

# How the Securitisation of Sexual Violence in Conflict Fails Us

Written by Michelle Dyonisius

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In the wake of the popularisation and mainstreaming of feminist advocacy, sexual violence in conflict (SVC) framed as a weapon of war has been prevalently condemned by the media, governments, and international organisations alike. While the widespread attention to the issue is warranted, such understanding of SVC and consequent securitisation of the matter is actually problematic. In turn, through problematising the conception of war and combat from a post-colonial feminist perspective, this essay argues for the reframing of the duality of 'war' and 'peace' into a continuum of battle and repression, in order to reject the perpetuation of gendered and colonial knowledge, which process is maintained and reproduced through the framing of SVC as a weapon of war. This is not to negate the strategic aspect of SVC completely, but rather to comprehend both its strategic and non-strategic facets of the violence by acknowledging the larger oppressive gendered and colonised power relations.

This essay will start by presenting existing feminist scholarship in support of the framing of SVC as a weapon of war. Then, it will highlight how the securitisation of SVC reproduces a gendered and colonial conception of war that has concrete consequences on policy to address sexual violence. In turn, reframing the duality of 'war' and 'peace' through a postcolonial lens allows a more nuanced understanding of SVC as a part of continuing oppression both in the West and elsewhere. This essay will use the case study of the sexual violence committed by Japan during World War II and subsequently by US soldiers in Japan under their occupation.

### Securitisation of SVC and its Flaw

To begin with, there are feminist scholarships that support the understanding of SVC as a weapon of war. The defence lies in a key assumption that SVC is strategically perpetrated by rational culpable actors to achieve political goals as women's purity is seen to represent their collective as a nation (Baaz and Stern, 2013). Hence, SVC punishes the enemy through humiliating both women by corrupting their ideal conception of feminine chastity and men by sullyng theirwomen (Enloe, 2000). In this sense, an explanation through 'universal patriarchal gender relations' is deemed inadequate, as it gives insufficient explication on the strategic targeting of women and girls, especially those of an 'Other' ethnic group in an ethno-national conflict (Allison, 2007: 89). In a flip side, the patriarchy approach also significantly fails to explain why men and boys are targeted as well. Therefore, it is argued that SVC needs to be understood as a weapon of war.

However, the implication of such framework is not only too restrictive but also reproduces a gendered knowledge of war and security more broadly. Firstly, such understanding SVC as a weapon of war situates sexual violence in a public sphere, as a collective threat to the nation beyond the private matters of the victims (Hirschauer, 2014). In doing so, the framework reinforces the public/private divide as well as affirming the hierarchical importance of public matters, while rendering the private as inferior: sexual violence is seen as important only once it is set to be 'rhetorically [attached] to security objectives of war' (Hirschauer, 2014: 187). The implication is that the recognition of the gravity of SVC is dependent on it occurring in the public space, where strategic fighting takes place between two collectives, as conventionally portrayed in the traditional theorisation of war (Buss, 2007; Shepherd, 2005). It is then logically inferred that somehow the personal experiences of sexual violence outside the context of war is less important. Hence, the weapon of war framework alleviates and divorces sexual violence from the continuing

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asymmetric gendered power relations, regardless of the formal context of war.

The implication is the homogenisation, objectification, and commercialisation of SVC (Meger, 2016). The securitisation of SVC negates everything else other than the strategic intent of the act. Hence, it is oblivious to the distinctions over the perpetrators, the victims, and the objectives other for tactical gains (Meger, 2011). This decontextualisation, performed to render SVC solely as a threat of international security, hides and ignores the underlying political, social, and economic relations that drive gendered violence during and beyond the context of war. Consequently, resources are allocated for emergency responses but not for prevention of SVC (Baaz and Stern 2010; Autesserre 2012). Organisations invite security experts to speak about SVC (Aradau, 2004). Meanwhile, those directly impacted are only featured in the campaigns to raise awareness and support, but nowhere near the decision-making table. The issue justifies interventionist foreign policy, while domestic infrastructures that can actually facilitates long-term change for women security after fighting and peacekeeping missions ends experience pushbacks (Merger, 2016).

Secondly, the weapon of war approach reproduces hetero-sexist and essentialised conception of women in their biologically reproductive ability, which is extended to symbolise the reproduction of the nation. The inherent vulnerability removes women's agency to protect themselves or indeed take part in the war struggle, let alone as combatants. This one-dimensional view of women invites the protection of men while overlooking how these supposed saviours are not immune to offend themselves.

In fact, combat reinforces and reproduces hegemonic masculinity through institutionalisation, which pressure permeates into the soldier individuals' experiences. Soldiers are trained in combat to embody the microcosm of the state, not only through the action of fighting itself, but also in their function as the carrier of the state's mission of war (Hale, 2012). Hence, combat is a legitimating ground for violence, so that individual personnel are intentionally trained to remove their own self in order to acquire the identity of a soldier which is aggressive, disciplined, and rational as the 'meaning of masculinity reflects the requirement of war' (Hutchings, 2008: 393). In addition to this positive reinforcement, the valorisation of masculinity is furthermore achieved through negative differentiation, in the form of devaluation of all that is considered feminine (Duncanson, 2009). In this sense, soldiers in combat supposed to embody the pinnacle of manhood: 'the hegemonic masculinity of the combat soldier' (Sasson-Levy, 2003: 327). Therefore, the military permits SVC not simply as a spoil of war, but a deliberate mechanism of enforcing and reproducing such masculinity. Thus, combat is not only a proving ground but also a system in constructing, emphasising, and reproducing hegemonic masculinity (Millar and Tidy, 2017). The Japanese Imperial Army consciously made the shift from treating rape as a secondary offence before 1942 to the creation of the 'comfort women' system based on a report that many officers 'deemed it necessary... to rape women in order to stimulate aggression' which is a rather valuable masculinised characteristic of a soldier (Tanaka, 2002: 29).[1]

At the same time, the nature of hegemonic masculinity is not normal, considering how its privilege derives from such high unachievable standards, which do not represent most experiences of men. Whitehead (2002: 93) puts it nicely that 'the concept of hegemonic masculinity can 'see' only structure, making the subject invisible,' Thus, the pressure and the assured failure of individual soldiers to live up to the mythical heroic soldier provokes the need for concealment by regaining their masculinity through SVC (Baaz and Stern, 2009). It is also a way of coping to divert the frustration as the soldiers are subjected to the military hierarchic chain of command which is an integral part of reinforcing characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. Japanese soldiers accounted their starvation and constant abuse by their superiors without the ability to oppose, as there was a pressure for preserving unity at their personal sacrifice (Dower, 1999). Conversely, when they do succeed such as winning in combat, there would be a sense of entitlement for an 'award' which takes form in SVC. Yasuji Kaneko, a former Japanese soldier stated, "They cried out, but it didn't matter to us whether the women lived or died. We were the emperor's soldiers. Whether in military brothels or in the villages, we raped without reluctance," (Tabuchi, 2007). Thus, to restrict the understanding of SVC as a weapon of war can actually be counter-productive to its goal in ending SVC in the first place.

## **New Framework: Continuum of Battle/Repression**

Alternatively, a more nuanced and useful feminist understanding of SVC can be achieved by reframing the duality of

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'war' and 'peace' through a postcolonial lens. The existing study of war has been largely based on a Eurocentric historical experience of major wars between sovereign nation-states that dichotomised the period of 'war' and 'peace'. This is evident from the contemporary study of international politics which situate international relations in the current time-frame of 'peace' of the post-1945 era, in contrast to the extraordinary 'wartime', deriving from the experience of the two World Wars. The problem with this approach is not that non-Western conflicts are ignored, but rather the utilisation of universalised concept to understand them without acknowledging the Eurocentrism. Therefore, there needs to be 'decolonisation of war' (Barkawi, 2016). The traditional defining characteristic of 'war' in contrast to 'peace', as in the extraordinary suspension of ordinary processes in society, no longer fits when non-Western experiences are examined. The analysis can be advanced by reframing the 'war/peace' duality into battle, as in armed resistance, and repression, as in employing punitive threat of force in suppressing such resistance (Barkawi, 2016). This is proved to be useful, as it does make sense not only for the Western empire historically, but also contemporarily in international asymmetric power relations. For instance, the US occupation of Okinawa to this day is not 'war' exactly but also not 'peace'. It reflects US power on Japan which is met with resistance from the locals such as from the Okinawan Women Act Against Military Violence. Nevertheless, the US is not stopping its occupation any time soon, which is the case for other US overseas military bases as well such as the infamous Guantanamo Bay naval base in Cuba.

The utilisation of this revised framework of battle/repression returns the 'sexual' to the analysis of SVC so that a feminist securitisation of sexual violence can be more holistic and sensitive to contingencies without being restricted being the context of 'war'. This is a significant step, as it provides a solution to the dilemma on how to understand SVC without normalising it as a part of warring. Baaz and Stern (2018) explain how the 'sexual' defines the nature of sexual relations in 'peacetime' society. Thus, rape can be judged as perverse because of the negation of the 'sexual' through the use of coercion during 'peacetime' society. It is understood as the exceptional in a normal circumstance. The issue arises when this schema is applied to understand SVC because the exceptional conception of the context of 'war'. The very presence of military force, representing coercion, immediately erases the question over the 'sexual'. The implication is that SVC seems to be a normal part of conflict rather than the exceptional in an already exceptional circumstance. The revised framework of battle/repression, however, no longer supports this exceptionality of force during conflict as it is an 'ordinary, not extraordinary, dimension of politics' (Barkawi, 2016: 201). Thus, this framework returns the 'sexual' as a determining category of SVC despite the context of conflict. Consequently, SVC can be seen as the exceptional in a normal circumstance by acknowledging the prevalence of force, including that within the previously concealed oppressive gendered power relations at large. In turn, the exceptionality of SVC is attributed to the use of coercion at an individual level between the perpetrator and the victim in relevance to each case. This approach consciously takes account various contingencies in cases and therefore respect the personal experiences of SVC, rather than homogenising them and only focusing on their strategic aspect of warring. At the same time, this provides a more holistic approach to SVC as it includes cases of sexual violence despite the lack of any strategic aspect of warring. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of SVC by respecting both its strategic and non-strategic aspect.

In doing so, this approach manages to reject the gendered knowledge in the public/private divide, and consequently its legitimisation of war and combat. This is because it allows to connect SVC with women's experiences beyond the context of conflict. It acknowledges 'how war is (also) enacted within 'private' spaces' (Gray, 2018: 2) and thus recognises the connection between the 'everyday' and 'extraordinary'. As a result, it is conscious of the 'continuum of violence' (Kelly, 1988) as a testament to the greater oppressive gendered power relations. This understanding of SVC breaks the legitimisation of war or any other vengeful actions on the basis that women with their symbolic reproductive role of the nation need men's protection. In contrast, this approach exposes how these very men pose the most immediate threat of sexual violence in the context of not-war, and their violent conducts are only further heightened surrounding the time of conflict.

This applies appropriately to criticise the hypocrisy of Japanese narrative after its defeat in contrast to its own military conduct during the conflict. After its official surrender, Japanese authorities began advising the citizens to evacuate metropolitan areas as there was great fear that the women would be raped by the US and Allied occupational forces who were about to land. There was a speculation that each neighbourhood would need to provide the service of young women and that they 'must disguise young women as men, otherwise they will be in danger,' (Tanaka, 2002:

# How the Securitisation of Sexual Violence in Conflict Fails Us

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112-113). The Japanese government attempt to 'protect' the women was to establish a version of 'comfort women' system for the US forces, even as far as taking 30 million yen to facilitate the sexual services facilities with the strategy of sacrificing these women who became the buffer in order to protect the 'good' Japanese women's chastity (Dower, 1999). Their efforts to protect women paradoxically exposed women to sexual violence.

Furthermore, the framework of battle/repression allows a more thorough analysis of SVC beyond the colonial rhetoric as the result of and to justify hierarchical international relationships. This is contemporarily seen, as Baaz and Stern (2013) notice the dominant stories about SVC are reproductive of the colonial image of the 'Third World' to indicate its barbaric violence. This conduct is 'unknowable/unintelligible' as the occident condescendingly declare that they would never do such a thing. At the same time, this behaviour is 'known', thanks to the conception of the oriental as enshrined in the colonial library (Said, 1978). In understanding US military identity over the years, it has assumed a 'masculinist orientalism', following its self-proclaimed supremacy over the enemy-Others and the need to rescue civilian-Others (Brunner, 2013). Meanwhile, the Japanese soldiers during the Asia-Pacific War was infamous for being the irrational 'obedient herds' following their emperor with a 'childish brutality' (Dower, 1999).

The framework is helpful because it exposes sexual violence, not only during battle but also in repression, which is the context where such international asymmetric relationships are usually most visible. This analysis reveals the hypocrisy of the West by divulging its own culpability, having committed the very violence of SVC that they condemned. This is particularly evident when the US prosecuted Japan for its 'comfort women' system during the Tokyo Tribunal, but committed sexual violence from having the very system of 'comfort women'. The victor's justice, exemplary during the Tokyo Tribunal, prosecuted Japan for its system of 'comfort women' (Dower, 1999). One of the most interesting aspects of the tribunal, however, was that the Dutch represented Indonesia and completely ignored the Indonesian women forced involvement as 'comfort women' to imply that rights were reserved for Westerner or its arbitrary allies only (Tanaka, 2002).

Meanwhile, a survey conducted by the Okinawan Women Act Against Military Violence reported that the US troops kidnapped and raped local women including nurses and women patients who had been admitted into the US Field Hospital shortly after their landing on Zamami Island (Tanaka, 2002). This behaviour continued as Tanaka (2002) compiles testimonies recalling American soldiers taking young girls from civilian houses at gunpoint and even the raping women who had gone to the US camps to receive food hand-outs. Many incidences were unreported as the Okinawan police completely collapsed during the battle. Further sexual violence was committed through Japanese commissioned 'comfort women' system specifically for the Allied forces. An organisation called Tokushu Ian Shisetsu Kyōkai (the Special Comfort Facilities Association) was established specifically for this task, which was soon renamed as Recreation and Amusement Association to avoid the disparaged term 'comfort women' (Tanaka, 2002: 142). The sexual violence committed by US servicemen in Okinawa continues in numerous cases of rapes whose perpetrators are often shielded by the military, as reported by the Okinawan Women Act Against Military Violence. As recently as in 2016, a local Japanese woman was raped and murdered by a former US Marine who worked at the US military base at Kadena Airbase (Soble, 2016). It is worth emphasising that this is not at all to negate or downplay the responsibility of Japanese military for its own perpetuation of SVC. The purpose is to expose the culpability of perpetrators of SVC regardless of their power to define the narrative and thus shield their crime.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, a postcolonial feminist analysis of war/combat helps to form a better understanding of SVC through employing a new framework of battle/repression as oppose to 'war/peace' to reject the reproduction of gendered and colonial knowledge. This approach manages to avoid the theoretical slippage through the weapon of war framework that simultaneously exceptionalise and normalise SVC. The framework rejects the perpetuation of the superiority of the public over the private. In contrast, allows securitisation of SVC in a more holistic and sensitive way by avoiding simplification or homogenisation of contingent experiences. It also breaks the legitimisation of war and combat's reproduction of hegemonic masculinity through exposing men's threat to conduct violence on women as oppose to protect them. Finally, the framework interrupt colonial rhetoric produced by dominant occidental power in knowledge-creation by uncovering the culpability of the West in committing SVC as much as its non-Western counterpart. By opposing the colonial rhetoric, the issue of SVC across national boundaries can be addressed through the solidarity

# How the Securitisation of Sexual Violence in Conflict Fails Us

Written by Michelle Dyonisius

of women to expose the prevalent oppressive gendered relations, which acknowledges gendered-based violence beyond experiences of just women. The aim is to make these instances of violence visible not only to ensure the accountability of perpetrators, but also justify and call for adequate policy response to systematically alter asymmetric gendered power relations, culminating in sexual violence, in the first place.

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# How the Securitisation of Sexual Violence in Conflict Fails Us

Written by Michelle Dyonisius

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[1] The term 'comfort women' is used to emphasise the Japanese institutionalisation of sexual violence. It is not to downplay or deny any Japanese responsibility on sexual violence in this form of sexual slavery.

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