Sexual Violence and War: Mapping Out a Complex Relationship

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In the 1990s there was more focus on war-time sexual violence than ever before. Within academia, among policy-makers and in the media emerged a consensus that sexual violence can be used as a weapon of war. This article attempts to understand the complex relationship between sexual violence and war by presenting three different conceptualizations based on a literature study of 140 scholarly texts published mainly during the 1990s. The crux of this article is the argument that the relationship between sexual violence and war is best conceptualized within a social constructionist paradigm. My analysis shows that it is the social constructionist conceptualization which is best equipped to explain the complex empirical reality at hand.

KEY WORDS ♦ conflict ♦ femininity ♦ gender analysis ♦ masculinity ♦ social constructionism

Rape, like genocide, will not be deterred unless and until the stories are heard. People must hear the horrifying, think the unthinkable and speak the unspeakable. (Tamara L. Tompkins, 1995: 852)

Introduction

After the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia in 1992–95, the theme of sexual violence has been set on the international agenda. Mass rape of women in these two conflicts has generated open debates about the phenomenon. It seems that the taboo which has overshadowed rape and sexual violence for so long has now been changed. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) are the...
first war crime tribunals where sexual violence is part of the agenda. The work carried out in both tribunals reveals, however, that there is a substantial lack of knowledge about the phenomenon.

In his reflections on the ethnic cleansing process in Bosnia, Sells writes (1996: 11) ‘[t]he more obscene the crime, the less visible it is’. Sexual violence in war is an example of such an obscene crime. Feelings of shame and guilt as well as culturally imposed taboos contribute to keeping the victims of this crime silent. Few have wanted to look into the mechanisms which create perpetrators, perhaps out of fear that the possibility of committing the same crime is a potential we all have. Few are also willing to look into how this crime affects the victims. The wars of the 1990s do seem to have changed this pattern of ignorance.

The basis for this article is a literature survey carried out in 1998. The goal of the study was to gather scholarly literature and other forms of publications based on systematic research which deal specifically with the issue of sexual violence in times of war. The articles and publications have been compiled in an annotated bibliography. This article, however, focuses on three different epistemological conceptualizations of the interrelationship between sexual violence and war. As will be shown, the social constructionist conceptualization is best equipped to explain the complex empirical reality at hand. Only this approach can help us understand why men are targeted by this particular war crime while simultaneously recognizing that women, and targeted groups of women in particular, constitute the largest group of victims.

**Background**

Within the scholarly literature it is far from clear what sexual violence is and whether or not, or how, it is a weapon of war. There is no consensus as to whether sexual violence is a question of sex with a violent manifestation, or whether it is the opposite, i.e. violence with a sexual manifestation. The definition of rape and sexual crimes has changed over time. In colonial times, rape was defined as non-consensual relations with married women when the man was someone other or inferior to the husband of the victim (see Donat and d’Emilio, 1998: 36). Psychoanalytical theory, on the other hand, pathologized the perpetrator of this kind of violence and regarded rape exclusively as deviant and abnormal behaviour. Finally, feminist scholarship has brought an understanding of rape and sexual violence as instances of violence, dominance and control aimed at maintaining patriarchy and women’s subordinate position within this social order (see Donat and d’Emilio, 1998: 36–41). To complicate things even further, sexual violence comes in many forms, it is not only a question of rape; forced prostitution/
marriage, genital mutilation and forced nakedness are some examples in addition to rape.⁴

If sexual violence is to be regarded as a weapon of war, this form of violence must have certain characteristics that distinguish it from other kinds of violence and weapons of war. The term weapon of war has not been made an explicit theme in political philosophical discourse and there is no agreed definition of the term. The common use of the term, however, demonstrates a practice of shared beliefs and ideas.⁵ The *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* defines a weapon as (1) any instrument or device for use in attack or defence in combat, fighting or war, as a sword, rifle, cannon, etc., (2) anything used against an opponent, adversary or victim, or (3) any part or organ serving for attack or defence, as claws, horn, teeth, stings, etc. But, not all weapons in the conventional sense will be weapons of war, and not all weapons of war will be conventional weapons. For instance, many journalists and analysts have characterized the attacks on food security in the civil war in Sudan as a weapon of war (Norwegian People’s Aid, 1999; Conner, 1999). The attack on food security is seen as having a destabilizing effect and causing people to flee from their homes even though this is not necessarily at gun-point. The use of the media and the Internet as propaganda may be other examples of the use of non-conventional weapons as weapons of war. The determining features for both conventional and non-conventional weapons to be characterized as weapons of war, are that they are used as part of a systematic political campaign which has strategic military purposes.

The three conceptualizations of the relationship between sexual violence and war which follow, are based on a discourse analysis of 140 scholarly texts published mostly in the 1990s. The majority of these texts, and at least the ‘canonized’ ones,⁷ focus on the use of sexual violence in the wars in the Balkans and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Although these texts are very different in terms of academic discipline, analysis and goals, together they reinforce certain important points. First, the sheer magnitude of scholarly texts focusing on this issue clearly tells us that the taboo which has made it impossible to make this war-time phenomenon a subject of social scientific study has now, at least to a certain extent, been lifted. Second, there is a strong consensus that sexual violence can be regarded as, and is being used as, a weapon of war, the argument being that if sexual violence in the war-zone were performed only by abnormal people, then there would simply be too many psychiatric patients recruited into regular and paramilitary units. The use of sexual violence in the war-zone is too widespread, too frequent and seemingly too calculated and effective for it not to be part of a larger political scheme and hence a weapon of war. Third, the majority of the authors argue that any convincing analysis of this phenomenon must have as

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its basis a clear gendered understanding of the war-zone. This means that attempting to analyse sexual violence without simultaneously analysing how the course of conflicts is also an enactment of male and female relations is incomplete.

My assertion is that war-time sexual violence is best understood when being subject to a social constructionist analysis. It is only this perspective which is broad enough and gives us sufficient theoretical leverage to understand the socio-cultural complexities in which these acts of crimes are embedded. This point will be discussed in much greater detail below.

**Conceptualizations I, II and III**

The following conceptualizations are different ways of understanding wartime sexual violence as a part of gender analysis (see Table 1). In this endeavour it has been helpful to read Sandra Harding’s definitions of feminist epistemology (see Harding, 1986, 1991). She makes a distinction between feminist empiricism; a line of thought she regards as inherently conservative (see Harding, 1991: 112) and does not challenge the ruling positivistic mode of scientific inquiry, and standpoint feminism and post-modern feminism. The latter two epistemologies depart from the grand theory of universal patriarchy and argue that there are differences and nuances between masculinity and femininity. In her definition of standpoint feminism Harding says that there are differences between ‘feminine and masculine personality structure . . . in different classes, races and cultures’ (Harding, 1991: 121). Standpoint feminism still maintains that there are patriarchal power relations between men and women, but that the content of these differences will vary according to class, race and culture. Post-modern feminism, on the other hand, is based on an inherent scepticism about universal theories (Harding, 1986: 27). Within this line of thought and argument, gender relations are questions of how acts, beliefs and behaviours become gendered, i.e. seen as appropriate to men and women. The relationship between masculinity and femininity is a matter of constant negotiation and renegotiation.

My ‘method’ of analysis has been to group the arguments in the texts according to which groups of victims the arguments relate to. This gave me three different empirical foci — namely, how sexual violence was related to all women in the war-zone, to targeted women in the war-zone and, finally, to targeted men and women in the war-zone. These different empirical foci correspond to three different epistemologies which both in content and outlook resemble Harding’s tripartite system of feminist epistemologies. One group of arguments, which I have called the essentialist, focused mainly on women in general as victims in the war-zone and attempted to
conceptualize this empirical observation within an essentialist understanding of gender differences. The second conceptualization has as its starting point that there is a difference between the female victims in the war-zone. When issues of ethnicity, religion and political affiliations are integrated into the analysis of war-time sexual violence new patterns of power and dominance occur. Although this conceptualization bears resemblance to Harding’s standpoint epistemology, I have chosen to call this conceptualization structuralist in order to emphasize that although ‘standpoint’ is still to focus on women, other structural differences such as ethnic, religious, political (and other) explain which women are targeted. The last line of arguments focus on targeted men and women as victims in the war-zone. The conceptualization is so-called postmodern in the sense that the hierarchical power relationship between the genders is not perceived as fixed and universal. I have chosen to label this conceptualization ‘social constructionist’ to emphasize that the hierarchies of power and dominance are constructed through social interaction and transaction between gender, ethnic, religious, political and other identities. This way of reading the 140 texts has given me the following conceptualizations:

Table 1
Three Conceptualizations of the Relationship Between Sexual Violence and War

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptualization</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Epistemologies</td>
<td>Essentialism</td>
<td>Structuralism</td>
<td>Social Constructionism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empirical focus</td>
<td>All women</td>
<td>Targeted women</td>
<td>Targeted men and women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argument</td>
<td>Women in the war-zone are victims of sexual violence in order to assert militaristic masculinity</td>
<td>Women in the war-zone are victims of sexual violence in order to attack the ethnic, religious, political group</td>
<td>Women in the war-zone are victims of sexual violence in order to masculinize the identity of perpetrator and feminize the identity of the victim</td>
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Conceptualization I

It is a known fact that the use and threat of sexual violence overshadow the lives of all women world-wide. This is true for women in times of both war
and peace. The effects of sexual violence in the war-zone are recognizable because we have become accustomed to them through times of peace. Recognizing this does, however, entail a potential danger. Nordstrom (1996: 156) warns, in a discussion about genocidal rape, that ‘by distinguishing qualitatively between “genocidal” rape in war and “everyday” rape, the latter is both “normalized” and made less significant than wartime rape’, whereas Copelon (1995: 207) says that placing ‘emphasis on the gender dimension of rape in war is critical not only to surfacing women as full subjects of sexual violence in war but also to recognizing the atrocity of rape in so-called times of peace’.

The essentialist discourse is appealing because it attempts to explain why it was that in the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina Serb, Croat and Bosnian women were raped as well as Hutu and Tutsi women during the genocide in Rwanda. This conceptualization asks whether all these women were raped simply because many women in general (i.e. in times of war and peace) are raped. Or, is it possible that the war-zone is a place where women in general are at greater risk of being victimized by crimes of sexual violence than in the non-war-zone?

Before exploring possible answers to the question raised above it is important to establish an understanding of the war-zone. First, it is important to recognize that the war-zone is a place where distinct rules of behaviour apply. Through for instance the Geneva Conventions soldiers are taught that certain acts which are normally non-permissible in times of peace, may, given that a set of criteria are met, be allowed. In reality, however, the war-zone appears to be a place where abhorrent modes of conduct can flourish — not all of which are in accordance with the Geneva Conventions. Second, the war-zone is a place of increased polarization between the genders. ‘In general . . . gender roles have become more polarized by nationalism and war’, says Benderly (1997: 60) in her description of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Men are called to fight and/or be killed, whereas women are, in the words of Enloe (1983: 46), set to keep the home fires burning. In the war-zone men are not only set to be men, but to be militaristic men (for discussion about this see Enloe, 1983, 1989, 1993). An understanding of militaristic culture is key in attempting to understand the gender dimension of the war-zone. Enloe (1993: 52) explains that ‘the glue [of militarism] is camaraderie, the base of that glue is masculinity’. Militaries need ‘real’ men. Being a real man in the war-zone may entail suppression of feelings of insecurity, gentleness and other characteristics which are commonly considered feminine. A combination of these processes might make it ‘easier’ for men to commit sexual violence in war situations (Seifert, 1994: 59–62). The use of sexual violence in times of war can thereby be perceived as a way of reaffirming patriarchal
hierarchies between men and women. The strategic purpose of the use of sexual violence is to manifest the militaristic masculine identity of the male perpetrator. The question then is how sexual violence can be perceived as masculinity reaffirming acts.

In attempting to answer this question it is necessary to return to an analysis of the non-war-zone. Feminist scholarship has argued since its beginning that the relationship between men and women is far from equal, but rather patriarchal and hierarchical. Within this social order it is common to regard women as men’s possession. As was explained above, the war-zone is a place where pre-existing gender relations become accentuated so that if women are perceived as men’s possession in times of peace, they will be perceived as such even more so in times of war. Brownmiller’s description of the war-zone illustrates that — ‘the soldier becomes an adrenaline-rushed young man with permission to kick in the door, to grab, to steal, to give vent to his submerged rage against all women who belong to other men’ (Brownmiller, 1994: 181, italics added). Seifert (1994: 65) has argued that a certain psychology develops from a patriarchal society. Masculinity is associated with power and worth and femininity is associated with the opposite. She further explains that ‘women are raped not because they are enemies, but because they are the objects of fundamental hatred that characterizes the cultural unconscious and is actualized in times of crisis’ (Seifert, 1994: 65). MacKinnon (1994) argues along the same lines in her analysis of the pornography industry and the mass rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Through interviews with former rape-camp prisoners she creates a picture of the camps as places where the perpetrators could live out their sexual fantasies. According to MacKinnon rapes have been filmed and shown on evening news in Banja Luka and Belgrade (MacKinnon, 1994: 76) and according to Allen (1996: 34) some of these films have been distributed on the international porn-market. MacKinnon (1994: 77) describes pre-conflict Yugoslav society as ‘the freest country in the world’ when it comes to pornography, and she continues: ‘When pornography is this normal, a whole population of men is primed to dehumanize women and to enjoy inflicting assault sexually’ (MacKinnon, 1994: 77). Card also attempts to explain how rape reinforces patriarchal relations between men and women. She says that the ultimate goal of rape in war and peace is ‘[t]o display, communicate, and produce or maintain dominance, which is both enjoyed for its own sake and used for such ulterior ends as exploitation, expulsion, dispersion, murder’ (Card, 1996: 7). Rape is used, she argues, because women in patriarchal societies are such easy targets both physically and socially (Card, 1996: 11).

This conceptualization regards all women in the war-zone as potential targets for sexual violence because the goal appears to be to manifest notions
of militaristic masculinity, rather than target the individual women. This conceptualization argues that in patriarchal societies crimes of sexual violence are ascribed meaning because they manifest the hierarchical power relationship between men and women. There are, however, serious shortcomings to this way of interpreting the strategic use of sexual violence in the war-zone. First, the conceptualization cannot explain why sexual violence oftentimes affects some women more than others in times of war. In other words, the gender component, i.e. the role of militarized masculinity within patriarchal societies, alone cannot explain which women are subject to sexual violence. This problem is interconnected with the conceptualization of patriarchy which is regarded only as supremacy of men over women. This conceptualization does not evaluate how ethnic, religious and political power relations interact with gender relations in an understanding of patriarchy. Second, the conceptualization does not reveal an understanding that men can also be victimized and violated within a patriarchal system. Third, the conceptualization suggests an essentialist understanding of masculinity. The exponents of this theory propose a theory of men as essentially sexually aggressive and that the social situation of war makes it possible for them to release their suppressed masculine drives. Brownmiller simply states that when given the possibility to rape, men will do it, while MacKinnon seems to argue that men are conditioned to rape through pornography. In both cases, they present masculine nature as static and unchangeable — a deterministic view which gives no hope for change. The following conceptualization will attempt to look closer at some of the critical points raised above.

Conceptualization II

How can one explain not only that women in the war-zone, in general, are at greater risk of being victims of sexual violence than in the non-war-zone, but that targeted groups of women are at a greater risk than others? The epistemological standpoint of this conceptualization is that other identities such as ethnicity, religious belonging and political affiliation will interact with the gender identity of the individual victims and thereby put some women at greater risk than others. The understanding of patriarchy is thereby made more complex because it is no longer seen as simply men having power over women, but as men belonging to the most powerful ethnic, religious or political groups having power over ‘their’ women (in order to protect them) and over the women of the ‘other’ (by potentially attacking them). This conceptualization is therefore critical to the notion that all women in the war-zone are equally prone to this particular kind of
violence and maintains that other identities differentiate the ‘rape-victim-potential’ of the women in the war-zone.

In *The Human Rights Watch Global Report on Women’s Human Rights 1995* it is said that — ‘[r]ape in conflict under repressive regimes is neither incidental nor private. It routinely serves a strategic function and acts as a tool for achieving specific military or political objectives’ (HRW, 1995: 2). The Human Rights Watch report demonstrates the different ways in which rape has functioned, as a strategic weapon against targeted groups of women in the conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Somalia, Haiti, Kashmir and Peru. In the 1996 Human Rights report, *Shattered Lives*, on sexual violence during the genocide in Rwanda it is also stated that rape was used for political purposes in emphasizing that the majority of rapes were directed against Tutsi women in an attempt to destroy Tutsi culture (HRW, 1996: 15–19). In her analysis of the status of rape in the Balkan conflicts Meznaric (1994: 86) states that it is not a new phenomenon that rape has been used as a means of sharpening the edges between ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia. It started in Kosovo from 1986 to 1990, when Albanian men were accused of the large-scale rape of Serbian women, an accusation which led the republic of Serbia to modify its penal code. ‘Sexual assault on citizens of different nationalities and ethnicities was considered more aggravating than “regular” rape’ (Meznaric, 1994: 86). According to Meznaric, this indicates that rape had become a political act.

If we follow Meznaric’s line of argument, i.e. that inter-ethnic rape is more political than other kinds of rape in the war-zone, we must also ask why the perpetrators chose this particular kind of violence. Does the use of sexual violence entail political effects that are different from the use of other forms of violence? Before exploring this question further, it is important to say that much of the literature struggles with defining the strategic use of sexual violence in the war-zone. Some authors have used the term *political rape* (Lusby, 1994; Sharlach, 1998) to denote rape that has a purpose connected to political agendas other than exclusively the subordination of women (Sharlach, 1998: 3). Cleiren and Tijssen (1994: 474) on the other hand stress that rape and other forms of sexual violence must be regarded as crimes of violence with a sexual nature and can thus be prosecuted within existing international law. Copelon (1995) and Green et al. (1994), however, would like to see sexual violence classified as gendered crimes, but also be regarded as violent acts which ought to be considered as grave breaches against the Geneva Conventions. Agger (1989) defines war-time sexual violence as *sexual torture*, while Blatt (1992) emphasises that it is simply *torture* and should be recognized as such. As to the effects of sexual violence there is a clearer consensus and Agger and Jensen’s distinction
between ‘regular’ torture and sexual torture can serve as an adequate explanation:

The victim’s as well as the torturer’s sexual structures are involved in the psychodynamics of this interaction, and the victim experiences the torture as directed against his or her sexual body image and identity with the aim to destroy it. Thus, the essential part of sexual torture’s traumatic and identity-damaging effect is the feeling of being an accomplice in an ambiguous situation which contains both aggressive and libidinal elements of a confusing nature. (Agger and Jensen, 1993: 687)

Agger and Jensen underline that the effects of sexual violence are related to notions of identity. This definition brings us even closer to an understanding of war-time sexual violence when coupled with Elshtain’s definition of war. She defines war as: ‘the cultural property of peoples, a system of signs that we read without much effort because they have become so familiar to us’ (Elshtain, 1995 [1987]: 167). Within this system of signs there are certain myths about male and female identities which become accentuated; female identity is seen as life-giving, whereas male identity is seen as life-taking. If we accept that this is a myth many people of the war-zone live by, then the use of sexual violence against women may be seen as a way of targeting women’s life-giving capacities. ‘Because women bear the next generation of a collectivity they are put uniquely at risk’, says Lentin (1997: 2).

The examples of forced impregnation in rape camps, most notably from the rape camps in Bosnia-Herzegovina (see Allen, 1996; Fisher, 1996; Goldstein, 1993) are perhaps the clearest examples of this. There is evidence from Bosnia-Herzegovina that women were held captive in rape camps and raped until they became pregnant. The literature is not consistent as to how many, or indeed where, rape camps existed in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Smith (1997: 34) identifies six rape camps in Brcko, Doboj, Foca, Gorazde, Kalinovik and Visegrad, i.e. mostly in the eastern part of Bosnia. Vranic (1996: 7), on the other hand, also identifies six rape/death camps, but these are mostly in the northern part — in Camp, Keraterm, Luka, Manjaca, Omarska and Tronopolje. Salzman (1998: 356) refers to the so-called RAM plan which was allegedly written by Serb army officers in late August 1991. This plan mentions raping women and children as an efficient and integral tool in the process of ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Salzman (1998: 356) explains that it was the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) Psychological Operations Department that had made the following observation about Muslim behaviour — ‘Their morale, desire for battle, and will could be crushed more easily by raping women, especially minors and even children’. Salzman therefore concludes that the organized
structure of the mass rapes and the rape camps were planned as early as August 1991. Allen explains that restaurants, hotels, hospitals, schools, factories, peacetime brothels, and other buildings served as rape camps (1996: 65) and that the aggressors were mostly Serb personnel from the Yugoslav Army, irregular Serb soldiers, Chetnics (Serb Monarchists), and even civilians. Stiglmayer (1994a: 115), on the other hand, emphasizes that one can find documentation of rape camps on the Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian sides alike. Common to most of the reports and documents she has reviewed concerning the rape camps is that they are undocumented and vague. As soon as any rape camps were identified they were dissolved and new ones were established in areas inaccessible to outsiders like the International Red Cross (Stiglmayer, 1994a: 115). This may help explain some of the variation in the documentation of rape camps in Bosnia. Allen (1996: 96) explains that the use of rape in the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina can be seen as genocide — ‘Any rape threatens reproduction because it makes survivors damaged goods in a patriarchal system that defines woman as man’s possession and virgin woman as his most valuable asset’. Elsewhere she says:

It is aimed at the destruction of people; it determines that this aim will best be served by attacking women and children in particular; it considers the violent crime of rape to be an ideal means to this destruction; it utilizes rape as one form of torture preceding death; in this case, rape is used against male and female adults and male and female children; it utilizes rape as a means of enforcing pregnancy and eventual birth; in this case, rape is used against persons capable of gestating pregnancy. In the case of enforced pregnancy, its illogical reasoning is founded on the negation of all cultural identities of its victims, reducing those victims to mere sexual containers. Although it may occur anywhere, it generally occurs in three locales: (1) towns and villages, where it is often performed publicly, most often on female women and children; (2) concentration camps, where it is generally performed sporadically on prisoners regardless of age or sex; (3) rape/death camps, where it is performed systematically on female women and children. (Allen, 1996: 100–1)

The view that rape can be seen as an element of genocide has also clearly been affirmed by the verdict in the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) which was the first verdict delivered in an international court where rape was included as a part of genocide. According to the press statement:

... the Trial Chamber underscored the fact that rape and sexual violence also constitute genocide in the same way as any other act, as long as they were committed with intent to destroy a particular group targeted as such. The court held that sexual violence was an ‘integral’ part of the process of
destruction of the Tutsi ethnic group. ‘The rape of Tutsi women was systematic and was perpetrated against all Tutsi women and solely against them’, the Chamber concluded. Furthermore, these rapes were accompanied by a proven intent to kill their victims. (Press statement, Internet version, http://www.un.org/News/Press)

The pattern appears to be that in an attempt to ethnically cleanse, or get rid of the entire population, manipulating the procreative abilities of the women in the target ethnic group has proved to be an effective weapon.

The socio-cultural identity of women is, however, not exclusively linked to their procreative abilities. Since a strict division of men and women often characterizes the war-zone, the majority of the civilian population left when men have gone off to battle, will necessarily be women, children and the elderly. If the purpose of the warfare is to target the civilian population then women will constitute the prime target. Much of the literature suggests that in order to disseminate fear and demonstrate control over the civilian population sexual violence is effective. Examples can be taken from the war in Bosnia where several accounts emphasize how women were raped in front of their family members and friends and/or publicly in towns and villages (Allen, 1996: 101; Benderly, 1997: 65; Bennett et al., 1995: 8; Meznaric, 1994: 92; Stiglmayer, 1994a: 82).

Direct experience and/or rumours of various kinds of sexual violence may serve as a trigger for migration. This has been the case in Kashmir. An Asia Watch Report (1993) states that, ‘The fear of rape has reportedly been a factor in the flight of Muslim families from Kashmir’. Another related example is the Japanese use of the so-called ‘comfort-women’ during the Pacific War (see Chai, 1993; Chung, 1994; Hicks, 1994; Hsu, 1993; Hu, 1992; Sancho, 1997; Soh, 1996; Ueno, 1994, for descriptions of the lives of the ‘comfort women’). Both Chai (1993) and Soh’s article (1996) stress how by luring ‘comfort women’ from Japanese colonized territories and bringing them to occupied territories the Japanese forces demonstrated complete control in the occupied region. Examples from Latin America demonstrate a slightly different pattern. In an attempt to crush oppositional elements of the civilian population women were singled out on the basis of their male affiliation and their individual political activities. Bunster-Burotto (1986: 297) explains that, ‘Military regimes in Latin America have developed patterns of punishments specifically designed for women who are perceived as actively fighting against or in any way resisting the oppression and exploitation visited upon their peoples by dictatorial governments’. Human rights reports have shown that being a wife, daughter or even cousin to a male opponent to the regime may also be seen as a way of ‘resisting the oppression’ (see also Bunster-Burotto, 1986: 303; on the situation in Peru,
see Amnesty International, 1989: 10; Human Rights Watch, 1995: 92–3; Human Rights Watch, 1992; on the situation in El Salvador and Guatemala, see Aron et al., 1991: 44). It appears in this literature that it is when the symbolic identity of women is coupled with their ethnic, religious or political identity that certain groups of women are singled out. Bernard (1994: 35–9) has outlined different political purposes that sexual violence can have — first, it facilitates ethnic cleansing by increasing the incentive to flee; second, it demoralizes the opponent; third, it signals the intention to break up the society; fourth, it inflicts trauma and contributes to the psychological damage by the opposing side; fifth, it provides psychological benefits to the perpetrators; and finally sixth, it inflicts a blow against the collective enemy by striking at a group with a high symbolic value.

The crucial point emphasized in the scholarly literature cited earlier is that particular women are targeted with sexual violence for two main reasons. First, the women are targeted because they are women who find themselves in a situation where patriarchal gender relations are accentuated. Second, these women are targeted because they are female embodiments of other socio-cultural identities. This conceptualization is critical to the notion that all women of the war-zone are equally prone to sexual violence because of their gender and it argues that we must critically analyse gender and other socio-cultural structures together in order to explain why it is that certain groups of women in the war-zone are more targeted than others.

The main advantage of the conceptualization is that it sets the focus on the female victim herself. In other words, we move away from regarding the sexual violence against the woman as a result of militarized masculinity to investigating how this particular kind of violence targets female cultural identity. Although positive in outlook, this point has been a grave concern within the literature in international law where it is argued that the law has been much too preoccupied with the sanctity of women’s honour, more than a woman’s human rights. In the Geneva Conventions (IV, art. 27) rape has been perceived as a violation of female honour and has therefore not been regarded as violence. The critique has also been that a woman’s honour traditionally has been defined in male terms, i.e. that it is men who give or take her honour (for discussion on this point, see Aolain, 1997; Askin, 1997; Blatt, 1992; Cleiren and Tijsen, 1994; Copelon, 1995; Healey, 1995; Meron, 1993; Niarchos, 1995). The conceptualization also sets out to explain why certain women are targeted more than others and thereby how the use of sexual violence in the war-zone can be intertwined with the political purpose of the conflict. This conceptualization cannot, however, explain the fact that men also can be victims of this kind of violence. In the last conceptualization this issue will be addressed.
This conceptualization attempts to understand the thinking behind targeting both men and women with sexual violence in the war-zone. Epistemologically, this conceptualization departs from the two previous ones in that it regards gender relations not as given through patriarchy, but as constructed through ‘transactions that are understood to be appropriate to one sex’ (Bohan, 1997: 33). Gender relations are perceived as something we do rather than something we are. Bohan (1997: 39) explains further that ‘the factors defining a particular transaction as feminine or masculine are not the sex of the actors but the situational parameters within which the performance occurs’. Social constructionist thought is inherently sceptical about generalized theories of male/female relations and thereby opens up for a way of thinking about sexual violence in war where both men and women can be potential perpetrators and victims.

A closer look at the social constructionist understanding of sexual violence committed by men against other men will clarify this perspective further. The Final Report of the Commission of experts established Pursuant to Security Council 780, UN Doc. S/1994/674 documents several incidents of male victims of sexual violence in the war in Bosnia. Hague (1997), Meznaric (1994), Nordstrom (1996), Sofos (1996), Thomas and Regan (1994) and Zarkov (1997) all stress that in order to fully understand the empirical reality that both men and women can be victims one must investigate how sexual violence in both peace and war is founded upon assumptions of power domination combined with gender identity construction. This concern is also reflected in Jones’ article (1994) where he says that men are the ‘absent subjects’ in feminist gender analyses of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. This view is supported by Zarkov who says that:

... there is no wonder that international legal institutions never acknowledged male victims of sexual violence, there was no wonder, until very recently, that the female victim of sexual violence was hardly ever a subject of international legal concerns. Association of femininity and victimization is so natural — wars or no wars — that few laws had anything to say about it. (Zarkov, 1997: 146)

Further, Jones points to the fact that men have been the majority of concentration camp victims (Jones, 1994: 126) and we know from both times of war and peace that sexual violence is not uncommon in all-male settings. Jones asks for a broader and more nuanced approach to an understanding of how the gender dimension works in the war-zone. This approach must, as he implies, include a conceptualization of men as victims and not only women. What then does the victimization of men through sexual violence symbolize? Can sexual violence against men in the war-zone...
only be committed by homosexuals? The social constructionist con-
ceptualization argues against such an understanding. In his analysis of
heterosexual men raping other heterosexual men in a USA peacetime
context, Scarce (1997: 78) says this kind of rape is ‘largely an exertion of
power and control through feminizing the other by forcing a man into the
sexually submissive role of the female’. From this we can conclude that a
man who is victimized though sexual violence in the war-zone, is also
feminized. What then happens to the perpetrator? If the victim is feminized,
is the perpetrator masculinized? Hague (1997) argues that this is the case:

In the crime of . . . rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina, traditional gender assump-
tions of which persons are ‘masculine’ and which ‘feminine’ came under
attack, and in many cases were asserted, through ascriptions of national
identity. The qualities of power, domination and violent subjugation often
associated with a hegemonic masculinity accrued, in this context, to the
national identities known as ‘Serb’ and ‘Bosnian Serb’. (Hague, 1997: 53)

In the same article Hague (1997: 52) argues against the notion that ‘all that
is female is feminine and all that is male is masculine’. An analysis of these
two quotes together suggests that it is not only ‘all that is male’ which can
be masculinized (or feminized), but that the same is true for national
identities (by suggesting that (Bosnian) Serb identities became masculinized
during the conflict in Bosnia). What, then does masculinization entail?
Zarkov explains that this can only be understood within a heterosexual
paradigm:

. . . it is crucial to stress that sexuality, as much as gender, is an organizing
principle, on which all of the cultures that we live in . . . are based, simply
because men and women are presumed to be heterosexual. Heterosexuality is
the norm we live with, whatever our sexual orientation. Construction of
masculinity is thus inseparable from the construction of heterosexuality.
(Zarkov, 1997: 144)

Zarkov goes on to argue that the key element of masculinity is power. ‘The
base of violence against both men and women is not in hetero- or homo-
sexuality of an individual male actor but in an inseparable construction of
argues ‘that in a situation of ethnic conflict [g]ender becomes an ethno-
marker in the boundary maintenance and in conflict groups’. Gendering the
ethnic groups thus becomes the way of ascribing power to the warring
parties in the war-zone. Combining these two claims gives us the following
line of reasoning — the victim of sexual violence in the war-zone is
victimized by feminizing both the sex and the ethnic/religious/political
identity to which the victim belongs, likewise the perpetrator’s sex and
ethnic/religious/political identity is empowered by becoming masculinized.
This conceptualization combines and expands conceptualizations I and II. First, it acknowledges that women, irrespective of ethnic, religious or political belonging, are more susceptible to sexual violence in war than men, and thus seems to agree with conceptualization I. Second, it also acknowledges that within the war-zone targeted groups of women, depending on their ethnic/religious/political belonging, are at a greater risk than other groups of women, and thus seems to agree with conceptualization II. The explanation this conceptualization offers is, however, very different from the explanations in conceptualizations I and II. It does not agree with essentialist or structuralist explanations, simply because it does not claim the world to be as static as these two epistemologies inherently suggest. Rather, the explanation why women in general, and targeted women in particular, are victimized through sexual violence is that these actions feminize the women through victimization. It is precisely this line of thought which allows the conceptualization to include the victimization of men and which makes the empirical focus more complete than the two previous conceptualizations. The direction of this analysis is more complex than for the two previous conceptualizations. While the essentialist conceptualization explains war-time sexual violence from the perspective of the perpetrator and the structuralist conceptualization explains it from the perspective of the victims, it is only the social constructionist conceptualization which focuses on how war-time sexual violence can be regarded as a transaction of identities between the perpetrator and the victims; i.e. how their social identities become situated. The line of thought can be summarized as follows: the perpetrator, and his (potentially also her) ethnic/religious/political identity become masculinized, while the victim’s ethnic/religious/political identity becomes feminized. Further, the masculinized and feminized identities are situated in a hierarchical power relationship where masculinized identities are ascribed power and feminized identities are not.

**Implications**

The conceptualizations outlined above have all focused in different ways on how sexual violence can be perceived as a weapon of war. It has been argued that sexual violence is a weapon directed against (a) all women in the war-zone, against (b) targeted women in the war-zone and against (c) targeted men and women in the war-zone. The strategic effects of this weapon have been defined as (a) reaffirming militaristic masculinity, and thereby focusing on the perpetrator, (b) attacking the ethnic/religious/political identity the woman is seen to embody, thereby turning the focus on the victim, and (c) masculinizing the perpetrators by empowering their identity and
feminizing the victim by victimizing his/her identity, thereby focusing on
the symbolic interaction between the perpetrator and the victim. Based on
these analyses we see that it is only the last conceptualization which manages
to explain the most comprehensive empirical reality (the victimization of
men and women) and also manages to explain why it is that sexual violence
is the ‘preferred’ form of violence (because this is the form of violence which
most clearly communicates masculinization and feminization). Why then are
these insights important? Does it really matter if we conceptualize sexual
violence in essentialist, structuralist or social constructionist terms? I believe
that it is important and that future research and policy-making will suffer if
we do not consider the complex reality in which war-time sexual violence
occurs and the complex consequences this particular form of violence can
have.

Research Implications
Future empirical research in this field must have as its premise that the
consequences of the acts of sexual violence are not given. The effects and
consequences will most likely vary according to time, culture and the nature
of the conflict. It is only through interaction with the victims/perpetrators
as well as an understanding of the nature of the conflict and culture in which
the acts of sexual violence took place, that the researcher can explain the
effects of war-time sexual violence. Can one claim that sexual violence is a
weapon of war if the effects are so dependent on time and circumstance? I
believe so, but the research challenge is to show how multifaceted the effects
are. This calls on the researcher to be sensitive to nuances; is war-time rape
experienced in the same way by all victims? When does the victim perceive
sexual violence as a weapon of war — must the perpetrator wear a uniform,
speak a different language, or be part of a group? When does the perpetrator
perceive sexual violence as a weapon of war? When is sexual violence in the
war-zone not perceived as a weapon of war — and what characterizes this
understanding? This approach calls on a dialectical methodology and
hermeneutic interpretations.

Pragmatic Implications
The pragmatic implications of conceptualization III are more difficult to
map out than for conceptualization I and II. Had war-time sexual violence
only been a result of masculine drives we could have transformed military
training and gotten rid of the problem. Also, had war-time sexual violence
only been committed against women representing the ‘other’ identities in
the given conflict we could have directed all our policy and aid work to these
groups. But, as has been shown, the picture is more complex. While we must
be sensitive to the issue of war-time sexual violence in our military training, as well as in our aid/human relief policies it is far from straightforward how best to deal with the issue in these contexts. My belief is, and this is also supported in the literature, that the best ‘coping strategy’ is to speak up about the issue. It is only by making policy-makers, journalists and lawyers and other analysts aware of the issue that one can stop the tradition of impunity and silence. The social constructionist conceptualization, however, urges us to analyse the situational parameters which shape the symbolic effect of sexual violence and any acts of speaking up must therefore be sensitive to the differences in the victims’ experiences and the intent of the crime. The work carried out in the ICTY and the ICTR are clear examples of the ‘speaking-up’ strategy. The ICTY and ICTR show us that war-time sexual violence is multifaceted (it has been regarded as torture, genocide and crime of war) and that getting the facts on the table is very difficult. Shame, guilt, fear and taboos keep victims and perpetrators silent and this poses a great challenge to outside analysts and it is precisely the same feelings of shame, guilt, fear and taboo which make sexual violence such an effective weapon.

Notes
1. I would like to thank the Resource Conflict and Forced Migration programme at the Norwegian Research Council for having funded the first 10 months of this study. I would also like to thank Nansenfondet and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for having funded the last months of the project. The members of the panel entitled ‘The Role of Women in the Westphalian System: Victims, Gatekeepers or Reformers?’ at the International Studies Association (ISA) 39th Annual Convention in Minneapolis, Minnesota, 17–21 March 1998 deserve special mention for having provided very helpful and insightful comments when I presented an early version of the article. The other members were Catia C. Confortini, George A. Lopez, Anita Schjølset, Simona Sharoni and J. Ann Tickner. I also want to thank Hjørdis Kaul, Iver B. Neumann, John Erik Riley, Berit Schei and Dan Smith for their comments. Synnøve Eifring, PRIO’s librarian, has done a tremendous job in locating the articles and without her I could not have conducted this research project.
3. In general, the term ‘constructionism’ can be used interchangeably with the term ‘constructivism’. Both terms denote the epistemological understanding that knowledge and perception is constructed and challenge the traditional view that the individual mind is a device for reflecting the character and conditions of an independent world. In social psychology, however, the term constructionism is preferred in order not to create confusion with the term constructivism from the field of cognitive psychology. Within this field, constructivism is used to denote a set of cognitive theories which emphasize the individual’s psychological
construction of the experienced world. Since I am a social psychologist by training, I use the term constructionism to denote the same line of thought and theories that sociologists, anthropologists and other social scientists would most often call constructivist.

4. In 1992 Korean women dared for the first time to come forward and testify that between 1932 and 1945 they had been forced into prostitution by Japanese military personnel. In Uganda women have been forced to marry men in the rebel forces in order to provide sexual favours for free (Bennett et al., 1995: 96). Palestinian women in Israeli occupied territories have told how they have been sexually humiliated by Israeli security guards who have fondled them and threatened them with sexual violence (Amnesty, 1991: 23). In Somalia, female prisoners have been stripped naked in front of male guards as a means of punishment (Amnesty, 1991: 22). In Bosnia, men have been ordered to bite off the testicles of fellow male prisoners. This was one of the points in the verdict against Ducan Tadic (see Walsh, 1997: 21).

5. I would like to thank my good colleague philosopher Henrik Syse for having enlightened me on this subject.

6. The secretary general of Norwegian People’s Aid, Halle Jørn Hansen, used this description of the food situation in Sudan in a documentary called ‘Brennpunkt’ produced by the Norwegian Broadcasting Association (NRK) shown on 17 November 1999 on the same TV channel.


8. Quotes, examples and references are intended as exemplars of discourses, rather than a classification of the publication as a whole.

9. See for instance Amnesty International (1993: 1); Bassiouni (1994: 312); Fletcher et al, Jones (1994: 117; 1994: 94); Salzman (1998: 349). In these articles it is stated that rape happened on all sides in the conflict, but it was predominantly Serbs who were the rapists and Muslims who were the victims. Zarkov (1997: 140–1) discusses how the rape victim identity in Bosnia has become synonymous with Muslim victim identity and is critical to this. Helsinki Watch (1993) and Human Rights Watch (1995) provide systematic outlines of crimes committed in different areas of Bosnia, by the different ethnic groups.


11. There are many exceptions to this rule (see for instance Skjelsbæk, 1998 on the roles of women in the wars in El Salvador and Vietnam), but in general this division is the norm.

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12. Testimonies of raped women in Bosnia reveal that many victims were subject to gang rape (Bennett et al., 1995: 231–51; Stiglmayer, 1994a: 86–147). Group pressure makes it difficult for an individual soldier to refuse rape, because this would potentially reveal ‘weakness’. He would deviate from the militaristic norm and he would have been perceived as less masculine.

13. Elshtain’s work (1995 [1987]) is mostly focused on nuancing these myths. She makes the elegant distinction between men and women by calling women ‘the ferocious few/the noncombatant many’ and men ‘the militant many/the pacific few’.

14. ‘Doing gender’ is a term introduced by West and Zimmerman (1991: 24) and it reflects an understanding that differences between girls and boys and women and men are not natural, essential or biological, but socially constructed. Male and female identities are negotiated and agreed-upon interpretations of what it means to be a man or a woman. These interpretations determine male and female actions, behaviour, perceptions and rationality.

15. Jones also argues (1994: 123) that the fact that men of combat age were denied the right to flee the war-zone and claim refugee status was another form of victimization of men.

16. See for instance Cameron (1994: 121), who defines rape in war as a secret ‘time bomb’; Chinkin (1992: 284), where she says that rape is being used to render women invisible in both war and peace; Nordstrom (1996: 147) defines rape in war as a public secret; Swiss and Giller (1993: 614) define rape as a secret which can lead to social isolation. In the literature on international law one of the major concerns is to stop the tradition of impunity (see for instance Askin, 1997; Aydelott, 1993; Healey, 1995; Thomas and Regan, 1994; Wilbers, 1994), an argument which can be read as a wish to stop the secrecy and the making invisible of crimes of sexual violence.

Appendix

Overview of the 140 Texts

In the initial stages of this project, finding appropriate literature was somewhat hazardous. There are no fields of science that have specialized in this aspect of warfare. There were no major scientific journals to turn to and an attempt to do a systematic literature search ended with very few, if any, hits. The most fruitful approach was therefore the ‘snowball’ approach, meaning that a reference in one article led to the discovery of new articles, which again led to new articles, etc. This is how the project proceeded all through 1998 and this also led to a vast variety of books, articles and publications being amassed. When acquiring a new article did not lead to new references it indicated that the study had reached its saturation point. Because the overall goal was to gather as much information as possible on how sexual
violence has been used in times of war and how it has been described it was necessary not to have too strict criteria in the selection of publications.

The articles and publications can be divided into four main categories. The largest group consists of social science books and articles. The majority of these publications are interdisciplinary (27%), while a substantial part of the publications are in fields such as psychology and psychiatry (17%), political science (15%), feminist studies (14%), history (12%), and anthropology (10%). The remaining articles are in sociology, theology and social medicine (in total 5%). These articles address questions such as what sexual violence actually is and how it can be understood in times of war. The second largest group consists of international law and legal studies articles. The main theme of these articles is how rape and sexual violence in war can be prosecuted within the framework of international law. Their inherent assumptions on how we should understand war-time sexual violence is reflected in how they argue that the international legal framework should be applied. Some see war-time sexual violence as parallel to torture while others argue that it can constitute an element of genocide. The third group of publications is human rights reports. The majority of these reports are different publications from Human Rights Watch (39%), Amnesty International have also published on this theme (17%) as well as different United Nations agencies (22%). The remaining reports (22%) are not by any of these big organizations but are special reports by governments and independent NGOs. The final category of publications consists of journalistic publications. These are longer than articles in the daily press, but shorter than conventional scholarly articles. They appear in weekly and monthly journals published by human rights organizations, research communities and governmental bodies. Table A1 shows the distribution of the various articles and publications.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social science books and articles</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International law and legal studies books and articles</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human rights reports</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalistic publications</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$N = 140$

The initial aim of the project was to focus on articles and publications from the 1990s, but I soon discovered that some areas could only be covered if I included
publications from the end of the 1980s. This was particularly true for Latin America. The outline of the articles and publications per year looks like the following:

As can be seen from Figure A1 there was a peak in the number of publications in the years 1993 and 1994. These are the years of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

The gender distribution of the authors of the articles and publications is striking. The vast majority of the publications are written by women. This reinforces the notion that the theme of sexual violence is now set on the international agenda due to women speaking up.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men and women</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table A2 shows there is also a large group called Unknown. This group comprises articles where the author's gender cannot be read from the name, either because there are only initials, or because I simply do not know whether the name signals a man or a woman. Some publications do not have named authors, but have listed the organization as the author.
References

Scholarly Books and Articles:


**Human Rights Reports:**


**United Nations Documents:**


**Internet Sources:**