Book review

Sexual violence and armed conflict,
Janie L. Leatherman (2011). Camb-
ridge, Polity Press (244pp)

Why is sexual violence such a devastating *'tool of war'* in many armed conflicts? How does it impact victims and their communities? Why are perpetrators using it? How is it linked into a global political economy of war that uses such violence as a means of plunder and profit?

These are the important questions that Janie Leatherman, a professor of politics and international studies at Fairfield University in the United States, addresses in this book. This study explores sexual violence as a part of armed conflict, in terms of the conditions that put women and girls at the highest risk of (re)victimisation throughout conflict cycles. This violence aims to humiliate male family members who, in turn, are perhaps even more silenced than women when they are sexually assaulted. The result is the destruction of family and community life, and the utter collapse of safe space.

In the first chapter, Leatherman conceptualises sexual violence in armed conflict by discussing various theoretical approaches, and makes clear that she adheres to the *'social constructivist'* school. Within this theory, the attention is on how the actions of people are shaped and constrained by power relations, and how the behaviour of people either reproduces and reinforces these power relations, or transforms them. The emphasis is on how norms, rules, beliefs, ideas and principles influence expectations for social behaviour, and how social institutions are formed and transformed. Social constructivist theory emphasises that there are many different kinds of *'masculinities'* and *'femininities'*. Leatherman

has paid particular attention to what she calls *'hegemonic masculinity'*. This latter term refers to a male-centred order that gives men, rather than women, primary access to power and privilege.

In the second chapter, Leatherman explains how massive sexual violence often begins during armed conflict, elaborating on the norms and expectations that perpetuate these actions. She characterises sexual violence as a *'runaway norm'* that justifies and normalises other extreme forms of violence. Norms provide the basis for behaviour according to social, cultural, and legally acceptable standards. Violation of norms typically provokes disapproval, stigma or sanctions. However, not all socially accepted norms are benevolent. Some norms, despite the related moral claims, may not stand the test of time as providing *'public good'*. *'Runaway norms'* are a special class of norms that produce social harms or *'public bad'*. They open the floodgates to abuse and exploitation without limit. Such norms operate through fear, and undermine the sense of personal and group safety or security. Runaway norms may legitimise conflict processes and come to be seen as *'right thinking'* by most members of a group.

Such processes, where runaway norms become engrained in groups, are fuelled by the proliferation of hate propaganda and with it, the mobilisation of communities on the basis of hatred for the *'other'*. When runaway norms around sexual violence become part of the self-identity, perceptions or goals of a group, then cultural, religious, or legal thresholds may be easily crossed. This may unleash transgression with regards to (1) the *type of violence* (e.g. gang rape, mutilation, cannibalism); (2) the *targets of the violence* (e.g. children, disabled, elderly); (3)

the *agency of the violence* (e.g. forcing children to commit atrocities; fathers to rape daughters); and (4) the *neutrality* in conflict (regarding *who* can signal it, with an erosion of neutrality (for e.g. medical or health professionals, clergy, or peacekeepers) and the *spaces* which can be claimed for *safety* and *refuge* (e.g. hospitals. churches, mosques, schools, refugee camps). Chapters 3 and 4 trace the perpetration of sexual violence in armed conflict from the onset or pre conflict to the escalation of conflict and its impact on families and communities fleeing violence through forced displacement. Chapter 4 also examines how often, sexual violence is transformed into new threats and risks of victimisation in the post conflict phase and, as a consequence, domestic violence increases, especially for women, girls and boys. When husbands and relatives have thrown women and girls out of their homes, they become vulnerable to human trafficking and sex work, when few other alternatives exist.

Chapter 5 develops a framework of analysis for explaining sexual violence in armed conflict by examining the link between the social construction of gender, especially hegemonic masculinity, and between the global political economy of war and sexual violence in local conflict settings. It begins with a detailed account of how these relationships in the wars in the eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, spilt over to the Rwandan genocide in 1994. The author shows, with many examples, that international *'corporate greed, fuelled by capitalist consumption, and the rape of women [in eastern Congo] has merged into a single nightmare...Women's bodies are the battleground of an economic war'* (pp.131). The chapter develops an analytical framework that explores these relations of domination, through the lens of hyper-masculinity, taboo violations, and

victims' loss of body integrity. It explores how the destruction of their lives, along with family and community, is linked to a global political economy of violence and its networks of plunder and profit, especially with illicit goods and conflict minerals. Sexual violence is used against typically marginalised, illiterate populations to control illicit goods.

Chapter 6 concludes this study with a critique of neoliberal globalisation, especially its political economy of violence, and how this relates to the disciplinary functions of sexual violence and its paradoxes. Multinational corporations must be held responsible for their part in the maintenance of sexual violence during wartime. These corporations take advantage of various war-stricken countries by exploiting their resources, such as jewel mines and oil wells. By supporting repressive governments, they are also supporting their actions, including the sexual violence they inflict on citizens. This analysis leads to a discussion of accountability. In the aftermath of violent conflict, communities face questions over reintegrating perpetrators, including child soldiers, or holding them accountable, while also finding culturally appropriate methods of rehabilitation, empowerment, prevention, and protection for family members and communities.

There are, unfortunately, no *'universal'* standards for protection and accountability, and there is no one right approach for every community. In the objective of programmes to support affected societies, attention should be paid to the strengths and limitations and possible unintended consequences of these programmes. At the same time underscoring the importance of mobilising international action to stand in solidarity with communities that have struggled to overcome sexual violence in armed conflict.

This book is a must for people who not only want to get more insight into the complexity of the causes of sexual violence, and the local and global involvement, but also into the effects on individuals, communities and the (inter)national search for justice, during the conflict and in the post conflict period. The book contains many cases and stories about sexual violence that took place during wartime, in countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Leatherman uses Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo as focal case studies, describing in-depth the challenges and consequences of sexual violence in each of these countries, which makes the theoretical approach very easy to read and understand. Although many readers may already be aware of the underlying social and cultural patterns that enhance (gender) violence, the examples are moving and occasionally despairing.

Sexual violence in conflict is a challenging and difficult topic in many ways, but Leatherman shows in this book that lifting the veil of silence and ending impunity are the first steps to social change, and the more complete realisation of human rights and wellbeing. By using a social constructivist theory, she shows us that sexual violence in war is part of a socio-economic and political strategy for terrorising, controlling, displacing, and even eliminating targeted groups. Sexual violence leads to eliminating safe space in society, and making women and girls, in particular, vulnerable to multiple instances of victimisation throughout a conflict's trajectory.

The construction of hyper-masculinity during conflicts is aimed at surpassing all limits, especially the sexual ones. If a taboo is passed, it can even be normalised and new taboos will be passed, often more appalling. Traumas are intensified by the fact that civilians are taken captive in war and forced to commit atrocities. Victimhood is extremely complex. The gross violation of human rights and crimes against humanity that sexual violence in armed conflicts entails underscores the urgency of concerted and effective international action to prevent it; commitments to enforce international law banning it; and the development of security measures in the context of humanitarian operations to ensure the greater safety of war survivors during conflict and its aftermath. This also requires an *'ethic of care'* committed to the delivery of health and trauma related service to survivors, and vocational and educational programmes that are culturally sensitive and appropriate to support reintegration into their families and communities. According to Leatherman, the emphasis of programmes should be on the deconstruction of aggressive, militarised, and hegemonic masculinities and to reconstruct them in positive socio-cultural terms. As gender is not biological, but socially constructed, there is, as she states, hope for social change. Unfortunately, she does not elaborate on how to transform those ideas into programmes.

The book ends with a bonus of selected readings. Leatherman guides us to sources that allow us to explore in depth concepts developed in her book. For every chapter she has selected the most interesting and often gripping readings.

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