

# Introduction:

## War, Violence and Gender in a Global Perspective: Memories and Representations in the Cases of the Algerian War, South Korean ‘Comfort Women’ and the Bosnian ‘Mothers of Srebrenica’

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Sexual violence against women is one of the most important contemporary global issues. This is illustrated by the recent development of the #Me Too movement, which spread from the United States to other parts of the world. By linking the words of women who are victims of sexual harassment and abuse, this movement has revealed the banality of rape, a crime that quite frequently remains unpunished even in countries that are advanced in terms of women’s rights like the United States and France. Critical as women’s situation in a democratic society in peace time may be, it is likely to be exacerbated in a society at war.

In the so-called post-war and post-cold-war periods, neither war nor wartime rape disappeared. In the 1990s, the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda revealed apparently new forms of war, surprising us with extreme violence against civilian populations and the use of collective rape as a weapon.<sup>2</sup> As a result, there have been many debates stressing in particular the specificity of wartime rape and the need to repress it.<sup>3</sup> In the Rome Statute adopted in 1998, rape is qualified as a war crime and a crime against humanity. In 2008, United Nations Security Council resolution 1820 affirmed that the use of rape can constitute a crime against humanity.<sup>4</sup> Over the past three decades, wartime sexual violence has become part of the international political agenda. However, the phenomenon is far from receding, and is

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Stanford University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 2006; C Chinkin, M. Kaldor and P. Yadav, “Gender and New Wars,” *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 2020, 9(1): 1, pp.1–13, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.733>, accessed 10 March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Véronique Nahoum-Grappe, “Violences sexuelles en temps de guerre,” *Inflexions*, vol.17, no.2, 2011, pp.123–138.

<sup>4</sup> This is in line with resolution 1325 concerning Women, Peace and Security of 2000.



taking place in many combat zones, where “women’s bodies have become a true battlefield.”<sup>5</sup>

Recognition of the criminal nature of wartime rape is relatively recent in the evolution of international law. In past centuries, these acts, which were generally prohibited by military norms, were sometimes tolerated, encouraged or even ordered.<sup>6</sup> Why and how has the use of sexual violence by the military been made possible up to the point of becoming a weapon? What news of sexual violence was there in the past? What were its purposes and influence? How was it described, memorised and forgotten? Through these questions, the articles seek to highlight some moments in the genealogy of sexual violence in war.

The first contributor, Elisa Camiscioli, an associate professor at Binghamton University, brings our attention to an armed conflict that a Western state, France, was engaged in not so long ago in order to maintain its colonial domination. Her article is about the French-Algerian War (1954–1962) and outrages that took place, in particular the French military’s use of sexual violence and the role of memory.

A specialist in modern France and in gender history, Camiscioli is known particularly for her work on the inter-war period and on the notion of French citizenship, in which she explores the gendered and raced dimensions in the immigration debate. In her work, she also sheds light on individual and collective trajectories that are taking shape as results of and in relation to the French colonial empire. She does this in her article, paying close attention to the life and testimony of Mohamed Garne (1960–). Born after the rape of his Algerian mother by the French military, he petitioned the French state for a disability pension as a war victim. The lawsuit was successful: in 2001 a decision by the appeal court granted him a pension, albeit modest, recognising the direct damage he suffered in his mother’s womb from the military’s mistreatment of her, attempting to provoke a miscarriage.

Camiscioli attentively examines Garne’s life story. He was born in Algeria as an orphan and once he grew up he embarked on a quest for his biological parents, before finding his mother in 1988. The analysis reveals the weight of silence surrounding sexual violence, especially in a patriarchal society such as that of Algeria. Women, who are victims of rape do not dare to talk about their experiences for fear of being stigmatised. The analysis highlights that this silence is a part of France’s collective amnesia about the Algerian war, as a series of laws were passed guaranteeing amnesties for acts committed by the French army during this war. Therefore, by acting for justice, Garne struggled against the state’s injunction to forget what happened during the war.

Following this story and reflecting on the Algerian war with abundant scholarship necessarily leads to consideration of contemporary issues. Since the end of the 20th century, international opinion has become more and more alarmed and critical about sexual violence in wartime. This has resulted in an awareness of the criminal nature of rape which has also fuelled a growing literature on the Algerian war, including Garne’s testimony. From this observation, Camiscioli shows in what sense this production helps our understanding, and especially of the complexity of memory. How can we deal with the suffering

<sup>5</sup> According to Denis Mukwege’s declaration when awarded the Sakharov Prize in 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Mariana Muravyeva, “‘Ni pillage ni viol sans ordre préalable’. Codifier la guerre dans l’Europe moderne”, *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire*, 39, 2014, pp.55–81.

of survivors, and that of children born from wartime rape? What does being healed mean and how is it possible? Garne's case seems to suggest some ways forward.

The author of the second article is Maja Vodopivec, an assistant professor at Leiden University. Her interdisciplinary training was in Peace and Conflict Studies and Japanese Studies. In 2012 she received a PhD in Global Studies (Peace and Conflict Studies) from Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. She was a postdoctoral fellow at Leiden University Institute for Area Studies (LIAS) in 2012–2013 and currently teaches Peace and Conflict Studies and Global History.

Vodopivec examines two incidents in 2015 related to paradigmatic transnational feminist movements since the 1990s and centred around issues of women who suffered from war violence. The first concerns South Korean scholar Park Yu-Ha, author of the controversial book *The Comfort Women of Empire* (2013). The author questions the conventional understanding of comfort women exclusively as victims of the Japanese military. Former 'Comfort Women' sued her for defamation in 2015, and a state prosecutor indicted her criminally. The second is the case of the Mothers of Srebrenica. Invited by the female Croatian president called 'The Queen of the Balkans', they participated in the commemoration of the military operation against Croatian Serbs in August 1995, *Operation Storm*. The operation was highly controversial because of war crimes under the command of Croatian General Gotovina. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia indicted him on war crimes and crimes against humanity charges connected with the operation. In 2011 he was found guilty and sentenced to 24 years of imprisonment but was acquitted in 2012 after an appeal. In the case of the Mothers of Srebrenica, the state primarily utilised the victims' voices to underpin its regional inter-state politics.

One of the issues that we realise through her argument is the 'nationalising' effect of the memories of victims. We hear the voices of harmed women as a collective, often national, memory. Addressing a problem as an issue of collective/national damage is the strongest strategy to bring it to international attention. At the same time, however, when suffering women's voices are treated as being of a collective nature, we should be aware of ensuing questions. First, the experiences of individual women might be erased. There may be great differences among experiences, but they might not be expressed properly. Second, the community to which women are supposed to belong might utilise women's memories for the sake of the community itself, not for that of the individual women. Third, the international community which consists of nations may accept or may deny the testimonies because of national interests. Regarding the colonial past in Asia, the Japanese government has refused to accept the testimonies and the historical facts about the 'comfort women' for diplomatic reasons. As the voices sound national, immediately the borders and walls of nations rise and the voices of women disappear.

How can we overcome this nationalising effect of memories? Yang Ching Ja's argument cited by Vodopivec might give us a suggestion. Criticising Park Yu-Ha's book, Yang claims that we can only appropriately understand the feelings and prolonged trauma of the survivors—former 'Comfort Women'—when we know the complex circumstances of the women (e.g. related to the Japanese soldiers' use of opium). These stories cannot fall into a collective/national victimhood narrative. Sometimes voices

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break the walls with which nations feel comfortable. In that uneasiness, there should be the possibility of women's voices. Through hearing the voices of women and the other victims focusing on their own experiences, and analysing gender-based violence cases historically and comparatively, we might be able to break the global international order built at the cost of victims of wartime and colonial sexual violence.