

Of Ruptures and Continuities: Sexual Violence in Conflict

Jelke Boesten

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In February 2016, two former military officers of the Guatemalan army were convicted of crimes against humanity based on cases of sexual and domestic slavery, perpetrated in the 1980s during the civil war. Together they received sentences of 360 years in prison, and ordered to pay reparations to the eleven victim-survivors on whose testimonies the case rested. The case, known as Sepur Zarco after the community where these crimes took place, is unique; it is the first domestic trial successfully prosecuting former military for sexual violence in conflict in the world. What happened in Sepur Zarco is less unique: the witness statements echo the experiences of women who gave their testimony to the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Committee (2001-2003), where women in embattled communities during the war between Shining Path

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and the state (1980-2000) were also systematically raped and/or enslaved. And there are other experiences; other genocides, war contexts, and rape camps in contemporary history, which would allow for a solid comparison with Sepur Zarco. Such an observation confirms the importance of the Sepur Zarco trial for the future of accountability and justice in cases of war-related sexual violence, in Guatemala, in Latin America, and indeed, globally.

The [testimonies](#) of victim-survivors in the Sepur Zarco trial against military commanders in Guatemala shows once more that rape in war has specific meanings and intentions that are informed and shaped by the specific coordinates of conflict. In the 1980s, the Guatemalan military repeatedly attacked the population of the rural community Sepur Zarco. Local indigenous leaders who were trying to get their land titled by the state were kidnapped, tortured, and killed. Women who went to search for disappeared family members at the military base were captured, beaten and raped, and enslaved as sexual and domestic servants of soldiers. Several witnesses at the trial told details about how they were raped and beaten multiple times, in front of or alongside their children, sometimes in a pit where their husbands would be held before being buried. They also told about other victims, abused, enslaved, raped and killed in their presence. The statements show a world of extreme cruelty and suffering, facilitated by racism and sexism, and encouraged by a military campaign against indigenous communities that lasted three decades. All [evidence](#) shows that in the case of Sepur Zarco, rape was used as a weapon of war: to conquer, to reinforce victory, to send a message, humiliate, and fragment entire communities, in sum, to control.

Of course, military commanders can only be prosecuted for systematic rape if we accept that rape in war is exceptional, different, and not inevitable.

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Perpetrators can only be held accountable if we recognise their *agency* in the act, their authority in allowing (or ordering) certain acts to happen. The extreme cruelty and violence that accompanies many of these acts further confirm that rape in war represents a rupture in a community's history and in the lives of both perpetrators and victims. This is not normal, and hence, we can prosecute.

And yet, there are others, including myself, who have emphasised the continuity in the history and possibility of sexual violence against women. I have argued, based on the testimonies of victim-survivors of rape in the Peruvian conflict, that while much of the scale and cruelty of these experiences were certainly exceptional and strongly conflict related, the script for these acts – immersed in racism and sexism, as in the case of Guatemala – pre-dated the conflict, and has yet to be dismantled. There is a continuum in the persistence of sexual violence against women that supersedes the categories of war and peace.

In contemporary Guatemala, around 700 women are murdered each year because of sexism, killed by intimate partners or unknown others. This is what is known as *femicidio* in the region. Impunity is not absolute, but it is certainly very high and contributes to its prevalence, as public institutions are uninterested in pursuing cases of 'private' violence. The idea that violence against women, even if so large scale as in contemporary Guatemala (or elsewhere), can be private and thus irrelevant to national security (police, judiciary, policy) is strongly tied to perceptions of women being responsible somehow for the domestic sphere, the home, including the sexual gratification of men. Women are often perceived and portrayed as somehow complicit in

their own abuse. Similar patterns of the domestication of violence are seen in conflict.

 Sculpture at Mujibnagar: A woman being raped by a Pakistani soldier during the 1971 war

Sculpture at Mujibnagar: A woman being raped by a Pakistani soldier during the 1971 war. Image by Rahat Rahim via [Wikimedia](#).

For example, women held at military bases to sexually serve men are often also required to [wash and cook](#). The Sepur Zarco case also heard a former military commissioner tell the court how the then head of the military base and the accused in the trial, Lieutenant Esteelmer Reyes Girón, ordered soldiers to gang rape a woman, and that the [Lieutenant](#) himself “took” this woman as his “wife”. In similar vein, [in the case of Peru](#), few women used the words ‘rape’ (violación) to describe their experiences. Instead, some said ‘he used me as his wife’, indicating how domestic and sexual enslavement were part of the package of abuse. One witness even stated ‘he started to beat us as if we were their wives’, further blurring the boundaries between the domestic and the political, between wartime abuse and peacetime abuse, and arguably, between husband and abuser. In Sierra Leone, and Uganda, similar patterns can be found: sexual and domestic slavery go hand in hand, and is made possible because of the peacetime structures in which women’s roles are already defined by their service to men. Hence, girls forcibly recruited into rebel armies soon became ‘wives’.

The idea that those who are violently enslaved could in fact be in a consensual relationship, albeit unequal, such as a marriage, provides a veil of legitimacy to an otherwise exceptional situation. It does, indeed, suggest a level of normality, a continuum, of life as one knows it. It might be the veil that makes survival

possible. But many victim-survivors of conflict-related rape and sexual slavery are ostracised from their communities, exposed to a postconflict life of continuous abuse from their intimate partners, or choose to hide their trauma out of fear of retaliation. The women who testified in the Sepur Zarco case either did so behind closed doors, or they hid their faces behind veils during public sessions. What happened in war might have been exceptional, but not sufficiently so to erase the suggestion of complicity entirely, less so, stigma.

In my book *Sexual Violence in War and Peace*, I identify a continuum in how sexual violence is understood and perpetrated in both war and peace, and hence, how such violence is dealt with post-conflict. The characteristics of rape regimes perpetrated by military in the high Andes of the 1980s and early 1990s showed many known features of power relations along lines of race, sex, class, age, and gender. Sexual violence, because of its intimate and potential reproductive qualities, helps produce and reproduce those unequal power relations. In war this might be strategic and large-scale, or it might be facilitated and condoned, in order to dominate over others (i.e., both to affirm power as well as subordination, both to destroy communities, as well as consolidate military loyalty and masculine strength). But in peacetime, it does the same: sexual violence produces dominance and subordination between genders, races, sexualities, classes and ages, be that catcalling, sexual harassment, marital rape or other forms of highly gendered and sexualised violence.

Understanding sexual violence along a continuum does not say anything about the gravity of the violence or even how it might be experienced. On the contrary, while recognising and naming the differences between forms of sexual violence, experiences can be named as violence and as harmful, instead of

normal or deserved. What the concept of a continuum of violence intends to highlight is how all forms of sexual violence are part of gendered social structures and patterns that have to be identified and transformed. Highlighting, combatting and prosecuting rape in war should arguably be part of a similarly linked set of measures that aim to eradicate gender inequality and the (often intersecting) violence with which such inequality is maintained and perpetuated, be that in war or in peace, at the level of families or in public space, in Guatemala or in the UK.

Thinking in terms of a continuum does not aim to minimise rape in conflicts, gang rape, or the femicides we are seeing particularly in parts of contemporary Central America. But it gives us an analytical tool that allows us to connect sex, male violence, and gender inequality, both in the everyday as well as during armed conflict. Thinking in terms of a continuum allows us to see how much violence is hidden, institutionalised, and/or normalised in everyday life, both in peacetime and wartime, in homes, in intimate relationships, and in public spaces. The term allows us to see parallels between the extreme and the everyday, the public and the private, thereby not undermining the seriousness of the extreme, but undercutting the normality of the everyday.

As such, the Sepur Zarco case is a milestone, and is hopefully a further step towards accountability for acts of sexual violence, and more broadly, gender-based violence, in both war and peace, in Guatemala and beyond.

Jelke Boesten is Reader in Gender and Development at International Development Institute, King's College London.

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101 Clerkenwell Road London
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