

**Wartime rape: weapon, ‘lust crime’ or an exalted form of misogyny? – an attempt to explain wartime rape, using the case study of the Rwandan genocide**

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*“Rape is a weapon even more powerful than a bomb or a bullet. (...)After rape, no one will talk to you; no man will see you. It’s a living death.”*  
(Jeanna Mukuninwa, a 28-year-old woman from DRC, cited in Gotschall, 2004)

*“...once he is handed a rifle and told to kill, the soldier becomes an adrenaline-rushed young man with permission to kick in the door, to grab, to steal, to give vent to his submerged rage against all women who belong to other men.”*  
(Newsweek, 1993)

*“Rape is a problem of organization of society.... If there is not a lot of poverty and suffering you will not see a lot of rape.”*

(testimony of a Lieutenant from DRC, quoted in Baaz and Stern, 2009)

## **I. Introduction**

Perplexed by the brutality and the reoccurrence of mass wartime rape, the author of this paper revisits some of the theories that explain the phenomenon of mass rape in conflict and compares them to the actual observed attitudes of perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide. Is it true, - as some would suggest, - that wartime rape is used consciously as a weapon to humiliate and disgrace the enemy? Do women's bodies in this way become a secondary battlefield?

This paper will argue that depicting mass wartime rape as a military strategy is an oversimplification of the intertwining psychological drama of conflict. As we will see in the Rwandan case, some part of rape is indeed directed by the army superiors, but some of it is completely spontaneous and might as well be driven by other motives. To fully understand the psychology of wartime rape, many other factors should be taken into account, such as poverty, strained gender roles and social hierarchies. It is only by understanding the real roots of wartime rape, that we will be able to address them and achieve change.

At the same time, it is necessary to look at the consequences of mass wartime rape. This not only highlights some of the security and societal issues, but also casts a light on our previous question, - if indeed wartime rape is a conscious weapon deployed by the waging parties, it must be deployed because of its desired and anticipated consequences.

In the first section, the paper discusses the worldwide phenomenon of wartime rape and its' consequences on the survivors, and the society as a whole. Next, the four main streams of theories explaining wartime rape will be presented. To test these theories, the author looks at the case of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the rape crimes perpetrated during that time. During the 100 days of the genocide, around one million Tutsis were killed, and up to five hundred thousand women were raped, and/or sexually mutilated (HRW, 1996). It was the first time in history, that the rape acts were recognised as a weapon by an international legal body, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, thus coining the term 'genocidal rape'. While Rwanda might be unique in the intensity of violence compared to the shortness of the genocide, it is also because of this reason that it constitutes an interesting body of research. As explained below, the conflict has been gendered since its inception, as caricatures and stories disseminated the archetype of the untrustworthy Tutsi woman. In this light, it is also interesting to look at Hutu women's reactions to the killings and rape of their Tutsi counterparts. One case, that of Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, the first woman to be convicted of genocide and of rape as a crime against humanity (Drumbl, 2013), is particularly well documented and shows the other side of

the coin, where women can be just as ruthless perpetrators as men. It is for these reasons, as well as a personal interest, that the author has chosen Rwanda as a case study.

The last part of the paper concludes, adding some suggestions to the academic and policy discussions around wartime rape.

## II. Wartime rape and the aftermath

*“Rape is a weapon even more powerful than a bomb or a bullet. At least with a bullet, you die. But if you have been raped, you appear to the community like someone who is cursed. After rape, no one will talk to you; no man will see you. It’s a living death.”* – testifies Jeanna Mukuninwa, a 28-year-old woman from Shabunda, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (quoted in Gotschall, 2004).

Though largely undocumented in the majority of cases, rape has been prevalent in all conflicts in human history. From the Roman mass rape of the Sabine women, through horribly vivid scenes in the Old Testament all the way to the atrocities that the Red Army has committed during the ‘liberation’ of Berlin (Brownmiller, 1975), rape remains to be an inevitable part of conflict. Wartime rape is not distinct from civilian rape, rather, as Susan Brownmiller (1975) points out it is used to measure the increased patterns and changed nature of rape committed during conflicts. In some cases, such as the abduction of the Sabine women it becomes the symbol of ultimate victory over the enemy, in others, such as the recent mass rape committed against Yazidis by ISIS it is an outspoken strategy of humiliation and dissemination of fear. (HRW, 2014). Wartime rape is in a lot of cases distinctive from civilian rape also by the brutality and the extent of it, - victims are raped multiple times, brutalised, mutilated and subjected to torture by the entering of foreign objects, such as rods, machetes and other sharp tools into their vaginas. It is only recently, that more field research has been done on wartime rape, especially focusing on its’ brutality. So, while we cannot be how brutal the acts of the Red Army were, the experiences in DRC have coined the new term of ‘rape with extreme violence’, referring to the mutilations and to forced penetrations by various objects (Mukwege, Nangini, 2009). Wartime rape thus becomes a scene of humiliation and of bonding between soldiers, or an initiation of younger soldiers. As Morrow points out (1993): *“Militarized or armed groups trained in the use of violence can exert a depraved peer pressure which lowers the group’s individual’s moral codes in favour of group bonding seen as crucial to survival. Performing atrocities/committing brutality is often part of initiation rites and can take the form of pleasing those senior to the individual, described as a type of ‘father to son approval’”* So, unlike the

majority of civilian rape cases, wartime rape is committed in groups against one or more women, men or children.

Before attempting to explain the reasons behind the nature and the prevalence of wartime rape, it is necessary to look at its consequences.

Rape is destructive for the human psyche, causing both psychological and biological distress to the victim. The weight of the humiliation associated with rape is multiplied by the refusal of society to reintegrate the victim, especially if the rape results in pregnancy. Children born out of rape are often referred to with shameful names such as “Russian brat” in German, “Devil’s children” in Rwanda or “children of hate” in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Van Ee and Kleber, 2013). The difficulties of assuming motherhood in this context will be discussed later through the Rwandan example. Adding to the, - often unaddressed – issue of psychological distress adds the biological cost of rape. This is especially severe in recent African armed conflicts, where rape perpetrators transmitted HIV to their victims, and/or brutally mutilated them.

In addition to the individual costs of rape, it is highly detrimental to the social cohesion of the community of the victims. As Denis Mukwege, the founder of Panzi-hospital in DRC, that treats rape survivors states: *"When rape is done in front of your family, it destroys everyone. I have seen men suffer who watched their wives raped; they are not mentally stable anymore. The children are in even worse condition. Most of the time, when a woman suffers this much violence, she is not able to bear children afterward. Clearly these rapes are not done to satisfy any sexual desire but to destroy the soul. The whole family and community are broken."* (Mukwege, 2007). As rape still remains a taboo, the needs of the survivors and their partners are not addressed adequately, resulting in a lot of tension and disintegration in families. This is even worse in situations, in which the husband had to witness the rape of his wife or daughter, as they can feel as if they had failed in their masculine roles of protecting their loved ones. The feeling of emasculation, as well as the social stigma of rape is well reflected in the testimony of a Congolese man, Mwira, who has participated in one of the rare rehabilitation programs offered to the partners of rape survivors in DRC. *"I was so ashamed,"* says Mwira. *"I thought I was the only one whose wife had been raped. But when I understood that others had the same problems as me, I started to understand that it wasn't her fault. And by then I started to come closer to her bit by bit."* (quoted in Baker, date unknown). Mwira and his wife are among the few luckier ones who were able to cope with the traumas, but many rape survivors and their families remain without guidance and without professional help. Behind the silence lurk all the unresolved issues, as the families struggle to build up a new life.

### III. The reasons behind wartime rape

As seen above, wartime rape is undoubtedly detrimental to social cohesion, and it punishes the enemy not only by humiliation and physical damage but also by spreading distrust inside its community. Is it knowing these impacts that soldiers continue to perpetrate mass atrocities of rape? In other words, are they encouraged to do so by their superiors with the clear strategic intent of destroying the enemy? Is rape a weapon just like any else, yet more powerful, as it destroys the atoms of society?

In the current academic literature, four main streams of explanations have been proposed to explain wartime rape. The author will briefly present these theories, offering a critique to them and then will look at the Rwandan case to identify the most relevant aspects of these frameworks. The most prominent of the theories, the *strategic rape theory* (Gotschall, 2004) supports the idea articulated above, that mass rape is a conscious weapon in the hand of the army lieutenants, who encourage their soldiers as a part of a strategy to completely annihilate the enemy. The theory, first described by Susan Brownmiller in her influential book, *Against Our Will*, has gained credibility after the Yugoslav war, and the Rwandan conflict, after which the term genocidal rape was born. Demoralization, emasculation and terror are named to be the objectives of this weapon, and it is undoubtedly true that these are effectively the consequences of wartime rape. However, just because the consequences are such there is no evidence that there is a conscious strategy behind it. In fact, as Gotschall points out (2004), in some cases rape can just as well be a bad strategy, just like in the case of the Japanese army in Korea. In this particular case, there is evidence that the army superiors were trying to stop their soldiers from committing rape, fearing the backlash of the anger of the locals. Studies suggest that this is why the much-discussed stations of “pleasure-women” were set up.

The second most widely disseminated theory to explain wartime rape is the *feminist theory*, that links the high prevalence of wartime rape to the masculine power structure. The theory, articulated to counter the argument that men rape during conflict because they are under pressure, suggests that mass war rapes are a pure expression of the wish to dominate women, which – in the midst of the violent surroundings of war – gains legitimacy. Thus, warrior rapists simply “vent their contempt for women” (Brownmiller, 1975) and express it through violent rape. Additionally, as all the frustrations of the war and loss build up, soldiers feel powerless and emasculated, to which they respond by reinforcing their ego through rape. As Meger (2014) puts it: “By physically overpowering a weaker, feminized body, sexual violence operates to reinforce the perpetrator’s masculinity at the direct expense of the social power of the victim

(male or female).” This theory has been the first that was articulated on wartime rape, and according to some critiques, as it is not based on empirical data and actual case-studies it remains overly generalising (Gotschall, 2004).

The third theory, called *cultural pathology theory*, represented by Barstow, Morris and others reaches back to psychoanalysis to identify some of the triggering causes of wartime rape. For example, Mckinnon (1994) explains Serb rapes of Muslim women as a direct impact of the spread of pornography in the region the years before the war. We will see the significance of this theory in the Rwandan case.

It is important to point out, that none of these three theories identify sexual desire as the cause of rape, in fact the first two clearly state that wartime rape has nothing to do with desire, - it is merely an expression of a military strategy on the one part, and misogyny on the other part. The fourth theory, the *biosocial theory* corrects for overlooking the biological needs and desire. Authors like Randy Thornhill (2000) offer a more nuanced explanation than the simple “biological” theories, that would state that men simply have needs that they need to thus satisfy. Biosocial theory argues that “*a prominent motive for wartime rape is the simple sexual desire of individual fighters*” (Gotschall, 2004), but that the conditions under which these desires would be expressed via rape are very much conditioned by the social environment and upbringing of the soldiers.

As we could clearly see none of these frameworks offer the one and ultimate explanation, rather they have to be combined and applied to real-life situations so as to decipher the real underlying causes. Additionally, they overlook one, very important detail: the high impunity of rape under conflict. In the confusion of a war, there is very little chance for a rape survivor to prosecute the perpetrator, or even to speak out. In this light, another factor to be taken into account the promise of sexual access to women as a motivating factor to join the army (Brownmiller, 1975). In the next section, the author will examine, based on the testimonies of soldiers and studies on the Rwandan genocide which one of these explanations apply to the conflict and the rape crimes committed during it.

#### **IV. Case study: the Rwandan genocidal rape**

As said in the introduction, the 1994 Rwandan genocide resulted in the death of over a million Tutsis, and the rape of between two hundred and fifty thousand and five hundred thousand women. The perpetrators include the Hutu militia, the *Interahamwe*, the soldiers of the national army, the *Forces Armées Rwandais*, as well as other civilians. The testimonies

collected from the survivors confirm that the rapes were done in an extremely brutal way, and often included the use and penetration of foreign objects into the victim's body, and genital mutilation (HRW, 1996). In addition to that, the rape was perpetrated as a part of a certain pattern: preceded by the torture and killing of their family members, and the looting of all the goods, the Tutsi women had to endure rape by multiple men and often were killed at the end or ended up as sexual slaves. *"I regret that I didn't die that day. Those men and women who died are now at peace whereas I am still here to suffer even more. I'm handicapped in the true sense of the word. I don't know how to explain it. I regret that I'm alive because I've lost my lust for life. We survivors are broken-hearted. We live in a situation which overwhelms us. Our wounds become deeper every day. We are constantly in mourning."* - testified one rape survivor to the NGO African Rights (quoted in Sai, 2012).

After the genocide, many returned to their original communities, just to live side by side again with those who perpetrated these brutal crimes against them and their families. Additionally, many women became pregnant as a result of rape. The Rwandan National Office estimates the number of children born thus to be between 2000 and 5000 (HRW, 1996). As the research of Odeth Kantengwa shows (2014) these children were stigmatized, and mothers had real difficulties accepting them as their own. Kantengwa bases her research on a qualitative research with fifteen rape survivors, all of whom gave birth to their "enfants mauvais souvenir" afterwards. These women give a sharp account of not only their difficulties of reintegrating, but also of their hardship of accepting their own children and not seeing their perpetrators' faces in their children's eyes. In the end Kantengwa draws an optimistic conclusion, stating that the ties of motherhood were stronger than the bad memories, meaning that the women were able to accept the children as their own. However, there is no mention on how the community has integrated them, or their mothers. Additionally, according to some estimations 70% of the survivors (and through them their children) have contracted HIV as a direct result of the rape (Landesman, 2002). Because of the stigma of rape, and a lack of resources many survivors have not been given any medical and psychological assistance. This dim overview of the aftermath of the genocide confirms the destructive nature of wartime rape that was discussed above.

Were the Hutu Interhamwe perpetrating rape with the clear intention of bringing on this situation? In other words, was this, as the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda stated *genocidal rape*, that is, a part of a well-thought and coordinated strategy aimed to destroy the Tutsis?

There is some evidence supporting the fact that the mass rape of Tutsi women was indeed a part of the well-thought strategy of the genocide. In fact, the anti-Tutsi propaganda from before the genocide was already extremely gendered (Coleman, 2002). Tutsi women were continuously portrayed as unreliable, as enemies of the state and as rejecting Hutu men, who would be below them. It is shocking to see how much this affected the perpetrators of the genocide. As Tutsi survivors recount, their violators would often come up with statements such as:

*“We want to see how sweet Tutsi women are.”*

*“You Tutsi women think that you are too good for us.”*

*“We want to see if a Tutsi woman is like a Hutu woman.”* (quoted in Coleman, 2002)

The propaganda was successful in targeting a fragile place, - and as a consequence of it Tutsi women were targeted as a way of bashing (the imagined) Tutsi superiority, but also as a way of reasserting a hurt masculine pride. The effectiveness of this propaganda is astonishing, especially knowing the number and frequency of inter-tribal marriages in Rwanda.

There is additional evidence on the strategic nature of rape during genocide. Surprisingly, it comes from the well documented case of Hutu woman officer, Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, the first woman who was condemned for genocide and genocidal rape. She repeatedly encouraged Hutu soldiers under her lead to not only kill, but rape the Tutsi women, with the intent of infecting them with HIV and humiliating the Tutsi community (Landesman, 2002). It is hard to find other direct orders for rape, but as the testimonies of perpetrators recollected by Hatzfeld suggest, Tutsi women constituted a part of the loot and thus were free for anyone to kill, rape or mutilate during the genocide. (Hatzfeld, 2003)

As we can see, a deeper analysis of a concrete case, in this case that of the Rwandan genocide shows a more nuanced image than the pure frameworks of the theories presented above. Among the motivations of the Interhamwe and the soldiers to rape we see aspects of the willingness to humiliate and annihilate the enemy (*strategic rape theory*), a clear ambition of reasserting a hurt masculinity (*feminist theory*), but also a part of considering access to rape as a reward of war (*biosocial theory*). Finally, the propaganda disseminated before the genocide has largely shaped the fantasies and acts of the soldiers, which seems to confirm the findings of the *cultural pathology theory*.

## V. Conclusion

Wartime rape is extremely detrimental both to its direct victims as to their communities. Unfortunately, although largely underreported, it has been prevalent in almost all armed conflicts. One of the most widely accepted theories trying to explain the brutality and frequency of wartime rape is to say that it is part of a well-thought military strategy to annihilate the enemy and destroy its' social cohesion (*strategic rape theory*). However, it is important to take an unbiased look at each case separately and try to identify the real causes behind these heinous crimes. This is what this paper has tried to do with the Rwandan case.

Wartime rape should be condemned more openly and frequently, and it should not be under any circumstances treated as an inevitable part of every conflict,- this approach would support impunity and might result in justifying it.

More and more efforts are made to give a voice and proper treatment to rape survivors, - a trend that should be encouraged in order to truly rehabilitate the victims and restore the social cohesion of their community. We also should not forget about men rape victims, - their stigma is even heavier, so more incentives should be given to them so that they would be able to speak up. Finally, while not forgetting about the immense trauma caused by wartime rape, in a post-conflict situation we should not solely concentrate on this. As Mertens and Pardy point out (2017), many women rape survivors in DRC would have required urgent legal help concerning land rights, as after their husband's death they were dispossessed of their own land. However, the organisations focused solely on Sexual and Gender Based Violence could not help them with that, and there was no one else they could turn to. It is always a challenge to englobe all aspects in a research or in the activities of an NGO, however we must try to have the most holistic approach possible, in order to truly help foster peace and help the victims.

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