

# Exploring Explanations of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Men

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## Abstract

Recently, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) has been recognized as a major global security issue. In most of the existing literature CRSV has been separated into two categories: 1) opportunistic and 2) strategic and systematic. Critical feminists have argued that we should step away from this binary framing of the problem, but research on CRSV against men has hardly been included in the literature. The dynamics of CRSV against men are complex, but until now the problem has mostly been framed as strategic/systematic. In this paper, I will study how CRSV against men fits within the strategic and opportunistic frames of CRSV. I found that male-directed CRSV can be both strategic and opportunistic. Besides this, I found explanations that go beyond these binary framing and therefore to move away from heteronormative binary grids of CRSV against men. By identifying these explanations, this study contributes new insights to the ongoing debate on male-directed CRSV.

## Evidence for Practice

- Conflict-related sexual violence is mostly framed as either the ‘sexed story’ (opportunistic) or the ‘gendered story’ (strategic). These heteronormative, binary framings are disproportionately negative against non-females, including men, and reduce sexual violence to merely an instrumental by-product of war.
- Strategic sexual violence is seen as the sole explanation for conflict-related sexual violence against men, completely disregarding the possibility of sex and sexual pleasure. This dominant framing limits the possibility to understand the complex dynamics of conflict-related sexual violence against men.
- I present stories of sexually violated men that are inconsistent with the dominant framing of conflict-related sexual violence against men and show that sexual violence can be about strategy, opportunism, pleasure and power.

**Keywords:** Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), male victims, strategy-opportunity paradigm, sex, pleasure, power

## Introduction

Due to the work of feminist International Relations scholars over the past decades, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) is now widely understood as an important global security problem (e.g., Cohen, 2013; Enloe, 2000; Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2013; Meger, 2010; Shepherd, 2008; Wood, 2014). The causes of and motivations for CRSV have been broadly framed in two ways: 1) opportunistic; 2) strategic and systematic. Critical feminist IR scholars argue that we should step away from these binary framings and emphasize that something as complex as wartime rape could have a variety of explanations (Cohen, 2016).

While these scholars have dismantled the binary grids within CRSV, research on CRSV against men has been insufficiently incorporated in the literature (for feminist research that has explored sexual violence against men see e.g., Askin 1999, 2003; Jones 2002, 2006; Féron 2018; Mounthaan 2013; Sivakumaran 2007; Schulz 2021). This is mainly caused by the fact that women and girls are disproportionately affected by wartime sexual violence and the overwhelming stigma and shame surrounding men (Lewis, 2010, p. 9.). This is problematic because an increasing body of evidence has shown that the victimization of men is much higher than assumed (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2010; Johnson et al., 2010; Lewis, 2010; Touquet and Gorris, 2016; Solangon and Patel, 2012). Besides this, CRSV can serve multiple purposes and have multiple explanations (Schulz and Touquet, 2020), but CRSV against men is merely framed in the 'strategic/systematic' form (e.g., see Sivakumaran, 2005; Meger, 2018; Féron, 2018) – often in public and/or performative ways (Drumond, 2018).

In this study, I will explore the question of how CRSV against men fits within the strategic-opportunism paradigm. Through the review of existing literature on the subject and the performance of a critical feminist discourse analysis of 30 testimonies of male Sri Lankan victims of CRSV, I found that CRSV against men can be explained through and beyond strategic *and* opportunistic frameworks. The dynamics of male-directed CRSV are very complex and do not fit as easy in these binary terms as presumed. To support this, I will first explore the existing explanatory frameworks of CRSV in general, and in particular against men. Second, I will present background information and methods for my discourse analysis. This is followed by the analysis

and results. I end this paper with a conclusion, summarizing the most important findings, and discussing future research.

## Existing theories on conflict-related sexual violence

In this article the terms 'rape' and 'sexual violence' will be used somewhat interchangeably, although rape, the penetration of the vagina, anus, or mouth with a penis/object (International Criminal Court, 2013, p. 5), is only one form of sexual violence, which entails a broader set of actions, such as enforced sterilization, public nudity, and genital mutilation (Clark, 2017). Conflict-related sexual violence, therefore, is sexual violence directly or indirectly related to a conflict (United Nations, 2020, p. 5).

One of the main discussions on CRSV in IR centers around its causes and motivations, which are often categorized as either strategic or opportunistic (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2013). Strategic sexual violence refers to sexual violence that is purposefully used to achieve organizational objectives (Autesserre, 2012), whereas opportunistic sexual violence is "carried out for private reasons rather than organizational objectives" (Wood, 2014, p. 47). Furthermore, strategic sexual violence has been linked to clear commands from commanders, where opportunistic sexual violence has not. Sexual violence can also manifest as a prevalent policy or practice within armed groups, where sexual violence is not 'officially ordered', but it is condoned and perpetuated, and so occurs on a regular basis (Schulz and Touquet, 2020, p. 1172). The two most common explanatory frameworks for CRSV are coined by Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2013) as the 'sexed' (opportunistic) and the 'gendered' (strategic) story. In the 'sexed story' rape is seen as natural to war because war is (presumably) committed by men, and because men are "subject to their biologically driven heterosexual needs", they rape (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2013, p. 17). A second explanation for 'opportunistic' or 'recreational' rape is that war eliminates all societal constraints, which causes men to become the 'sexual animals' they 'naturally' are or can be (ibid.). These explanations follow an essentialist reasoning that all men are biologically potentially rapists. The 'sexed story' is thus organized around the idea of the 'natural' force of male heterosexuality. Eriksson Baaz and Stern

resonate with other critics that the ‘sexed story’ is sex-essentialist and deterministic. Besides this, the story is inherently heteronormative, categorizing men as predators and women as victims. This is unequally negative towards anyone who is not considered ‘female’, because it implies sexual violence only happens against women and by not recognizing non-female victims their suffering remains a “marginal concern to international policy” (Grey and Shepherd, 2012, p. 116), which has significant implications for the institutions that are set up to support e.g., male victims of CRSV.

The ‘gendered story’ can be seen as a critique of the ‘sexed story’ that attempts to illuminate the role of gender ideologies for the ‘use of’ sexual violence in armed conflict. Rape, in this story, is dominantly framed as a ‘weapon of war’. This ‘weapon of war’ paradigm is heavily influenced by the United Nations Women, Peace and Security agenda, which was the first to frame CRSV as such (Hagen, 2016; Kirby and Shepherd, 2016). Here, rape is conceived as ‘instrumental to, rather than a mere by-product of, armed conflict’ (Buss, 2009, p. 148) and as “an effective tool of humiliation and intimidation” (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2013, p. 19). The ‘gendered story’ has no essentialist assumptions but focuses on the logic of militarization and hegemonic masculinity that teach men to be violent in military settings. In contemporary scholarship and policymaking, the ‘rape as a weapon of war’ narrative underpins the dominant framing of CRSV (ibid.).

Both stories can be criticized for failing to address the relationship between structural gender inequality and political violence. Moreover, contemporary scholarship appears to eliminate sexuality from discourses of CRSV by focusing largely on gender as opposed to sex, particularly in the case of male-directed CRSV (Schulz and Touquet, 2020, p. 1174). Although there are scholars who advocate for different explanations (e.g., Cohen, 2016; Dolan et al., 2020; Njoku and Dery, 2021), most of the existing literature on CRSV against men is theoretically and empirically underdeveloped, focusing almost exclusively on the ‘gendered story’ of sexual violence (Schulz and Touquet, 2020). Sivakurman, for instance, argues that male-directed “rape is about power and dominance and not about sex” (Sivakurman, 2007, p. 272). By doing so, he ignores sexuality and sex as reasons of male-directed sexual assault. Like Sivakurman, some scholars suggest that the most

common driver of CRSV against males is the emasculation of men's identities by feminizing or homosexualizing them (Njoku and Dery, 2021; Hagen, 2016). These analyses situate sexual violence against men mainly in the public realm, “focused on context of detention”, while sexual violence against women is said to occur in the public and the private sphere, along with ‘in-between’ spaces (Schulz and Touquet, 2020, p. 1176).

By erasing the opportunistic frame from the discourse on male-directed CRSV, the literature fails to address how sexual pleasure and desire can interact with aggression and dominance (Dolan et al., 2020). This is partly because feminist scholars have thought long and hard to erase the idea of ‘the sexual’ (sexuality, pleasure, desire, eroticism, etc.) from CRSV. Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2018), however, argue that *theorizing* ‘the sexual’ away from sexual violence leads to a lack of understanding the ways “perpetrators say they harm, and survivors feel harmed” (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2018, p. 297). Additionally, they state that this way the notion that peacetime rape is *not political* and wartime rape is *not sexual*, is reinforced. In line with this, other scholars like Sjoberg (2016), Eichert (2018) and Gray (2018) advocate for the use of ‘the sexual’ in explanations of CRSV, including CRSV against men.

## Empirical evidence

To address the discordances in the literature, I will present an example of CRSV against men in Sri Lanka that contrasts with the dominant framing of CRSV as strategic/systematic (the ‘gendered story’). By doing so, I aim to identify broader patterns in or explanations for CRSV against men that question and complicate the dominant stories. Before presenting the results of my study, I will give a quick overview of the background of the Sri Lankan case and the used methods.

## Background

In July 1983, a Sri Lankan military convoy was ambushed by members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a militant organization with the aim of securing an independent state, Tamil Eelam. This triggered anti-Tamil riots which resulted in the death of hundreds of Tamils. Black July, as the incident is often referred to, was the

start of a 26-year-long armed conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. On May 18, 2009, the government declared victory over the LTTE (Human Rights Watch, 2013, p. 12). During the conflict, Sri Lankan security forces have committed sexual violence against women, girls, men, and boys (Amnesty International, 1999, 2002; Human Rights Watch, 2013; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015). In 2000, the rape of male detainees by security forces was first acknowledged in a medical review, which revealed that at least 20 percent of 184 male detainees had been sexually violated during detention. Since then, reports of past and continuing sexual violence keep emerging (idem, p. 20).

## Methodology

To inquire if male-directed sexual violence can be both strategic and opportunistic, I will carry out a discourse analysis on 30 testimonies of Sri Lankan male victims of rape and sexual violence between 2006 and 2012. The discourse analysis will be carried out using the computer software *Atlas.ti*. Discourse assumes that language has the power to steer what people consider 'neutral' or 'normal' (Brass, 2000). Critical feminist discourse analysis seeks to advance a deep and nuanced knowledge of the intricate interactions between ideology and power in discourse that support (hierarchically) gendered social structures (Lazar, 2007). It is important to remember that I, as a researcher, am the one interpreting text and thus giving meaning to it. My positionality therefore will affect the outcomes of this study. During the coding process, I will pay attention to indicators of both strategic and opportunistic forms of sexual violence.

Due to geographic and time restrictions, I am not able to carry out interviews myself and am therefore dependent on public data. I specifically chose to examine male victims of sexual violence during the civil war in Sri Lanka because this is one of the few conflicts on which data are publicly available. The dataset I will use is from the Human Rights Watch (HRW) report *We Will Teach You a Lesson* (2013). Between November 2011 and December 2012, HRW collected interviews in multiple countries with 68 victims (27 men, 38 women, and 3 boys), all ethnic Tamil, who claimed to have been sexually violated by members of the Sri Lankan security forces between 2006 and 2012. HRW took serious measures to ensure the victims' safety and comfort, such as substituting

information that could endanger them or their families for fake information (HRW, 2013, p. 10).

## Analysis and results

In this section I present the findings of the discourse analysis. I found three evident textual patterns of CRSV against men: strategic and systematic violence, private sexual violence, and the possibility of pleasure and power. In the following paragraphs I will discuss these patterns in turn.

### *Strategic and systematic violence*

The interviews clearly illustrate a story of CRSV that matches the dominant narratives. In all testimonies, I found various forms of male-directed sexual violence, including rape. All victims report to have been sexually violated while being questioned about their involvement with the LTTE. This is in line with the literature on sexual violence that sees it as a strategic and instrumental part of conflict to humiliate – “They sexually assaulted me. It was clearly done to humiliate me.” (SA, 2012) – and intimidate victims (Buss, 2009; Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2013). Almost every interrogation started with stripping the victims from their clothes, making forced nudity the most common form of sexual violence. After this, the interrogating officers often went on to mutilate the victims' genitals.

In 13 cases, men were raped during interrogation, which suggests strategic behavior. Three of them reported being sexually violated or raped with objects, such as wooden sticks, metal wires and pipes. Most survivors said they signed a confession confirming their links to the LTTE, in the hope the rapes would stop. This is a great example of sexual violations being about power/dominance and strategy and not about sex (Sivakurman, 2007, p. 272). Yet merely one states that “The sexual abuse by the officials stopped after I signed the confession” (KP, 2011). While another said that the rapes continued after he signed the confession (DK, 2011). Despite this, the fact that these men signed statements with the idea the rapes would stop, suggests that they themselves thought of the rapes as strategic.

## ***Private sexual violence***

The predominant idea in the literature is that female-directed sexual violence can happen in public, private or in-between spaces, but male-directed sexual violence only happens in public, focused on contexts of detention (Schulz and Touquet, 2020, p. 1176). Contrasting to this narrative, I found that in more than half of all cases, victims were raped in their cells/rooms or taken to the “private room” of a high ranked official (PR, 2012) or “an abandoned motel” (SA, 2012). Some could argue that this still happened in a context of detention, but if cells do not count as private, they at least can be categorized as ‘in-between’ spaces. These examples also demonstrate that the abusers were not deliberately trying to ‘perform’ sexual violence, as the literature would expect in cases of male-directed sexual violence (Drumond, 2018). One victim specifically said that he was raped at night by drunk men who interrogated him during the day (BL, 2012), suggesting that the rapes were not part of the official interrogation but rather a personal act. Other victims also stated that their abusers were under influence of alcohol and wore civilian clothing. This also indicates that the rapes were more ‘opportunistic’ than ‘strategic/systematic’.

One survivor’s testimony illustrates the ‘systematic’ use of sexual violence by interrogating officers and ‘opportunistic’ use by prison guards. While interrogators would rape him during questioning, the prison guards would rape him at night in his cell (KP 2011). The latter is not part of ‘official commands’, but rather condoned and perpetuated and therefore occurs regularly (Schulz and Touquet, 2020, p. 1172). This is also confirmed by another victim stating, “Everybody knew that when he takes someone out of the cell, he rapes them” (PR, 2012), implying nobody did anything to stop him.

## ***The possibility of pleasure and power***

Closely related to the occurrence of rape in a private setting is the possibility of pleasure. Sexual pleasure and desire are mostly absent from studies on CRSV against men. As said, sexual violence after interrogation in a private setting suggests opportunism. The fact that many victims were raped alone in their cells outside of questioning, suggests that the perpetrators did this at least partially for their own sexual pleasure. There are

instances where army officials or guards performed oral sex on their victims (KP, 2011) or performed sexual acts in front of them (DS, 2011). There is no evidence that these acts were connected to official interrogation in anyway. I, therefore, believe these actions are part of what we would call ‘the sexual’ (i.e., sexual pleasure, desire, eroticism, etc.) (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2018) and not so much of the strategic/systematic frame. Eriksson Baaz and Stern explain a paradox where it is possible that an “assailant has had sex with the victim, but the victim has not had sex with the assailant”. In this case I consider it possible that rape is a sexual act, because ‘the sexual’ in this reasoning refers to “the one-sided experience of sex” (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2018, p. 301).

Existing theories pose that emasculation and homosexualization of men are the most common driver of CRSV against men (Njoku and Dery, 2021). However, this appears not necessarily true in this case. To illustrate, one survivor said that a male army official showed him ‘naked photos of Asian girls’ and made fun of him when he was aroused (PT, 2012). The army official deliberately did this to humiliate the victim, but by showing him pictures of naked girls there is no intention of homosexualizing him. In this case, the humiliation does not seem to be of strategic use, but rather for the amusement or ‘pleasure’ of the officer.

Another survivor has reported to have been raped by two female police officers. These women did not interrogate the victim but raped him at night and threatened to torture the victim if he did not cooperate (LB 2011). This case seems opportunistic and has nothing to do with homosexualization. In both cases, there is no clear systematic behavior, but there is an evident link between power and sex. The guard, as well as the female police officers, use their position of power to abuse the detainee, outside of particular orders or commands. What is also striking about the last case is that, even though it seems opportunistic, it does not fit within the heteronormative stereotypes of the ‘sexed’ story, where men are immoral predators and women are harmless victims. This finding thus complicates the dominant way gender is understood in the context of CRSV.

As such, the first pattern I identified and analyzed here corresponds to the dominant notion of what CRSV against men drives and what it entails. The other two patterns are inconsistent with this narrative and attest to how complex and

multicausal the male-directed CRSV can be. They go against the idea that sexual violence against men is always situated in the public realm, used to communicate or perform a message to others. Besides this, they show that the sexual abuse males suffer is not strictly about emasculating them but can be about sex, pleasure, power or a combination of them. While there are various explanations for the sexual violence victims have experienced, power seems to be a prevalent theme throughout all of them. This analysis thus illustrates that both the ‘gendered’ and the ‘sexed’ story are present within the dynamics of CRSV against men, whilst also recognizing that the explanations of male-directed CRSV even go beyond this binary framing.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have investigated how conflict-related sexual violence against men fits within the strategic-opportunism paradigm. While existing scholarship frames male-directed CRSV as generally strategic and distinct from any form of sex or pleasure, I found that the explanations of CRSV against men are perceptibly more complicated than that. My analysis – which is consistent with earlier research on the subject (e.g., see Féron 2018; Njoku and Dery 2021; Schulz 2021) – of 30 testimonies of sexually assaulted

men, demonstrates that strategy, opportunity, sex, pleasure and power are all part of CRSV against men and that we should move beyond existing heteronormative binaries. First, my evidence has shown that sexual violence and rape can be used in strategic ways to extract confessions from detainees and humiliate them. Second, my research illustrates that male-directed sexual violence often takes place in ‘private’ or ‘in-between’ spaces, out of the public’s eye; can be about (sexual) pleasure, frequently evoked by unequal power relationships; and does not always fit within either strategic or opportunistic framings.

For this reason, I recommend that future research on CRSV against men does what Schulz and Touquet (2020) call ‘queering’ explanatory framings of sexual violence. By ‘queering’ they mean “disrupting heteronormative frameworks based on strict binary and dichotomous conceptions of sex and gender” (Schulz and Touquet, 2020, p. 1171). Besides incorporating men in the study of CRSV, this also means including the LGBTQ+ population (Hagen, 2016). I believe that in future research, feminist scholars should avoid thinking in binary grids of strategic versus opportunistic or male versus female and stay open to a broader realm of explanations.

### A note from the author

Amara Boumann is a Political Science student at the University of Amsterdam. The only thing (academically speaking) she loves more than writing, reading, and debating about politics, feminism and (in)equality, is adding words to sentences that are already too long and exceeding every word limit she gets. She is an aspiring journalist and hopes to complement her bachelor’s degree with masters in Political Communication and in Journalism and Media.



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