

## Review - Sexual Violence Against Men in Global Politics

Written by Matthew Kearns

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MATTHEW KEARNS, JUL 20 2018

### ***Sexual Violence Against Men in Global Politics***

**Edited by Marysia Zalewski, Paula Drumond, Elisabeth Prugl and Maria Stern  
Oxford: Routledge, 2018**

The issue of sexual violence against men in global politics has received marginal attention within critical analysis of sexual violence and conflict. However, critical scholars of gender and international politics have contributed to a rich literature on sexual violence against women during conflict, often linking this to a wider feminist concern about the role of military masculinities and how they are (re)produced through such violence (Baaz and Stern, 2009; Kirby and Henry, 2012; Karim and Beardsley, 2017). This edited volume represents a highly significant attempt to address this gap by thinking through, both conceptually and empirically, the issue of sexual violence against men (SVAM). The book explores a multiplicity of different perspectives in order to achieve this, confronting the full complexity of the debates around SVAM by embracing the tensions within those different perspectives as well as their convergence. Global politics is understood within the book through the lens of armed conflict, though the title might arguably imply a slightly broader understanding. This is justifiable in the sense that the majority of the literature in international relations on sexual violence has focused upon its role within armed conflict, and the editors rightly remind us that such a focus is not to assume a neat or ontologically fixed delineation between 'war' and 'peace' in the perpetuation of sexual violence (pp.5-6).

The editors describe the book as a "multi-textured text" (p.9) divided into two main parts. The first entitled *provocations* aims to "initiate the process of opening up, exploring and discussing" the tensions inherent to studying SVAM, particularly how it might unsettle or challenge established categories within gendered analysis of conflict and the conceptual frameworks best placed to understand it (p.9). The second part entitled *framings* explores how SVAM has been discursively constructed in order to "unsettle the notion that it pre-exists its enactment and representation" (p.11), focusing on areas such as media discourse (Dolan, Chapter 9), the United Nations (Becerra, Chapter 10) and international jurisprudence (Viseur-Sellers and Nwoye, Chapter 12); punctuating these main sections are a series of reflection pieces. Each piece contains valuable insights on the text as a whole and injects greater theoretical nuance to the arguments the individual chapters develop. Further, the use of such reflections also disrupts the (understandable) desire for concrete knowledge about SVAM by repeatedly questioning whether our existing conceptual frameworks are adequate to theorise the concept. Indeed, a key strength of the book is its resistance to this desire by virtue of the multiple perspectives and tensions it draws upon, viewing such tensions not as problematic but productive in creating new possibilities for intervention and thinking otherwise about how such violence is made possible.

Marysia Zalewski's opening contribution to *provocations* is especially notable. Zalewski introduces the problematique of SVAM and the provocation that "sexual violence against men and boys is (almost) as frequent as that against women and girls" (p.28), unpacking the questions such a statement invites in relation to what is counted as sexual violence and why we know so little about such violence. She raises the question of whether the feminist focus, which has (rightly) been placed on sexual violence against women, might have "hidden the facts about sexual

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violence against men” by implicitly gendering such violence as a “paradigmatically feminised injury” (p.28). In short, she explores how the assumptions inherent to feminist epistemologies might have contributed to making SVAM ineligible within our conceptual frameworks and thus marginal to our empirical concerns. These are deeply provocative and irresolvable questions which set the stage for the remaining chapters within the book, with authors offering different and sometimes conflicting perspectives upon them.

Each of the subsequent chapters develop different approaches to analysing SVAM, for example by examining military masculinity and sexual violence in the US military (Mesok, Chapter 3), theorising SVAM to encompass forms of sexual violence beyond rape (Myrntinen, Chapter 4) and analysing SVAM through the lens of international political economy (Meger, Chapter 6). The *framings* section does an excellent job of deepening the book’s analysis by engaging with a range of case studies. Collectively this analysis raises many pertinent questions, not least on the ways forward in seeking to analyse SVAM which are addressed in the reflection pieces. A key theme throughout is the politics underpinning what we think we know about sexual violence (against men), or rather what we don’t know. I was reminded here of Stern and Zalewski’s concept of ‘feminist fables’ (Stern and Zalewski, 2009) and how feminist knowledge succeeds in making visible and critiquing the gendered power relations which underpin global politics but inevitably (re)produces those power relations within its knowledge claims. SVAM necessarily challenges certain feminist assumptions within feminist epistemology as it presents the paradox of the male victim. Although the inversion of dichotomy between the masculine perpetrator and feminine victim is not new to feminist thinking (see Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007) it nevertheless complicates feminist understandings of sexual violence as the authors within this collection illustrate. As noted earlier, the book resists offering a clear way through such debates but it maps them out with clarity for the reader to make sense of them on their own terms.

The subject matter of the book is undoubtedly challenging. Several reflection pieces pull out the difficulties of reading such graphic accounts of sexual violence. Laura Shepherd’s reflection piece articulates this well when she both describes her horror at these accounts and her uneasiness at being able to “turn the page, turn away from these accounts, and to engage in other things, while the survivors whose stories are documented in these accounts have no such options” (p.129). At several points during the book I felt similar emotions, at times having to physically turn away from the book in reaction to what I was reading. By overtly acknowledging such uneasiness through the use of reflection pieces, the book recognises the challenges of reading, writing and researching about sexual violence against men but also reminds us of the need to ensure our conceptual frameworks (and the politics which underpin them) are best placed to understand how such violence is made possible.

Overall the book represents a bold effort to understand an issue marginal to international politics. It successfully interrogates the politics which make such marginality possible within both scholarship on sexual violence and conflict as well as policy agendas, while demonstrating how such violence is integral to the perpetuation of war and conflict. In line with the book’s aims it lacks a definitive conclusion to its analysis, though its individual chapters offer a wealth of different approaches which could inform and shape future research agendas. Its analysis will be of immense interest not only to students and scholars of gender and international relations but also policy-makers working on sexual violence and conflict.

## References

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### **About the author:**

**Matthew Kearns** is a doctoral candidate in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at Newcastle University, UK. His research interests concern the representations through which state militaries recruit their personnel and how they produce and perform diverging constructions of gender. Through this, his research speaks to wider feminist debates concerning military masculinities and their potential to become displaced in changing security contexts. He has recently published work in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* on gender, visual securitization and the 2001 war in Afghanistan.