

|| Book Review ||

***Conflict-Related Violence against Women:
Transforming Transition***

Aisling Swaine. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 321 pages

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There is a blind spot in every phenomenon. Mechanisms related to violence, which are succinct, result-oriented measures, are no exception. Dealing with the three central cases of Liberia, Northern Ireland, and Timor-Leste, Swaine (2018) analyzes conflict-related violence against women (CRVAW) and explores the legal and social measures and their blind spots. The most recent and significant legal measures on CRVAW in international mechanisms is the United Nations Security Council's adoption of resolutions on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), specifically concentrating on sexualized violence during conflict, since 2000.

After centuries of a legal perception that considered women's bodies as the property of men or families of women, recent initiatives have shifted the focus to understanding the experiences of individual women who were exposed to conflict-related sexual violence. However, these recent attempts unexpectedly narrowed down the scope of violence. By acknowledging sexualized violence in different legal categories—war crime, crimes against humanity, and as an element of genocide—the laws generated a “hierarchy of violence.” That is, legal frames rank violence experiences undergone by women according to the functionality of the laws, and the typology of violence limits broader debates that are based on a holistic apprehension of violence. In such logic, “systematic public rape has been given more attention and credence than the violence that appears in women's everyday lives” (p. 11). In a similar vein, the current frames on CRVAW cause people to perceive violence as something that takes place only in the battlefield. By emphasizing “strategic rape” during the war, the violence that cannot be captured by existing legal frames, such as intimate partner violence, is often dismissed. As Swaine articulates, “in reality, the ways in which international law was constructed and interpreted could easily fail the women and girls who were experiencing a multitude of harms

that may not have been enacted by parties to the conflict” (p. 4).

Noticing this gap, Swaine explores violence in pre-, mid-, and post-conflict stages and explains violence through a broader approach. The violence taking place in pre-conflict conditions is deeply related to the one taking place in the middle of the conflict. Often, violence during conflicts demonstrates the same pattern before the conflict and takes various forms during the conflict. Unlike the assumptions of legal mechanisms to regard violence perpetrated by militants on the conflict scene, CRVAW is often the outcome of prevalent gender inequality that has been embedded before the conflict.

Post-conflict transition “tends to be presented as a move from madness to sanity, or from evil to good,” and this leads to a theme of transitional justice for the last phase of conflict (p. 267). In the post-conflict phase, redefinition of violence takes place with the labelling process, which produces new meaning for violence. The conceptual, legal, and social restructuring process shapes frames for people to understand the rampage they went through and to decide on next steps. In the process, violence mutates according to a different context.

CRVAW is multifaceted; it takes place in diverse forms over time and space. These harms are also perpetrated by diverse subjects, from parties to the conflict to the civilians who are affected by the conflict. While parties to the conflict can be easily pinpointed under international laws, civilians who perpetrate sexual violence against women may often be ignored under the “weapon of war” paradigm. Such a gap between legal and non-legal boundaries is related to the intersection area between “public” and “private,” which has been debated among feminist scholars for a long time. “Challenging definitional binaries of ‘public’ and ‘private’ violence, ... multi-purpose harms are conflict-influenced and are identified as sitting ‘in-between’ these strict categorizations” (p. 15).

Swaine assesses CRVAW through archival research and interviews with service providers at the sites of violence. While the data she employed are both quantitatively and qualitatively extensive, as Swaine admits at the beginning of the book, the only limitation of the approach may be that the voices of the victims of violence could not be directly heard. While this research method might be advantageous and safer in terms of circumventing possible ethical issues around interviewing the victims of violence, since the content is fundamentally about their experiences and the structures around them, one questions why they were not directly contacted in the first place so that their subjective voices could be included in the writing. Nevertheless, interviewing service providers is an essential process in understanding the gap between real experiences from the fields and the abstract discourses on

CRVAW.

Overall, Swaine successfully questions the predominant systems for conflict-related sexual violence and challenges existing boundaries by embracing hardly touched aspects of CRVAW. By traversing three different countries, these boundaries are crossed in terms of the times, the definition of violence and perpetrators, and the levels and types of changes. While many existing studies on women, peace, and security and gendered violence tend to linger on the canonical elements of international norms, Swaine brings her experience of working in the humanitarian aid sector to her book *Conflict-Related Violence against Women: Transforming Transition* and challenges the gaps with abundant comparative studies from three different continents and through various use of the data. With such abundant data and insights from the field, this book will be a novel guide for those who would like to explore CRVAW.

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