



# Sexualized war violence. Knowledge construction and knowledge gaps



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 17 June 2014  
 Received in revised form 13 July 2015  
 Accepted 15 July 2015  
 Available online 23 July 2015

### Keywords:

Sexual/ized war violence  
 War rape  
 Mass atrocities  
 Perpetrators  
 Supranational criminology

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative literature review provides an overview of the proliferating research field that research on sexualized war violence has become. The article critically reviews some of the main theories on sexualized war violence in light of five basic and interrelated dimensions: terminology and conceptualizations, etiological approaches, disciplinary grounding, contextual emphasis, and, lastly, the policy implications these dimensions imply. The review involves a discussion of critical contestations within the field and an outline of research gaps that still need exploration. Sexualized war violence is a research area that warrants criminological attention; it is an aim of this article to suggest possible theoretical and empirical directions that such inquiries may take.

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## 1. Introduction

Only a few decades ago, sexualized war violence was underreported and under analyzed. It was considered an inevitable consequence of warfare, and thus irrelevant for analyses of war and international politics. Today, sexualized war violence is a vast and growing field of research, involving multiple disciplines. It is also an increasingly important concern for international security politics (e.g., Kerry & Hague, 2014). From a marginalized position in the wider fields of research on peace, conflict, and international relations, sexualized war violence is today

seen as an indispensable part of academic presentations and analyses of war and peace processes. Taking the increased criminological attention to international crimes into account, the purpose of this article is twofold: (1) to critically structure and assess the status of research on sexual war violence to better understand how we theorize the phenomena that this term captures and (2) to introduce this particular area of atrocity crimes research to internationally oriented criminologists and scholars from adjacent fields. Although it is not within the scope of this article to conduct empirical analysis, it can be read as an invitation to further criminological inquiry into both the theoretical and empirical phenomena that sexualized war violence comprise.

As a brief outline of the pages to come, I will start by locating research on sexualized war violence within the emerging subfield of criminology referred to as supranational or international criminology.

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I will then review main theorizations on sexualized war violence in light of five basic and interrelated dimensions: terminology and conceptualizations, etiological approaches, disciplinary grounding, contextual emphasis, and, lastly, the policy implications that a given research agenda implies or suggests. This review aims to provide the reader with an overview of the field, a discussion of critical contestations therein and an outline of research gaps that still needs exploration.

### 1.1. Locating sexual war violence research within a criminological tradition

Over the last decade, supranational and international criminology research that focus on atrocity crimes<sup>1</sup> and international criminal prosecution is emerging as a criminological subfield in its own right (e.g., Hagan, Raymond-Richmond, & Parker, 2005; Karstedt, 2012; Maier-Katkin, Mears, & Bernard, 2009; Smeulders & Grünfeld, 2011; Smeulders & Haveman, 2008). Despite this increased criminological focus on international conflict related crimes, sexualized war violence is only to a limited extent addressed in these efforts. In general, criminological studies of mass violence in conflict situations do not analytically differentiate between the repertoires of violence that may constitute the aggregated crime they address. When sexualized war violence is included in criminological research on war crimes, authors tend not to draw on the established research field that sexualized war violence research has become. These criminological inquiries tend not to explain the explicit sexualized expression of the violence or incorporate a gender perspective to understand sexualized war violence as such (for noticeable exceptions, see Ericsson, 2011; Mullins, 2009a), or war crimes more generally (Smeulders & Hoex, 2010). On the other hand, research on sexualized war violence is delimited by a thematic focus across several disciplines<sup>2</sup>—but tends not to draw on criminological thinking on crime, engagement in criminal behavior, and crime control in its attempt to understand and analyze the causes and consequences of this particular form of war violence. Sexualized war violence research tends to focus exclusively on this particular form of violence and primarily, often unilaterally, analyze it from a gendered perspective. Hence, the fields of international/supranational criminology on one hand and sexualized war violence research on the other constitute and develop as separate scholarships. I hold that a combination of perspectives, and a scholarly interaction and debate between these two fields, offer both with a potential for mutual benefits and an increased understanding of the social phenomena in question (Houge, 2014). The expanding national and universal criminalization of sexual war violence offenses make this research field particularly relevant for criminological inquiry, based on the discipline's tradition of critical studies of criminalization processes, control measures, related correctional and social services, as well as its focus on victimology. The potential of a criminological gender research focus on atrocity crimes generally and sexual war violence more specifically can add to our current understanding of the phenomena under study, the legal strategies applied in this particular field, and critically assess perpetrator and victim constructions, perspectives and re-presentations, in the legal system, in the overall public on local, national and international levels, and, not least, in scholarly publications on this thematic (Houge, Lohne, & Skilbrei, 2015).

## 2. Theorizations on sexualized war violence

Theories on sexualized war violence differ in terms of chosen terminology and conceptualizations, etiological weighting, ideological

<sup>1</sup> "Atrocity crimes" here refers to violence that falls under the umbrella of core crimes under international law: war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity (see Scheffer, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> As a cross-disciplinary field of research sexual war violence research used to be dominated by gender researchers, but is currently dominated by political scientists. See section on ideological and disciplinary grounding below.

grounding, contextual emphasis, and the policy implications that different theorizations ask for. The continuums of perspectives that each of these dimensions encompass reflect both the accumulation of knowledge that research build on through time and different epistemological horizons or political choices researchers make as they enter and navigate this field.

While this review provides a general overview, it cannot capture all there is to say about research on sexual war violence, or all that we know and have learned about the phenomena under study<sup>3,4</sup> Some of the texts I refer to are included because they are groundbreaking, innovative or central in their contribution, while others are included because they illustrate trends and directions I wish to draw attention to. Combined, these publications reflect central theoretical differences and emphasize the influence of different methodological and theoretical choices in the research process for the outcome and applicability of research.

### 2.1. Terminology and conceptualization: from implicit vaginal rape to differentiated sexualized<sup>5</sup> violence

Sexual war violence research has typically been led by feminist researchers working on women's issues with a primary focus on women as the silenced victims of men's violence. In much of this writing on sexualized war violence, sexual violence as a term has been used interchangeably with rape. Rape, in turn, has implied vaginal rape, although it has not always been explicitly defined as such. Susan Brownmiller (1975), who is often credited for putting wartime sexual violence on both the feminist movement agenda and the overall research agenda with her ground-breaking book *Against our will*, is a case in point. She held that a victim of war rape "is chosen *not* because she is representative of the enemy, but precisely because she is a woman, and *therefore* an enemy" (1975: 62, emphasis in original). Similarly, in a much-cited and more recent article on "soldier-rapists," Lisa Price (2001: 214) contends that "[a]s in peacetime, rape in war is a gender-specific act, an expression of hatred of women *qua* women." Quoting Tompkins, Price continues by asserting that "[r]ape is (...) a one-way street where the risk factor is being female." In researchers' and activists' attempts at forcing much-needed attention to women's war experiences in international relations thinking and policy making, some have – in terms of sexual war violence – advocated not a gender perspective, but a de facto gender *exclusive* perspective.

Sexual war violence has been conceptualized as a war against women that only patriarchy and misogyny can explain (e.g., Stiglmeier, 1994a). An effect of these successful efforts at making many women's war

<sup>3</sup> In particular, I do not include research contributions that focus on the medical, material and psychosocial needs of and short term and long term consequences for victims in the aftermath of war (Bosmans, 2007; de Brouwer & Ka Hon Chu, 2009; Henry, 2010; Kaitesi, 2014; Kuwert, Klauer, Eichhorn, et al., 2010; Milillo, 2006; Rubio-Marín, 2012; Skjelsbæk, 2012b; Vranic, 1996). Nor do I address the situation of children born from wartime rape, which has received only limited attention by a few scholars—and comprise an important gap to explore in future research (see Carpenter, 2007, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> For readers interested in prevalence and statistics Cohen and Nordás (2014b) provide the most thorough examination of prevalence of sexual violence during conflict (covering all conflicts in the period of 1989–2009). Their article is based on the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict dataset, available at <http://www.sexualviolencedata.org> (Cohen and Nordás, 2014a). Also, the UN Secretary General publishes annual reports on sexual violence in armed conflict. (See UNSC S/2014/181 for the latest report.)

<sup>5</sup> I deliberately use "sexual violence" and "sexualized violence" interchangeably in this text. There is a tendency among both activists and scholars in this field to categorically claim that sexual violence in war is *never* about sex, but about power, terror and control (e.g., Jolie, 2014; Kuehnast, 2014). Although this can be true on a structural, macro level, it need not be the case on the micro level at which individual perpetrators act. By using the term "sexual violence", I intend to not underestimate the materiality of the violence as sexual, that is, the sexual intent, lust or desire that individual perpetrators might experience. By also applying "sexualized violence", the intention is to highlight that the offenses included might first and foremost be acts of violence or (violent) power, and that the sexualized expression of the violence is intended to serve an instrumental purpose beyond satisfying sexual desire, such as instigating humiliation or fear upon the victims and victims' communities.

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