

2007

## Sexual Violence and Armed Conflict: Complex Dynamics of Re-Victimization

Janie Leatherman  
Fairfield University, [jleatherman@fairfield.edu](mailto:jleatherman@fairfield.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/politics-facultypubs>

Copyright 2007 International Journal of Peace Studies.

Journal articles freely available at: <http://www.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/>

Peer Reviewed

---

### Repository Citation

Leatherman, Janie, "Sexual Violence and Armed Conflict: Complex Dynamics of Re-Victimization" (2007).  
*Politics Faculty Publications*. 6.

<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/politics-facultypubs/6>

### Published Citation

Leatherman, Janie (2007). Sexual Violence and Armed Conflict: Complex Dynamics of Re-Victimization.  
*International Journal of Peace Studies* 12 (1): 53-71.

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. **You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.** For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@fairfield.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@fairfield.edu).

## **SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND ARMED CONFLICT: COMPLEX DYNAMICS OF RE-VICTIMIZATION**

**Janie Leatherman**

### **Abstract**

This article first examines two types of causes of sexual violence in armed conflict: systemic, or more distant causes, and more proximate, or situational causes, including the role of "runaway norms." In the second part, the article draws from a phase model of conflict to understand the new wars and the types of sexual violence that they entail in different stages of conflict. One of the important contributions of this model is to highlight the multiple situations and ways women and the girl child especially (and sometimes others in society, including men and boys, though this is typically underreported) are at risk of sexual violence. It also shows how that risk leads to re-victimization throughout the cycle of conflict for many sexual assault survivors. In addition, it helps elucidate the complexity of "victimhood," as many victims are also forced to commit atrocities. The conclusions draw the relevance of these insights for thinking about policymaking to prevent sexual violence in armed conflicts, to identify perpetrators versus victims, and assist the survivors during and in the aftermath of conflict (see Ward and Marsh 2006).

### **Introduction**

Sexual violence in armed conflict has long been part of the spoils of war. Susan Brownmiller (1975) documents this in a systematic historical study of the mass psychology of rape spanning the two World Wars, case studies on Bangladesh and Vietnam, as well as the American Revolution, and civil violence and pogroms in other societies, including against Indians and slaves in the American experience. Other scholars have documented its use against Native Americans (Smith 2005), Chinese in Nanking during World War II (Chang 1997), and comfort women by the Japanese between 1928-1945 (Dolgopol 2006).<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1990s, the problem of sexual violence in war has received increasing attention with the creation of ad hoc tribunals set up by the United Nations to try war crimes in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. In both instances, sexual violence and systematic rape were used as tools of war for the purposes of ethnic cleansing and genocide. These tribunals established new precedents in international law, leading to

the first prosecutions of rape as a war crime and crime against humanity and paved the way for the inclusion of these in the Statute of the 2000 Rome Treaty of the International Criminal Court, and the Special Court for Sierra Leone (UN Security Council Report 2002, 4). The day of impunity is, from a legal perspective, over. The adoption of United Nations Security Council (UN SC) Resolution 1325 in October 2000 also placed issues of women, war and conflict resolution squarely on the agenda of the United Nations Security Council for the first time. This was an historic breakthrough in international policymaking circles. These developments signal the end to the deafening silence of the international community and international law on the question of sexual violence in armed conflicts.

Like international law, the fields of conflict resolution and peace studies have also historically been silent on the question of sexual violence and mass rape in armed conflict. Top-down management strategies silenced the gendered study of conflict, and conflict resolution. In addition, prevailing paradigms of conflict resolution during the Cold War were more focused on waiting for conflict to be ripe for resolution (Zartman and Berman 1982), than on addressing structural or root causes, or thwarting violence in early stages, for example. This phase model argued for waiting until the parties exhausted their resources and themselves, and then promoting mediation, negotiation and conflict resolution. In effect, the Cold War approach favored stability over transformation. However, models of conflict resolution have changed since the end of the cold war, along with changes in the conceptualization of post-cold war conflicts.

This article first examines two types of causes of sexual violence in armed conflict: systemic, or more distant causes, and more proximate, or situational causes, including the role of “runaway norms.” In the second part, the article draws from a phase model of conflict to understand the new wars and the types of sexual violence that they entail in different stages of conflict. One of the important contributions of this model is to highlight the multiple situations and ways women and the girl child especially (and sometimes others in society, including men and boys, though this is typically underreported) are at risk of sexual violence. It also shows how that risk leads to re-victimization throughout the cycle of conflict for many sexual assault survivors. In addition, it helps elucidate the complexity of “victimhood,” as many victims are also forced to commit atrocities. The conclusions draw the relevance of these insights for thinking about policymaking to prevent sexual violence in armed conflicts, and also to assist the survivors during and in the aftermath of conflict (see Ward and Marsh 2006).

### **Causes of Sexual Violence and the “New Wars”**

Often referred to as the “new wars” (Kaldor 2003, 1999; Duffield 2001; Weiss 2006), post-cold war conflicts are no longer caught in the ideological contestations of the superpower-driven bipolar system, where the parties came under some disciplinary

influence of their patron. Identity conflicts centered on ethnicity, religion or race have replaced confrontation over political ideology. These new wars are distinguished by the fractionation of warring parties (in some cases like the East Congo, extreme fractionation, see Nest et al. 2006) and the spread of small arms and light weapons (partly from the selling off of Cold War stocks). Humanitarian aid workers, and United Nations peacekeepers, who once counted on neutrality, have consistently found themselves in the crosshairs of the fighting, often targets themselves. The funding of wars has shifted from superpower patrons to shadow economies linked up to global systems of profit-seeking (Nordstrom 2004; Ballentine and Sherman 2003; Barkawi 2006). The push to loot and control local resources is often accomplished by strategies of terrorizing local populations, including through various methods of sexual violence. Patterns of violence centered on male dominance and control of resources also encompasses the dominance and exploitation of women, so that in many conflicts, women are treated as a loot-able resource, too. In some cases like Rwanda or the wars in the former Yugoslavia, sexual violence is a fundamental part of the strategy of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Widespread violence against civilian populations has also led to large numbers of internally displaced persons, and refugee populations. These complex humanitarian crises in the context of failed states have created new demands on international humanitarian operations, and also led the international community to adopt the norm of the responsibility to protect (even though the record of its implementation has been dismal, as the genocide in Darfur attests). The political economies of violence pose numerous barriers to post-conflict transitions to reconstruction and development, and further threats to the welfare of women and the girl child, leaving them vulnerable to sex trafficking and sex work, for example (Machel, 2001, 57; Tambiah 2004 on Sri Lanka).

The causes of sexual violence in armed conflict are multiple and complex. However, they can be differentiated partly in terms of: (1) permissive conditions that are more systemic, and hence remote from the commission of the violence; and (2) proximate or situational factors, that help explain the forms that sexual violence takes locally by particular parties to that conflict.

### *Systemic Factors*

The most general permissive factors stem from the international system itself, and how peace and conflict resolution have functioned historically in relation to the role of the state. Even in the peace studies tradition, the early study of peace focused on war prevention. There are two variants on this theoretical school: peace as the absence of war—a perspective that gained prominence in abolition of war movements in the early 20th century (Groff 2002, 7). Another way of thinking about war prevention is in terms of the balance of forces in the international system. This approach predominates in realist, international relations theory, described by Kenneth

Waltz as a balance of power. It shapes much of the political thinking in diplomatic and governmental circles throughout the world. This kind of approach is based on conflict management/top-down approaches to maintaining peace, rather than transformational strategies that are based on empowerment of civil society. This also privileges male-dominated approaches to peacemaking and conflict resolution. Thus, it is not surprising that women have been a minority among scholars and practitioners of conflict resolution. A key area of debate is whether "the discourses and institutions that reproduce militarism and violence are themselves gendered so that successful long-term conflict resolution requires a radical transformation here as well" (Miall, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse 1999, 60). The exclusion of women from formal negotiations and design of peace agreements and their implementation may "well be factors which perpetuate the exclusionist and violent discourses and institutions which contribute to conflict in the first place" (Miall, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse 1999, 61).

A second major theoretical school for thinking about peace concerns "peace thinking that stresses eliminating macro and/or micro physical and structural violence" (Groff 2002, 7). Here, it is not enough to think of peace as the absence of war. Factors relating to structural violence must also be transformed in order to achieve peace. This type of peace thinking requires questioning root causes of violence, and finding ways of overcoming them. Feminist peace thinking is a particular approach to structural violence, focusing its attention on eliminating physical and structural violence not only in the international system, but also within nation-states, community and family systems, as well as the individual. Feminist perspectives on peace and human rights also make connections between gender relations within the family and society, and violence (see for example Ewelukwa 2006).

However, gender as a category has been nearly totally absent until the late 1980s and early 1990s not only in peace and conflict resolution studies and practice (see Brock-Utne 1989, and more recently Boulding 2000 and Reardon 2002), but also in theories of international relations and the nation-state system. As Tickner (2002) notes, the end of the Cold War had the effect of freeing up international relations from a close association with strategic studies to include international political economy, ethnic conflict and other types of collective identities, globalization, transnationalism, and so on, with which women have greater affinity and interest. Tickner's 2002 study *Gendering World Politics* documents how feminist perspectives came into the international relations field, and how in many ways, feminist writings still remain at the margins of the field even after more than a decade of important texts by feminist scholars, including in the fields of the global economy, conflict and conflict resolution. Again, this marginalization may not be surprising. Tickner (2002, 3-4) notes that

whereas IR has traditionally analyzed security issues either from a structural perspective or at the level of the state and its decision makers, feminists focus on how world politics can contribute to the insecurity of individuals,

particularly marginalized and disempowered populations. They examine whether the valorization of characteristics associated with a dominant form of masculinity influences the foreign policies of states. They also examine whether the privileging of these same attributes by the realist school in IR may contribute to the reproduction of conflict-prone, power-maximizing behaviors.

Furthermore, while traditional international relations scholars focus on the causes of war, peace agreements, and post-conflict, feminist scholars ask questions about what goes on during the wars, what happens, including to women and the girl child, and what their causes are, and how the violence persists against women and girls even after the war is ostensibly over (Cockburn and Zarkov 2002; Meintjes, Pillay and Turshen 2001). Feminists tend to see militaries as “antithetical to individual security, particularly to the security of women and other vulnerable groups. Moreover, feminists are concerned that continual stress on the need for defense helps to legitimate a kind of militarized social order that overvalorizes the use of state violence for domestic and international purposes” (Tickner 2002, 4).

Engendering the concept of peace is problematic as long as the effort is attached to institutions of war making—such as the state system is today. At the crux of the problem are patriarchal systems of privilege that construct violence against women as permissible, along with other forms of violence. State sovereignty protects governments from external scrutiny (regarding human rights, for example), which is the international parallel to the domestic divide between the private and the public. Ito Ruri (2003, 2) argues that “in reconceptualizing the notion of peace from the perspective of gender, I want to underscore the importance of understanding violence against women as a key to understanding numerous forms of structural violence, from domestic violence to sexual harassment as well as sexual violence in war.” Similarly, Colombini (2002, 169) argues that “male coercion and sexual violence are the result of powerful constraints on women’s freedom and men’s attempt to control them. It reflects the patriarchal structure of society where the female body is seen as a ‘territory’ to be owned and controlled by the male.” Liberal human rights seek to protect masculine modes of thinking and rights especially relating to the bill of rights. Forms of oppression that women often face in “marriage, procreation, labor, property ownership, sexual repression, and other manifestations of unequal citizenship that are routinely viewed as private, nongovernmental, and reflective of cultural differences” have not historically been part of liberal activism on rights (Lockwood 2006, viii).

However, the international campaign that took off in the 1990s to end violence against women was an essential move toward engendering the concept of peace and also engendering peace work. The campaign has sought to redefine private versus public policy both at the global level and within countries throughout the world. This has been achieved through United Nations sponsored and parallel civil society conferences on women, beginning with the UN Decade of the Woman launched in Mexico City in 1975, and follow up conferences in Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995

(including its Declaration and Platform for Action), as well as the 1993 Second International Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, which brought violence against women into the framework of human rights. In 1994, the United Nations Commissioner on Human Rights, Radhika Coomaraswamy served a three-year term as a special rapporteur on violence against women, and initiated a series of studies and reports. Following the path-breaking work in the 1990s of the international tribunals set up to prosecute the atrocities of the wars in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, in July 2000, the Rome Treaty on the International Criminal Court cited violence against women, including systematic rape in war-time, as crimes against humanity. Such efforts were critical in developing the normative framework and political momentum for passing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on October 31, 2000.<sup>2</sup>

1325 embraces a number of initiatives that address violence against women, including in the context of armed conflict. It recognizes for the first time the role of women in conflict—not as victims, but as actors in the prevention and resolution of conflict and in equal participation in peacebuilding and decision-making. 1325 calls for the full implementation of international humanitarian and human rights law during and after conflicts to protect women and children, and calls on parties to conflict to protect women and girls from gender based violence, especially rape and other forms of sexual abuse. It also calls on states to put an end to impunity and prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, including those relating to sexual and other violence against women and girls.

It also addresses the gendered dimension of mine awareness and clearance, and calls for mainstreaming gender perspectives into peacekeeping operations. 1325 also calls on the United Nations to name more women as special representatives of the Secretary General, to expand the role of women in field operations, promote gender sensitivity training and incorporate gender perspectives into peace agreements and reconstruction. UN SC 1325 sets new standards to overcome the gendered aspects of conflict during its intensification, escalation, de-escalation phases, and in the context of peacekeeping and reconstruction of societies. The resolution sets out a broad agenda for addressing the gendered context of violence against women in relation to war. There have been a growing number of studies evaluating the goals and objectives of 1325 in the field (e.g. Cockburn and Zarkov 2002; Moser and Clark, eds. 2001; Mazurana, Raven-Roberts and Parpart 2005; Rehn and Sirleaf 2002; see also UNIFEM's [United Nations Development Fund for Women] portal, [womenwarpeace.org](http://womenwarpeace.org)).

These developments in international law and in the practice and study of peace and conflict resolution end an international culture of impunity regarding sexual violence and war. While there is much to be done to translate these commitments to actual policies and practices on the ground (in the adoption of national laws, balancing justice and reconciliation with truth-telling, judiciary practice, protection of victims,

and so forth), there are at least new grounds on which to build prevention, humanitarian action, and judicial methods of accountability.

### *Proximate Causes*

The literature on sexual violence in armed conflict contains numerous proximate causes, many of them highly situational. Wood (2006) reviews a number of proximate causes, beginning with the opportunity itself (for example, looting in armed conflict gives access to individual homes). Another is incentive. Although Wood (2006, 325) finds little support in the literature on the relation between combat and male sex drive, she argues that “a very different explanation for increased incentive for sexual violence in wartime begins with an understanding of peacetime gender relations as patriarchal, in which women’s inferior social status is maintained by the state and other institutions and by violence, including sexual violence.” The breakdown of social institutions and authority in wartime thus opens the gate to increased violence against women to maintain gender roles. Sometimes there is, however, contradictory evidence. For example, the presence of a significant number of female combatants may actually serve to decrease violence against women in armed conflict. Alternatively, sexual violence was carried out in Rwanda with the complicity of some women, and sexual violence against US prisoners in Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantanamo have occurred in instances where women played central roles. Other explanations focus on revenge and hypermasculinity, and militarized hypermasculinity, but Wood notes that military training, and discipline within the ranks of armed groups can also work to prevent or minimize sexual violence in war.<sup>3</sup>

What Wood (2006, 327) finds of particular significance is the role of “sexual violence as instrumental for the group.” Such instrumental violence may serve as a reward for participation, means of building in-group solidarity, a form of retribution, or humiliation to soften up prisoners for interrogation—as the US has done in the “war on terror.” Sexual violence is also used instrumentally to destroy the very fabric of communities. This is most clearly seen in cases where sexual violence is used to pursue strategies of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Sexual violence is also used to quell resistance. Women’s bodies are used as symbolic of the community and to send messages through various forms of sexual violence, torture and mutilation (Ward and Marsh 2006, 2).

The instrumental use of sexual violence is driven by runaway norms that legitimize rape, torture, and other atrocities. Runaway norms are a special class of norms. Just as some norms ban unacceptable practices or control and limit conflict, they can also justify its escalation. Runaway norms reinforce solidarity within the group, while justifying dominance over the out-group/s. As Rubin, Pruitt and Kim (1994, 93) explain, runaway norms “come to be seen as the ‘right thinking’ by most members of a group. They are taught to new members and imposed on old members



who appear to question them.” Negative attitudes such as stereotyping, dehumanization, and zero-sum thinking—the psychological dynamics of conflict escalation, “can become the subject of norms. When this happens, they gain strength and stability. They become group traditions rather than the property of separate individuals. Hence, they are more likely to contribute to escalation” (Rubin, Pruitt and Kim 1994; 93). Norms also tend to be self-perpetuating, and this is true of runaway norms. One of the dynamics that sustains runaway norms is social pressure. As Rubin, Pruitt and Kim (1994, 108) explain, “people who challenge a norm tend to be punished by the group. Others who doubt the validity of a norm remain silent for fear of being labeled deviates or, in the case of intergroup conflict, traitors.”

Runaway norms have several effects on conflict escalation. First, they justify actions by a group that cross cultural or traditional limits or thresholds on violence, and other prohibitions on abuse and torture. They cross thresholds in terms of the *type of violence* (e.g. forced cannibalism), the *intended targets* of the violence (sexual violence against pregnant women), and also in terms of the *agency* of violence (forcing child soldiers to commit rape). Second, they violate traditional methods of signaling *neutrality* (for noncombatants, women, children, elderly, infirm, disabled, and the like). Third, runaway norms *erase safe spaces*, or “peace zones” in society where refuge from violence is often sought (churches, schools, refugee camps, hospitals, safe havens, UN compounds, and the like) (see Farr 2003, 27). Fourth, runaway norms *justify extreme violence* such as genocide, systematic rape in war, torture, and the use of abductees, including the young boy and girl child or women to carry out heinous crimes. These practices breach cultural norms in society that maintain thresholds on violence, and are used by armed forces to heighten shock, terror, and submission among civilians or the opposition group/s.

The type of violence committed in the decade-long civil war in Sierra Leone included amputation of limbs, forced cannibalism, forced labor and sexual slavery; the use of thousands of girls and women as sex slaves by rebels—many forced to marry their rebel husbands; the torturing of pregnant women; rape of pregnant women and women breastfeeding, and rape of elderly women. There were undoubtedly many cases of male rape of men, however, for reasons of cultural stigmatization, these were rarely reported. However, Human Rights Watch (2003, Part V, 22) reports that some cases were documented. Rebel forces also carved their initials into their captives, so if caught by the government forces, they would be killed as suspected rebel sympathizers. Women with forced pregnancies were often prevented from aborting them, including by the use of traditional herbal medicines, because rebel forces were concerned that the high level of killings required them to replace the population.

The rape and mutilation of pregnant women, women breastfeeding and elderly women were also clearly violations of cultural taboos. According to Sierra Leonean culture, “women are not to have sexual intercourse until their children are weaned and can walk, which can take up to three years (Human Rights Watch 2003, Part V, 17).

One practice was called “virgination”—the targeting of young girls who were believed to be virgins—in order to make them less eligible for marriage. It was another tactic to destroy the social fabric of the society. Other traditional thresholds on violence were also crossed when child combatants committed sexual violence, or were abused. Family members were forced to commit incest, one of the biggest cultural taboos, against their own kin, including fathers and brothers forced to rape their young daughters/sisters, while making the family members sing in praise or clap their hands—itsself a form of psychological torture. Many victims were subject to multiple abuse and torture (see Human Rights Watch 2003, Part V). Revolutionary United Front (RUF) officers bore both individual criminal responsibility and command responsibility for the actions of their soldiers, but frequently breached this norm, too (Human Rights Watch 2003, Part V, 26). Non-governmental forces carried out most of the sexual violence and rape. Rights Watch documented the RUF, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and the West Side Boys—a break off group of the AFRC—as the main perpetrators of sexual violence. Human Rights Watch (2003, Part I, 2) documented “only a limited number of cases of sexual violence by pro-government forces, the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) and the militia known as Civil Defense Forces (CDF), the latter consisting of groups of traditional hunters and young men who were called upon by the government to defend their native areas.” Human Right Watch (2003, Part I, 2) has also documented several cases of sexual violence by United Nations peacekeepers with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), and reports of rape by Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) soldiers. Soldiers from both peacekeeping missions also have solicited child prostitutes and sexually exploited women while in Sierra Leone (Human Right Watch 2003, Part I, 2; see also Levin 2003).

Runaway norms also cross escalation thresholds by erasing safe spaces in society. The definition of safe space varies culturally, and also may change throughout the course of a war and in its aftermath. For example, the definition of safe places differs considerably even among Sierra Leoneans, who variously described it as encompassing the bus, churches, hometowns, and hospitals. At the outset of the war large cities were thought safe, but as they were overrun by confrontations between the RUF and government forces, so again the bush was considered the safe place of last resort (Leatherman and Negrustueva 2005).

### **Phase Model and Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict**

The phase model of conflict presents an essentially linear conception of conflict that focuses attention mostly on the escalation of violence through the life cycle of a conflict. This puts most of the focus on the means of escalation, rather than other factors, like agents, issues, norms, etc. This model configures conflicts through pre-

conflict, conflict escalation, crisis, de-escalation/negotiation, peace agreement, post-conflict DDR (disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs), and reconstruction. The model does not separately capture a variety of elements of conflict that undergo. It presumes a linear reality of conflict, and overlooks the irregular intensification of conflict among its many element—namely that conflicts do not escalate among all parties, in relation to all issues, practices, norms, means of contestation, or across geographic areas in tandem (Leatherman, Väyrynen, DeMars and Gaffney 1999). For example, some parts of a state or region may experience high levels of violent conflict, while other areas may remain relatively untouched (for example, the eastern regions of the Congo experienced high levels of violence during periods when the capital was relatively calm).

These limitations notwithstanding, the phase model does help identify how different phases of conflict affect women and girls (and at times also men and boys, though typically in fewer numbers) in different settings and relationship to the violent perpetrators (see Moser and Clark 2001). Thus, the main contention of my analysis here is two-fold: (1) that the high levels of discrimination against women/the girl child, and prevalence of human rights abuses against them during times of relative peace or early pre-conflict phases predispose them or make them especially vulnerable to gendered dynamics of violence during armed conflict; and (2) that this relationship holds throughout the cycle of conflict including through the post-conflict and reconstruction phase, when violence against women and girls may actually increase, even as the conflict among the armed factions is de-escalating and ending. Using a phase model to develop a typology and explanation for sexual violence brings conceptual clarity to the multifaceted and multiple situations of vulnerability that victims of sexual violence face throughout the cycle of conflict, but also has policy relevance, too. International policymakers working in the area of complex humanitarian crises typically follow a phase model of conflict to design programs of intervention and assistance (see Mazurana, Raven-Roberts and Parpart 2005). Understanding how sexual violence relates to different stages of conflict can lead to the identification of immediate strategies to protect girls and women at risk in conflicts, such as security, health care, counseling, and educational and vocational opportunities to promote recovery for survivors (regarding children see Machel 2001; Boyden and de Berry 2004),<sup>4</sup> and longer-term initiatives for women's rights. These arguments are illustrated below in a discussion a couple key phases of conflict: pre-conflict, escalation, and the aftermath.

### *Pre-conflict Phase*

Historically, women and girls have been denied access to many basic human rights and needs, including education and literacy, health care, employment outside the home, and inheritance laws and rights to property—including the family home and land

(UN SC Report 2002; Johnstone 2006; Amirthalingam 2005; Jefferson 2004). In addition, cultural norms and practices regarding rape and definitions of what constitutes rape, forced marriages, and cultural codes regarding family honor leave women in vulnerable positions. Documenting violations of women's rights in war is itself difficult for a number of practical and also cultural reasons (Ochieng 2005). In the case of Sierra Leone, the general law, customary law, and for some groups, Islamic law, have all provided for highly discriminatory practices against women.<sup>5</sup> Women were devalued in peacetime already in the Sierra Leone cultural context, partly because the society embraced a gender ideology that promoted a sense of male ownership of women's reproductive as well as productive capacities. Sexual violence was already a "normal" part of the peacetime culture in Sierra Leone (Human Rights Watch 2003, Part IV, 7-16). The Physicians for Human Rights (2002, 24) provides a similar societal assessment, noting "domestic violence against women and children is common, though it is not generally recognized as a societal problem. Nearly 67 % of urban women interviewed for a survey on AIDS knowledge, practices and behaviors revealed that they had been beaten by an intimate male partner, and over 50% reported being forced to have sexual intercourse."

In some communities, if a woman becomes pregnant from rape, that pregnancy is considered illegal and the women can be imprisoned, as Human Rights Watch (2005) has reported on Darfur and Chad. In some cultures, the family's honor is protected by the woman marrying her rapist, or by the woman being raped to avenge the other family's honor. Typically, the women's honor is never a consideration—it is her husband's or family's honor that has to be repaid. For some women, the only solution is to leave the family home or be thrown out.

The risks women and the girl child face from sexual violence vary across different phases of conflict. In pre-conflict periods, the intensification of nationalist or other patriarchal ideologies (religious, ethnic, racial, and so forth) are used to mobilize and polarize members of society, and draw tighter boundaries between in and out-group/s. This kind of rhetoric often relies on using the symbol of the women as the "mother of the nation," and the carrier of the "purity" of the group. Thus, attacks against the enemy's women and girls, or claims that one's own women or girls are being attacked and raped serve as mechanisms of conflict escalation and can be considered important signals of the potential for intensification of conflict. In the Yugoslav wars, Serbian President Milosevic repeatedly used offensive ethnic slurs as he claimed that Albanian men were raping Serbian women.<sup>6</sup> Ethnic Albanian women from Macedonia also reported that they were at risk of violation if they sought medical attention from ethnic Macedonia male gynecologists.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Wood (2006, 327) reports that in Rwanda, "pre-war propaganda denigrating and sexualizing Tutsi women created a climate in which mass sexual violence appeared to be an appropriate form of retribution for long-standing grievances."

*Escalation*

During conflict escalation, women and girls face risks of capture by and forced labor for soldiers and armed rebels. Armed groups also use sexual violence to pursue a variety of strategic and tactical purposes to build their forces and control local populations. For example, women and girls are often captured as sexual slaves to serve armed combatants. They may perform a variety of functions in captivity along with sexual slavery, such as searching for water, food, and firewood, or carrying these and other camp supplies, and performing other camp duties, such as washing clothes and preparing food. They may also be coerced to act as spies to gain information from enemy forces through sexual exploitation, or carry out atrocities themselves on the local population blurring the lines between their own victimization and roles as agents in the perpetration of violence.

The internal displacement of women and girls, or relocation to refugee camps also leaves them vulnerable to sexual violence for several reasons (Marsh, Purdin and Navani 2006). First, women typically flee with children and elderly or infirm members of the family. Thus, they lack the protection of male family or community members. Lack of security within the camps places them at risk of sexual violations from other camp residents (Human Rights Watch 2005, 9). For such reasons, the placement of bathrooms and showers within camps, for example, is an important security consideration for the protection of women and girls.

Second, when women and girls leave the relative safety of a camp to collect water and firewood, or to sell goods at a market place, and venturing onto open roads and fields also places them at risk (Human Rights Watch 2005, 6). Women have attempted to travel in groups of other women or also with elderly women, and even unarmed men, but these strategies have generally not proven effective against well armed, marauding gangs. Women in eastern Congo have attempted to wear many layers of clothing in an effort to discourage sexual violence, but it is unclear that this strategy affords much protection, either. Women and girls have also been at risk of sexual attack from international aid workers and peacekeepers, leading to recent efforts to enforce a code of conduct among them (Handrahan 2004, 436; Corrin 2001, 83). However, some evidence suggests that these violations are rarely prosecuted after the accused individual returns home.

*Aftermath*

A woman or child's horror does not end with the cessation of hostilities. They live with the physical and emotional trauma of their injuries. Women must continue to care for children, including those born of rape, and suffer because society, and their husbands and own families treat them as "damaged goods," living symbols of a nation's humiliation and bearers of 'enemy' children" (Farr 2002, 19; Carpenter 2007).

The women suffer from shame and devaluation for the tortures they have suffered. Having been abused, their community or former husbands often do not take them back. Indeed, many of the abducted young girls and women stayed with their captor after the cessation of hostilities. Thus women in post-conflict Sierra Leone suffer from both deep scares that are both physical and social-psychological. Consider the following testimony from a Sierra Leonean woman six months pregnant repeatedly raped by her abductors:

One rebel had sex with me several times. He said he was punishing me for not having shown him where the rice and palm oil was hidden. I yelled for the commander and complained saying, "He wants to kill me, tell him to leave me!" but he said, "We have killed others that are better than you." I did not complain after that. They kept saying they were about to stop fighting—that they really want peace and that after peace comes, they won't do these things any more" (Human Rights Watch 2003, 19, "*We'll Kill You...*").

Even when women assumed a greater range of roles during the conflict, the opportunity to be engaged outside the household quickly disappeared at war's termination, as men reasserted their authority over women and the public domain. Competition for scarce jobs in the formal market place drove women out, and DDR and humanitarian aid programs overlooked the training of women for reintegration (Mazurana and Carlson 2004, 19). Such structural and cultural barriers drove many women into prostitution. In the event, as Human Rights Watch (2003, Part IV, 16, fn 6) reports, sexual exploitation "has always been rampant" in Sierra Leone, condoned because of limited economic opportunities, in spite of the high value placed on virginity.

### Re-victimization

Another important perspective on sexual violence that the phase model brings to light is the multiple risks women and girls face of re-victimization in the new wars, both within certain phases *and* across the phases of conflict (Bouris 2007). Women and the girl child who are captured and enslaved by armed factions may not only suffer sexual violence, but also be forced to commit unspeakable atrocities themselves. CNN reporter Jeff Koinange (2006) reported that re-victimization was common in the abduction of girl children by the Lords Resistance Movement in Uganda, who were not only abused sexually, infected with HIV/AIDs, but also forced to commit heinous crimes against humanity that also left them with severe post traumatic stress disorder.

Women who attempt to escape from sexual enslavement and forced labor in rebel or government forces are also at risk of being recaptured by the same or other factions. Even going to the police for protection is often not a viable strategy. Women may be vulnerable to sexual assault by authorities at local police stations (Human

Rights Watch 2005). Also, when the local culture considers a pregnancy outside of marriage illegal, regardless of whether it was a result of rape, a victim presenting herself to the local police for rescue may instead end up imprisoned (Human Rights Watch 2005). In addition, fleeing to a refugee camp may offer little effective protection. Returning home is often not an option for multiple reasons. The area may not be safe from fighting; even if it is, a woman who has been raped may not be accepted. Her husband and possibly entire family may shun her, forcing her to leave the family compound entirely, or live on its margins.

The fact that women in many cultures do not have control over or rights to inherit property—including their home or land, also leads to their displacement after fighting has ended in their own communities. Even if their husbands have died, other relatives will sometimes not take her back in. This leaves women and girls vulnerable in the post-conflict and reconstruction phase. This problem was particularly acute in the post-genocide Rwanda, since so many of the men were either killed, or were imprisoned and facing prosecution as perpetrators (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2001). The proliferation of prostitution and trafficking during and after conflict is often part of the local shadow economies, and an indicator of the disempowerment of women (Tambiah 2004).

Women and girls (and men and boys sometimes—Colombini 2002, 168) are also re-victimized by the lack of adequate health care, and support structures for assisting victims of sexual violence. Victims of sexual violence risk multiple health complications from sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. In Rwanda, one report estimates that as many as 67% of the rape survivors were HIV/AIDS positive. Human Rights Watch (2005, 13) reports that in February 2005, “of the agencies that were providing health services in the refugee camps in Chad, only one of the six agencies had a protocol for rape that included the provision of emergency contraception, comprehensive treatment of sexually transmissible disease and post-exposure prophylaxis of HIV.” The health consequences of sexual violence are both immediate and long-term, and include physical and psychological impacts, ranging from “severe body pain, gynaecological problems, STIs and unwanted pregnancy” to longer term problems such as “partial or permanent disability, infertility and damage to the reproductive health system, as well as fatal consequences (Colombini 2002, 171). Severe trauma often requires surgical repair, which most victims are unlikely to find available. Reports on the violence in East Congo also reveal that many women who did receive treatment from Doctors without Borders operating in that region, returned only a few weeks later having suffered repeat assaults.

The shame and psycho-social stigma that survivors of rape suffer is another form of re-victimization. Thus, simply reaching out for help is problematic. Programs to assist survivors of sexual violence have to be designed so that women and girls can access them without that very help serving as another marker of victimization. The Rainbow centers in Sierra Leone set up to assist women, sought to circumvent these

cultural issues in a number of ways, including by the name they chose for their organization, and also by the array of services that they offer. Similar strategies were used in the former Yugoslavia. Providers of humanitarian assistance have also begun to recognize the urgent need for transcultural psychiatry to provide appropriate therapeutic care in refugee camps for rape victims (Atlani and Rousseau 2000).

### Conclusions

This article has provided a phase model approach to the study of sexual violence, exploring the patterns of sexual violence as conflict emerges, escalates and moves toward its termination and aftermath phase. Women and the girl child are often victims of instrumentally driven sexual violence in the context of the "new wars." The strategies of sexual violence have many intended effects geared toward terrorizing, controlling, displacing and even eliminating targeted groups. It also has the effect of eliminating safe space in society, and making women and girls in particular vulnerable to multiple instances of victimization throughout the life cycle of conflict. These traumas are intensified by the fact that the girl child and women taken captive in war are often then forced to commit atrocities, so understanding victimhood is extremely complex. The gross violation of human rights and crimes against humanity that sexual violence in armed conflicts entail underscores the urgency of more concerted and effective international action to enforce international law banning it, and to provide security measures in the context of humanitarian operations to ensure the greater safety and especially to respond to the immediate health needs of at risk populations. Furthermore, post-conflict programs for DDR and reconstruction need to incorporate health programs to assist survivors, and also special vocational and educational programs to support their reintegration into society. Over the long-term, only the provision of women's rights will lead to more effective means of empowerment and protection from the multiple vulnerabilities and suffering that place women and girls at such great risks in armed conflicts and their aftermath.

### Notes

1. Despite these examples of widespread prevalence, there is a significant variation in sexual violence in armed conflicts. That is, in some conflicts, like the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, or in Rwanda, the conflict involves high levels of sexual violence, whereas in others, Palestinian/Israeli conflict; for example, there is very little reporting of such violence, despite considerable international monitoring of the conflict. These variations are difficult to explain. Wood (2006) offers numerous hypotheses, but calls for much more work to understand why sexual violence is a part of some conflicts, but not others, and the policy implications.

2. Available at <<http://www.peacewomen.org/un/sc/1325.html>> Last accessed July 5, 2007.

3. However, in some of the New Wars, the distinction between one armed group and others breaks down, as soldiers cross lines and change allegiances. In the Sierra Leone war, those who broke ranks with government forces, often at night, were called "sobels."



4. For example, a UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) report argues that gender-based violence in war has its roots in structural violence in society in peacetime (UNHCR 2003, 21). And Farr (2002, 19) notes, "it is male power over females that make women and girls vulnerable in the first place."
5. Islamic law in Sierra Leone has to be understood within the context of local, cultural practices. For example, under Islamic law four wives is considered the limit, but in Sierra Leone, some chiefs may have as many as 50 wives.
6. Author meeting with President Slobodan Milosevic, Belgrade, as delegation member of the South Balkans Working Group, Council on Foreign Relations (New York), December 6, 1995.
7. Author Interview, field research notes, Tetova, Macedonia, March 1995.

#### Acknowledgements

This article was presented as a paper on the panel Gendering Security in Theory and Practice II at the International Studies Association 48th Annual Convention, Chicago, Illinois, March 2, 2007. The author expresses her gratitude to her co-panelists and audience members for their insights, and also to Howon Jeong for his helpful comments on an earlier draft.

#### References

- Amirthalingam, Kumaralingam. 2005. "Women's Rights, International Norms, and Domestic Violence: Asian Perspectives." *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 2, May, pp. 683-708.
- Atlani, Laëtitia and Cécile Rousseau. 2000. "The Politics of Culture in Humanitarian Aid to Women Refugees who have Experienced Sexual Violence." *Transcultural Psychiatry*, Vol. 37, No. 3, pp. 435-449.
- Brownmiller, Susan. 1975. *Against Our Will. Men, Women, Rape*. New York: Simon and Shuster.
- Ballentine, Karen and Jake Sherman, eds. 2003. *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict. Beyond Greed and Grievance*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Barkawi, Tarak. 2006. *Globalization and War*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Boulding, Elise. 2000. *Cultures of Peace: The Hidden Side of History*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Bouris, Erica. 2007. *Complex Political Victims*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.
- Boyden, Jo and Joanna de Berry. 2004. *Children and Youth on the Front Line. Ethnography, Armed Conflict and Displacement*. New York: Berghan Books.
- Brock-Utne, Birgit. 1989. *Feminist Perspectives on Peace and Peace Education*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Carpenter, Charli, ed. 2007. *Born of War. Protecting Children of Sexual Violence Survivors in Conflict Zones*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.
- Chang, Iris. 1997. *The Rape of Nanking*. New York: BasicBooks.
- Cockburn, Cynthia, and Dubravka Zarkov, eds. 2002. *The Postwar Moment: Militaries, Masculinities and International Peacekeeping*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

- Colombini, Manuela. 2002. "Gender-based and Sexual Violence against Women during Armed Conflict." *Journal of Health Management*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 167-183.
- Corrin, Chris. 2001. "Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Gender Analysis in Kosova." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 78-98.
- Dolgopol, Ustinia. 2006. "Women's Voices, Women's Pain." In Bert B. Lockwood, ed., *Women's Rights: A Human Rights Quarterly Reader*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Duffield, Mark. 2001. *Global Governance and the New Wars*. New York: Zed Books.
- Ewelukwa, Uche U. 2006. "Post-Colonialism, Gender, Customary Injustice: Widows in African Societies." In Bert B. Lockwood, ed., *Women's Rights: A Human Rights Quarterly Reader*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Farr, Vanessa. 2003. "Women, Men and the Struggle to Disarm." *Conflict Trends*. ACCORD, Vol. 3 (Issue 3, No. 3), pp. 26-31.
- Farr, Vanessa A. 2002. "A Gendered Analysis of International Agreements on Small Arms and Light Weapons." In Kliflemariam Gebre-Wold and Vanessa A. Farr, eds., *Gender Perspectives on Small Arms and Light Weapons: Regional and International Concerns*. Brief 24 Bonn International Center for Conversion, pp. 14-24.
- Groff, Linda. 2002. "A Holistic View of Peace Education." *Social Alternative*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 7-10.
- Handrahan, Lori. 2004. "Conflict, Gender, Ethnicity and Post-Conflict Reconstruction." *Security Dialogue, Special Issue on Gender and Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4, December, pp. 429-445.
- Human Rights Watch. 2005. Sexual Violence and its Consequences among Displaced Persons in Darfur and Chad. Briefing Paper. April 12.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. "We'll Kill You if You Cry." *Sexual Violence in Sierra Leone Conflict*. Vol. 15 (1) A, January. <<http://hrw.org/reports/2003/sierraleone/>> Accessed February 20, 2007.
- Jefferson, LaShawn R. 2004. "In War as in Peace: Sexual Violence and Women's Status." *Human Rights Watch World Report*. <<http://hrw.org/wr2k4/15.htm>> Accessed February 20, 2007.
- Johnstone, Rachael Lorna. 2006. "Feminist Influences on the United Nations Human Rights Treaty Bodies." *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 28, pp. 148-185.
- Kaldor, Mary. 2003. *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999. *New War and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*. Stanford: Stanford University.
- Koinange, Jeff. 2006. "Old Horrors, Young Victims." February 23. <[http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/anderson.cooper.360/blog/archives/2006\\_02\\_19\\_ac360\\_archive.html](http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/anderson.cooper.360/blog/archives/2006_02_19_ac360_archive.html)> Accessed July 5, 2007.

- Leatherman, Janie and Nadia Negrustueva. 2005. "Militarized Masculinity and Runaway Norms: 1325 and the Challenge of Overcoming Extreme Violence." Paper presented on the panel From Rhetoric to Practice: The Challenges of Implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 at the International Studies Association 46<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention, March 1-5, Honolulu, Hawaii.
- Leatherman, Janie, Raimo Väyrynen, William DeMars and Patrick Gaffney. 1999. *Breaking Cycles of Violence: Conflict Prevention in Intrastate Crises*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.
- Levin, Scott. 2003. "Sexual Exploitation of Refugee Children by UN Peacekeepers." *NY Law School Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 19 (pt 3), pp. 833-842.
- Lockwood, Bert B. 2006. "Introduction." In Bert B. Lockwood, ed., *Women's Rights: A Human Rights Quarterly Reader*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Machel, Graça. 2001. *The Impact of War on Children*. London: Hurst and Company.
- Marsh, Mendy, Susan Purdin and Sonia Navani (International Rescue Committee). 2006. "Addressing Sexual Violence in Humanitarian Emergencies." *Global Public Health*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 133-146.
- Mazurana, Dyan, Angela Raven-Roberts and Jane Parpart. 2005. *Gender, Conflict and Peacekeeping*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Mazurana, Dyan and Kristopher Carlson. 2004. "From Combat to Community: Women and Girls of Sierra Leone." *Women Waging Peace*. Hunt Alternatives Fund. <[http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/Sierra\\_Leone/sierraleoneindex.html](http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/Sierra_Leone/sierraleoneindex.html)> Accessed July 5, 2007.
- Miall, Hugh, Oliver Ramsbotham and Tom Woodhouse. 1999. *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Meintjes, Sheila, Anu Pillay and Meredith Turshen, eds. 2001. *The Aftermath. Women in Post-conflict Transformation*. London: Zed Books.
- Moser, Caroline O. N. and Fiona C. Clark, eds. 2001. *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*. London: Zed Books.
- Moser, Caroline O. N. and Fiona C. Clark. 2001. "The Gendered Continuum of Violence and Conflict." In Caroline O. N. Moser and Fiona C. Clark, eds., *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*. London: Zed Books.
- Nest, Michael, with Francois Grignon and Emizet F. Kisangani. 2006. *The Democratic Republic of Congo. Economic Dimensions of War and Peace*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Nordstrom, Carolyn. 2004. *Shadows of War*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ochieng, Ruth Ojiambo. 2005. "The Efforts of Non-governmental Organizations in Assessing and Documenting the Violations of Women's Human Rights in Situations of Armed Conflict: The Isis—WICCE Experience." Division for the Advancement of Women. Expert Group Meeting. April 11-14.

- Physicians for Human Rights (with the support of UNAMSIL). 2002. *War-Related Sexual Violence in Sierra Leone*. Full Report. <[www.phrusa.org](http://www.phrusa.org)> Accessed February 20, 2007.
- Reardon, Betty. 2002. *Education for a Culture of Peace in a Gender Perspective*. UNESCO Publishing.
- Rehn, Elizabeth and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. 2002. *Women, War and Peace: The Independent Experts' Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peacebuilding*. New York: UNIFEM.
- Rubin, Jeffrey, Dean G. Pruitt and Sung Hee Kim. 1994. *Social Conflict, Escalation, Stalemate and Settlement*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Ruri, Ito. 2003. "Engendering the Concept of Peace: On Violence Against Women." *Znet Japan Focus*. April 03. <[http://www.zmag.org/content/print\\_article.cfm?itemID+3380&sectionID=17](http://www.zmag.org/content/print_article.cfm?itemID+3380&sectionID=17)> Accessed April 4, 2003.
- Smith, Andrea. 2005. *Conquest: Sexual Violence and the American Indian Genocide*. Boston: South End Press.
- Tambiah, Yasmin. 2004. "Sexuality and Women's Rights in Armed Conflict in Sri Lanka." *Reproductive Health Matters*, Vol. 12, No. 23, pp. 78-87.
- Tickner, J. Ann. 2002. *Gendering World Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR). 2003. *Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons: Guidelines for Prevention and Response*. May.
- United Nations Security Council (UNSC). 2002. Report of the Secretary General on Women, Peace and Security. S/2002/1154. October 16.
- Ward, Jeanne and Mendy Marsh. 2006. "Sexual Violence against Women and Girls in War and its Aftermath: Realities, Responses, and Required Resources." A Briefing Paper prepared for the Symposium on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Beyond, Brussels, June 21-23.
- Weiss, Thomas G. 2006. *Humanitarian Intervention*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. 2001. "You Cannot Dance if You Cannot Stand." A Review of the Rwanda Women's Initiative and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' Commitment to Gender Equality in Post-Conflict Societies. April.
- Wood, Elizabeth Jean. 2006. "Variation in Sexual Violence During War." *Politics and Society*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 307-341.
- Zartman, I. William and Maureen Berman. 1982. *Practical Negotiator*. New Haven: Yale University Press.