inherent in many cultures throughout the world. In a masculinized world dominated by defense intellectuals, military personnel, and male politicians, raising gender issues is difficult enough. Acknowledging the existence of male rape is even more problematic, as it questions the very core of masculine identity. The perception that a man should be able to fight for his security and protect his women and children from outside threat is infused at all levels of political spaces, from the decision-makers in state governance to community leaders to the individual male psyche. Sexual violence perpetrated against men threatens to

fundamentally undermine this belief system. This impasse underscores why very few people are willing to speak on its behalf and raise the issue.<sup>14</sup> Male rape remains a perverse and unnatural occurrence, silenced by heteronormative assumptions muddying the reality of gender-based violence.

The uncomfortable desire to shy away from discussion stands in stark contrast to the public nature of documented incidences. According to Pauline Oosterhoff et al, the sexual torture of men in conflict remains somewhat of an “open secret”. One account from Croatia graphically details:

First they grabbed X and pushed him down by the road. He was the weakest...four men pushed him down and were holding his head, legs and arms. Y approached him, she had a scalpel in her hand. The men who pushed him down took his trousers off. She castrated him. We had to watch. I was watching, but I was so scared I did not see much...<sup>15</sup>

Cases of sexual torture often involve public humiliation. In the above report, victim X was castrated by a woman, symbolizing the ultimate form of public humiliation and emasculation. The “open secret” elucidates how gender norms powerfully constrain the actions of individuals. Many brave women from the Balkans came forward to share their experiences of rape and atrocity, but few women or men have articulated the extreme sexual acts carried out against men. Support is virtually nonexistent, including physicians, who have internalized stereotypical gender roles (men as aggressors, women as victims), to the extent that they are unable to recognize male victims of sexual violence and even dismiss them.<sup>16</sup> Persistent ignorance of gender-based violence demonstrates the strength of gender norms

in governing the working presumptions of society and the danger of leaving these standards unquestioned.

In addition, heteronormativity is intensified by widespread homophobia, which not only renders male victims invisible, but also further persecutes them for being “gay”. A case in point is South Africa, which remains highly homophobic, so much so that the distinction between consensual male-male sex and male rape is blurred.<sup>17</sup> Coerced same-sex acts elicit a similar response to xenophobic apprehensions about homosexuality. The negative consequences are twofold—the perpetrator revels in the knowledge that he imposes the disgrace of homosexuality on the victim, and afterwards the victim must choose between ostracization from his community or suffering alone in silence. Rape victims therefore experience a paralytic trepidation to come forward lest they be branded homosexual. If cultural taboos surrounding the rape of men are unable to be overcome, human rights advocates will fail to achieve a politics of recognition in any capacity.

In the context of armed conflict, it is a fallacy to view male rape as something born out of the sexual desires of deviant homosexual men. Denial stems from the perception that incidences are few and far between, arising only in extraordinary circumstances. Sexual violence within the male/male paradigm transpires for the same reason as the male/female: the struggle for power. Power relations figure centrally as the perpetrator strives to exert their masculine dominance over the feminized, or in the case of male/male rape, emasculated *and* feminized victim. A man raped by another man is thus fundamentally stripped of their masculine identity, vitiated into submission and forced to assume the role of the “woman”. Similarly, in instances of sexual torture, men who are castrated lose their strongest physical association with manhood. It is therefore incorrect to claim only homosexual



men rape other men; by reaffirming one's masculinity through imposing a feminized role on the subordinated individual, the perpetrator maintains their heterosexual status. In a geopolitical battle for military control, the feminized male loses his standing as combative warrior once the enemy vanquishes his masculine identity.

Male rape has little to do with the sexual orientation of those involved and everything to do with the complex interplay between gendered identities and their associated hierarchies. Rape becomes a tool to strengthen these hierarchies. In times of war, undermining the masculinity of male figures becomes an effective disempowerment strategy. War glorifies the heterosexual man, and "to deviate from this heteronormative male standard is to be 'less' masculine. Thus, to cast aspersions on the individual's gender or sexuality would be to subordinate the victim to the perpetrator and strip him of his masculinity".<sup>18</sup> For combatants subscribing to hegemonic expressions of war and masculinity, the ability of the soldier to maintain his auxiliary masculine traits forms the basis for his belief in himself as a protector.

Conflict begets chaos and the disintegration of social order, which inflames the struggle for power and desire to establish the dominance of one group over another. The Hobbesian regression of war creates an environment in which acts of violence are often public in nature. Militaries utilize this as a medium to drive a message into the community at large. With sexual violence directed against men, the public nature of these defilements further stigmatizes the male, "and the community is informed that their male members, their protectors, are unable to protect themselves...the manliness of the man is lost and the family and community are made to feel vulnerable".<sup>19</sup> Symbolically, male rape is sometimes used as a method of emasculating the male "leaders" of a community, rendering them powerless. The

inclusion of sexual emasculation as a tactic of war exemplifies the pivotal role gender plays in armed conflict. Other theories of international relations, such as realism, neoliberalism, and marxism, insufficiently address these gendered dimensions. As has been argued here, so too does traditional gender analysis. Male rape falls through the cracks of theoretical analysis because no lens addresses it, and therefore the issue has difficulty gaining traction.

The gendered foundations of male rape also indicate a closely intertwined relationship with constructions of nationalism, extremist doctrines, and ethnic cleansing. In different ways, the sexualization of women and men in armed conflict embodies the nation. Men come to embody the guardian of an ethnic group's national territory and the stronghold that must be toppled in order to emerge victorious. Exposing the men of a particular ethnic group to sexual violence is akin to feminizing the symbols of strength and virility inherent to the group. Ethnic cleansing employs various tools, including the impregnation of women; castration performs a similar task, seeking to ensure a nation's men are unable to reproduce future generations. Conflicts defined by ethnic tension are rife with displays of gendered hierarchies asserting the domination/subordination dichotomy. As in the former Yugoslavia, ethnic cleansing and ultranationalism were adopted in Serbian policies. Politics are greatly influenced by the gendered undertones driving national leaders, whether sexual violence is committed against women or men.

Sexual norms traditionally governing military settings are pervaded when rape warfare becomes widely and systematically used. Marysia Zalewski contends, "military life works with and depends on quite specific understandings about what counts as 'normal' sexual relations or behaviors; one of these being the idea that (heterosexual) men will normally (in many senses) look

at/lust after (heterosexual) women".<sup>20</sup> Incidents in the former Yugoslavia, sub-Saharan Africa, and others attest to the notion that sexual violence in war constitutes a practice separated from physiological sex attributions. Constructions of normalized gender roles are maintained and buttressed by the masculine/feminine relationship, but the corporeal sex and sexual preference of the perpetrator and victim are devalued in the gendered struggle for power.

Power relations within male rape speak volumes about the importance of the issue to feminist international relations. Male rape is aligned with the feminist objective of ending gender inequality and the dominance of hegemonic masculinities over the feminine. Through the emasculation of the male victim, constructions of gender in male/male rape closely parallel those manifesting themselves in the rape of women. A gendered perspective advocating for the protection of women from sexual violence but casting men as involved only insofar as they refrain from acting as aggressors is incomplete, discriminatory, and potentially dangerous. Confronting the issue requires broadening the gendered lens to include a more nuanced approach considering women and men victims of hegemonic masculinity. To champion women's rights in the context of sexual violence without recognizing the profound affect it also has on men further alienates male victims.

The need to delineate the distinction between gender and sex is ever-present. Male rape in armed-conflict underscores how this is sometimes forgotten. As Cynthia Enloe states, "[t]here needs to be a feminist consciousness informing our work on gender. A feminist consciousness is what keeps one taking seriously—staying intellectually curious about—the experiences, actions, and ideas of women and girls".<sup>21</sup> While Enloe acknowledges the need to analyze masculinity, this passage

explicitly equates the feminine consciousness with women and girls. A feminist consciousness is concerned with the construction of feminine gender roles within international relations; as such, it needs to encompass the way in which these notions of femininity are attributed to men and boys as well. Since male rape seeks to reverse and assert certain gendered attributes to the male victim, sexual violence against men falls within the scope of this movement.

Reports emerging around the world confirm that male rape is not a localized or sporadic phenomenon. It happens in every conflict in which sexual violence is commonplace, and yet it has received almost no international attention from global civil society. The language used by nongovernmental organizations and supranational bodies continue to frame acts of sexual violence exclusively in terms of men violating women. These international institutions wield resources and political will, and are perhaps the most important arenas in which the issue of male rape must achieve recognition. Like most movements in need of gaining momentum, the path to recognition must start from simultaneous efforts from grassroots human rights activists as well as influential scholars. Addressing male rape still has much headway to gain in this respect.

Gender analysis surrounding wartime rape, focusing on the victimization of women, has effaced men as victims leaving them visible only as agents of violence. For this effect to be reversed, concepts like “gender-based violence” must be discursively expanded to include men rather than being equated solely with women. Since the human rights agenda values increasing and equitable human security, the probability of it being amenable to this suggestion is favourable. A more difficult concern lies in counteracting deeply entrenched beliefs about traditional gender norms and masculinity that shape and influence social

organization and political processes. These factors transcend cultures and territorial boundaries. The international community is quick to condemn the actions of military operations and extreme nationalist ideology, but it is more challenging to induce a shift in the paradigm of heteronormative thought when these values permeate all levels of politics, even the benign and democratic. As more men hesitantly come forward with their stories, one can only hope that the organizations supporting them give voice to their plight.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Laura Stemple, "Male Rape and Human Rights," *Hastings Law Journal* 60, no. 3 (2010): 605-645.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Sandesh Sivakumaran, "Sexual Violence Against Men in Armed Conflict," *European Journal of Human Rights* 18, no. 2 (2007): 255.
- <sup>5</sup> Stemple, "Male Rape and Human Rights".
- <sup>6</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, 2000.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 2.
- <sup>8</sup> Phil Rumney, "Gender Neutrality, Rape and Trial Talk," *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 21, no. 2 (2008): 144.
- <sup>9</sup> Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 2002.
- <sup>10</sup> Adam Jones, "Effacing the Male: Gender, Misrepresentation, and Exclusion in the Kosovo War," in Jones, *Gender Exclusive: Essays on violence, men, and feminist international relations*, (New York: Routledge, 2009): 94
- <sup>11</sup> Jones, "Effacing the Male: Gender, Misrepresentation, and Exclusion in the Kosovo War," 77.
- <sup>12</sup> Sandesh Sivakumaran, "Male/Male Rape and the 'Taint' of Homosexuality," *Human Rights Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2005): 1279.
- <sup>13</sup> Charlotte Hooper, "Masculinities, IR and the 'gender variable': a cost-benefit analysis for (sympathetic) gender sceptics," *Review of International Studies*, 25 (1999): 491.
- <sup>14</sup> Sivakumaran, "Male/Male Rape and the 'Taint' of Homosexuality".
- <sup>15</sup> Pauline Oosterhoff., Prisca Zwanikken., and Evert Ketting, "Sexual torture of men in Croatia and other conflict situations: an open secret", *Reproductive Health Matters* 12, no. 23 (2004): 75.
- <sup>16</sup> Oosterhoff et al.
- <sup>17</sup> Sasha Gear, "Behind the Bars of Masculinity: Male Rape and Homophobia in and about South African Men's Prisons", *Sexualities* 10, no. 2 (2003): 209-227.
- <sup>18</sup> Sivakumaran, "Sexual Violence Against Men in Armed Conflict," 270.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 269.
- <sup>20</sup> Marysia Zalewski, "Feminist International Relations: Making Sense...", in L.J. Shepherd (Eds.), *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations*, (New York: Routledge, 2010): 34.
- <sup>21</sup> Cynthia Enloe, "'Gender' Is Not Enough: The Need for a Feminist Consciousness", *International Affairs* 80, no. 1 (2004): 97.