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A GLOBAL HISTORY OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

PROFESSOR JOANNA BOURKE

Sexual violence: it is a difficult subject to talk about. There is something frightening, even distasteful, about speaking of it. It is a subject I never thought I would broach – until one day, sitting in an American library working on the history of killing, I came across an interview of an ex-soldier who had served during the Vietnam War. Unlike other accounts I had read in which sexual violence was mentioned, this was different – because he admitted participating in the violence (while most claim that others raped, but not themselves). But even in this account, the victim was silenced.

He never knew her name. Neither he, nor his comrades, would have been interested in such niceties. The only relevant considerations were that she was Vietnamese and a virgin. “Guys are taking turns screwing her”, he recalled, adding, “It was like an animal pack. Nobody was turning their back or nothing. We just stood in line and we screwed her”. While this soldier was “taking her body by force”, his heavily armed comrades stood and watched. Then, suddenly, unexpectedly, the unnamed woman turned toward him, “Why are you doing this to me?”, she said in English: “Hey... why are you doing this to me?” I could not get her words out of my head: “Why are **you** doing this to **me**?” Rape: not as a metaphor for the ruin of a city (“The Rape of Nanking”) or nation (“The Rape of Belgium” or “The Rape of Kuwait”), but the embodied violation of another individual. As in Jean Améry’s description of being tortured, while the physical agony faded away, the realization that the others present were impervious to one’s own suffering never waned. This was what most destroyed “trust in the world”: “Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world”, Améry concluded.

This destruction of “trust in the world” is compounded by the fact that those who experience sexual violence – and I am going deliberately to call them “victims” as opposed to “survivors”, if only to remind ourselves that not all are survivors – are typically unheard. In fact, it is worse: their words are disparaged, silenced, and suppressed.

Attempting to write a global history of sexual violence, there is a further problem: a global history of any phenomenon is necessarily reductive. When the timeframe extends over two centuries (the nineteenth century to the present), there is also a risk of emphasising similarities over differences. This must be resisted. The abducted peasant women of Ireland or central Europe have little in common with date-raped cheerleaders in America. The girls and women violated by Red Army soldiers in 1945 cannot reliably be compared to women who acquiesce to sexual intercourse with their husbands as the “easier option”. It matters if you are a boy or man. It makes a difference if the attacker wields a machete or waves an unsigned employment contract. Terror is always local; to universalise it is to write history as a morality tale – it removes the specificities of an individual’s history. It is to forget that Vietnamese woman’s question: “Why are **you** doing this to **me**?”

What do we find when we look historically and globally at sexual violence. The first notable thing is the remarkable fluidity of what is called “sexual violence”. Legal commentators sometimes base their definitions on lack of explicit consent to sexual intercourse; others require evidence of extreme physical coercion. In some countries, and during certain periods of history, only girls and women can be raped and there has to be proof of penile penetration of a vagina as well as evidence of emission of semen. Elsewhere, the gender of both victims and perpetrators are irrelevant and a wider range of acts is accepted as abusive. The age at which a person can



consent to sexual intercourse has also fluctuated. In England, for example, the age of consent was raised from 12 to 13 in 1875, then, scarcely ten years later, to 16 years. Having sexual intercourse with girls below those ages was considered to be violent “by definition”. In the US, the age of consent in different states ranges from as young as 10 in Mississippi and Alabama and as high as 18 in Kansas and Wyoming. Throughout the globe, variations were linked to ideas about the onset of puberty, different expectations of childhood, shifting views about the innocence (or otherwise) of infants and youth, and the strength of feminism.

The term “sexual violence” draws attention to two problematic words: “sex” and “violence”. Both concepts are unstable. Both have a history. For many people and for much of history, emphasis has been placed on the “sexual” nature of sexual violence: it was a heinous crime because it attacked the purity, decency, and honour of girls and women. By extension, it violated their families and communities as well.

From the late 1960s onwards, however, many feminists attempted to disrupt this weighting, stressing instead the “violent” part of sexual violence. Susan Brownmiller’s Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape (1975), and Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics (1969) contested assumptions that rape has a libidinal component for perpetrators. Other feminists (including Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin) contended that distinguishing male sexuality from aggression was itself misguided because violence is an integral part of masculine desire. As MacKinnon put it,

Rape is not less sexual for being violent. To the extent that coercion has become integral to male sexuality, rape may even be sexual to the degree that, and because, it is violent.

As she trenchantly asked, “if it’s violence not sex why didn’t he just hit her?”

The difficulties in assessing the extent of sexual violence are legion. We do not know how many people perpetrated acts of sexual violence; we do not know how many were victims. In Britain, the best evidence suggests that around 80 per cent of rapes are never reported to the authorities in the first place. Perpetrators generally avoid leaving incriminating evidence. They know that what they are doing is wrong. They often beg victims not to tell anyone. They feel embarrassed, ashamed, and guilty. Many seek solace in alcohol, drugs, and other numbing substances. Such responses suggest that sexual violence is not a valued masculine trait, but its opposite.

What we do know is that, throughout the world in the past two centuries, victims and witnesses are reluctant to come forward. For victims, even retelling their experiences could resurrect painful memories. They know that reporting sexual assault will be an ordeal. They dread having to undergo humiliating police questioning (which often resemble interrogations) and uncomfortable genital examinations. They fear publicity and the likelihood of retaliation. Certain types of victims are routinely discriminated against. Prostitutes, peddlers, domestic workers, and immigrant groups are generally correct when they believe that their complaints will be ignored. Silence might in fact be the preferred option for victims keen not to humiliate their own communities. The most extreme example is Jewish women who had been sexually abused by fellow prisoners (such as Kapos) in labour and extermination camps were often speechless in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

There may be good reasons to be silent. It is important to observe that the insistence on the need to “speak trauma” is very much a Western construct: the “trauma script” is part of the “globalization of Western theory of the mind/psychology”. The idea that victims must “break the silence”, as “the necessary route to recovery or as a privileged political tactic” is not a universal. “Survival itself sometimes necessitates a refusal to recount or even a refusal to disclose and deal with the assault or abuse”? Disclosure could be more emotionally, financially, and physically damning to victims of atrocity than silence. As feminist scholars Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray argue, “the coercive stance that one must tell, must join a support group, or must go into therapy is justly deserving of the critique Foucault offers of the way in which the demand to speak involves dominating power and an imperialist theoretical structure.” This is, of course, doubly the case when it is an expert, therapist, or “well-meaning” outsider who demands of the survivor that she speak. In other words, confessional discourse requires the adoption and framing of the traumatic experience along rigid lines shaped by Anglo-American and European legal doctrines and moralistic codes, which may not be in keeping with an individual’s process of self-creation.



In times of armed conflict, the relative silence of rape victims might also be due to the fact that it was simply one of many vicious assaults on their bodies and minds – and perhaps not the worst. A stark example of this can be seen in Rwanda. Between the second week of April and the third week of May 1994, mass rape was routine (80 per cent were raped), but it occurred in a context where between 5 and 10 percent of the country's population was killed. Survival took place against great odds. In genocidal situations, the silence of victims and their communities could be an important way of protecting their dignity and honour, as well as promoting peaceful future relations between divided communities.

There is also the problem of language. In Kinyarwanda, for example, the word used to refer to sexual violence was “kubohoza”, meaning “to help liberate”. As a Rwandan court interpreter explained,

In my culture you don't say the words for genitalia. But in court you have to. It is a shock for interpreters, as well as witnesses. And graphic descriptions of rape are an ordeal for a woman. And the interpreter may be a woman too.

Crucially, notions of honour gagged victims: their violation shamed not only themselves, but also their family and even community. Victims struggle to find words for their suffering. In many cultures (such as Mexico in the nineteenth century), they faced assumptions that only shameless women would talk publicly about sexual matters.

During inter-ethnic conflicts, sexual violence has been adopted as a weapon of war precisely because it could be experienced as a form of murder. In more recent times, the trigger-point for such debates was wartime sexual violence during the 1991-99 conflict in the former Yugoslavia, in the heart of Europe. Indeed, debates about genocidal sexual violence continue to be inflected through that war. Mass rapes took place on all sides, but systematic and widespread violations were perpetrated by Serbian forces against Muslim women, Catholics, and Croats. According to some estimates, nearly 20,000 women were raped. Women and girls were routinely violated in their homes; they were incarcerated in detention camps established explicitly for the purpose of rape; they were forced into prostitution; and at rape camps like the one at Foča they were deliberately impregnated, then forced to bring the foetus to term and give birth. According to some commentators, forced impregnation was nothing less than the “occupation” of women's wombs.

But should the violence be considered as “ethnic cleansing” by Serbian forces? There is general agreement that the mass rapes were part of an attempt to clear territory of Bosnian Muslims and Croats, with the intention of destroying their cultures. But should widespread, systematic rapes conducted by Serbian forces be regarded as genocidal or were they a dramatic extension of “everyday rape”? Was there a risk of ignoring the rapes carried out by non-Serbs? Notably, the first time that the ICTY judged rape to constitute a grave breach of international humanitarian law (rather than a breach of the Geneva Convention) concerned a Croat defendant (Furundžija) while the second prosecution involved a Bosnian Muslim defendant who raped Serbian women at Čelebići (Foča). Did some victims' suffering count for more than others?

An important plank in the argument that the Serbian rape campaigns were genocidal lay in the deliberate impregnation of women who were then forced to give birth to what the rapists claimed would be “little Chetniks”. In other words, they assumed that infants born of rape would be Serbian. This is deeply problematical, and not solely for obvious physiological reasons. This version of the genocidal argument accepts the ideology of the rapist that ethnicity is biological and paternal: that is, infants born of rape belong to the father. As legal expert Karen Engle put it, the belief that “if a Muslim egg were inseminated with a Serbian sperm, a Serbian child would ensure”, too often went unchallenged. This socially constructed notion of biology, favouring the male, was particularly stark in the context of Bosnia where there is little to differentiate Bosnian Muslims and Serbs genetically and where, prior to the war, around one-third of marriages in the region were inter-group.

There are also practical reasons why the extent of violence is unknown. Most brutally, victims simply disappeared: they were murdered or committed suicide. Those able to speak were unrepresentative: they were alive and were more likely to be educated, articulate and to possess skills (medical knowledge, for example) that were valued by their tormentors. At an even more basic level, victims found that there were often no authorities



to which the crime could be reported. The women who worked as sex slaves in the inafu from the late-1930s faced Chinese authorities who were resistant to accusations, Japanese governments who were indifferent to their plight, and an apathetic international community. It took sixty years before their voices could be heard.

In wartime, in particular, accounts of rape projected powerful messages about national identity and ideology. As a result, censorship was rife. In countries with formidable legal controls (as in North Korea) there might be no mechanisms for attracting widespread public attention. In the Soviet Union, East Germany, and Hungary following the Second World War, it was only after the collapse of Communism that many people felt able to talk about what they had done or experienced. Tight controls over the press and mass media had ensured that their stories could not be told. In many communist states, governments had promoted an idealised version of history in which the Red Army liberated (rather than victimized) populations. When rape was discussed – as in Hungary – it was often as a political attack on communism. The perpetrators might be the government.

Court records are equally unhelpful in quantifying abuse. Well into the twentieth century, it was common for rape accusations in the US, Europe, and South American nations to be treated as “seduction”, with the woman cajoled into marrying her abuser. In New York City between 1896 and 1946, 1 in every 4 prosecutions included attempts to resolve the case through marriage. Rape was frequently viewed as a private attack on a woman’s honour rather than a public crime. This was the case in much of southern Europe as well as Britain through much of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century. This could lead to cases in which fathers or husbands could drop charges against alleged rapists, irrespective of the wishes of victims.

Even if all these deterrents to reporting and pursuing a rape allegation could be overcome, there was still a further ordeal for victims of sexual violence: the court case. It is hardly surprising that this has often been called a “second assault”. Accusers generally have to provide irrefutable physical evidence of having vigorously resisted in order to be believed.

If the court case was not proven beyond doubt, rape accusations could rebound dramatically on the woman herself. Unsuccessful complainants in Darfur could be charged with zina or adultery, which is punishable with imprisonment or a public whipping. The Hudood Ordinances in Pakistan included rape under zina (adultery/fornication) offences. If a prosecution fails, the accuser can be treated as having confessed to adultery, and punished by public lashings or even stoning to death.

Despite the formidable challenges in quantifying the extent of sexual violence, there is no doubt that it has blighted the lives of billions of women in the past and today. In some jurisdictions (such as South Africa), the extent of rape has been called an “unacknowledged civil war”. It has been a political stratagem (for instance, against followers of Aristide in Haiti or supporters of Benazir Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party in Pakistan), a weapon wielded by one ethnic group against another (the Chinese in Indonesia, the Ogoni in Nigeria, and the Tutsis in Rwanda), a way of collecting information during interrogation (its function for Peru’s counter-insurgency forces), and a way of wreaking religious vengeance (against Muslims and Croats in the former Yugoslavia, as well as against Muslims in India and Myanmar).

It is important to note that the destructive effect of sexual violence actually preceded any attack. The fear of rape constrained women’s movements and encouraged parents to marry their daughters at very young ages in the belief that husbands might provide some kind of protection.

In other circumstances, victims of sexual violence were not even present at the moment of violation. Children born of rape were stamped with a formidable stigma, often for life. After the First World War, French children born of rape by German troops were branded “enfants du barbare”. After the conflict in Vietnam, infants born as the result of American abuse were “children of the dust”. In Bosnia, they were “children of hate” while in Kosovo they were “children of shame”. Rwandan “children of bad memories” were given names such as “Little Killers”, “The Intruder” and “I Am at a Loss”.

For the immediate victims – the sexually violated girls, women, boys, and men – sexual violence was a scourge that caused suffering for years or decades after the attack. The psychological harms are atrocious. They include sleep disturbances, eating disorders, flashbacks, headaches, blackouts, difficulties walking, and hyper-vigilance.



In those cases where mass rapes took place in public places, victims often felt bitter towards their own communities for failing to protect them.

They were also often left with devastating physical injuries, not only to their sexual organs but over their entire bodies as well. The victims' subsequent incapacity to do heavy work or bear children reduced their "value" to their families and communities as well as rendering them unmarriageable. During the Rwandan genocide, up to 70 per cent of raped women contracted HIV.

In order to understand these global legacies of sexual violence, we need to interrogate centuries of cognitive distortions about gender, sexuality, and violence. Some of these myths concern ideas about the female body and that slippery concept of "consent".

Women have often been viewed as culpable for attacks made upon them. Even the mass rapes carried out by the Red Army as they made their way through Eastern Europe were presented in this way. Boris Slutsky was a poet who served as a politruk of a Red Army infantry platoon between 1941 and 1945. In his memoir, entitled Things that Happened, he claimed that

Hungarian women loved the Russians in their turn, and along with the dark fear that parted the knees of matrons and mothers of families, there was also the affectionate nature of young women and the desperate tenderness of the women soldiers, who gave themselves to the men who had killed their husbands.

It is routine for aggressors to state that their victims were seductive, and therefore at fault for the cruelty inflicted upon them. Husbands, boyfriends, and close acquaintances might get "carried away", but women wanted "it" anyway. American and European psychiatrists routinely christened rape a "victim-precipitated" crime. As forensic psychiatrist Seymour Halleck put it in 1972, the rape victim "frequently" played

as large a role in precipitating the offense as the offender. Many rapes, particularly where the victim is known to the offender, might never have taken place had the "victim" not been both flirtatious and ambivalent as to her desire for a sexual experience.

In an attempt to normalize abuse, sexually violent men might even carry out a "parody of domestic interaction" in its aftermath, sipping tea with their victims afterwards, for example, or wishing them a polite "good night".

In the early nineteenth century and earlier, a woman's body was frequently believed to betray her consent to sexual intercourse. Pregnancy after a forced sexual encounter was given as evidence that she must have been a willing participant – based on the idea that to get pregnant, a woman has to have had an orgasm. Although stated less obliquely, this myth reappears in the twenty-first century. In August 2012, for example, Missouri Republican Todd Akin insisted that pregnancy as a result of rape was "really rare". He claimed that "If it's a legitimate rape [sic], the female body has ways of trying to shut the whole thing down". Sharron Angle even advised women who became pregnant as a result of rape or incest to make "a lemon situation into lemonade".

The notion that "honour is greater than death" has also been disastrous for victims of sexual assault. In British jurisprudence textbooks, for example, it was routine to read that it is "impossible to sheath a sword into a vibrating scabbard". In other words, "true" resistance is always effective. The penis is coded as a weapon; the vagina is its passive receptacle, which merely by "vibrating" could ward off attack. There is another way of saying this: any women who failed to fight off an attack on her virtue could be assumed to have acquiesced or even consented. Of course, concessions were made when the victim was a delicate, middle- or upper-class woman. Sturdy, working-class women had no excuses: they were, effectively, un-rapeable.

Again, lest this bizarre claim be seen as something relegated to distant, less civilized times, it was echoed by members of Italy's Supreme Court in 1999. The court overturned a rape conviction on the grounds that the victim was wearing blue jeans at the time of the attack. The Justices reasoned that "it is impossible to take off jeans... without the active cooperation of the person wearing them". Only a massive protest, including by



female parliamentarians wearing jeans and holding placards reading “Jeans: An Alibi for Rape”, eventually led to their ruling being overturned – but not until 2008.

War also undercuts the salience of “consent”. “Volunteering” for sex work was a survival strategy. In the words of a woman speaking of her experiences during the Holocaust,

Well, I refused to be consumed and vanish like a cloud. I wanted to return to my house. I’m eighteen years old – I don’t want to die.... Everyone in the lager goes around picking up leftovers from the garbage. They suck bones other people spit out – and I’m supposed to refuse life because it’s offered on a dirty plate?

In other words, when food, shelter, and life itself depends upon sexual relations, the liberal emphasis on free and informed consent in deciding issues of rape is a charade.

There is also the problem of gender. Although I have used the male pronoun to refer to sexual predators, the claim that the rapist is inescapably male is actually unsupportable. Women, too, can be guilty of sexual violence. As feminist theorist Sharon Marcus perceptively observed,

taking male violence or female vulnerability as the first and last instances in any explanation of rape is to make the identities of rapist and raped pre-exist the rape itself.

In recent years, the attention paid to female involvement in sexual attacks has led one feminist commentator to dub female-on-male rape one of the great “rape myths”. She is partly right. Only 1 per cent of rapists in prison are female, although the proportion of female perpetrators involved in sexual violence against children is not insubstantial. The exaggerated presence of female perpetrators in civilian contexts is a construction of the media. Female perpetrators make good “newspaper copy”.

However, female violence can be extreme during war, such as in Liberia and Rwanda. During the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 41 per cent of female rape victims and 10 per cent of male victims claimed to have been victimized by a woman.

We should not be surprised by the presence of sexually violent women in armed conflicts. Nationalist and ethnic ideologies exerted a formidable power over these women, trumping female solidarity. Many female perpetrators had been subject to extreme violence, even rape, themselves. Often their attackers had been their own comrades. Many female-soldiers also hoped that their cooperation in abusing other women would mean that their male comrades would spare them similar insults.

Male victims face serious problems in reporting. They often ejaculate – which is assumed to mean compliance. Male victims often fear that being attacked in a sexual way is emasculating. Victims with a heterosexual orientation worry that they might be labelled homosexual or lesbian: perhaps they “unconsciously wanted it”. In other words, homophobia is a powerful disincentive to reporting both male-on-male and female-on-female abuse. Protesting against this kind of violence is difficult for all members of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities. Reporting sexual assault – “washing our dirty linen in public” – provokes alarm within LGBT communities that they will be further stigmatised. After all, as late as 1973, the American Psychiatric Association classified homosexuality as a disorder, as did the World Health Organization until 1992. Today, 78 countries criminalize sexual activity by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex people. Such attitudes make reporting sexual attacks practically impossible.

In other instances, some kinds of forced sex are not “wrong” at all. The most egregious example is rape within marriage. In the UK, the “marital rape exemption” was not abolished until 1992: in countries like Greece, it took until 2006. In countries where men pay large dowries to the families of their brides (as in countries as different as Ireland, Mexico, and Ghana), there is the assumption that they have “bought” their wives and therefore have a right to complete authority.



Sexually violent men routinely position themselves as “also victims” in order to elicit sympathy and absolve themselves of responsibility. These men and their defenders frequently present the male sex drive as an irrepressible force: denied an “outlet”, it simply cannot be contained. For other commentators, excuses such as inner city poverty, gang membership, discrimination, racism, alcohol and substance abuse, dysfunctional families, peer pressure, ignorance, and a “crisis of masculinity” are also used to explain why some men rape, often with little discussion why these environmental pressures would excuse attacking women who were often enduring similarly harsh lives. This is not to argue that such environmental pressures do not elicit rage and aggression – they do – but they also do not exclude more constructive responses to unhappiness.

“Perpetrator-victimhood” arguments appear most frequently in the brutalizing context of combat. The mass rapes carried out by Red Army soldiers as they moved through Germany at the end of the Second World War were co-opted in the 1990s by revisionist historians attempting to re-position the German people as victims (as opposed to perpetrators). Helke Sander (who, in 1992, produced a film about the rape of German women by Allied forces, entitled Liberators Take Liberties: War, Rapes, Children was accused of transforming German women into victims of the war rather than active participants in the atrocities of Nazism. The mass rape of German women was translated into a story whereby Germans were violated by a brutal Soviet culture.

It was a refrain often heard during the Winter Soldiers’ Investigation in 1971 when 109 American veterans testified about war crimes (including rape) that they had committed during the conflict in Vietnam. These GIs provided a formidable list of the reasons why they acted in atrocious ways, including racism, peer pressure, fear of being punished by their comrades or senior officers, environmental confusion, retaliation and revenge, lack of training, failures in military leadership, and so on. There were so many “stressors” listed that sexual atrocities quickly became over-determined. They also effaced the victims.

The veterans at the Winter Soldiers’ Investigation repeatedly made claims such as “none of you people who have ever been involved, ever let this happen to YOU... don’t ever let your government do this to you”. The true victims (the raped, tortured, and killed) were effectively effaced; the “real victims” are assumed to be the American soldiers – victims of US government policy.

This tendency is most striking during armed conflict. After all, war spectacularly increases the number of men and women willing and able to inflict sexual cruelty. It becomes an intensely public display of brutality; it could even be valorised as a patriotic act and one that facilitated emotional bonding between perpetrators. From the late 1930s, for example, rape and enforced prostitution was a feature of the Japanese invasion of China. In Nanjing, for example, over 20,000 women were raped in 1937 alone. Shirō Azuma participated in this atrocity. He recalled that

While the women were f*****, they were considered human, but when we killed them, they were just pigs. We felt no shame about it. No guilt.

Chillingly, he noted that they killed the victims because “Otherwise, we wouldn’t have been able to sleep at night”.

The 1937 mass rapes in Nanjing were early examples of what was going to take place (to varying degrees) in all theatres of war. Every invading army during the Second World War proved to be rapacious. In France and Germany towards the end of that war American troops raped between 14,000 and 17,000 women. Notorious mass rapes took place in Germany, Russia, Korea, China, Japan, Italy, and the Philippines. Despite this, international law was sluggish in responding. The war crimes trials in Nuremberg ignored rape and other gender-based crimes. The International Military Tribunal for the Far East did prosecute rape, but as “failure to respect family honour and rights”, rather than crime against the women themselves.

What can be done?

Throughout the last two centuries, feminists, politicians, lawmakers, police, and community activists – not to mention victims themselves, and they may also be feminists, politicians, lawmakers, and so on – have debated how sexual violence can be diminished, if not eradicated. Many attempts are unhelpful, if not ridiculous. Victim



blaming – such as suggestions that women police their own behaviour, upgrade their security, and act modestly – is common. Too many anti-rape initiatives warn women to avoid “dark alleys” and “short skirts”. Advising girls and women to “stay at home” is equally ignorant: domestic spheres are crowded with abusers and in most countries in the world familial as well as individual survival depends upon female labour in the fields, forests, and marketplaces.

Other proposals are sensible but so particularized to have minimal effect outside the immediate context. This includes attempts by individual women to seek out ways to publically humiliate their attackers. In nineteenth century England, for instance, known sexual abusers might be paraded around the village to local jeers; the windows of their homes, broken; their credit, rejected at the market. Today, the Pink Sari Gang is the world’s largest female vigilante group, with over 20,000 members. Local justice might be gratifyingly retributive, but would never change a culture of sexualised violence.

Lawyers believe in better laws; international relations experts place their faith in international agreements. Is the solution less pornography or better pornography? Do we need a return to family values or sexual liberation? In the late twentieth century, support for rape crisis centres grew, although they were chronically under-funded.

One of the most debilitating myths for those of us seeking to forge more peaceful worlds is the assertion that sexual violence is inevitable. But rape is not “about” male biology or an evolutionary inheritance; it varies greatly over geographical space and historical time, as I argue in Rape: A History from the 1860s to the Present (2007). Even in armed conflicts, there are wide variations in the nature and degree of sexual violence – with some conflicts experiencing very little. Rape was prevalent on a vast scale in Punjab in 1947, for instance, but not during the communal violence of the 1980s and 1990s. Although rape is high during what international scholar Mary Kaldor has called “new wars” – that is, those that are counter-insurgent and where the lines between armed forces and organised crime are blurred – it is low in armed groups that possess a strong degree of internal discipline and ideological values. Clearly, discourses favourable to rape are not present in all cultures. Cultures with sexual equality, high levels of female economic power, and low levels of armed conflict tend to have relatively low levels of rape. Sexual abusers learn how to act as sexual abusers within specific historical communities. Remember the women with whom I began this talk: “Why are you doing this to me?”, she asked, insisting on historical specificities, instead of an ahistorical narrative based on supposedly biological and psychological constants. We need to pay attention to her question. Sexual violence and the fear of violation are embedded in women’s lives. This is not because of any innate tendency in men; it is not only because of socialisation. Rape thrives in situations of structural inequality. Obviously, there is an urgent need to reform the legal system so that more rapists are identified, convicted, and punished for their crimes. But, in the final analysis, political attempts to reduce and finally eliminate sexual aggression must start with the main perpetrators. Rape is a crisis of manliness; its eradication is a matter for men – for a radically different conception of agency and masculinity. Rape is infused through and through with political meaning and norms about gender performances. This is why any diminution of sexual violence will require the political, ideological, and discursive labour of every global citizen.

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