

# NOREF Book Review

## *The political psychology of war rape: studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina*

Book by Inger Skjelsbæk  
Reviewed by Nora Sveaass

### Executive summary

“Sexual violence is a problem found in every society in the world, and all countries have to do more to tackle it at home. We have to ensure equal rights for women at every level of society, and to protect the vulnerable, most of all our children. But it is in the context of war and conflict that sexual violence is found to the most appalling degree, and on a scale most of us cannot imagine”. These are the words of the UK’s Foreign Secretary, William Hague, announcing a UK initiative on preventing sexual violence in conflict, in May 2012.<sup>1</sup>

Inger Skjelsbæk has written an important, informative and well-written book about sexual violence against women in a context of war and

conflict. By approaching this hideous crime from a political-psychological point of view, the author combines the two perspectives: the political, understanding violence as an intentional political action, dependent on shifting power structures and political objectives; and the psychological, exploring what rape in war means on a personal level for those exposed to such terrible crimes. The importance of a holistic view of war rape and the extreme trauma that this represents in a context of peace and conflict management is also underscored. Building peace in the aftermath of conflict is both a political and a therapeutic or psychosocial action.

### The reviewer

**Nora Sveaass** is a clinical psychologist who has worked with refugees and victims of torture for many years and has written extensively on issues related to trauma, psychology, political psychology and human rights. She holds a doctorate in psychology from the University of Oslo and is Associate Professor at the Department of Psychology. She conducts a research project “Dealing with the past: victims’ experience of justice in Argentina and Peru”, and is a member of the UN Committee against Torture and chair of the Human Rights Committee of the Norwegian Psychology Association.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?id=769621682&view=News>

Despite the fact that sexual violence against women has been considered the most widespread form of violence, it was not until the mid-1980s that process of defining violence against women within a human rights context actively started, with important contributions from, among others, Rhonda Copelon, frequently quoted by Inger Skjelsbæk. And it was only in 1993, during the Vienna Conference on Human Rights, when the world had become aware of the horror of mass rape in war in Bosnia, that violence against women was finally accepted within the mainstream human rights discourse as an issue of high priority. As the then Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, said on March 8th 1999, "Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation. And it is perhaps the most pervasive. It knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth. As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality development and peace".<sup>2</sup>

Today it is hard to believe that, during the wars in the Balkans, projects to support women who had been exposed to war rape in the early phase of the conflict were not supported by funds dedicated to torture victims. Rape could not be considered as falling under the category of either torture or war crime. The author analyses this historical process, and reviews the literature, from denials, and perceptions of violence against women in war as accidental, random or something that has always been there, to the international acknowledgement of rape in war as widespread and systematic, as intentional, part of a strategy, and even as a weapon or a tool in war. It is the journey from considering rape "as a crime against the honor and dignity of women" (p. 74) to rape as a crime of war and crime against humanity as established by the Rome Statutes of the International Criminal Court. This development has been strengthened further by the unanimous adoptions of UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) dealing with the situation of women in conflict. Most widely known is probably UNSCR 1325 from 2000, on Women, Peace and Security, followed by UNSCR 1820 from 2008. Here, sexual violence in conflict and in post-conflict situations was addressed and the view of the widespread and/or systematic use of sexual violence as an

instrument of conflict was established. The need to end such atrocities and to hold perpetrators to account was asserted and, in 2009, UNSCR 1888 reiterated the need to take global efforts to end violence against women and children in war. So a lot has happened. Good intentions are in place, awareness of these forms of atrocities is strengthened and ongoing violence is reported on a daily basis. However, despite this, the author argues, the violence seems endemic, it continues and it happens with impunity.

Challenging questions are raised. How is it that rape in conflict has become such a pervasive weapon of war? It is not easy to explain why aggressors in a conflict situation resort to the use of sexual violence, because intuitively it all seems so wrong. With advanced military technology one would think that aggressors preferred to use weapons which increased the distance between perpetrator and victim, but, contrary to this, the author argues, the new wars have shown a "surprising tendency of aggressors to involve themselves and their own bodies as part of the aggression" (p. 61). Rape in war has become a means of attacking the victims' identity, culture, and dignity. It represents humiliation of the family, the network and the community. As such, rape has been understood as a means of ethnic cleansing.

The review of the history of rape, and of the literature coming out of this, represents an important contribution. However, the author has, as part of her political-psychological approach, wanted to go behind the headlines, and behind the political debates and statements. The author speaks to those involved in post-conflict work and reminds them of the complexity and the different concerns that must be addressed in a reconstruction process, together with a focus on documentation as a means to obtain accountability. Accordingly, this book may also become a tool on the ground.

What are the experiences of those who have been subjected to rape in war, how are they living their lives and how are they dealing with the atrocities? It is extremely valuable that the author takes the reader into this area. A lot of literature on conflict and post-conflict situations may speak *for* and *about* but often not *with* the victims. This is done here. In-depth interviews

2 <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/1999/19990308.sgsm6919.html>

with individuals victimised by these crimes and with those who are helping them in the aftermath provide important insight. Clear voices are given to the affected women, and, by doing this, ways of thinking about this may be challenged or at least rocked a little. The stories of Danira, Azra, Ceca and Emila remind us of the deep personal tragedy involved, the extreme suffering and the challenges confronting them in a post-war society. Their voices also force us to revise some positions, in particular on victimhood, on shame, on relations and on denials. Their stories about how they see themselves as survivors, as persons dragged into war and combat without their will, that their husbands know and understand, that they were victims but also survivors – these are strong statements. Life is changed for ever, and they struggle to find different ways of defining the crime. Some good examples are offered: women exposed to rape may see themselves, or want to be seen, as soldiers, as war veterans and as survivors, and this may represent a transformation of shame and humiliation. Redefinitions such as this may change the stigma and the totally unspeakable, at least a little, in society as well as in the individual. More such ways may be found, but this may not be possible without the presence of support and social acceptance, a space where there is sufficient sense of safety to be able to move out of the dark.

Finally, accountability, justice and reparation must be part of any post-conflict project. What are the options for women raped in war to complain, have their cases heard, their perpetrators tried and punished, and themselves awarded different forms of reparation? The author refers to the very few convictions that have been pronounced for sexual violence as a war crime or crime against humanity. The burden on those who will complain or bring their story to the courts must also be taken into account. Challenges in relation to the justice system and to investigations as well as witness protection programmes are discussed.

The book is about a deeply disturbing subject. At the same time we come close to resilience and willingness to overcome, and to the importance of integrating resources as well as concerns into post-conflict development. Finally, these messages are presented together with an encouragement to move research and systematic knowledge about these crimes further, in order actively to contribute to prevention, to full accountability and to securing respect, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition to the many who have lived through the worst of crimes.