For www.openDemocracy
2010

War is social, and examining soldier identity and male bonding may give us insight into how the incidence of sexual violence in war might be reduced, says Cynthia Cockburn.

Who Do They Think They Are? War Rapists as People

Cynthia Cockburn

War is social. It may be about wounding and killing, but these actions are performed in the context of relationships between identifiable people - people who have a sense of self, and a notion of the identity of the ones they attack or by whom they are attacked. Likewise, although it goes against the grain to think of rape and sexual torture as relational, it makes sense to ask who the rapist thinks he is, and who he thinks his victim is. I was prompted to this thought by reading the words of a young Vietnamese woman as later reported by the US soldier who, with his colleagues, was about to rape, mutilate and murder her. Speaking English, she surprised them (he later wrote) by asking, “Why are you doing this to me?” You and me. She asked him in effect to identify himself, and to indicate the identity he ascribed to her. I wanted to try to answer her question, since he did not.

It is sometimes suggested in the case of rapes in peace time that some are committed by men who are clinically insane, who cannot be held responsible for their actions and about whom it makes no sense to ask sociological questions. Be that as it may, the perpetrators in that US squad during the Vietnam war of 1955-75 were enlisted soldiers, operating effectively in a military system. This suggests a certain level of social and psychic competence. Besides, as war rape characteristically is, this was a collective act. We must assume therefore that it was performed by knowing individuals, who had a verifiable subjective sense of self, enabling and indeed requiring conscious processes of identification and dis-identification with others.

A useful way of understanding identification is to distinguish between a person's sense of self, and the 'identity' projected onto her or him by other people or institutions. Identity is complex, made up of several positionings in terms of power. We may assume the soldier 'identified' the woman as ethnically inferior. He was born under the Stars and Stripes, she is a slant-eyed oriental. In class terms, she is economically inferior, worth less than him, 'worthless'. He also identifies her as a woman, to whose body, as a male in a patriarchal gender order, he feels entitled. This gender subordination is amplified by the fact that civilian status is usually perceived as feminizing by those whose sense-of-self is of being armed, of belonging to a military apparatus.

We know that processes of identification are unavoidable. They are what makes us human beings in relation to differentiated others in a complex human society. But there are a variety of modes in which we can constitute ourselves in relation to others. At one extreme we can define the self by constituting an 'other' who is totally alien and inimical, who may even have to be annihilated if one's self is to survive. At the other extreme, the self may be constituted in relation to another conceived as an individual or group whose existence validates one's own, even complements it. Usually we conceive of ourselves and others in forms somewhere between these two possibilities.

To attempt an answer to the young woman's question (how I wish I knew her name), I decided to look at instances of armed conflict in which the men of a military force abstain from sexual violence against enemy women. I uncovered research, first, on male soldiers of the Israeli Defence Force. The researcher, Tal Nitsan <http://www.anth.ubc.ca/graduates/student-profiles/tal-nitsan.html> observed that Israeli Jewish soldiers seldom perpetrate rape on Palestinian women, although the Occupation presents ample opportunity. Why, the researcher wondered, this infrequency, when the occurrence of rape of Israeli Jewish women by Israeli Jewish men is no less than that of intra-ethnic rape in other countries? And, given a record of other kinds of brutal treatment by IDF soldiers of Palestinians, why not rape? The answer, it

emerged from interviews with IDF soldiers, is to be found in a religious ethic in Judaism that constitutes Palestinian women as profoundly impure - so dirty that such physical intimacy would befoul the Jewish rapist. The IDF soldier's sense of self and other was constituted in terms of such extreme alienation that evasion had priority over subjection. Ironically, rape was averted.

The other case of abstention from rape I examined was in the case of the Vietcong forces during the Vietnam war. While not only the US but also their South Vietnamese allies, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) frequently raped Vietnamese women, those of the Vietcong very seldom did so. When rape did occur, the perpetrator was publicly shamed by his unit, brought to trial and sentenced to execution. The moral injunction in this case derived not from religion but politics. The Vietcong forces were tightly controlled by the Communist political wing of the National Liberation Front, whose cadres were involved right down to the three-man battle units in the field. While the political command did not hesitate to order brutal executions of the leaders of the ARVN-controlled villages through which the NLF troops passed, it sought to constitute soldierly identity as one involving 'respect for the people'. Though the armed conflict was deadly, Vietcong soldiers were taught to view the population among which they fought not as the enemy but rather as the masses of a future Communist Vietnamese society. The belief was inculcated that it was wrong to steal even 'a needle and thread' from a villager. To rape his wife or sister was unthinkable.

So rape is averted in these two cases, it appears, by extreme forms of identity constitution. In the case of the Vietcong, the Vietnamese woman is constituted as 'like', 'close' to the self, 'worthy of respect'. In the case of the IDF, the Palestinian woman is put beyond the pale, remote from the self, cast out from the social. Surprisingly, this process too results in an infrequency of rape, because the woman is so despised as to be sexually untouchable.

The key factor at work in both cases, it seems to me, is a further process of identification, that of the male soldiers with each other. It is well understood, not only by academics researching militaries, but by those who

train and command soldiers, that male bonding is an important social mechanism in building a strong and effective fighting force. The men must identify each other as equals, gain their sense of self from the respect their comrades accord them, and in turn achieve viability in dangerous situations from being able to identify with and trust the soldiers of their unit. This, I would suggest, is the factor that inhibits rape in both cases. The US soldier rapist with whom this story opened would be likely to gain approval and regard from his fellows by participating in the gang rape of that young Vietnamese woman. He would lose the respect he so badly needs by failing to do so. In the case of both the Israeli soldier and the Vietcong fighter, if he rapes an enemy woman he will be condemned and cast out by his comrades. It is in these details, I think, that war shows itself to be social. There may be hints in these insights as to how the incidence of sexual violence in war might be reduced. And perhaps if we learn how men can be led away from raping enemy women, we may be on the way to learning, too, how they may be led to reconsider the identification of certain men as enemies.

...

For detail and references please see the author's article 'Why Are *You* Doing This to *Me*? Identity, Power and Sexual Violence in War' published in Jónasdóttir, Anna G., Valerie Bryson and Kathleen B.Jones (eds) (2011) *Sexuality, Gender and Power: Intersectional and Transnational Perspectives.* <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415880879/>