

Queering explanatory frameworks for wartime sexual violence against men  
HELEEN TOUQUET AND PHILIPP SCHULZ\*

---

\* This article is part of the special section in the November 2020 issue of *International Affairs* on 'Sexual violence in the wrong(ed) bodies: moving beyond the gender binary in International Relations', guest-edited by Paula Drumond, Elizabeth Mesok and Marysia Zalewski.

Owing to increasing international political as well as scholarly attention, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) is now widely understood to be an integral aspect of warfare and armed conflict. Throughout the past two decades, a growing body of scholarship on the gendered dynamics of international relations and armed conflicts has directed its primary attention to wartime sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).<sup>1</sup> Within these debates, scholars have paid particular attention to the causes of and motivations for this type of violence.<sup>2</sup> The ensuing explanatory frameworks regarding the causes of SGBV are broadly framed along two distinct storylines—the ‘sexed story’, focused on opportunistic motives pertaining to the sexual gratification of individual perpetrators, and the ‘gendered story’, referring to sexual violence as strategic and systematic.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the ‘rape as a weapon of war’ narrative has gained increasing traction within both scholarship and policy-making circles. In recent years, however, these binary framings have come under increasing scrutiny from critical feminist IR scholars, who conceptualize sexual violence as a continuum,<sup>4</sup> and emphasize that a ‘phenomenon as complex as wartime rape may have any number of conceivable causes’.<sup>5</sup> Defying monocausal explanations, feminist literature outside IR has

---

<sup>1</sup> Dara Kay Cohen, Amelia Hoover Green and Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Wartime sexual violence: misconceptions, implications, and ways forward*, special report no. 323 (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, Feb. 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Dara Kay Cohen, *Rape during civil war* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); Elisabeth Jean Wood, ‘Variation in sexual violence during war’, *Politics and Society* 34: 3, 2006, pp. 307–42.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, *Sexual violence as a weapon of war? Perceptions, prescriptions, problems in the Congo and beyond* (London: Zed, 2013); Sara Davies and Jacquie True, ‘Reframing conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence: bringing gender analysis back in’, *Security Dialogue* 46: 6, 2015, pp. 495–512.

<sup>4</sup> Aisling Swaine, ‘Beyond strategic rape and between the public and private: violence against women in armed conflict’, *Human Rights Quarterly* 37: 3, 2015, pp. 755–86; see also Cynthia Cockburn, ‘Gender relations as causal in militarization and war’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12: 2, 2010, pp. 139–57.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen, *Rape during civil war*, p. 3.

shown since the 1970s that sex and power are intertwined, and that rape can be about power through sex, thereby avoiding the erasure of the sexual aspects of this violence.<sup>1</sup>

Yet while critical scholarship has contributed to dismantling the binary categorization of male perpetrators and female victims of SGBV,<sup>2</sup> emerging research on male survivors of sexual violence has to date been only insufficiently included in (and itself affected by) the conceptual and empirical development of explanatory models for SGBV.<sup>3</sup> In this article, we claim that the insight that wartime sexual violence can serve multiple functions and occur for multiple different reasons has not yet been incorporated into the emerging literature on conflict-related sexual violence against men.<sup>4</sup> Instead, such violence is predominantly framed in unitary terms as a systematic strategy aiming to subordinate male victims—often publicly and/or performatively.<sup>5</sup> Sara Meger claims, for example, that ‘male victims . . . are targeted for

---

<sup>1</sup> Liz Kelly, *Surviving sexual violence* (London: Polity, 1988); Maria Stern, ‘Courageously critiquing sexual violence: responding to the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize’, *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, pp. 1235–50.

<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *The curious feminist: searching for women in a new age of empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Laura Sjoberg, *Women as wartime rapists: beyond sensation and stereotyping* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> For examples of this emerging research, see Chris Dolan, ‘Victims who are men’, in Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Naomi Cahn and Dina Haynes, eds, *The Oxford handbook of gender and conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Philipp Schulz, ‘Displacement from gendered personhood: sexual violence and masculinities in northern Uganda’, *International Affairs* 94: 5, Sept. 2018, pp. 1101–15; Heleen Touquet and Philipp Schulz, ‘Navigating vulnerabilities and masculinities - how gendered contexts shape the agency of male sexual violence survivors’, *Security Dialogue* (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> See Heleen Touquet and Ellen Gorris, ‘Out of the shadows? The inclusion of men and boys in conceptualisations of wartime sexual violence’, *Reproductive health matters* 24: 47, 2016, pp. 36–46; Marysia Zalewski, Paula Drummond, Elisabeth Prügl and Maria Stern, eds, *Sexual violence against men in global politics* (London: Routledge, 2018); Paula Drummond, ‘What about men? Towards a critical interrogation of sexual violence against men in global politics’, *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, pp. 1271–88;

<sup>5</sup> Paula Drummond, ‘Sex, violence and heteronormativity: re-visiting performances of sexual violence against men in former Yugoslavia’, in Zalewski et al., eds, *Sexual violence against men in global politics*, pp. 152–66.

[sexual] violence . . . for their particular strategic value'.<sup>1</sup> Consideration of motivations related to sexuality, perpetrators' sexual pleasure or opportunism, however, rarely appears in analyses of male-directed sexual violence.<sup>2</sup>

We argue that, by applying monocausal explanatory frameworks that focus on only one side of the strategy–opportunism binary, scholarship on male-directed sexual violence has failed to unearth the complexities and multiple causality of gendered violence against men. We likewise argue that the neglect of factors related to opportunism and sexualities in seeking to understand the dynamics of male-directed sexual violence is based on unexamined assumptions. According to such (latent) heteronormative and often homophobic premises, same-sex violations cannot be assumed to be 'opportunistic', but must instead serve a strategic and military objective, and male combatants cannot possibly be expected to rape other men for sexual gratification. By making these observations, we also put forward a broader claim: that positionalities, including unexamined gendered assumptions and stereotypes, predetermine which categorizations we as researchers use (or do not use) in order to make sense of the messy complexities of lived realities in times of war—even though these categorizations have deeply political consequences.

Our arguments are based on our respective field-based research with male sexual violence survivors{2} in northern Uganda and with Sri Lankan refugee survivors of sexual violence{2} in the UK, during which we encountered multiple instances of sexual violence against men that do not neatly map onto the systematic and strategic 'weapon of war' narrative, but instead disrupt this dominant script. While these cases are situated within patterns of wider systematic warfare at the macro level, they also display elements that allowed us and the survivors themselves to interpret them as related to sexual gratification on the part of the perpetrators. They include instances of sexual violence at the micro level within the private sphere, out of sight of any community and/or family members and therefore not occurring explicitly in any immediate subordinating performative manner. These instances of CRSV against men thereby seem simultaneously to confirm and elude {3} categorization as opportunistic, situated as

---

<sup>1</sup> Sara Meger, 'The political economy of sexual violence against men and boys in armed conflict', in Zalewski et al., eds, *Sexual violence against men in global politics*, pp. 102–16.

<sup>2</sup> Philipp Schulz, *Male Survivors of Wartime Sexual Violence: Perspectives from Northern Uganda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020); Heleen Touquet. [\*Unsilenced. Male victims of sexual violence in Sri Lanka\*](#). (London: International Truth and Justice Project, 2018).

they are in systematic conditions of warfare and deeply unequal power relationships. Through our work in this area, we aim not merely to add ‘opportunism’ as a factor for male-directed sexual violence, but rather to collapse the binary representations of sexual violence—prevalent throughout the literature—as *either strategic or opportunistic*, an opposition which, we believe, problematically masks the complexities and messiness of sexual violence during war.

By bringing these complexities to the forefront, in this article we initiate a process of what we refer to as *queering* existing explanatory frameworks for wartime sexual violence against men. In this context, we understand ‘queering’ as disrupting heteronormative frameworks based on strict binary and dichotomous conceptions of sex and gender. We therefore apply queer insights and approaches—investigating ‘the “who” and “how” that cannot or will not be made to signify monolithically in relation to gender, sex, and/or sexuality’<sup>1</sup>—to empirical evidence from a range of cases that disrupts common tropes of how sexual violence against men is made sense of. A queer analysis uncovers a wider spectrum of factors along the intersections between sexualities and gender that do not neatly fit into binary categorizations, including explanatory frameworks of strategy or opportunism. In this reading, queering should not be (mis)understood in narrow terms as referring only to diverse gender identities and sexual orientations and bringing attention to LGBTQI individuals, but rather more broadly to the open mesh of possibilities, lapses and dissonances where gender and sexualities intersect as analytical categories beyond monolithic heteronormativities.<sup>2</sup> By showing how sex(ualities) alongside gender can potentially explain sexual violence against men, we contribute towards more complex and holistic examinations of and debates about the lived realities and dynamics of gendered violence. In doing so, we concur with Boesten that ‘in order to understand the gendered nature of war, we need to listen to the complex experiences of women [and men] beyond any prewritten assumptions and scripts’.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Cynthia Weber, ‘Queer International Relations: from queer to queer IR’, *International Studies Review* 16: 4, 2014, p. 597; Jamie Hagen, ‘Queering Women, Peace and Security’, *International Affairs* 92: 2, March 2016, pp. 313–32.

<sup>2</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Sara Ahmed, *Queer phenomenology: orientations, objects, others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Jelke Boesten, *Sexual violence during war and peace: gender, power, and post-conflict justice in Peru* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 112.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we review the growing literature on conflict-related SGBV, which has focused intensively on the question of whether such violence is *either* opportunistic *or* strategic. We then proceed to focus on how sexual violence against men has been integrated in that framework, which—as we demonstrate—is almost exclusively as strategic and systematic. Following this critical overview of the literature, we then present our empirical findings from our two case-study sites to show how, within wider strategic dynamics of warfare, instances of sexual violence against men can also be motivated by opportunism, or desire for sexual gratification on the part of the perpetrator. Our examples collapse several of the binaries which are central to monocausal explanatory frameworks, thus contributing empirically and conceptually to research on wartime sexual violence, as well as on the gender dynamics of armed conflict more broadly.

### **From ‘sexed’ to ‘gendered’: the evolution of explanatory frameworks for conflict-related sexual violence**

Sexual violence has been studied in a variety of fields, including sociology, philosophy and medicine, and has been researched extensively in interdisciplinary feminist scholarship. The political science and IR literatures only began to systematically examine wartime sexual violence in the 1990s, and have not always taken up the more victim-centred insights offered in other disciplines. One of the central debates on CRSV in IR focuses on its causes and motivations,<sup>1</sup> which—although complex and various—are commonly classified in binary terms as *either* strategic *or* opportunistic.<sup>2</sup> ‘Strategic’ sexual violence broadly refers to ‘instances of rape [and sexual violence] purposefully adopted in pursuit of organizational objectives’, while ‘opportunistic’ sexual violence is generally ‘carried out for private reasons rather than organizational objectives’.<sup>3</sup> Also, strategic sexual violence has mostly been associated with explicit orders from commanders, while opportunistic sexual violence is thought to occur without such orders. Wood added a third manifestation to this classification, situated somewhere in between and in conversation with the two other categories: that of

---

<sup>1</sup> Dara Kay Cohen, ‘Explaining rape during civil war: cross national evidence (1980–2009)’, *American Political Science Review* 107: 3, 2013, pp. 461–77.

<sup>2</sup> Eriksson Baaz and Stern, *Sexual violence as a weapon of war?*; Davies and True, ‘Reframing conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence’.

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Jean Wood, ‘Conflict-related sexual violence and the policy implications of recent research’, *International Review of the Red Cross* 96: 894, 2014, p. 47.

sexual violence as a pervasive policy or practice within armed groups.<sup>1</sup> In this reading, sexual violence is not officially ordered, but nonetheless tolerated and perpetuated, thus occurring fairly regularly.

Eriksson Baaz and Stern broadly categorized these two most common theoretical frameworks for explaining sexual violence during conflict as the ‘sexed’ (opportunistic) and the ‘gendered’ (strategic) story respectively.<sup>2</sup> In essence, the ‘sexed story’ proposes that CRSV can be attributed mainly to male perpetrators’ unfulfilled sexual needs in times of war and conflict, and can be ‘facilitated by a lack of command structure or norms against sexual violence within the armed group’.<sup>3</sup> This explanation is based upon the (essentialist) assumption ‘that sexual release is a “natural” need for men, exacerbated by the stress of battle conditions’.<sup>4</sup> The ‘sexed story’ and the related ‘opportunistic rape argument’ have received considerable scholarly attention in relation to sexual violence against women, especially in earlier scholarship on the topic,<sup>5</sup> and have been found to be of explanatory value in some cases of violence against women and girls.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the opportunism argument has rightfully been critiqued as sex-essentialist and deterministic, and for depoliticizing rape in conflict. The ‘sexed story’ is also inherently heteronormative, relying on categorizations of male perpetrators and female victims. Sjoberg therefore argues that relying solely on the ‘sexed story’ is problematic, because doing so omits any explicit gender analysis and thus oversimplifies the complexities of CRSV.<sup>7</sup>

The ‘gendered story’, in contrast, departs from this ascribed sex-essentialism. Focusing on gender and militarization, this explanatory frame instead ‘sheds light on the power of gender

---

<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Jean Wood, ‘Rape as a practice of war: toward a typology of political violence’, *Politics and Society* 46: 4, 2018, pp. 513–537.

<sup>2</sup> Eriksson Baaz and Stern, *Sexual violence as a weapon of war?*.

<sup>3</sup> Nicola Henry, ‘Theorizing wartime rape: deconstructing gender, sexuality, and violence’, *Gender and Society* 30:1, 2016, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> Sjoberg, *Women as wartime rapists*, p. 188.

<sup>5</sup> See Ruth Seifert, ‘The second front: the logics of sexual violence in wars’, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 19: 1, 1996, pp. 35–43; Susan Brownmiller, *Against our will: men, women and rape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, *Rape during civil war*.

<sup>7</sup> Sjoberg, *Women as wartime rapists*.

ideologies as underlying rationales for the “use of” sexual violence in armed conflict’.<sup>1</sup> According to the gendered story, sexual violence in conflict constitutes an effective instrument of humiliation and intimidation in a gendered manifestation. According to this explanation, sexual violence can be understood as a systematic ‘weapon of war’ and a ‘deliberate collective strategy deployed against civilians’.<sup>2</sup> It is this narrative that primarily ‘underwrites the dominant framing of conflict-related sexual violence’ throughout contemporary scholarship and policy-making.<sup>3</sup> The UN campaign ‘Stop Rape Now’, for instance, explicitly focuses on preventing and ending the ‘use of sexual violence as a tactic of war’.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the prominence of the ‘rape as a weapon of war’ framing in policy discourses and academic debates, feminist IR scholars have responded to it critically, arguing that sexual violence is multifaceted, can take many different forms and can occur for a range of reasons.<sup>5</sup> Eriksson Baaz and Stern themselves have offered a compelling critique of this dominant narrative, arguing that it frames sexual violence unilaterally, oversimplifies the complexities of gendered conflict dynamics,<sup>6</sup> and ignores the explanatory power of patriarchy.<sup>7</sup> Davies and True, furthermore, criticize both explanatory frameworks for failing to account for the ‘relationship between structural gender inequality and political violence’.<sup>8</sup>

By primarily focusing on gender (as distinct from sex), scholarship on gender, conflict and security also increasingly seems to erase sexuality from discourses around sexual violence in conflict.<sup>9</sup> Eriksson Baaz and Stern observe these ‘curious erasures’ of the ‘sexual’ in wartime sexual violence, noting that sex ‘has been seemingly theorized away as irrelevant, and even

---

<sup>1</sup> Eriksson Baaz and Stern, *Sexual violence as a weapon of war?*, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Davies and True, ‘Reframing conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence’, p. 163.

<sup>3</sup> Eriksson Baaz and Stern, *Sexual violence as a weapon of war?*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Kirby, ‘Ending sexual violence in conflict: the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative and its critics’, *International Affairs* 91: 3, May 2013, pp. 457–72.

<sup>5</sup> Wood, ‘Rape as a practice of war’.

<sup>6</sup> Eriksson Baaz and Stern, *Sexual violence as a weapon of war?*.

<sup>7</sup> Anne-Kathrin Kreft, ‘Civil society perspectives on sexual violence in conflict: patriarchy and war strategy in Colombia’, *International Affairs* 96: 2, March 2020, pp. 457-478

<sup>8</sup> Davies and True, ‘Reframing conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence’, p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> Holly Porter, *After rape: violence, justice and social harmony in northern Uganda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).



dangerously misleading in efforts to explain and redress conflict-related sexual violence'.<sup>1</sup> Despite earlier rigorous feminist scholarship on the interconnections between sex, sexuality, violence, power and dominance more broadly,<sup>2</sup> it appears that more recently consideration of the 'sexual' has largely been forgotten 'or bypassed in our attention to *wartime*{4} sexual violence'.<sup>3</sup>

This neglect of the 'sexual' is particularly pertinent for analyses of sexual violence against men, which are almost exclusively framed within the 'gendered story'. We argue that this is the result of unexamined heteronormative assumptions, resulting in a blind spot when it comes to questions of how sexuality and sex are organically linked to power (and thus to gender).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, while gender must undoubtedly remain the cornerstone of any analysis of sexual violence,<sup>5</sup> sexuality and sex do need to be foregrounded in any such discussions. Caution is required, however, that in reintroducing sexuality into analyses of CRSV we do not downplay the importance of the dominance and power dimensions of sexual violence.<sup>6</sup> Gender-based violence (within or outside conflict) in general, and against women in particular, arises from structurally ingrained gender inequalities.<sup>7</sup> A wealth of feminist scholarship has shown how structural gendered power disparities constitute part of the backdrop to and systemic context of sexual violence.<sup>8</sup>

In the light of this complex picture, Sjoberg notes that CRSV 'is sexed, sexual and gendered, and all of these observations matter in theorizing it'.<sup>9</sup> Her application of gender subordination

---

<sup>1</sup> Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, 'Curious erasures: the sexual in wartime sexual violence', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20: 3, May 2018, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Kate Millett, *Sexual politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 'Curious erasures' (emphasis added).{?}

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *The history of sexuality* (New York: Penguin, 1978; first publ. 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Davies and True, 'Reframing conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence'.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly, *Surviving sexual violence*; Brownmiller, *Against our will*.

<sup>7</sup> Carine Mardorossian, 'Towards a new feminist theory of rape', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27: 3, 2012, pp. 743–75; Henry, 'Theorizing wartime rape'.

<sup>8</sup> Davies and True, 'Reframing conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence'; Sara Meger, 'Toward a feminist political economy of wartime sexual violence: the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17: 3, 2015, pp. 416–34; Kreft, 'Civil society perspectives on sexual violence in conflict'.

<sup>9</sup> Sjoberg, *Women as wartime rapists*, p. 139.

theories to sexual and gender-based violence in conflict zones advances an understanding of the dynamics of such violence, including against men, in all its complexities. Framing sexual violence as a form of hierarchical gendered subordination, she accounts for male survivors or female perpetrators alongside the conventionally adopted categories of male victimizers and female victims. Effectively, gender subordination must be conceptualized as placement along gendered hierarchies by means of {5} undermining victims' gendered and sexual identities. In many ways, this resonates with feminist insights which posit that sexual violence, and penetrative rape in particular, is not disconnected from sex,<sup>1</sup> but rather can also communicate and symbolize power *through* sex.

The consensus in the literature, then, based on our critical readings of existing scholarship, seems to be that CRSV can never be monocausal, and that both the sexed and the gendered stories play a role in explanations of its occurrence. Yet these insights have not yet been (fully) incorporated in research on sexual violence against men. Instead, existing attempts to explain male-directed sexual violence during wartime primarily pursue the 'gendered story', arguing in unitary terms that this violence is above all a strategic weapon of war and specifically 'not about sex'.<sup>2</sup>

### **Where the gendered story dominates: explanations for sexual violence against men**

In recent years, a growing body of literature has begun to recognize that sexual violence against men and boys is perpetrated more frequently than has been commonly assumed,<sup>3</sup> and yet remains underexplored in scholarship and policy-making alike.<sup>4</sup> Despite the prevailing marginalization of male-directed sexual violence, existing studies have examined the scope of this violence, explored how masculinities render men vulnerable to gender-based violence in

---

<sup>1</sup> Brownmiller, *Against our will*.

<sup>2</sup> Sandesh Sivakumaran, 'Sexual violence against men in armed conflict', *European Journal of International Law* 18: 2, 2007, p. 272.

<sup>3</sup> Touquet and Gorris, 'Out of the shadows?'

<sup>4</sup> Elise Féron, *Wartime sexual violence against men* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

the first place,<sup>1</sup> and begun to uncover the manifold harms and vulnerabilities experienced by survivors, including the effects of violations on their gender identities.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the existing literature, however, remains both undertheorized and not based on solid empirical data. In particular, analyses focusing on the causes of male-directed sexual violence are significantly underdeveloped both empirically and conceptually, primarily pursuing one line of enquiry—that of sexual violence as a strategic weapon of war along the lines of the ‘gendered story’. Sivakumaran, for instance, claims that male ‘rape is about power and dominance *and not sex*’<sup>3</sup>; he thereby directly ignores sexuality and sex as contributory causes of male-directed sexual violence, and neglects the inherent link between sex and power. In her work on the political economy of sexual violence, Sara Meger likewise explicitly states that

<ext>women may experience CRSV borne out of opportunism, bolstered by ideas of masculine virility . . . , and the male sex right . . . , as well as for strategic purposes. *Male victims, on the other hand, are targeted for this violence not out of patriarchal constructions of the male sex right, but for their particular strategic value.*<sup>4</sup><extend>

The vast majority of existing studies thereby suggest that one of the most common, if not *the* single most prevalent, driver of male-directed sexual violence is the strategic ‘emasculatation’ of victims.<sup>5</sup> Deriving from a socially constructed premise that masculinities are incompatible with vulnerabilities, this view considers that sexual violence compromises men in their masculine identities by foregrounding their gendered and sexual victimhood.<sup>6</sup> According to this dominant narrative, sexual violence against men is a highly masculinized act of male-to-male communication, aiming to systematically terrorize, punish and humiliate its victims in a

---

<sup>1</sup> Charli Carpenter, ‘Recognizing gender-based violence against civilian men and boys in conflict situations’, *Security Dialogue* 37: 1, 2006, pp. 83–103.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Myrntinen, Lara Khattab and Jana Naujoks, ‘Re-thinking hegemonic masculinities in conflict-affected contexts’, *Critical Military Studies* 3: 2, 2017, p. 10; Schulz, ‘Displacement from gendered personhood’.

<sup>3</sup> Sivakumaran, ‘Sexual violence against men in armed conflict’, p. 272 (emphasis added).

<sup>4</sup> Meger, ‘The political economy of sexual violence’ (emphasis added).

<sup>5</sup> For a critical reading of the ‘emasculatation’ through ‘feminization’ conception and an alternative framework, see Schulz, ‘Displacement from gendered personhood’.

<sup>6</sup> Jessica Auchter, ‘Forced male circumcision: gender-based violence in Kenya’, *International Affairs* 93: 6, Nov. 2017, p. 1340.

gendered framework by asserting the perpetrators' dominant (hyper)masculinities while subordinating and compromising the victims' masculinities.<sup>1</sup> Building further on the idea of intramasculine communication, it is also argued that sexual violence against men is deeply 'performative' and 'gains its meaning through the aversion and abjection evoked by a penetrated/un-phallic/emasculated body'.<sup>2</sup>

These analyses frequently draw on instances of sexual violence against men that take place in front of an audience, often in detention (such as in Abu Ghraib or the former Yugoslavia), and where 'the offence is . . . intended to humiliate the victims and ridicule their masculinity by forcing them to take part in a public, homosexual performance'.<sup>3</sup> This stands in contrast to scholarship on gender-based violence against women, which has recognized its occurrence in both the public and the private realm, as well as 'in-between' spaces.<sup>4</sup> Research on sexual violence against men, on the other hand, largely situates such violence in the public realm, focused on contexts of detention.<sup>5</sup> Yet monocausal generalizations portraying the 'emasculatation' of victims as the sole or primary driver of male-directed sexual violence that mostly takes place in the public sphere are simplistic and reductionist, failing to account for the messy complexities and variation of conflictual and violent contexts.

Conditioned by these dominant themes, scholarship on sexual violence against men has thus far turned a blind eye to the sexual and opportunistic factors involved in such violence.

Eichert therefore argues that a 'subject of study should be the strategic use of pleasure and sex in relation to sexual violence against men'.<sup>6</sup> As he points out, while 'some explanations of

---

<sup>1</sup> Miranda Alison, 'Wartime sexual violence: women's human rights and questions of masculinity', *Review of International Studies* 33: 1, 2007, pp. 75–90.

<sup>2</sup> Drumond, 'Sex, violence and heteronormativity', p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> Anette Bringedal Houge, 'Sexualized war violence: subversive victimization and ignored perpetrators', in Inge Lander and Sige Ravn, eds, *Masculinities in the criminological field* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 166.

<sup>4</sup> Swaine, 'Beyond strategic rape', p. 755.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Janine Natalya Clark, 'Masculinity and male survivors of wartime sexual violence: a Bosnian case study', *Conflict, Security and Development* 17: 4, 2017, pp. 287–311; All Survivors Project, *Destroyed from within: sexual violence against men and boys in Syria and Turkey* (Vaduz, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> David Eichert, 'Homosexualization revisited: an audience-focused theorization of wartime male sexual violence', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 21: 3, 2018, p. 426.

man-on-woman rape by military units focus on the soldier's libido'—referring to the perpetrators' 'need for sex'—'no attempt has been made to relate this principle to the rape of men'.<sup>1</sup> Harriet Gray, too, has argued that 'the question of whether perpetrators experience sexual pleasure is . . . often obscured in scholarship' on this topic.<sup>2</sup> In this article we seek to respond to these calls for further research by elucidating multiple instances of sexual violence against men that do broadly seem to (also) be connected to sexuality (and pleasure).

In a related line of argument, we also suggest that this neglect of opportunism, sexuality and sexual gratification on the part of the perpetrator as potential factors in explaining the occurrence of male-directed sexual violence largely derives from unexamined heteronormative and homophobic assumptions. According to such presumptions, same-sex violations cannot be assumed ever to be opportunistic or linked to sexual pleasure, but must always and exclusively serve a strategic and military objective, and male combatants (or civilians, for that matter) cannot be expected to rape other men for sexual gratification. We therefore emphasize the role played by gendered assumptions and stereotypes in predetermining which categorizations we as researchers use (or do not use) in order to make sense of complex lived realities in times of war. We furthermore argue that these categorizations are deeply political, and have unintended and possibly harmful consequences for victims and survivors. As Harriet Gray has stated, '[sexual] violences do not objectively fall into one or another neat definitional box', and 'our framing and our categorisation of violence is political, and it has important political implications'.<sup>3</sup> These implications include hierarchies of gendered victimhood and related access to services and assistance.<sup>4</sup>

### **Making sense of a messy reality: empirical evidence from Uganda and Sri Lanka**

To engage with these dissonances in the literature, we introduce here instances of male-directed sexual violence that are inconsistent with this dominant framing. These cases are taken from two contexts: Uganda and Sri Lanka. Before presenting our empirical evidence, we first reflect on the background of the two cases, on the nature of the evidence at hand and on our respective methodologies. It is important to note that, by bringing these cases together, our intention is not to conduct a rigid and systematic comparison, but rather to present

---

<sup>1</sup> Eichert, 'Homosexualization revisited', p. 427.

<sup>2</sup> Harriet Gray, 'Reflections on the slippery politics of framing' in Zalewski et al., eds, *Sexual violence against men in global politics* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 244 {?}

<sup>3</sup> Gray, 'Reflections on the slippery politics of framing', p. 244.

<sup>4</sup> We elaborate in more detail on these political implications in the conclusion.

empirical material, taken from two different contexts, that challenges common assumptions in order to demonstrate the complexities of sexual violence against men and its causes.

#### *Contextual background information*

On a macro level, both cases show clear indications of sexual violence occurring as an element in broader ‘strategic’ warfare patterns. In both cases, crimes of sexual violence against men occurred within the context of protracted civil wars, perpetrated alongside various other human rights abuses, including large-scale SGBV against women and girls, and situated within highly unequal gender hierarchies. In both cases, we found a wide variety of forms of sexual violence against men, demonstrating that this type of violence cannot be limited to male rape.

In northern Uganda, sexual violence against men was perpetrated during more than two decades of civil war between the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) rebel group and the Ugandan government. During the early years of the conflict, government soldiers of the National Resistance Army (NRA) unleashed a violent campaign—as punishment and retaliation for previous episodes of violence—against the civilian Acholi population.<sup>1</sup> Within this context of systemic and strategic military operations, government soldiers committed widespread sexual violence against men, most commonly in the form of penetrative anal rape. These acts were sometimes perpetrated by ‘small groups of two to four soldiers in the bushes or even in the men’s own homesteads’,<sup>2</sup> but at times also in the public sphere, where survivors were violated in front of their families and communities.

In Sri Lanka, security forces have used sexual violence against women, girls, men and boys as a strategic means of subordinating and controlling political opponents, Tamil fighters and the civilian Tamil population over several decades.<sup>3</sup> Various forms of sexual violence against men including anal and oral rape, genital mutilation and forced masturbation—were documented in the 1980s and during the civil war in the 1990s. While Sri Lanka is now

---

<sup>1</sup> Schulz, ‘Male Survivors of Wartime Sexual Violence’.

<sup>2</sup> Justice and Reconciliation Project, *The beasts at Burcoro: recounting atrocities by the NRA’s 22nd Battalion in Burcoro village in April 1991* (Gulu, 2013), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Doney, ‘The psychological after-effects of torture: a survey of Sri Lankan ex-detainees’, in D. Somasundaram, ed., *Scarred minds: the psychological impact of war on Sri Lankan Tamils* (New Delhi: Sage, 1998); Basil Fernando, *Narratives of justice in Sri Lanka, told through the stories of torture victims* (Hong Kong: Asian Legal Resource Centre, 2013); R. Munasinghe, *Eliyakanda Torture Camp (K Point)* (Colombo: S. Godage & Bros, 2012).

ostensibly at peace, sexual violence is still a core ingredient of the torture practised by the military and police apparatus, often taking place in detention situations. Several reports have concluded that sexual violence perpetrated by the Sri Lankan security forces is part of a deliberate strategy that serves to demobilize, intimidate and dominate the Tamil minority.<sup>1</sup> The practices have followed similar patterns, using similar tools over a wide range of detention locations, time periods and force groupings, reinforcing the ‘conclusion that it was part of an institutional policy within the security forces’.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Methodology and empirical material*

The empirical material from the northern Ugandan context was collected over a period of nine months, primarily in 2016, and homes in on the experiences of 46 male survivors who are members of survivors’ associations. The survivors’ testimonies derive from four participatory workshop discussions with male survivors, each of which lasted between two and four hours. The data were collected by one of the authors (Schulz), working in affiliation with the Refugee Law Project (RLP) and in the presence of two trained and experienced psycho-social service providers. The study was situated as part of the RLP’s sustainable and participatory process of collaborating with male survivors of sexual violence.

The empirical material from the Sri Lankan context is based on a qualitative dataset of 121 anonymized testimonies and excerpts of testimonies by male survivors, collected over a period of more than a decade by experienced investigators of the International Truth and Justice Project (ITJP). All of the survivors are refugees who were interviewed outside of Sri Lanka (mostly in Europe) about experiences inside the country. Interviews were typically spread over several consecutive days; the ITJP followed all necessary ethical precautions and provided (mental) health and social support when needed. All testimonies were anonymized

---

<sup>1</sup> Freedom from Torture, *Tainted peace: torture in Sri Lanka since May 2009* (London, 2015), and *Out of the silence: new evidence of ongoing torture in Sri Lanka 2009–2011* (London, 2012); Human Rights Watch, *We will teach you a lesson: sexual violence against Tamils by the Sri Lankan security forces* (New York, 2013), <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/02/26/we-will-teach-you-lesson/sexual-violence-against-tamils-sri-lankan-security-forces>> (accessed on 24 Feb. 2020).

<sup>2</sup> *Report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Investigation on Sri Lanka* (New York: UN, 2015), p. 223, para. 591.

and numbered before they were sent to the researcher for analysis. In most cases, the interviews touched upon several topics, including some of the survivors' life stories.<sup>1</sup> In both cases, testimonies were narrated by sexually violated men themselves, therefore representing survivors' perspectives of what happened. This may mean that personal experiences, biases or the influence of public narratives can influence what is being told, left out or emphasized. While some survivors spoke about events that had happened over 20 years previously, others (in the Sri Lanka case) described instances that happened more recently, and the differences in the time that has elapsed since can obviously have an impact on the nature of the testimonies. Some survivors had also had some form of (individual or group-based) therapy, while others had not; this too can influence how people structure and narrate their stories.

While our data offer some indications of how to make sense of CRSV in more complex terms, these insights by no means provide the full picture; for this, additional data from a perpetrator's perspective would have been necessary.<sup>2</sup> Also, the interviewers' gender and subjectivities may well have had an impact on how survivors told their stories and what aspects they emphasized. We therefore recognize our own positionalities in interpreting these testimonies, and let ourselves be reminded by Patrocínio Schweickart and Elizabeth Flynn that

<ext>the reader is a producer of meaning; what one reads out of a text [or testimony] is always a function of the prior experiences; ideological commitments; interpretive strategies; and cognitive, moral, psychological and political interests that one brings to the reading.<sup>3</sup><extend>

While bearing these methodological caveats in mind, we suggest that these narratives clearly point towards the involvement of multiple factors in CRSV against men. Rather than foregrounding one universalizing storyline, they specifically illuminate the complexities and

---

<sup>1</sup> Touquet, *Unsilenced*.

<sup>2</sup> See Cohen, *Rape during civil war*, p. 20. For male-directed sexual violence specifically, data from the perpetrators' side is almost entirely absent. For an exception, see Féron, *Wartime sexual violence against men*.

<sup>3</sup> Patrocínio P. Schweickart and Elizabeth A. Flynn, *Reading sites: social difference and reader response* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2014), p. 2; see also Tara Roeder, "'You have to confess': rape and the politics of storytelling", *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 9: 9, 2015, pp. 18–29.



messiness of the lived realities of gender-based violence and challenge some of the dominant theoretical ideas about sexual violence against men. More specifically, they disrupt the dominant assumption that all types, forms and crimes of wartime sexual violence against men are always (only) strategic, and never (also) about sex.

### **Queering explanatory frameworks beyond dominant scripts**

In our empirical material, we identify two broader patterns of sexual violence against men that challenge and complicate the dominant scripts of strategic warfare practices. First, in both cases, several survivors invoked the (potential) sexual pleasure of the perpetrators to explain what happened to them and why, even in contexts where same-sex acts are considered a taboo and/or criminalized. Second, survivors at times described circumstances in which perpetrators tried to conceal their crimes, or where sexual violence took place without an audience, thus contradicting the hypothesis that sexual violence against men necessarily communicates to a wider audience a strategic and public message of gendered subordination. By moving beyond heteronormative scripts and (re)introducing elements concerning sexuality into analyses of sexual violence against men, we aim to queer existing explanatory frameworks.

#### *Pattern 1: survivors invoking explanations regarding sexual pleasure and opportunities*

In both cases, some survivors explained what happened to them by invoking biological explanations, referring to the perpetrators' 'need' for sexual gratification. For instance, in northern Uganda, various male survivors suspected that the government soldiers specifically chose to rape civilians of both sexes—including men—'because they stayed for too long in the bush without seeing their women so they took women and men to have sex with'.<sup>1</sup>

According to another male survivor: 'I think these were soldiers who were so long in the bush without sex so I think this is why they decided to rape me.'<sup>2</sup> According to such interpretations, the occurrence of some cases of rape were attributable, at least in part, to the fact that prolonged episodes of conflict meant that many NRA soldiers spent considerable time away from civilian life and their wives or other female sexual partners. Within this context, survivors themselves presumed that NRA soldiers, deprived of regular opportunities for sex, raped civilian women and men in order to satisfy their sexual needs. This is in essence the core notion of the 'sexed story' and its 'substitution' argument, according to which 'sex by force occurs in military contexts because soldiers do not enjoy "normal" access to women

---

<sup>1</sup> Survivor discussion, Uganda, 20 May 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Survivor discussion, Uganda, 24 Feb. 2016.

in other ways'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, many people in war-affected settings, including military staff and soldiers, 'understand conflict-related rape in this way',<sup>2</sup> although most commonly in relation to violence against women. In a context where sexual violence against men is often falsely equated with homosexuality, yet where same-sex acts are heavily stigmatized and criminally punishable by life imprisonment, such survivor explanations are particularly striking and remarkable.

In the Sri Lankan case, survivors specifically mentioned that guards abused them for their own sexual gratification and thought that the perpetrators (sexually) enjoyed abusing them. In their narratives, they linked this to the fact that they were abused not only during interrogation, but also in their cells at night. In the entire dataset, only one survivor explicitly stated that he did not believe that the perpetrators 'did it for their sexual pleasure'.<sup>3</sup>

Describing different degrading sexual crimes committed against him, one survivor, for instance, speculated: 'I think they did this for their own pleasure as they did not link the sexual abuse to any interrogation.'<sup>4</sup> Another survivor similarly explained that he was made to perform sex acts which 'seemed to be purely for the pleasure of the Terrorist Investigation Department (TID) [7]officers'.<sup>5</sup> {8} In Sri Lanka, which inherited the same British colonial laws as Uganda, same-sex acts are in theory punishable by law; but, unlike in Uganda, the law is not actually applied.<sup>6</sup> Same-sex love and sex are nevertheless still stigmatized, and this socio-cultural context may also (in part) explain why another survivor engaged in (homophobic) 'ethnic othering', arguing that his perpetrators must have enjoyed the abuse 'because they were Sinhalese: I think they brought Sinhalese detainees to come and forced them to touch my private parts. They did more than what the TID officers told them to do and I felt they enjoyed it because they were Sinhalese.'<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Eriksson Baaz and Stern, *Sexual violence as a weapon of war?*, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Eriksson Baaz and Stern, *Sexual violence as a weapon of war?*, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Survivor testimony W74, undisclosed place in the United Kingdom, 9 February 2015. {?}

<sup>4</sup> Survivor testimony W247, London, 17 March 2017. {?}

<sup>5</sup> Survivor testimony W296, undisclosed place in the United Kingdom, 16-18 November 2017. {?}

<sup>6</sup> Ismail, Amra 'Sri Lanka should take guidance from Indian counterparts' Interview with Aritha Wickramasinghe, *Daily Mirror* 18 Sept. 2018 <<http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/-SL-should-take-guidance-from-Indian-counterparts--155639.html>> (accessed 8 April 2020)

<sup>7</sup> Survivor testimony W288, undisclosed place in Switzerland, 11 September 2017. {?}

Some of these contextual dynamics surrounding the sexual violations have led the survivors to conclude that the abuse also implied sexual pleasure on the part of the perpetrators. The examples offered here thereby illustrate that power, violence and sex do not always have to be opposed to one another,<sup>1</sup> and that sexual violence can be about power *through* sex, power *as* sex, or sex *and* power.<sup>2</sup> However, the fact that the male perpetrators also at times seem to have derived some form of sexual pleasure from abusing other men in these contexts of armed conflict does not imply that they identified as gay in doing so, but rather illustrates these myriad entanglements between power, pleasure and sex.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the data provide evidence that in Sri Lanka, survivors were sexually abused both during interrogations (suggesting strategic purposes) and after episodes of interrogation (suggesting opportunism). The same perpetrator can thus sexually abuse male victims for strategic reasons as well as for pleasure, demonstrating the interplay of sexual and gendered elements in causing wartime sexual violence against men.

*Pattern 2: male sexual abuse in private and secret*

The second pattern that we observed is linked in part to the distinction between the private and the public spheres as locations of male-directed sexual violence. In several cases in the Sri Lankan dataset, acts of sexual torture and rape were performed in front of an audience of male and female camp guards or other prisoners.<sup>4</sup> This echoes dynamics observed in other contexts, such as the former Yugoslavia or Syria. In northern Uganda, some cases of male rape were also perpetrated in the public sphere, for instance in school yards, or in front of the victims' families and communities.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Volker Woltersdorff, 'The pleasure of compliance: domination and compromise within BDSM practice', in María do Mar Castro Varela, Nikita Dhawan and Antke Engel, eds, *Hegemony and heteronormativity: revisiting 'the political' in queer politics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 169–88.

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Belkin, *Bring me men: military masculinity and the benign facade of American empire, 1898–2011* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 79–124.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Ward, *Not gay: sex between straight white men* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); see also Eichert, 'Homosexualization revisited'.

<sup>4</sup> Touquet, *Unsilenced*.

<sup>5</sup> Philipp Schulz, 'The "ethical loneliness" of male sexual violence survivors in northern Uganda: gendered reflections on silencing', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20: 4, 2018, pp. 583–601.

However, many survivor statements also told of perpetrators who took their victims to places far away from any audience, where no one could see what happened. At the very least, these instances indicate that the perpetrators were not particularly interested in ‘performing’ gender subordination publicly—as is commonly suggested for most cases of sexual violence against men.<sup>1</sup> In the past, arguments related to opportunism and sexual gratification have been confused with victim-blaming, or advanced to make false generalizations that all perpetrators are gay-identifying, and homosexuality and male rape in detention contexts in particular have been conflated.<sup>2</sup> The fact that sexual violence against men takes place in a private setting, however, does not signify that no abuse of power is involved; nor does it tell us anything about a perpetrator’s sexual identity or orientation. In such cases, the perpetrator can be understood as abusing his power for his own (sexual) gratification—which in itself can carry sexual elements—thus dehumanizing and disempowering a non-consenting victim. Clearly, in these instances, sexual violence against men may also seem to be about sexual pleasure; but at the same time it strongly represents and arises from an unequal power relation—in this case between more powerful prison guards and subordinated male victims.

In northern Uganda, we learned of several instances of sexual violence inflicted in the private sphere, out of sight of other family and community members. To illustrate, consider the example of Owich,<sup>3</sup> who was raped by government soldiers of the NRA in September 1995, close to his homestead. The time-frame is significant here, because the vast majority of sexual violence crimes against men perpetrated in the context of the civil war in northern Uganda occurred during the early stages of the conflict, between the late 1980s and early 1990s, closely linked to the very particular conflict dynamics of that time.<sup>4</sup> The fact that this instance was perpetrated almost four years after the systematic perpetration of male rape against civilian Acholi men ceased is therefore indicative that this case is not necessarily embedded within wider strategic patterns. This inference is supported by the particular circumstances of this example. Owich was raped by a patrolling NRA soldier while he was in the bushes some few kilometres outside his home compound, searching for firewood. The soldier stopped him,

---

<sup>1</sup> Drumond, ‘Sex, violence and heteronormativity’.

<sup>2</sup> Sasha Gear, ‘Behind the bars of masculinity: male rape and homophobia in and about South African men’s prisons’ *Sexualities* 10: 2, 2007, pp. 209–27.

<sup>3</sup> Not his real name.

<sup>4</sup> Schulz, ‘Displacement from gendered personhood’.

asked him in Swahili where he was from and pointed the gun at him.<sup>1</sup> He told him to undress and turn around, and then forcefully penetrated him anally. According to Owich, he was not accused by the soldier of being a rebel or of supporting the LRA—as many other survivors were<sup>2</sup>—nor did the soldier threaten and/or abuse him verbally.<sup>3</sup> There were no other soldiers or any civilian community members around to witness the rape, so this did not even potentially constitute a performative and/or communicative act addressed at a wider audience. Even so, the sexual abuse experienced by Owich is nevertheless characterized by unequal power relations between the dominant soldier (from a superior ethnic group), equipped with a gun, and the subordinated civilian Acholi victim.

Several cases from Sri Lanka similarly provide indications that sexual violence was the result of guards taking advantage of their positions of power for their own sexual gratification. One survivor's story reveals a pattern of both opportunistic abuse by guards and strategic abuse by interrogators. The guard who brings him food comes into his cell and forces the prisoner to perform oral sex on him. When the guard hears boots in the hallway, he quickly stops. This suggests that he does not want to get caught sexually abusing a male detainee, and that he might be acting on his own, for his own sexual gratification, and to individually abuse his own position of power, outside the context of specific commands or orders. In the interrogation cell, the soldier who entered

<ext>had his rifle slung across his back. He removed my clothes including my underwear. He told me to hold his penis. When I refused he slapped me and told me 'dog Tamil you will be dead if you do not hold it'. In fear I held it. He told me to masturbate him. I did. Before he ejaculated we heard sounds of boots by the door. He quickly pushed me away and pulled up his pants and left.<sup>4</sup> <extend>

Before this specific incident, this survivor was also raped by other interrogators in the interrogation room.

In yet another example of such seemingly opportunistic behaviour, another survivor was raped by an unknown man who brought sellotape and a rope to his cell. The survivor's mouth

---

<sup>1</sup> In this part of northern Uganda, Acholi is the lingua franca; Swahili is the language spoken in the Ugandan army.

<sup>2</sup> Schulz, 'Displacement from gendered personhood'.

<sup>3</sup> Survivor discussion, Uganda, 24 Feb. 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Survivor testimonies W36, London, 9 March 2014 and W116, undisclosed place in the United Kingdom, 30 June 2015. {?}

was taped and the ropes were put around his ankles and hands, to make sure he did not move and was not heard screaming and shouting (by other guards and/or detainees). The perpetrator then forcefully performed oral sex on his victim, and afterwards removed the tape and ropes.<sup>1</sup> Several victims also reported that guards tried to bribe them into having sex with them, promising they would be freed if they agreed. To illustrate, two Sri Lankan survivors recounted instances where guards offered them help in exchange for sexual favours: ‘He said to me in broken Tamil: “If you agree to have a sexual relationship with me, I will help you to escape.” I said I could not do that.’<sup>2</sup> These instances and dynamics do not neatly fit the idea of systematic, strategic gender subordination, as these perpetrators already have a level of power and control over the victims due to their positions as guards, and thus would not need to ‘negotiate’ a sexual relationship but could instead enforce it. Rather, these examples resemble opportunistic patterns, although situated within wider warfare dynamics, where men with no links to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam are abducted, tortured and sexually abused by security forces, and their families forced to pay large sums in ransom.<sup>3</sup>

The two patterns we have identified and analysed here thus point towards the complexities and multicausality of the dynamics of sexual violence against men. While all the instances we have discussed were situated in conflicts where wartime sexual violence can be seen as a strategy to humiliate and terrorize broad sections of the population and particular ethnic groups, these examples also reveal different truths as narrated by survivors. On the one hand, survivors themselves—in spite of the strong taboo on same-sex acts—attribute the violations committed against them at least in part to ‘biological’ and/or sexual factors, or believe that the perpetrators (sexually) enjoyed the abuse. Also, the testimonies show that abuses often take place in private spaces, out of sight of anyone else, with perpetrators directly attempting to conceal their violations. These considerations, among others, undercut the generalization that sexual violence against men is always about communicating or performing a message to a broader audience. In particular, the instances of sexual violence against men discussed here do not easily map onto the ‘opportunism’/‘strategy’ dichotomy, but instead require a more nuanced examination of the intertwined relationships between sex, power and violence. While

---

<sup>1</sup> Survivor testimony W205, London, 25 August 2016. {?}

<sup>2</sup> Survivor testimony W299, undisclosed place in the United Kingdom, 4-7 December 2017. {?}

<sup>3</sup> Wendell Block, Jessica Lee and Kera Vijayasingham, ‘Mercy for money: torture’s link to profit in Sri Lanka, a retrospective review’ *Torture* 27: 1, 2017, pp. 28–41.

there is indeed a diverse range of possible combinations of factors relating to sex and gender in motivating sexual violence against men, the one dimension that is consistent across contexts, cases and scenarios is that of power—i.e. the unequal relationship between victim and perpetrator (and, by association, between their respective ethnic/national groups).

### **Conclusion**

In this article we have demonstrated how, within wider patterns of sexual violence against men for strategic purposes and wider systematic warfare dynamics in Uganda and Sri Lanka, there are multiple instances of sexual crimes targeting men that resemble opportunistic motives, including among others those linked to sexualities and sexual pleasure. This disrupts the dominant script in existing scholarship that portrays wartime sexual violence against men as universally strategic and as explicitly disconnected from sex. Our deeply contextual empirical analysis has sought to queer commonly utilized heteronormative explanations of CRSV against men by (re)introducing factors related to sexuality, by disrupting heteronormativity and by moving beyond binaries, in two particular ways. On the one hand, we have shown that survivors themselves often make sense of their abuse using arguments based on perpetrators seeking sexual gratification—and not always and only for strategic purposes of subordination. On the other hand, our evidence has shown that sexual violence against men often takes place in private settings, far away from audiences, thus complicating the common notion that these violations, as instances of emasculation, send a broader message to other men (and women) who belong to the victims' ethnic group.

In many ways, it should come as no particular surprise that there are opportunistic and 'sexed' cases of sexual violence against men within wider strategic patterns—this has, after all, been well established with regard to conflict-related SGBV against women and girls.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as we have shown, the explanatory frameworks that have dominated the literature to date, focused on sexual violence against men in unitary terms as a strategy, do not adequately capture or explain these instances. Indeed, and with broader relevance to gendered violence during armed conflicts more broadly, we maintain that binary categorizations of sexual violence as *either* strategic *or* opportunistic cannot do justice to these complexities. In attempting to position crimes of sexual violence squarely within one of these dichotomous categories, we risk losing sight of the intricacies, multiplicities and multicausalities of sexual violence and its causes. Our analysis thus demonstrates the need to embrace more complex systems of knowing and theorizing that move beyond and within these categories and accommodate

---

<sup>1</sup> Wood, 'Rape as a practice of war'; Swaine, 'Beyond strategic rape'.

sexuality as an explanatory factor, in a queer sense. As we have shown, there is indeed an ‘open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances’<sup>1</sup> around the intersections between polyvalent understandings of sexuality, gender and power that needs to be taken into account when making sense of the dynamics surrounding sexual violence against men and its causes across different conflict settings.

While the categorizations of strategy and opportunism have been employed throughout existing scholarship to render the messy reality of wartime sexual violence more readable, questions remain about other aspects of this complexity we may be ignoring, downplaying or amplifying in keeping these binaries in place. In particular, rather than strictly trying to define specific cases as opportunistic or strategic—which would in turn reinforce binary theorizing—we should also be concerned about why, how and to whom these differences matter. From a survivor’s perspective, these categorical differences may at times be negligible—as both ‘forms’ carry devastating impacts. These distinctions also risk creating new hierarchies of gendered victimhood, whereby victims of strategic rape may allegedly be taken more seriously than victims of opportunistic rape.<sup>2</sup> It has recently been noted that forms of gendered harms that ‘do not fit neatly into the categories of “rape as a weapon of war”’ are overshadowed and invisibilized in gender-sensitive programming.<sup>3</sup> The instances of sexual violence against men with seemingly opportunistic and/or sexual motives as documented in this article certainly fall into these blind spots. As Harriet Gray has argued, these framings and categorizations are therefore deeply political,<sup>4</sup> and can have far-reaching implications, including with regard to service provision, accountability and prospects of redress. Crude dichotomous categorizations of strategy/opportunism thus reinforce lapidary understandings of CRSV, which in turn marginalize survivors’ experiences that do not fit neatly into these frameworks. Binary categorizations also deny the complex lived realities of survivors of sexual violence, and risk underemphasizing the ever-present role of power and unequal power relations in underpinning multiple instances of sexual violence.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen et al., *Wartime sexual violence*; Sara Meger, ‘The fetishization of sexual violence in international security’, *International Studies Quarterly* 60: 1, 2016, pp. 149–59.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Myrntinen and Nicola Popovic, *‘We were like caged birds, this gave us wings to fly’: a review of UN Women programming on gender-sensitive transitional justice* (New York: UN Women, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Gray, ‘Reflections on the slippery politics of framing’.



As feminist scholars, we contend that simply adding opportunistic elements to our analyses of sexual violence against men ‘does little to illuminate our understanding of conflict-related sexual violence unless it also addresses the importance of [unequal] gender relations for understanding how war is fought, who fights, and who is targeted’ and which bodies are wronged.<sup>1</sup> Rather, simply adding opportunism as a category would in turn reinforce binary frameworks. Instead, there is a crucial need to deepen debates and develop new ways of thinking about sexual violence against men during times of conflict. Our intention of queering explanatory frameworks for male-directed sexual violence accordingly seeks to break out of binary heteronormative frames of male/female, sexed/gendered or opportunistic/strategic, to take into account instead the multiplicities of possible entanglements between and layers of violence, power, gender and sexualities as causal elements in wartime sexual violence against all genders, and to take the discussion of sexual violence beyond any single, universalizing storyline.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kirsten Campbell, ‘Producing knowledge in the Field of Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict Research: Objects, Methods, Politics and Gender Justice Methodology’, *Social Politics* 25: 4, 2018, p. 472; Christine Chinkin and Hilary Charlesworth, ‘Building women into peace’, *Third World Quarterly* 27: 5, 2006, p. 937.