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sexual violence as a weapon of war? perceptions, prescriptions, problems in the congo and beyond

Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, Zed Books, London and New York, 2013, 168pp., ISBN: 978-1-7803-2164-6, £65.00 (Hbk)/ISBN: 978-1-7803-2163-9, £21.99 (Pbk)

In *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War? Perceptions, Prescriptions, Problems in the Congo and Beyond*, the authors discuss the aspects of conflict-related sexual violence, the security problems it brings, how redress has become a high priority and how the feminist discourse has interacted with this subject thus far. The book starts with a quote from former Special Representative of the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Margot Wallström, where she states that 'It has to be understood that this is a security problem, not just men behaving like men. It's not an inevitable consequence of war—it's something that is planned. It can either be commanded, condemned or condoned. We need to say that we can stop it. It's not inevitable'. This quote gives us a good overview of how the authors situate themselves within the discourse.

The book gives us a glimpse of the sexed and gendered story of sexual violence. It focuses on how socially produced masculinity plays a central role in the sexed body, and how we interpret violence against these bodies. Is it men's violent nature? Is it a learned attribute? What is it that produces this sex/gender paradox? It is simply a glimpse, as it doesn't necessarily tackle some relevant feminist legal theory that has played a significant part in understanding the arguments behind the sexed and gendered story. The fact that the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was chosen as the backdrop of this research can be seen as both positive and negative. The positive aspect is that it's such a complex region that it offers possibilities for thorough observations into the diversity of the sexed and gender story. The negative side is that by choosing this very country, the authors remind us that not much has changed for the DRC. The authors address the colonial and racialised context of the conflict in the DRC, and script it to construct a deeper understanding of the sex/gender paradox, which definitely brings about questions regarding the methodological aspect of research on violence in specifically postcolonial spaces.

One of the highlights of the book is the discussion of framing rape as strategic, and whether wartime rape can be considered strategic. In an analysis on whether rape can be seen in a broader way than just rape being committed as a direct order, the authors show us that strategy in this instance can mean different things: condoning, and encouragement of rape, for example, can also be seen as strategic approaches to rape. We are reminded that the language used in these settings can play a significant role in how rape as a weapon of war is portrayed, and how we discuss it. The media, academics and other key actors such as NGOs play an undeniable role in how we talk about wartime rape and the rationale behind it. This is done by asking questions like who is the perpetrator/rapist, who is the victim/survivor and is there a hierarchy in the pictures

we are shown? And is this only relevant because the message of the West is that we keep searching for that culpable, punishable subject—or is there more? The authors explain that shifting the discourse of *Rape as a Weapon of War* gives us new incentives and promises change. If we understand rape as a gendered weapon of war—avoidable and not inevitable—it can be changed.

That change, which is partly addressed in the subject of military institutions and the role they play in wartime rape, and how they sometimes function as facilitators of spaces for violence, as is the case in the DRC, is a complex subject that I wish had been better explored with a more in-depth comparison of a different region. I think in this particular instance focusing on the DRC does not give us a full picture of the cycle of violence, the power hierarchies and how the discourse of sexed and gendered bodies contextualises the power and domination in these settings. Although Vietnam can give us a similar narrative, we do miss the aspect of armed groups (i.e., non-state ones) and local conflicts that are probably fuelled by the intersectional aspects of race and economics. This then highlights the notion of *being a good global feminist* that the authors address, and how this Western view of saving the Congolese woman (from the Congolese man) shows us that we fail to listen to the underlying tones. It also highlights how this failing to listen, and commercialising rape as this token that everyone needs to address and define by deciding *who speaks and who is complicit*, has most likely affected where we are in the discourse, and how much there is still to be done.

Overall, due to its compact nature, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War?* is a highly accessible book that caters to a diverse group. The book not only shows us the horrors of wartime rape; it helps introduce the perceived narrative that is created with the title and highlights spaces still to be explored. The authors have taken an extremely complex subject and dissected it for the public to understand and engage with. While one chapter gives us the experience of researching rape in the DRC, the other looks at postcoloniality, victimhood and humanitarian engagement: what is being a good global feminist about? It gives us critiques of interventions, who it benefits and what the consequences are. The book allows the reader to explore the complexity that is wartime rape, colonial links, racialised notions, and the strategic aspect of rape as a weapon of war and the international response to it. Although I wished the authors had included more work on the colonial links and the contemporary legal struggles, it does make for a vivid reading experience that leaves one with questions, and perhaps scepticism on the progress of this particular discourse.

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