

Rape as a Weapon of War: Strategy, Trauma and Fear

Assist. Prof. Dr. Pinar KADIOGLU

Abstract— The last decade witnessed a new paradigm shift which acknowledged conflict-related sexual violence as an obstacle to peacebuilding. The preventive efforts as well as providing support for the survivors have been largely discussed in academia while simultaneously been added to the United Nations agenda for action. This paper aims to serve as an explanatory source through which the particular social and cultural contexts that enables 'rape' to be used as an operative tool for the psychological and physical destruction of the enemy, as well as enabling the survivors of such atrocity to experience continuous abuse.

Keywords— conflict-related sexual violence, patriarchy, trauma, war.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE last decade witnessed the erosion of the perception of rape as the *by-product* of war with the acknowledgement of conflict-related sexual violence as a planned and targeted policy [1]. Moreover, while recognizing women as the primary target of such atrocity, the victimization of men has also started to be voiced [2] [3], which gives us a solid reason to praise the works of feminist and post-modern peace scholars.

In a similar line of thought, this paper aims to serve as an explanatory source for the reader to make sense of the socio-psychological and cultural elements that enables *rape* to be employed as an operative tool for the psychological and physical destruction of the enemy, as well as causing the survivors to experience on-going abuse within their own groups. Thus, explaining the phenomenon at hand, while exposing the root causes underpinned by masculinities so to contribute to the establishment of a common sense which is required for the betterment of preventive efforts worldwide.

II. PATRIARCHAL MIND & SEXUAL VIOLENCE

WE live in a world of pervasive social systems of gender-inequality, where roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property is dominated by men. Almost all human societies across the world share and legitimize the presence of such societal system through the perception of women as *naturally untrustworthy members of human society*, who shall be kept in check and controlled by men to guarantee the societal well-being.

In line with this understanding, the patriarchal mind foresees a limited performative freedom for women to be exercised in private sphere, while assigning all kinds of public performance exclusively to male domain. Under such system of gendered

inequality and subordination, millions of women face physical and social vulnerability.

Although the severity of the subordination appears diverse under different political regimes and constitutional structures, the practical ends does not show enough sufficiency. As the legal structures often does not provide an efficient barrier for cultural denial of economic and socio-political participation of women in democratic regimes; and under authoritarian regimes we face with actual legal denial in addition to the cultural denial.

The very understanding of women as *naturally untrustworthy members of society* stems from the perception of women being *morally, intellectually, and physically inferior beings*. This socially construction stems from the idea of women *being stuck in a state of perpetual childhood*, as gullible beings vulnerable to negative outside influences and actions who lack the capacity to protect themselves not just intellectually but also physically. In some societies, this understanding also is supported by the association of women with evil- in which they are depicted as temptresses, the cause of all sin.

Such understanding legitimizes the control of women by the male members of society, making them a male property in practice- to be owned, protected, acquired. Any negative act women face, any negative experience, thus regarded as a result of not just female weakness but also the weakness of male members of society who are responsible of women.

In line with such mindset, sexual assaults against women becomes a matter of societal power play among men. An act which is a demonstration of might through the violation of property of other men, or simply as a natural occurrence, an act stemming from the natural right for men to exercise due to their superiority. This is the reason why even in the societies which are considered to be most advanced, the assault of women is trivialized, where women are scolded for *what they were wearing at the time of the rape* and/or *being in the wrong place in the wrong time*. Blaming the victim for acting outside the established male rules, or simply, being present in the male domain.

Such blame also often extends to the male associates of the victim, while establishing them as inadequate members of the society who are not capable of protecting their daughters, wives, girlfriends, mothers. The male associates of the victims are blamed for failing to teach women well and to restrain their actions or seen as inferior as they could not protect them physically. Thus, such mindset normalizes this human rights abuse and often gives the perpetrator a pass while providing an alibi for their act.

III. RAPE AS A WEAPON OF WAR

THE everyday life patriarchal male power-play takes a different dimension in conflict situations as a result of gendered understandings of perpetrator and victim positions [4]. War strategies developed in such mindset, perceive rape as a powerful and efficient weapon of war that is operative for *psychological and physical destruction of the enemy*.

As a strategy for psychological destruction, rape is employed as a tool for controlling the enemy through humiliation, creation of a sense of helplessness and defeat. Sexual violence against the enemy women translates into not just harming victims as individuals, but also male members of the enemy group. Especially, in cases where women are raped in the presence of male members of the group. In such occurrences, the power play involves not just punishment and humiliation but also emasculation.

War-time rapes, although primarily targets women, are also employed as a tool against male members of enemy groups and children. Yet, the male victims frequently hide the incidents as the occurrence entitles double humiliation based on the patriarchal mindset.

In conflict zones, rapes take place through taking advantage of a coercive environment; by force or threat of force, through coercion – caused by fear of violence and detention, psychological oppression, abuse of power. Different than the regular sexual assault cases, the war-time rapes tend to be more brutal as use of objects in the act appears to be common which in cases leads to the destruction of internal organs and immediate deaths.

Targeting women in such act is also carries genocidal aims as it is perceived as the ultimate operative tool for the destruction of the enemy through bringing an end to the group's biological existence. Especially in societies where ethnicity of children is thought to be determined by the identity of the father, getting the enemy women pregnant through rape is known to be employed as a method to either prevent the victims to give birth to a baby within her own group, or to cause serious bodily and mental harm which will cause victims to not be able to reproduce.

War-time rapes, thus, became a strategic weapon to destabilize the enemy, terrorise and control civilians as well as affecting ethnic balance through provoking ethnic cleansing.

IV. SURVIVOR EXPERIENCES

IN comparison to the regular sexual assault cases, the war-time rapes differ immensely, as they are deliberate and systematic political acts [5]. As they communicate terror while aiming total destruction of the enemy, they tend to be more brutal and performed by more than one perpetrator (usually performed in the form of repetitive gang rapes where victim is kidnaped and kept hostage forced to live in inhumane conditions).

The use of objects in such acts also appears to be common which leads to immediate deaths through damaging internal organs. War-time rapes also involve severe cases of beating, punching, kicking, biting, burning, and maiming regarding physical violence. The psychological dimension, on the other hand, involves not only verbal abuses in the form of insults

and degradation but also forcing victims to perform certain acts through constant threats towards their immediate family's survival and confinement.

The victims who manage to escape during the course of conflict or in post-conflict environments, in addition to suffering immediate and grave physical and psychological harms, face with social problems stemming from the gendered stereotypes embedded in patriarchal systems. The most common physical problems in such cases are sexually transmitted infections, disability, miscarriage, infertility, pelvic and genital injuries, where common psychological problems are post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, sleeping disorders, chronic fatigue, sexual dysfunction [6].

In addition to these problems, the social myths embedded in patriarchal mindset enables further victimization of the survivors in within their own communities. Victims are frequently marginalized in everyday aspects of life, they are condemned by their own families and acquaintances, labelled *worthless* facing general stigma from the societal group they live in. Based on this patriarchal understanding on sexual violence they tend to feel shame and blame themselves for what happened to them. This practice leads to serious health consequences and carries a high potential for re-victimization. Furthermore, victims tend to be afraid of not believed or mistreated by the officials of their own community. The fear of retaliation as well as disability and young age also appears as the reasons behind the lack in reporting [7].

Many women survivors within these patriarchal settings are forced to leave their hometowns. Furthermore, in case of having children out of abuse, in worst cases, they face murder attempts towards themselves and the kids and in best cases social isolation. The reluctance of health, police and justice services and mechanism are also known in various cases in response to rape cases, as the victims are seen as unworthy members of the society due to being raped. In some extreme cases, victims are also known to be raped by the officials that they seek assistance from or forced to prostitution [8].

V. SELECTIVE CASES

JAPANESE invasions during the Second World War between 1932 and 1945 had witnessed some of the most known examples of conflict-related sexual violence in human history. During this period Japanese Imperial Army soldiers are known to establish comfort stations which were populated with more than 200.000 women from occupied countries like Korea, China and Philippines who were kept as war prisoners and systematically raped for 3 to 5 years, and many lost their lives due to abuse and torture [9]. The most disturbing occurrence of all in this time period took place during the 1937 Nanking Massacre in China where 300.000 civilians were killed in the course of six weeks and approximately 80.000 women was raped [10].

The genocidal campaign in Rwanda is another well-known historical example for this case where between April and July of 1994, Hutu groups with the aim of ethnic cleansing are known to kill 80.000 Tutsi and who they labelled as Tutsi-sympathizers, as well as raping approximately 500.000

women. The Hutu leaders are known to openly encourage rapes as a war strategy during the course of events [11].

The Congolese War, being the most recent and on-going case, is another significant case amongst many that made the humankind face with unseen/untold atrocities. The civil war in Congo which has been on-going since 1996 hold the record for the highest number of reported war rapes. The net reports of 2011 with regard to the numbers of rapes in the on-going war between the Congolese army and local militias was 40,000. It is estimated that since the beginning of the conflict, the number of deaths in Congo is 5 million and the war-rape cases are 2 million [12]. The rapes in Congo are known to be utilized not only for demoralizing the enemy but also terrorizing populations to remove them from certain lands of interest. The rape in Congo also carries disturbing cultural components as some groups believe that intercourse with pre-pubescent females bring good luck and success. Thus, the age of reported rape cases ranges from four months to 84 years of age [13].

VI. CONCLUSION

ALMOST all societal systems across the world is defined by patriarchal masculinity which establishes political leadership, moral authority and control of property as the natural privilege of men. Legitimized by the myths of *natural superiority* of men over women in terms of physical and mental capacity, this particular understanding constructs woman as individuals who lack the intellectual and physical capacity to protect themselves from outside influences, and as individuals who are evil by their nature. Although oxymoronic, these assumed realities form the basis of a hegemonic structure which establish women as the naturally untrustworthy members of human society, who shall be kept in check and controlled by men to guarantee the societal well-being.

Thriving on such gendered stereotypes sexual violence in patriarchal societies surface as a tool for male power play. A performance that communicates the message of one's superiority over another. If directed against women – sexual violence becomes a performance that is trivialized and legitimized through blaming the victim for acting outside the established male rules, or simply, being present in the male domain. A criminal act claimed to communicate a warning message to remind the expected behaviour to other woman. Yet, accordingly with the perception of women being male property (to be owned, protected and acquired); such events is not only considered as a result of female weakness but also as the weakness of male members of society who are responsible from the women. If directed against a men and children – sexual violence becomes a performance that communicates the similar message on male capacity lack.

Sexual violence surfaces as a war strategy stemming from this gendered understanding of perpetrator and victim positions. a powerful and efficient weapon of war that is operative for the psychological destruction of the enemy. A tool for controlling the enemy through humiliation, creation of a sense of helplessness and defeat. Although such acts of sexual violence can be directed against all members of the perceived enemy group; women frequently become the

primary target- which take their suffering to extreme levels in both conflict and post-conflict zones.

In effect with the increasing awareness of the phenomenon, with the international efforts towards the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1820 on sexual violence, there exist operative improvement in prevention of such acts and providing effective aid towards victims of sexual violence. Yet, prevention entitles first and foremost a change in the dominant cultural codes across the world, the removal of patriarchal mindset. Thus, although the case of how to achieve such end extends beyond the scope of this paper and requires further study, it could be stated that the continuation of international efforts through providing effective assistance, extending the monitoring and reporting mechanisms in the conflictual areas where sexual violence occurs, adapting targeted measures against state parties to armed conflict that fail to address acts of sexual violence, ensuring the trial of perpetrators as well as promoting human rights and awareness with regard to gender equality are imminent efficient steps.

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