

# *Sexual Violence and Armed Conflict* by Janie L. Leatherman

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In May 2011, a United Nations report was released which detailed the shocking reality of rape and sexual violence faced by women during the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In her 2011 book, *Sexual Violence and Armed Conflict*, Janie Leatherman – Director of International Studies and Professor of Politics at Fairfield University – therefore discusses a pertinent issue. The work is both timely and well researched. The main aim is to end the silence on discussing sexual violence in armed conflict. In her view, only by discussing the power politics that defines this behaviour (behaviour the author consistently argues is a result of the patriarchal society we live in) can attitudes change. The book would be a useful tool for students of international politics, particularly those focussing on violence and war, as well as researchers and those working directly in the field.

The first chapter discusses her motivation for writing the book, as well as giving an overview of the history of sexual violence and outlining the three theoretical positions that are used to analyse sexual violence in conflict. These positions are essentialism, structuralism and social constructivism. In Leatherman's view, an essentialist would 'treat sexual violence as an inevitable by-product of war' (p.13), a structuralist 'sees sexual violence through the structure therefore some women are more likely to be victims of it than others' (p.15) and, finally, social constructivists look at how 'actions

are shaped and reproduced' (p.17). The second chapter considers the dilemma of sexual violence in conflict and includes an interesting section on the norms of war. The third chapter discusses the dangers faced at the beginning of conflict when the power plays begin and the tone of the conflict is worked out. The fourth chapter examines safe space and the lack thereof in conflict areas. The fifth chapter looks at the global political economy and the sixth and final chapter concludes the arguments that have been made, namely that sexual violence in war and peace is the ultimate taboo and that hegemonic masculinity is the primary reason for sexual violence in conflict. The key message is that the violation of women in this sense is a form of power politics.

The theoretical frame of the book is feminism and the feminist undertones form a bias in the work; femininity is never discussed in a universal way but masculinity often is and this has an effect on the power of Leatherman's argument. The universal tone used amounts to accusing all men of being capable of performing sexual violence in the context of conflict. This view is partially tempered by the author's full and frank discussion of the reasons why all men might be able to fall into this trap. The section on hyper-masculinity in chapter five is particularly useful and insightful. While it is a key argument, its placement near the end of the book is a mistake. Leatherman has used a universal tone throughout the book without discussion and when it is discussed it appears laboured and comes too late to erase the criticism that the universality of behaviour argument has evoked.

The structure of the book, however, on the whole can be praised as it is clear and moves from issue to issue seamlessly. The author has used real, often extreme, examples and this heightens her

ability to persuade us that this subject needs to be addressed. An argument can be made that using extreme and harrowing examples is gratuitous; one example in particular goes into shocking detail in order to relay the violence that some women have faced and might be considered gratuitous were it not for the subject matter of the book. In order to shine a light on the issue, arguably distressing cases do need to be detailed, however, there is a fine line between making the reader feel compassion and making the reader feel like they have been manipulated. This is a line that Leatherman comes close to crossing on a number of occasions. In another section in chapter two she talks about the victims, describing that 'even the pregnant women were not spared' (p.47) and then a couple of pages later that 'elderly rape is all the more reprehensible' (p.51). The lexical choices of 'spared' and 'reprehensible' give a value judgement as if adding different levels of rape. What excuses it from trying to manipulate the reader is the sincerity with which the author writes and the tone throughout the book. This issue is one of the last taboos in international politics. Her tone makes us understand that the examples need to make for hideous reading in order to mobilise action and end the silence.

The scale of the work is broad and brings together stories from a number of wars and this breadth is important. Nevertheless, the book lacks a full discussion on women who commit sexual violence in armed conflict. These women are touched on but are never addressed in a universal sense (that it would be possible for all women to commit acts of sexual violence if the situation presented itself) unlike men who commit such violence. Her argument is that women who perform these acts are working against their defined gender roles whereas men are socialised into using sexual crimes as a

way of gaining power. The central claim of the work is that power is a key reason why sexual violence is committed, but dismissing the women who commit these acts removes what would be a very interesting discussion on the subversion of power roles. That men can be victims of sexual violence in conflict both inflicted by women and other men is also touched on and then overlooked. It is true that the vast majority of people affected by sexual violence in armed conflict are women but Leatherman has at times used extraordinary examples that happen to a minority of women to make her point. The dismissal of the 'other' minority acts of violence is therefore a strong criticism of the book and clearly an area that needs more study.

The quote that begins the penultimate chapter (chapter five) is the following,

Sexual violence in armed conflict is a multifaceted and complex criminal act. Trying to explain why it happens seems like answering a bottomless question. There is simply no one simple, definitive explanation for sexual violence in warfare [...] ( p.116)

This accurately describes the modus operandi of this book. It has tried to answer a bottomless question, and while there are some aspects that have been overlooked, it is still an impressive piece of work. It is well researched, evidenced by the 35 pages of notes and six pages of further reading. The issue of sexual violence in war has been described by the author and others as the silent issue. This book deserves its position as the megaphone helping those working in the field to give it its voice.