

**Sara Merger.** *Rape Loot Pillage: The Political Economy of Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. viii, 238 pp. (\$74.00 cloth).

In *Rape Loot Pillage*, Sara Merger makes two important contributions to our understanding of sexual and gender-based violence in conflict (SGBV): first she offers an important political economy alternative to the security paradigm that has come to dominate both academic literature and policy and aid responses in the past two decades. In so doing, she redirects feminist theorizing on the subject toward a theory of sexual violence that takes into account local-to-global gendered processes.

Rather than being an exceptional, existential threat to security demanding emergency security responses, SGBV must be understood as a political problem, inscribed in a continuum of gender-based violence in war as in peace times, regardless of the effects it has on a society's "security" (p.33). As such it demands political and economic solutions aimed to address its root causes. These, in turn, are to be found at three levels, all intertwined with, and constitutive of gender hierarchy as a "structural feature of social and political life" – a phrase she borrows from Lauren Wilcox (pp. 37): at the individual/relational level SGBV is a form of interpersonal violence, which "serves to masculinize the perpetrator and feminize the victim" (pp. 106), regardless of the sex of victim or perpetrator.

At the political level, it is a means for warring groups to pursue a particular agenda and "challenge or subvert existing power hierarchies" (p. 38). Finally, in the "global assembly line" (p.37) of macro-level political economic structures, sexual violence "operates as a cog" (p. 37) to reproduce material relations of inequality between core and periphery states. Sexual violence by armed groups in civil wars of developing states enables access to commodities sought after in the global market. Thus, "far from an unfortunate side effect of globalization, violence in the 'developing' world constitutes a key component of the current global logic" (p. 50). In sum, sexual violence is a manifestation of unequal local-to-global gendered relations of power.

In stressing both the political nature and the continuum of sexual violence, Merger joins a growing literature contesting the assumptions and consequences of securitization theory, not only with regard to sexual violence in war, but in IR theory more in general. Although the securitization approach has led policy makers to reckon with the "premeditation and deliberateness of SGBV" (p.8), it has also homogenized these kinds of violence and detached SGBV from any particular context, as well as from the causes of violence in general.

Moreover, in commandeering emergency responses and resources, the securitization of sexual violence has provoked as well its "fetishization:" SGBV "has become a key commodity in the competition among perpetrators, as well as victims, communities, states, NGOs, and academics for status-recognition and resources" (p.22). In other words, Merger claims, through securitization sexual violence has become an object of media and public obsession, focusing on simplistic narratives, and clear distinctions between victims and perpetrators, commodified for public consumption. Securitization and commodification have resulted in policy responses oriented toward medical care for victims and criminal justice responses toward perpetrators, with only a quarter of international funding directed at violence prevention programs that

address the structural causes of violence. In turn, existing programs have provided incentives for local communities and combatants to use sexual violence as bargaining tools or income-earning strategies.

Merger's call for a re-politicization of SGBV demands that it be understood contextually, because it serves different purposes for different perpetrators in different types of conflict. Merger gathers a variety of sources – policy and academic analyses, court transcriptions, NGO reports – to conclude that, for example, in interstate wars the invading army employs sexual violence for opportunistic motives. Sometimes SGBV takes the form of “authorized transgression” (p. 61 – officially sanctioned, in practice tolerated), and sometimes it is used to enforce submission, but never as a primary weapon against invaded people. In civil wars with ideological objectives – as in Latin America, Sudan, Syria, and Sri Lanka – sexual violence is primarily employed by government forces and their allies for national security motives as a “strategy of suppression of the insurgent group” (p.92) and as a means to punish and terrorize those from whom the rebels draw support. Finally, in economic civil wars, the purpose of which is not to overthrow a government but rather to create the political instability and chaos necessary for the development and maintenance of a “war economy for profiteering” (p. 67), all armed groups use widespread and often systematic SGBV. The purpose in these cases – Sierra Leone, Angola, and the Democratic Republic of Congo – is to pressure civilians into complying with the armed group's economic objectives, which are often related to resource exploitation and linked to global political economic processes.

Such is the case of sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where the discrepancy between international policy and media narratives and realities on the ground is made apparent through Merger's interviews with NGO and humanitarian workers. Here, despite an international narrative that depicts rape as opportunistic, in fact all armed groups use widespread and systematic sexual violence as a weapon of terror and torture in their pursuit of economic gains, access to natural resources, and to submit and control the population to their will in the context of “an archetypal economic civil war” (p. 139).

Merger's in-depth account of rape in the DRC, while incisive in many ways, also highlights the risks of relying primarily on Western, English-language sources to understand local realities. Her depiction of Central African masculinities and femininities is at times detached from the specific historical context of colonial exploitation in the Congo which, as in other colonized areas, likely produced changes in gender relations. Perhaps this gap is a reflection of a common challenge for IR scholars, not many of whom draw extensively and inter-disciplinarily from local sources to understand local contexts. That a painful paucity of data – especially qualitative, narrative accounts – on the extent, modalities and motivations for sexual violence in armed conflict makes the typologies of SGBV that Merger outlines tentative and provisional by her own admission, is then one but not the only weakness of this otherwise important book. A greater engagement with and inclusion of studies from African scholars of gender and/or conflict would have also strengthened its analysis.

At the same time, in highlighting the political and contextual salience of sexual violence in armed conflict, this work is a stark reminder of the need to address the gendered political and economic inequalities that inform violence, as well as the violence and victims that remain

invisible when they don't fit easily in a popular grand narrative.

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