

Should we regard gender-based violence as a weapon of war?

Written by Kieran Ford

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KIERAN FORD, SEP 8 2011

The rape of women in conflict is not a new thing; “war rape is as old as war itself.”[1] Rape has been used many times as a tactic or weapon within war to demonise, terrorise and defeat women both physically and emotionally. Gender-based violence (GBV) is, however, more than simply rape; Carpenter argues for a greater acknowledgement of a wider conception of GBV to encompass those occasions where men suffer according to their sex and gender as well.[2] This essay, however, looks beyond the immediate circumstances of men and women’s experiences in war to explore the way gender manifests itself in the essence of war, not simply in its logical end of violence. This essay extends Carpenter’s conception of GBV to argue that all violence can be exposed as an expression of gender; as an expression of masculinity or as an attack on femininity. Secondly, this essay also seeks to explore the ways in which war itself is based on gender, and derives meaning from a gendered lens. Having first explored the way the First World War found meaning in gender, and inspired by Spivak’s often recited phrase, “white men are saving brown women from brown men”[3] this essay explores the ways in which the violence of the War on Terror and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are based on gendered narratives. Two elements emerge from this analysis – that the Bush Administration used a gendered narrative of feminism to legitimise the war, but that this war was actually based on a deeper masculinity within US national identity. This essay argues that while we should acknowledge the different ways in which both men and women are affected by war, we should not restrict our discussion of gender in war to conclude that GBV is simply a weapon of war. Instead, gender-based violence is at the essence of war, war is indeed a form of gender-based violence. Rape and other less obvious forms of GBV are simply this gender-based war in its most crude and obvious form.

With either an implicit assumption or an explicit definition that GBV only affects women, a large proportion of the literature on GBV deals with the concept synonymously to that of rape: be that academic writing[4] or NGO reports[5]. To borrow a technique from Cynthia Enloe who coined the phrase “womenandchildren,”[6] a great deal of these misconceptions derive themselves from the well used phrase “sexualandgenderbasedviolence.” For instance, one article defines GBV so that it “includes, but is not limited to rape, forced impregnation and forced maternity. Gender-based violence encompasses physical violations directed at women *on account of* their gender.”[7] Johnson’s definition incorporated five main categories of sexual, physical, emotional/psychological, and socio-economic violence along with harmful traditional practices under a broad banner of “violence that is directed at individuals on the basis of their gender.”[8] Carpenter’s arguments that we shall explore shortly call for a much broader definition of GBV.

Were the question to be addressed: “Should we regard the rape of women as a weapon of war?” then the answer would be somewhat different and it is relevant to discuss this answer at this point. Rape has been used regularly within war since time immemorial – the historical examples of the rape of Nanking[9] and the treatment of Vietnamese women by US soldiers in the Vietnam War[10] both provide recent reminders of this; these reminders were however conditional on the fact that academics have exposed these examples some years after they occurred. Nancy Farwell notes that a “weapon of war” is an unusual concept for international relations academics[11] yet we can craft a definition from a dictionary, which defines a weapon as: “any object used in fighting or war, such as a gun, bomb, sword etc.”[12] Many examples, such as the mass rape in the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina[13], provide evidence that rape is used as a weapon, not as an expression of sexuality but of power and dominance[14], predominantly of

Should we regard gender-based violence as a weapon of war?

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men over women: “it breaks the spirit, humiliates, tames, produces a docile, differential, obedient soul.”[15] It is for this reason rape is to be considered *gender*-based violence, for it is an attack on gender, not just a body. The word *should* must be emphasised from the question addressed. “Rape evokes the nightmarishness of war, but it becomes just an indistinguishable part of a poisonous wartime stew called ‘lootpillagedrape’”[16] Naturalised as “collateral damage” or “spoils of war”[17] war rape can easily go unnoticed and as such the acknowledgement that rape is a weapon of war is vital to alleviate the suffering of victims. “Accepting rape as an inevitable aspect of armed conflict can lead to condoning it and thereby to an overt strategy that utilises rape as a weapon of war.”[18] This essay will examine how this naturalisation process of rape within war is tied up in the gendered nature of war itself.

Whilst rape can be used as a weapon of war, and must be regarded as such to combat the ambivalence the concept is prone to receive, GBV, according to Carpenter should encompass a greater spectrum of violence than simply rape. Men, Carpenter argues, have violence inflicted on them for the very reason they are male, in the same way that women have certain types of violence inflicted on them due to their sex and gender. The three issues Carpenter raises are: sex-selective massacre, forced recruitment into armies and militias and sexual violence inflicted upon men.[19] Even if the definition of GBV were left at the point at which Carpenter draws the definitive line, the clear categorisation of GBV as a ‘weapon’ is becoming blurred as we see the gendered nature of certain institutions within war, such as the recruitment of combatants, being exposed.

While Carpenter insists quite correctly that we should not forget the experiences of men as well as of women as victims of violence, an implicit assumption that this essay will attempt to discredit is the idea that certain types of violence bear no relation to gender. This is the binary assumption implicit within the terminology GBV. Instead, all violence can be explored in terms of gender, and indeed should; the reason being that a gendered lens can expose certain resolutions to conflict that are hidden by gendered binaries.[20] To blinker our discussion of gender within the framework of wars to the impact violence has on the individual genders of men and women within war hides from us the wider discussion one should have about the impact gender has on an international sphere between states. From that discussion, it emerges, that war is in fact itself an act of gender-based violence. Let us explore more closely the interrelationship between violence, war and gender.

“Violence is a property of force. A force is violent if it ‘violates’, i.e. if it breaks and destroys that to which it is applied.”[21]

Violence is inherently masculine. Pope and Englar-Carlson, in a study on masculinity and violence in boys describe how the masculine roles ascribed and internalised in young boys include aggression and anger which lead to violence. In discussing how to stop this violence, the article immediately speaks of how boys are shunned if they act ‘like girls.’[22] Violence is, as we see above, to do with force, but also with dominance; the dominance of masculine over feminine or a competition of domination between masculinities. A study by Anthony Whitehead calls for masculinity to be considered a risk factor in violence amongst criminals, alongside other factors such as anger management. He argues “that the individual man may demonstrate his masculinity by two categories of violence to other men: violence which includes his victims in the category ‘man’ as worthy rivals and violence which excludes victims from the category ‘man’ as unworthy of being there.”[23] Such a masculine notion of violence renders the idea of a non-gender-based violence impossible. A closed conception of GBV, currently commonly used, perpetuates a false paradigm in which a discussion of gender is restricted to those cases where the existence of gendered meaning is so explicit – such as rape.

War, with its customary violence, is a clear expression of masculinity and is also often expressed, understood and legitimised through gendered meanings. It is for this reason that this essay claims GBV not to be the weapons of war, but that *war is a form of GBV*. Two cases of war, in which gendered ideas played a large part in terms of the basis on which the war was fought shall now be considered to interrogate this notion that gender-based violence is at the essence of war: firstly, the case of the First World War will be explored and secondly, the War on Terror.

“I suppose the first thought in the minds of most of us women was a sense of shattering horror at the choice with which the men were confronted.”[24] [spoken in 1915]

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Written by Kieran Ford

Britain's involvement in the First World War was one of patriarchal protectionism; a clear expression of masculinity. Protecting Belgium (and ultimately Britain itself) was an expression of masculinity, power, dominance and military force against Germany that ultimately led to the deaths of millions. Though speaking of a contemporary 1990s, Tickner's sentiments seem relevant to a context nearly a century earlier: "the values and assumptions that drive our contemporary international system are intrinsically related to concepts of masculinity: privileging these values constrains the options available to states and their policy makers."^[25] Embedded in the masculine Great Power system, the British rulers had little choice but to retain its masculinity and go to war.

What is interesting about the First World War is the way that elements in the war were ascribed gendered meanings. Rape played a large rhetorical part in the discourse of British patriotism. While Great Power competition was a highly masculinised endeavour, the nation was depicted as incredibly feminine. Images of rape were used as a metaphor for invasion such as the 'rape of Belgium.' Nations were feminised and the reproductive ability of such nations were accentuated. This metaphor was extended through the examples of French and Belgian women being raped. "Attacks on women were more than attacks on unfortunate individuals; they were assaults on the nation's reproductive future."^[26] This led to a paradigm of "women as the nation."^[27] This paradigm ultimately had great impact on both men and women in Britain during the war. Rape was not only used as a tool to convince men to protect women through violence, but also asked questions of women who were not giving birth to plenty of British soldiers.^[28]

In the First World War therefore, gender played two roles. Not only was Britain's participation in the war an expression of masculinity, but also British patriotic discourse used gendered imagery and metaphor surrounding the notion of rape to impose gendered expectations on both men and women. The violence inflicted by and inflicted upon British men would therefore both fit within Carpenter's conception of GBV, and also strengthen the rejection of such a thing as non-gender-based violence. Both these instances of gender within the First World War strengthen the claim that GBV is inextricably linked to the essence of war; rather than it just being a tactic used during war.

Almost a century later, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq show similar expressions of gender: the act of war itself being an expression of masculinity on the world stage by the Bush administration, and the legitimisation of the war (rather than the rallying patriotic fervour of the First World War) being drenched in feminist rhetoric.

The justifications for such an expression of masculinity as an invasion of a foreign sovereign country such as Iraq or Afghanistan lie in the American national identity and culture. Bonnie Mann describes how the concept of US sovereignty has changed and "is no longer an issue of secure borders and secure interests... sovereignty becomes instead a certain style of national masculinity, and war becomes an occasion for its performative constitution, a self-making rather than self-defending."^[29] US sovereignty is not bound up in protecting territory, but in protecting an image – and an highly gendered image. Nancy Ehrenreich describes how all elements of US society can gain a sense of self-worth by supporting the war and through this process strengthening their own sense of masculinity as 'Americans.'^[30] Mann depicts how the war has been articulated as an expression of a collective war in which all Americans take part.^[31] US sovereignty and an American individual's sense of security can be improved through the emasculation of Saddam Hussein and all other 'brown men'. The war in this sense "has reinforced a racialised national sense of masculinity by playing on the association of maleness with violent domination of people of colour."^[32]

At the same time as being a deep expression of masculinity, the war on terror has been coated in a feminist rhetoric summed up in Spivak's well known "white men are saving brown women from brown men."^[33] The Bush administration regularly reminded citizens that the war on terror would "also be fought to protect the rights and dignity of women"^[34] and that the Islamic religion was barbaric and demeaning towards women. Krista Hunt coined the phrase of 'embedded feminism' to describe this rhetoric. In the same way that the US military employed an embedded media to be deployed with US troops to present a positive message to the listening audience back in the US, so too did they employ an embedded feminism to give this act of imperialism a positive meaning.^[35] While many academics and journalists alike have written to criticise this supposed feminism in order to expose the underlying imperialism of the war on terror,^[36] this message gave a positive meaning to the show of masculinity: "disguising American imperialism as noble expressions of civilising, manly power."^[37]

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One should never have been shocked by the images of Lyndie England abusing, torturing and ritually humiliating Iraqi men in Abu Ghraib prison. While these images shocked the Western public and she and others involved were scalded as being a minority of monsters,[38] the actions that she undertook were simply part of a wider gender-based act of violence of one country against another. "Here the American woman is given the phallus in true (postmodern) democratic form as the military takes up the practice of racialised gender bending." [39]

The purpose of this exploration of both these wars has been to illustrate the way that in the same way that all forms of violence are based in an expression of gender, so too is it the case for war. War is the expression of gender-based violence in a collective form. The themes that one can draw from the two cases used in this essay aid us in understanding this wider paradigm in which to explore war, and also clearly demonstrate how to simply regard gender-based violence as a weapon of war would be short-sighted.

Though the wars were fought almost a century apart from each other, the same expression of masculinity existed as both nations sought to re-invent themselves as dominant cultures. We have seen that rape is an act of dominance and bears little relevance to sexuality. Invasion, as we saw with the case of Belgium can also easily be seen as rape – they are both invasions of a kind, destroying preconceived notions of sovereignty. It is in this same frame that Bonnie Mann can describe the attacks of 11th September 2001 in the US as "the homosexual rape and simultaneous castration of the United States by a dark, brutal and overwhelmingly masculine enemy." [40]

If war is rape of a nation or, in the case of intrastate conflict, the rape of one group of people by another, the logic of rape as a weapon of war becomes clearer. The rape of women by soldiers in war is simply the deepest and most crude performance of dominance within a setting of a war based entirely on an expression of gender. The existence of rape within war is therefore inextricably linked to the gendered meaning of war. Rape becomes naturalised within war as they both are one and the same thing; the concerns of Enloe and Farwell that were expressed above.

In conclusion, this essay rejects the notion that we should regard gender-based violence as a *weapon* of war. Using the work of Carpenter, who extended the conception of gender-based violence beyond simply the violation of women in war, this essay extended the conception further to reveal the gendered nature of violence itself. War, inherently violent, has also been exposed as being an expression of gender. There is no core difference between the dominance sought in a pub brawl, and the dominance sought in international conflict. If war is gendered and violent, and all violence is gendered, this essay argues for the consideration that war is therefore a form of gender-based violence itself. While this essay has recognised the continuing importance of the closed conception of GBV most commonly articulated and the documentation of how rape is used within conflict as a weapon of dominance, this essay also stresses the importance of exploring the gendered nature of war. Such a paradigm could reveal lessons about contemporary and historical war, and could allow for more *feminised* resolutions to conflict to be introduced.

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