For centuries, rape and sexual violence have been used as tactics of war. Rape itself is almost always motivated by a deep desire to dominate another. During times of war, rape and sexual violence serve a similar purpose. The exploitation of an enemy’s body is meant to demoralize those directly involved in, or associated with a particular conflict. Typically, sexual violence is reserved for females. In an attempt to express control over the enemy, the wives sisters, and mothers of soldiers are often captured and systematically raped and tortured. Women, however, are not the exclusive victims of sexual domination during conflict. Throughout history, men have been the target of equally disgusting acts of sexual exploitation. When directed toward men, these acts serve a unique strategic purpose – feminizing the enemy.

War, conflict, and even competition can be described as masculine pursuits. Masculine is not used here as a biological term. Rather, I am referring to the social construction of masculinity. In this context, masculinity is defined by tendencies toward violence and aggression. This traditional masculine ideology informs the way military endeavors are carried out. Military or political leaders who favor dialogue and multilateralism over conflict and military superiority are often characterized as soft, feminine, and unaware of how the international system actually works. War is about power, and so is masculinity. Thus, attempting to strip a male of his masculinity through sexual violence can and has resulted in perceptions of femininity and weakness on the part of the victim that can be truly traumatic. As Sandesh Sivakumaran explains, rape is carried out in defense of a power dynamic that maintains male dominance. Male/male rape is thus an attempt to emasculate and feminize men (Sivakumaran, 2005). When this sexual violence is carried out during war, it serves the purpose of humiliating and weakening the enemy. Despite its negative effects, this tactic is quite effective. Emasculating a male enemy through sexual exploitation can leave him feeling confused, weak, and hopelessly alone. In a hyper masculine military context, inflicting these feelings is, for some, a small price to pay for the reward of victory.

Although male rape has occurred in countless conflicts throughout history, it is a matter rarely discussed or addressed by traditional media, human rights groups, or other international organizations. The sexual exploitation of males is as disturbing and widespread as it is effective. Yet, despite its pervasiveness, few feel compelled to actively campaign against it. Fortunately, a few situations which were riddled with horrendous instances of sexual violence have recently surfaced. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where war has raged on for years, male victims of rape are finally being acknowledged. The sexual humiliation of male prisoners at Abu Ghraib has also been exposed, drawing international attention to some of war’s greatest atrocities. These unique situations illustrate the way that war’s ceaseless association with masculinity drives its participants to do anything and everything to emasculate their enemy.

**The Making of Bush Wives**

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is no stranger to conflict. Once Rwanda’s genocide ceased, Hutu and Tutsi militias invaded Congo’s eastern province, inciting lawlessness and violence that persists to this day. As a result of Hutu-Tutsi violence and hostilities between various groups over minerals and other resources, the Congo has suffered through years of devastating conflict. In the last decade, Congo has seen the loss of over four million lives as the country becomes increasingly fractured and dangerously insecure. Not surprisingly, this atmosphere of violence and insecurity has inspired an unprecedented amount of sexual violence. According to a director of United Nation’s emergency relief funds, rape has become a “cultural phenomenon” in the Congo (Washington Post). Unfortunately, sexual exploitation is not a new development.

In a recent expose on the rape epidemic in the Congo, Washington Time’s reporter Betsy Pisik explains the region’s long history of sexual violence. Slavers and Belgian colonists raped and tortured Congolese women for decades. Even after achieving independence, corrupt dictators allowed rape and abuse to continue with impunity. Today, the amount of rape that actually occurs is incalculable. Even conservative assessments from the United Nations estimate that 200,000 women have been raped in the last decade, while at least 40 women are raped each day in the Congo’s eastern province (Pisik, 2009). Of course, this is a shocking epidemic that requires an immediate and aggressive response. These statistics, however, ignore many of the Congo’s silent victims of rape and abuse. These silent victims are men.

In a rare publicized account, Tupapo Mukuli and Kazungu Ziwa describe being taken from their homes and brutally gang-raped by Congolese rebels. In an interview with the New York Times, both men explain being humiliated and ostracized as a result of being raped. Ziwa feels so tired and alone that he has lost all will to work. Even at a rape ward, Mukuli is isolated. As the only man among hundreds of women, Mukuli has no interest in basket-weaving (what most women do at the ward during recovery) and instead spends a great deal of time by himself, silently reflecting on his experience with sexual violence. Even more troubling was the response to both men’s rape by their own communities. Mukuli and Ziwa were laughed at and referred to as women. Some even labeled them “bush wives,” a painful reminder of what happened to the men in the bushes outside their homes (Gettleman, 2009). Unfortunately, these men’s stories are not unique. Human Rights Watch and Oxfam have noted a sharp spike in male rape in the Congo. Unfortunately, these same organizations seem baffled by the rise, and offer no speculation as to its cause.

## Although there is a great deal of confusion about why male rape occurs, it is not terribly difficult to explain. As I have argued above, war is a masculine pursuit. Dominating and feminizing the enemy is an integral part of most, if not at all, military strategies. Taking that feminization to the extreme through rape or sexual violence, although deeply troubling, serves as an effective strategic tool. This is especially true when such exploitation occurs in a country as deeply patriarchal and homophobic as the Congo. As Steven R. Tracy explains in “Patriarchy, Rape, and Heroism: Lessons from the Congo,” the Congo “epitomizes moral depravity” through patriarchy and persistent violence against women (Tracy, 2009). Moreover, according to an article published by Afrol News, “homosexuality is taboo in Congolese society and it has never been an issue of public debate.” While homosexuality is technically legal in the Congo, that legality is premised on the belief that gay and lesbian individuals simply do not exist there (Afrol News , 2005 ). This should clearly illustrate why rebel soldiers choose men as targets of their sexual violence. When a male suffers rape at the hands of an enemy, that male appears feminine or homosexual and thus incapable of defending a country or community that refuses to acknowledge the personhood of such individuals. Not only is the victim now ill-suited to stand up or fight back against the perpetrator, but he is also exiled from his community.

## Unfortunately, as a result of the patriarchy and homophobia that permeates Congolese society, men are less willing to speak out against such atrocities. According to the previously mentioned New York Times article, many men are so ashamed of being targets of sexual abuse that they never report its occurrence. Some men even overlook devastating health problems associated with the sexual violence, often resulting in persistent sickness or even death (Gettleman, 2009). Never the less, this silence is not exclusive to the Congo. Male/male rape is and has been utilized as a weapon of war in countless conflicts in numerous countries across the globe. If there is any potential for this sexual violence to end, it must first be widely acknowledged.

## Assault at Abu Ghraib

## At the Abu Ghraib prison, just a few short miles outside of Baghdad, several American soldiers ruthlessly tortured numerous Iraqi prisoners. The Abu Ghraib prison scandal is one of the most highly publicized examples of torture in modern American history. An official investigation revealed shocking reports and troubling photos that chronicled the deeply disturbing details. Though the abuse was widespread and multifaceted, one theme seemed to persist throughout – the sexual exploitation of men. The scandal illustrates the extreme drive of those in conflict to humiliate and exploit their enemies sexually in order to maintain dominance at all costs.

## This sexual exploitation is thoroughly detailed in Seymour Hersh’s article “Torture at Abu Ghraib”. Among other things, the abuse included pouring cold water over naked detainees, threatening male prisoners with rape, sodomizing a detainee with a chemical light, and forcing the prisoners into a number of compromising, sexual positions (Hersh, 2004). Hersh’s account largely relies on a report issued by retired major general Antonio Taguba. In “The Taguba Report,” he explains that “numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted on several detainees.” This was substantiated by several witness statements as well as extensive photographic and video evidence of the abuse that occurred (Taguba, 2004). A number of these detailed witness statements, once classified, have now been leaked. One statement in particular illustrates the severity of sexual exploitation at Abu Ghraib. In his sworn testimony, Kasim Mehaddi describes being stripped naked, forced to wear women’s underwear, and labeled as a “faggot” by several guards. The abuse did not end there. According to Mehaddi, several men were forced to have sex with their fellow detainees while the female guards took pictures. Even more shocking, is the testimony’s account of a young man no older than eighteen being brutally raped by an American soldier (Mehaddi, 2004). Clearly, the sexual violence inflicted by the guards at Abu Ghraib intended to humiliate and demoralize the detainees. These acts are consistent with other examples of rape and sexual abuse of men, in that they seek to exploit cultural proclivities toward homophobia and patriarchy.

## As New York University professor of Middle Eastern Affairs Bernard Heykel explains, “Being put on top of each other and forced to masturbate, being naked in front of each other—it’s all a form of torture” (Hersh, 2004). Homosexuality is opposed by Islamic law. As a result, fundamentalist Islamic societies exercise a general intolerance toward gays and lesbians. This explains why the sexual abuses carried out at Abu Ghraib, which would be characterized as disgusting from any cultural standpoint, were particularly shameful. Making each detainee a recipient of or participant in forced, homosexual acts is deeply emasculating for Arab men. Unfortunately, that is, more than likely, the reason why the torture was carried out. As I have explained above, war, rape, and power are all intertwined in these examples of sexual abuse. In order to assert their power over the prisoners, the guards did their best to strip each detainee of his masculinity with the hope that it would weaken them and achieve some broad, strategic victory.

## Femme Fatales

## While the abuses at Abu Ghraib are abnormally appalling all-around, one aspect of the sexual exploitation seems particularly peculiar. A number of highly publicized photos released following the abuse displayed a few women proudly posing with prisoners in a number of compromising positions. According to Seymour Hersh, those women were Specialist Megan Ambuhl, Specialist Sabrina Harman, and private Lynndie England. These women can be seen dragging a detainee on a leash, giving a “thumbs-up” in front of a pile of naked prisoners, and smiling as several men masturbate and perform forced sexual acts on one another (Hersh, 2004). Instances where women perpetrate these acts are fairly unexpected. Thus, when women participate in this sort of sexual violence it is particularly shocking. If the actions of these women demonstrate any one thing in particular, it is that sadistic violence is not solely reserved for men. Even more than that, it seriously calls into question what role biology plays in violent, militaristic aggression.

## Barbara Ehrenreich expands on this point in “What Abu Ghraib Taught Me.” According, to Ehrenreich “A certain kind of feminism, or perhaps I should say a certain kind of feminist naiveté, died in Abu Ghraib.” The naiveté she is referencing is the belief that women are somehow morally superior to men, somehow less aggressive, somehow not capable of the same violent exploitation. Ehrenreich further contends that simply incorporating women into political or military institutions is not nearly enough to combat the type of gruesome violence that surfaced at Abu Ghraib (Ehrenreich, 2004). This point is made quite clear through the imagery and first-hand accounts of the female guard’s participation in sexual violence. Each woman clearly played a role in humiliating the male detainees by doing everything in their power to strip them of their masculinity. A point Ehrenreich does not explore, however, is why the women carried out these acts in the first place. The answer, it would seem, is that upon assimilating into the military, and participating in war, the women took part in a culture of dominance and power that is informed by a traditionally masculine way of perceiving the world. As I have noted previously, biology is quite irrelevant when trying to understand why violence occurs. That is not to say, however, that the social belief in male superiority does not play an extraordinarily important role. It would thus seem that, at least in this particular context, the cultural notion of gender is more powerful than biology.

## The women involved in the Abu Ghraib scandal clearly exhibit how patriarchy guides the way wars are fought and won. Even though England, Ambuhl and Harman are women they clearly believed emasculating their enemy was an important and effective strategic tool. This belief illustrates the idea that wars can only be won by those that display traditionally masculine characteristics. This view has potentially drastic consequences not only for these women but for gender equality and international peace and security as a whole. This notion undermines the importance of women in international affairs and rewards aggression and violence. Unfortunately, if women can fall prey to the masculine ideology that views the feminization of men through rape and abuse as a useful strategic tool, it is difficult to hold out hope that such sexual exploitation will be avoided by the broader, significantly more masculine military structure.

## This commitment to sexual violence is articulated in a rare interview Lynndie England gave to the German magazine “Stern”. In the interview, England argues that her orders to participate in the violence came from much higher up. Despite originally feeling confused and discomforted by the acts, England explains how reinforcement from members of the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and various superior members of the military chain of command justified and even encouraged the abuse. Throughout the interview, England makes clear that these kinds of things occur all the time in war. England explains, without remorse, that she was carrying out orders that, although seemingly outrageous, are not terribly uncommon during conflict (England, 2008). While claiming that she was simply following orders does not in any way dismiss England’s actions, it does expose the ability of the military and intelligence community to cajole soldiers’ participation in rape and torture. Even further, England’s testimony demonstrates a broad commitment on the part of certain leaders of military and intelligence communities to the perpetuation of sexual violence against men. Although all the men and women involved in the Abu Ghraib scandal are solely responsible for the exploitation they participated in, it cannot be said that that exploitation was an isolated phenomenon.

## The sexual violence carried out at Abu Ghraib is signified by a level of depravity and wickedness that disgusted America and the world. Since its inception, Abu Ghraib has served as laboratory for experimentation with sexual exploitation and psychological humiliation. This particular example of sexual violence is an important one, because it illustrates the extremes to which individuals and larger organizations will go in order to feminize and emasculate an enemy during war time. Abu Ghraib is hyper-masculinity at its worst. Unfortunately, this scandal is just one of the countless examples of sexual abuse of men during conflict. Following the release of various reports and photographs exposing the abuse at Abu Ghraib outrage and indignation was widespread and highly publicized. Never the less, very similar acts of rape and sexual exploitation occur consistently across the world with little if any response from the international community. Hopefully, the world can learn from the scandal at Abu Ghraib and take note of the sexual violence inflicted on men as a tactic of war.

## A Deafening Silence

## Although much has been written about rape, especially as it occurs during conflict, scholarship on the exploitation of men is extraordinarily rare. It is difficult to understand exactly why. Certainly, it can be conceded that women become targets of sexual abuse far more often than men. Never the less, the rape and abuse of men is not an infrequent occurrence, and its consequences are equally devastating. It is too simplistic to write off this issue’s lack of coverage as ignorance of its existence. Surely, those that write about or perceive the rape and abuse that occurs in conflict situations are aware that men are often victims of sexual exploitation. So why then is coverage so limited and shallow? According to Sandesh Sivakumaran, there are essentially two reasons. The first, is that male/male rape and sexual abuse is viewed as a non-issue by an international community that pays little attention to things associated with homosexuality. Of course, the involvement of two men does not at all mean both parties are homosexual. But, Sivakumaran believes a perception that it does “taints” the cause, decreasing its importance globally. The second, more personal reason is that men often suffer traumatic disorders after being abused sexually. Men have to overcome barriers to report their rape, and are often ridiculed and ostracized after they do (Sivakumaran). Sivakumaran’s explanation of the international community’s silence is compelling and likely accurate. Yet, it does not go far enough in its examination of why exactly the international community cares so little about male victims, and why these victims feel compelled to silence themselves.

## One possibility is that the notion that men are stronger and more dominant than women is well established cross-culturally. This is, more than likely, the reason why women suffer at the hands of men across the globe. However, it is also a very plausible explanation for why extensive legal protections and academic scholarship focus exclusively on female victims of sexual violence – they are the ones the international community is interested in protecting. Traditional understandings of masculinity elevate men to the level of protectors, defenders, and the de facto leaders of homes, communities, and countries. Males are also characterized as aggressive, violent warriors. These traditional understandings of masculinity render male victims of sexual violence invisible. Very little attention is paid to those men that abandon their role as protectors by failing to protect themselves. As Katherine MacKinnon notes, "men who are sexually assaulted are thereby stripped of their social status as men.” Mackinnon further argues that the belief that sexual violence is not or cannot be inflicted upon men simultaneously obscures the reality of its occurrence and reinforces the social dominance of men (MacKinnon, 1997). In order to end this invisibility, a fundamental belief about masculinity must change. Men are not naturally or biologically superior to women, but well established social beliefs and traditions allow this gender hierarchy to persist. Unfortunately, it is this hierarchy that allows the international community to disregard the sexual exploitation of men altogether.

## Conclusion

## Rape is one of, if not the most, deplorable acts of domination. Rape is an expression of violence and power that exceeds all others in its depravity. Unfortunately, those in battle have utilized rape as a strategic weapon of war for centuries. And, contrary to popular belief, women are not the only ones victimized by sexual violence during conflict. In the Congo, Abu Ghraib, and numerous others countries and localities throughout the world, men are targeted for rape and abuse. This sexual exploitation does not occur randomly or without reason. War, like sexual violence, is an expression of power and dominance. To use male/male rape and abuse as weapons of war is to strip the enemy of his masculinity and enact the ultimate expression of strength and authority. While legal protections and medical wards may, in some ways, address this problem, they do not do enough. Traditional beliefs about masculinity must be confronted and fundamentally changed. Until that occurs, countless men will remain targets of hyper-masculinity in its most perverse and aggressive form.

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