

What is sexual about conflict-related sexual violence?

Stories from men and women survivors

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‘I have been asked about, and thought over the question, can you really ejaculate (which the perpetrators do) unless you feel desire?’¹

In focusing on the horror sexual abusers inspire, it is easy to be deaf to cries of their victims: ‘Why are *you* doing this to *me*?’²

Given the global prominence that the problem of widespread conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) has recently attained, it might seem unproblematic to discern what is sexual about sexual violence (SV) in conflict settings, and along a continuum of violence spanning war and peace. Yet there is a growing sense among scholars and policy advocates alike that, despite years tussling over definitions of rape and determinants of consent in both legal and academic spaces, we still know little about what is sexual about sexual violence, according to whom, or why and how this matters in our efforts to prevent and redress its harms.³ While connections between violence and the sexual (the erotic, desire, pleasure, etc.) have generated sustained enquiry in many fields of study, answers to the questions ‘What makes SV sexual?’ and ‘According to whom?’ remain extremely meagre, particularly in relation to CRSV.

This article therefore joins the growing body of SV research that sets out to disrupt clear distinctions between peacetime and wartime logics and effects,⁴ and to call for a retheorizing of the sexual in CRSV.⁵ This expanding theoretical,

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¹ Author interview, Kampala, 2016.

² Joanna Bourke, *Rape: a history from 1860 to the present day* (London: Virago, 2007), p. 413 (emphasis in the original).

³ See also Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, ‘Curious erasures: the sexual in wartime sexual violence’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20: 3, 2018, pp. 295–314.

⁴ Attention to the perception of certain acts of violence as ‘conflict-related’ and others as not lies beyond the scope of this article, although we recognize such distinctions as both political and contextual.

⁵ e.g. Linda Alcoff, *Rape and resistance: understanding the complexities of sexual violation* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018); Bourke, *Rape*; Paula Drummond, ‘What about men? Towards a critical interrogation of sexual violence against men in global politics’, *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, pp. 1271–87; Eriksson Baaz and Stern, ‘Curious erasures’; Holly Porter, *After rape: violence, justice, and social harmony in Uganda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Paul Kirby, ‘The body weaponized: war, sexual violence and the uncanny’, *Security Dialogue* 51: 2–3, Nov. 2020, pp. 99–118; Holly Porter, ‘Rape without bodies? Reimagining the phenomenon we call “rape”’, *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 25: 4, Dec. 2018, pp. 589–612; Philipp Schulz, ‘Displacement from gendered personhood: sexual violence and masculinities in northern Uganda’, *International Affairs* 94: 5, Sept. 2018, pp. 1101–119; Laura Sjoberg, *Women as wartime rapists: beyond*

political, legal and ethical imperative resonates with increasing efforts in advocacy and activist circles to ‘break the silence’ and insist that survivors’ collective and singular experiences of *sexual* violence be heard; and that more inclusive understandings of these experiences be reflected in adjudication, and in designing support services for victims.⁶

This article, therefore, turns to survivor accounts to explore some of the ways in which survivors comprehend—and indeed theorize—the sexual in SV.⁷ In an analysis based on in-depth and focus group interviews at the Refugee Law Project (RLP) in Uganda with both men and women survivors of CRSV,⁸ we focus on how survivors speak about *what was sexual or not* about the violence to which they were subjected. We thus explore how they understand the possible imbrication of the perpetrators’ erotic desire and pleasure with the violence inflicted,⁹ as well as how they deem such intermeshing impossible or deeply problematic in relation to the gendered frames that govern their own thinking about distinctions and linkages between violence and sex, as well as about themselves as sexual, social and embodied subjects.¹⁰

Painstaking advocacy and community work across the globe have rendered accounts of survivors of SV in both wartime and peacetime settings utterable, visible and audible. This work has also made clear that, while many accounts resonate across contexts and history, the experience of SV and its harms also remains highly specific and particular.¹¹ Nonetheless, too little is known about how CRSV survivors themselves make sense of what may or may not be sexual about the violence inflicted upon them.¹² Indeed, surprisingly little attention has been paid *at all* to how survivors of CRSV themselves comprehend perpetrators’

sensation and stereotyping’, ‘Gender and political violence’ series (New York: New York University Press, 2017); Heleen Touquet, *Unsilenced: male victims of sexual violence in Sri Lanka* (Johannesburg: International Truth and Justice Project, 2018); Gaby Zipfel, Regina Mühlhäuser and Kirsten Campbell, eds, *In plain sight: sexual violence in armed conflict* (New Delhi: Zubaan Academic, 2019); Camile Oliveira and Erin Baines, ‘Children “born of war”: a role for fathers?’, *International Affairs* 96: 2, March 2020, pp. 439–56.

⁶ ‘Women’s Initiatives for Gender Justice ... an international human rights organisation advocating for gender justice through the International Criminal Court (ICC) and national mechanisms ... launched the *Call it what it is* campaign in December 2018 with a goal of enhancing the understanding of what may constitute an act of sexual violence, and subsequently increasing accountability for ... CRSV’: Women’s Initiatives for Gender Justice (WIJG), ‘Civil Society Declaration on Sexual Violence’, 2019, <https://4genderjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/English-Civil-Society-Declaration-on-Sexual-Violence.pdf>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 25 May 2020.)

⁷ See also Alcoff, *Rape and resistance*, pp. 198–9.

⁸ In the remainder of this article, we refer to the individuals we interviewed as ‘survivors’, as this is how they label themselves through their group affiliation, and also as ‘participants’.

⁹ The article also builds on previous research that explores accounts of their motives given by perpetrators in the Congolese national armed forces, e.g. Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, ‘Making sense of violence: voices of soldiers in the Congo (DRC)’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 46: 1, 2008, pp. 57–86 at p. 77; Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, ‘Why do soldiers rape? Masculinity, violence, and sexuality in the armed forces in the Congo (DRC)’, *International Studies Quarterly* 53: 2, 2009, pp. 495–518. We are not aiming to arrive at a definitive answer to the question of perpetrator motive, or even to show correspondences between perpetrators’ views of their motives and survivors’ views. Nonetheless, as the accounts largely reflect experiences of violence inflicted by armed forces in the DRC, we reflect on some similarities in our analysis.

¹⁰ See also Philipp Schulz, ‘The “ethical loneliness” of male sexual violence survivors in northern Uganda: gendered reflections on silencing’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20: 4, Oct. 2018, pp. 583–601.

¹¹ Alcoff, *Rape and resistance*.

¹² See also Porter, *After rape*; Schulz, ‘Displacement’.

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motives or experiences,¹³ and how this interpretation of their perpetrators in turn influences their perception of themselves as victims. This, we believe, has to do, at least in part, with the framing of CRSV in scholarly, policy and media arenas alike as a weapon or tactic of war decidedly *not* motivated by sexual desire or pleasure.¹⁴ In this deeply established framing, which remains dominant despite a growing body of critique,¹⁵ CRSV appears as already somehow known and understood, thus foreclosing, or at least deflecting, critical enquiry into survivors' lived experiences and the ways in which they attempt to make sense of them.

Why is it important to understand how someone understands the violence enacted against them—whether or not this understanding resonates with motives or experiences recognized by perpetrators themselves? First and foremost, frames of understanding CRSV matter in survivors' attempts to find ways to rebuild their everyday lives and selves in the aftermath of violence through collective and individual meaning-making.¹⁶ These context-specific understandings can also resonate with wider, often globalized frames, which, as Alcoff (citing Medina¹⁷) notes, 'echo' in different ways in the 'feedback loops' involving 'cultural conventions, discourses, beliefs, and practices',¹⁸ and inform the sense imparted to particular and complex experiences. Meaning-making about the sexual in the violence inflicted is a key to better understanding the myriad dimensions of SV: its rationales, harms and effects, and the 'affordances' of self-making it occasions.¹⁹ Taking seriously how survivors theorize connections between, for instance, violence, erotic desire and pleasure in relation to *their* experiences and subsequent narration of specific violence helps us reflect upon and critically revisit how certain conceptualizations of SV (mis-)shape laws, policy and services, compounding the gendered and racialized subjectification of both survivors and perpetrators. It also provides vital knowledge for thinking about possible interconnections between the sexual and violence—not to arrive at a 'global dictionary'²⁰ emerging from universalizing ideas about the western psyche,²¹ the sexual²² and violence,²³ but to understand better these interconnections in all their complexities, and to design

¹³ Cf. e.g. Kirsten Campbell, Elma Demir and Maria O'Reilly, 'Understanding conflict-related sexual violence and the "everyday" experience of conflict through witness testimonies', *Cooperation and Conflict* 54: 2, June 2019, pp. 254–77.

¹⁴ Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 'Curious erasures'; Gaby Zipfel, 'What do bodies tell?', in Zipfel et al., *In plain sight*.

¹⁵ See e.g. Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, *Sexual violence as a weapon of war? Perceptions, prescriptions, problems in the Congo and beyond*, 'Africa now' series (London: Zed, 2013).

¹⁶ See e.g. Veena Das, *Life and words: violence and the descent into the ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Didier Fassin, 'The trace: violence, truth, and the politics of the body', *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 78: 2, 2011, pp. 281–98; Harriet Gray, Maria Stern and Chris Dolan, 'Torture and sexual violence in war and conflict: the unmaking and remaking of subjects of violence', *Review of International Studies* 46: 2, Dec. 2019, pp. 1–20; Carine M. Mardorossian, *Framing the rape victim: gender and agency reconsidered* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

¹⁷ José Medina, *The epistemology of resistance: gender and racial oppression, epistemic injustice, and resistant imaginations* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁸ Alcoff, *Rape and resistance*, pp. 10–11, citing Medina, *The epistemology of resistance*.

¹⁹ Alcoff, *Rape and resistance*, p. 43.

²⁰ Alcoff, *Rape and resistance*, p. 148.

²¹ Cf. Joanna Bourke, 'Introduction', in Zipfel et al., eds, *In plain sight*.

²² Cf. Rachel Spronk and Thomas Hendriks, 'Introduction', in Rachel Spronk and Thomas Hendriks, eds, *Readings in sexualities from Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020).

²³ Cf. Veena Das, 'Violence, gender, and subjectivity', *Annual Review of Anthropology* vol. 37, 2008, pp. 283–99.

prevention and redress initiatives that can learn from those who have experienced SV.²⁴ This is particularly true for the role that the sexual aspects of SV can play in perpetuating such violence, and in rendering it so injurious and intractable.²⁵

Our argument coalesces around two main and interrelated points. First, survivors' accounts both reproduce and unravel dominant understandings of the motives of perpetrators, including ones that emerge in perpetrator accounts from armed conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and elsewhere, as well as those that echo in juridical, humanitarian, academic and policy discourses.²⁶ Second, the sexual was variously imbued with meaning in these accounts of violence. How it is seen either as intermingling with violence, or as being expunged from violence, tells us much about the norms that govern the survivors' gendered and sexual subjectivities, as well as the blurriness of dividing lines between sex and violence. Taken together, the testimonies urge us to rethink established views regarding CRSV—particularly the surmise that such violence is *not* about 'sex'.²⁷

In the following sections of this article, we first outline our methodology. We briefly flesh out what we mean by dominant understandings of perpetrator motives and experiences in CRSV and how these refute or implicitly rely on the import of the sexual. We then explore how connections between sex, violence, domination, aggression, pleasure, desire, the erotic, sexuality and other motifs figure in survivors' accounts. We thus pay attention to how survivors speak of the sexual as the motive behind and alongside and as a part of the violence, *and* how sexual desire and pleasure figure as impossible, or as deeply problematic, in their accounts.

Learning from survivor accounts: a discussion of methodology²⁸

This article is based on group and individual interviews carried out between 2016 and 2018 with refugees living in Kampala, Uganda. Most participants had fled conflict in the DRC, with smaller numbers from Rwanda and Burundi; all were clients of the RLP, through which they were recruited. Many had lived in Kampala for several years and, through the RLP, were familiar with dominant framings of SV that circulate in (globalized) policy and advocacy communities. The RLP, a community outreach project of the School of Law at Makerere University, was established in 1999 to provide legal aid to refugees and asylum-seekers in Uganda; today it also provides psycho-social support.²⁹ Clients of the RLP in Kampala are

²⁴ See also Holly Porter, 'Moral spaces and sexual transgression: understanding rape in war and post conflict', *Development and Change* 50: 4, 2019, pp. 1009–1032.

²⁵ See e.g. Susan J. Brison, 'Surviving sexual violence: a philosophical perspective', in Wanda Teays, ed., *Analyzing violence against women*, vol. 12 (Cham: Springer, 2019), pp. 11–26; Philipp Schulz, *Male survivors of wartime sexual violence* (Oakley: University of California Press, 2020); Touquet, *Unsilenced*; WIJG, 'Civil Society Declaration'.

²⁶ Fassin, 'The trace'; Dorothea Hilhorst and Bram J. Jansen, 'Humanitarian space as arena: a perspective on the everyday politics of aid', *Development and Change* 41: 6, 2010, pp. 1117–39; Renee Heberle, 'Deconstructive strategies and the movement against sexual violence', *Hypatia* 11: 4, 1996, pp. 63–76 at p. 71; Nicola Gavey, *Just sex? The cultural scaffolding of rape* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

²⁷ See also in this issue: Philipp Schulz and Heleen Touquet, 'Queering explanatory frameworks for wartime sexual violence against men', *International Affairs* 96: 5, Sept. 2020, pp. 1169–87.

²⁸ For further discussion of our method see Gray, Stern and Dolan, 'Torture and sexual violence'.

²⁹ Refugee Law Project, School of Law, Makerere University, 2019, <https://www.refugeelawproject.org>.

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supported in organizing themselves into peer-support groups around particular experiences; these include Men of Hope (male survivors of sexual violence); Ameruv (women with children born from rape); Living with Hope (people living with HIV arising from violence); and the Association of Torture Survivors.

This article draws mostly on eight group interviews with members of these peer-support groups (four with fifteen participants, four with four or five participants), thirty individual interviews conducted with group members, and three additional interviews conducted in 2018 by the RLP staff, one of which was recorded on video.³⁰ Reaching survivors for research on violence through groups and services from which they have already sought and received support, and with which they have established relationships of trust, facilitates their sense of safety in sharing their experiences. Conducting such interviews under the RLP's auspices also ensured the availability of further support for any needs arising during an interview.³¹

Individual and group interviews were conducted by one or more of the authors,³² working together with RLP staff. Participants and researchers spoke a mixture of Lingala, Swahili, Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, English and French. Conversations were supported by several interpreters, who simultaneously translated the dialogues. With the exception of one quotation, we have not made a granular analysis of the language spoken by the participant,³³ as the focus group discussions occurred through an interpreter to and from several languages. Nonetheless, deep contextual knowledge of the specific refugee communities in Kampala, as well as facility in Swahili (Dolan), and fluency in French (Dolan and Stern) and Lingala (Eriksson Baz), helped the team to notice nuances in much of the language used in participants' accounts.

All interviews addressed how participants made sense of their experiences. Specific questions included how they understood what was sexual, and the role of desire and pleasure (on the perpetrators' part), in the violence they had experienced. In reproducing participants' statements here, we have made some small language edits for clarity and ease of reading. In the interests of anonymity, we do not attribute participants' statements to their respective group. Furthermore, our fieldwork is not a representative case-study, and so we do not count how often certain types of statements occurred in our participants' interview texts; when we refer to 'some' or 'many' in our analysis, we refer to generalized senses of the prominence of certain reflections, not specific numbers. Our aim of enriching and nuancing understandings of CRSV, and of learning from survivors as 'epistemic' agents,³⁴ as well as our emphasis on exploring survivors' complex meaning-making rather than cataloguing patterns of fixed meanings, would not be significantly helped by numerical indexes of particular statements.³⁵

³⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clHYkqhwhfYg>.

³¹ Anna E. Jaffe, David DiLillo, Lesa Hoffman, Michelle Haikalis and Rita E. Dykstra, 'Does it hurt to ask? A meta-analysis of participant reactions to trauma research', *Clinical Psychology Review* vol. 40, 2015, pp. 40–56.

³² This fieldwork was part of a larger research project conducted by a team including Harriet Gray.

³³ Cf. Porter, *After rape*, pp. 122–9.

³⁴ Alcoff, *Rape and resistance*, p. 184; see also Fassin, 'The trace', p. 285.

³⁵ See Porter, *After rape*, p. 30.

Furthermore, we do not claim that participants' accounts of the reasons driving wartime rape discussed here are better or more authentic, or, inversely, less true, than those posited by academics and policy-makers. As Mardorossian explains, it is clear that victims' account of [their] experiences does not exist in a vacuum of authenticity awaiting a feminist revolution to be able to safely express itself, since victims, like all of us, get their cues from the intersecting and conflicting discourses through which the world is understood and shaped.³⁶

Available 'grids of intelligibility' thus circumscribe how participants remember and make sense of what has 'happened to' them, as well as how they narrate these in an interview setting with a team of white researchers from Europe.³⁷ Thus the degree of individual survivors' familiarity with dominant global discourses (for example, rape as a 'weapon of war') is likely to shape the terms through which they narrate their experiences of violence. Such grids inevitably inform, and are informed by, accounts produced by the academic, policy and media communities.³⁸ Yet they are also crafted out of framings of war and violence, and ideas about the sexual, as well as gendered power relations and heteronormative imaginaries articulated in their most immediate surroundings, both in the DRC and in Uganda, as well as by wider 'feedback loops' (e.g. historical determination, lexicons of asylum and resettlement, international jurisprudence, and legal and humanitarian framings informing support services, as well as the institutional framing of the RLP).³⁹ It is therefore impossible to make easy distinctions between globally dominant discourses and local ones. Furthermore, as much work on experience, memory and narrative has shown, rendering sense of the embodied experience of violence is a complex work in progress.⁴⁰ The survivors we interviewed hailed from multiple ethnic and language groups (primarily in the eastern DRC), and had spent different amounts of time in refugee communities in Kampala, surrounded by people with diverse backgrounds and languages. In such a linguistically fluid context, any attempt to fully discern culturally or linguistically specific discourses

³⁶ Mardorossian, *Framing the rape victim*, p. 45.

³⁷ See Gray, Stern and Dolan, 'Torture and sexual violence'; also Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: violence and the remaking of a self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 31–3. On 'grids of intelligibility', see Michel Foucault, *The history of sexuality*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 93.

³⁸ They are also informed by how we, as researchers, pose questions and interpret testimonies, and thus frame survivors' experiences, turning them into accounts for public consumption. See Gayatri Spivak, 'Institutional validation and the agency of the researcher', in Stina Hansson, Sofie Hellberg and Maria Stern, eds, *Studying the agency of being governed* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 74–84; 'Special issue: revisiting methods and approaches in researching sexual violence in conflict', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 25: 4, 2018.

³⁹ Participants' experiences at the RLP, their status as refugees and, for many, their hope of third-country resettlement, immerse them varying in hegemonic narratives on conflict violence, as well as the language of asylum and resettlement. Official categories of harm become part of the landscape through which survivors make sense of, and narrate, their experiences. See Hilhorst and Jansen, 'Humanitarian space as arena'; Amy Shuman and Carol Bohmer, 'Gender and cultural silences in the political asylum process', *Sexualities* 17: 8, 2014, pp. 939–57; Didier Fassin, 'The precarious truth of asylum', *Public Culture* 25: 1, 2013, pp. 39–62. On 'feedback loops', see Alcoff, *Rape and resistance*; on historical determination, see Didier Fassin, 'True life, real lives: revisiting the boundaries between ethnography and fiction', *American Ethnologist* 4: 1, 2014, pp. 40–55 at p. 45. See also Gray, Stern and Dolan, 'Torture and sexual violence'.

⁴⁰ For a good overview see Alcoff, *Rape and resistance*, ch. 2.

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practices and beliefs is doomed—and risks reifying certain ideas about culture and language.⁴¹

Our analysis underscores the epistemic authority of survivors with whom we spoke to imbue particular concepts with meaning through, among other discursive strategies, linking and distinguishing between categories. This includes, for instance, notions of ‘normal’ vs ‘deviant’ sex as they relate to normative and regulatory gender relations and identities,⁴² as well as ideas about sexual desire, pleasure, complicity and violence, brutality and evil. As Alcoff explains, experiences of sexual violations

are always experiences *of* as well as *in* the social world yet that world is a meaning-rich environment ... Survivors endeavouring to make sense of their experiences and to find adequate terms and concepts are in a privileged position to do so ... survivors retain best access to the contentful nature of that which they are processing.⁴³

In this sense, we seek to discern the meanings imparted to the ‘sexual’ in SV as they emerge in survivors’ accounts. We read these accounts, however, through our own grids of intelligibility—grids largely informed by feminist theories on sexual violence. Questions of how sexual desire and pleasure intermingle with domination and violence have generated sustained reflection within feminist theory and activism, as well as in many other fields. How we understand what constitutes ‘sexual’ acts is variously attached to a web of interrelated questions about (inter-)subjectivity, power, violence, desire, will, pleasure, norms, silences, body parts, acts, intentions, authors, audiences and effects, to name just a few factors; understandings of these relations also differ among theorists and advocates, and in legal jurisprudence, in ways that we cannot account for here.⁴⁴ Suffice it to say that we see the sexual as both socially constructed and phenomenological, product (and productive) of discourse, practices, desires and bodily experiences—of pain, pleasure and arousal. In our reading of the interview texts, we draw upon a variety of theoretical insights in this general line of reasoning, as will be apparent below.

What is (not) sexual about CRSV in familiar understandings?

The prevailing framing of CRSV as a weapon or tactic of war, and therefore as a serious security problem that can and must be stopped, emerged in contradistinction to the previously dominant notion that CRSV was a more or less natural socio-biological by-product of war. The weapon of war script relies on familiar war–peace distinctions that cast war as a state of exception to the ‘normal’ workings of domestic politics.⁴⁵ In this script, SV emerges from the rational

⁴¹ See Spronk and Hendriks, eds, *Readings in sexualities*.

⁴² Alcoff, *Rape and resistance*, p. 113; Porter, *After rape*, pp. 79–93; Porter, ‘Moral spaces’, p. 1011; Campbell, in Zipfel et al., eds, *In plain sight*.

⁴³ Alcoff, *Rape and resistance*, p. 74. See also Mardorossian, *Framing the rape victim*, p. 45.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, eds, *Feminism and sexuality: a reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 2; Bourke, *Rape*, p. 10; Kate Fisher and Sarah Toulalan, eds, *Bodies, sex and desire from the Renaissance to the present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). See also WIGJ, ‘Civil Society Declaration’.

⁴⁵ Tarak Barkawi, ‘Decolonising war’, *European Journal of International Security* 1: 2, 2016, pp. 199–214.

calculations of military and political leaders, and/or as the fault of gender inequalities, whereby military strategy and practice work together in a 'war against women'. 'Strategy' implies rational intention, collective motives, and mastery over the desires of the individual body.⁴⁶ In this framing, strategy can be prevented and thwarted, with the threat of prosecution supposedly the trump card in an appeal to the rationality of perpetrators (again, presumably) engaged in pre-engagement calculations of the possible costs and benefits of specific courses of action. This view does not readily accommodate the possibility that warring could itself unleash or produce particular manifestations of the sexual that, while conflict-related, are not necessarily dependent on juridical notions of 'command responsibility' and 'joint criminal enterprise', in so far as this possibility threatens the politically important stance that sexual violence is not inevitable and *can* be brought to an end.⁴⁷

Alternative framings of the motives/rationales behind CRSV do, however, persist alongside and even in contrast with this script. Some arguably rely upon, but do not foreground, the question of the role of the perpetrator's sexual desire, pleasure and gratification as motives for and effects of violence. Sense is made of these readings in part through notions of male heterosexual desire, pleasure and gratification, be they produced or inherent, as underlying factors that serve as the conditions of possibility for such practices to occur and function. For example, scholars have convincingly argued that SV can be seen as a practice,⁴⁸ or as a mode of male 'in-group' bonding,⁴⁹ that is far less strategic in terms of military or political goals than a simplistic reading of what a 'weapon or tactic' in war might imply. References to 'recreational rape',⁵⁰ or 'opportunistic rape',⁵¹ describe instances of armed men who, deprived of the 'normal' sexual outlets found with wives or girlfriends while on leave or through soliciting prostitutes, take 'sex by force'.⁵² Other framings surmise that CRSV serves as a 'substitution' for mundane and 'normal' peacetime sexual relations, and is supposedly unleashed or unfettered in the theatre of war. While these different understandings may rest upon familiar notions of male heterosexuality, they nonetheless rarely explicitly address how assumed sexual pleasure and desire intermingle with violence and domination.⁵³ Let us then turn to how the survivors themselves make sense of what is sexual (or not) about CRSV.

⁴⁶ See Harriet Gray and Maria Stern, 'Risky dis/entanglements: torture and sexual violence in conflict', *European Journal of International Relations* 25: 4, Dec. 2019, pp. 1035–58; Kirby, 'The body weaponized'.

⁴⁷ Notions well captured in the Twitter handle of the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict: @endrapeinwar. See also Eriksson Baaz and Stern, *Sexual violence as a weapon of war*.

⁴⁸ Elisabeth Jean Wood, 'Rape as a practice of war: toward a typology of political violence', *Politics and Society* 46: 4, 2018, pp. 513–37.

⁴⁹ Dara Kay Cohen, *Rape during civil war* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

⁵⁰ Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: the international politics of militarizing women's lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁵¹ Sara Meger, 'Rape of the Congo: understanding sexual violence in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 28: 2, April 2010, pp. 119–35.

⁵² Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 'Why do soldiers rape?'.

⁵³ Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 'Curious erasures'.

The possibility and impossibility of the sexual: survivors' accounts of CRSV

Reproducing and unravelling dominant rape scripts

As noted above, the dominant frame of CRSV as a violent strategy of destruction echoes in survivors' narratives. Many (both women and men) explained that the violence to which they were subjected was inflicted largely as a weapon of war or act of destruction. This is hardly surprising; this framing has become widely established globally. Various actors and outlets such as NGOs, politicians and the media both locally and internationally disseminate the mantra that sexual violence is an *arme de guerre* (weapon of war);⁵⁴ the framing also circulates widely in refugee settings in Uganda.⁵⁵ Moreover, that the participants readily embrace this framing surely also has to do with their efforts to process the harm caused by their experience of CRSV. Accordingly, the perpetrators are often described as 'evil' (*motema mabe koleka*), as 'animals', as 'people without a heart', people 'without pity' (*sans pitié*) and with 'no humanity'.⁵⁶ In most iterations of this framing, the consequences of the violence are easily conflated with assumed intentions. Although methodologically problematic, such conflation is understandable, as survivors live the destruction and often dire consequences that follow in the wake of CRSV.

Yet—and crucially—this frame sits alongside notions of CRSV as driven by sexual desire and pleasure. Participants' identification of these motivations resonates with research and policy discourses referring to 'recreational rape' and 'opportunistic rape',⁵⁷ thus disturbing the dominant 'weapon of war' framing in various ways, allowing room for different, and at times coinciding, rationales. One woman explained, for instance, that 'there are many intentions ... [and there are] those who are just using [SV] to please themselves'. A man (interrupting her) further explained: 'Yes. And then also for power. And then also others just use it as revenge.' Others underscored the coexistence of motivations, as well as the way in which motivations may 'shift in the course of any single attack'.⁵⁸ In another group discussion a participant (a woman) explained: 'It can be both sexual lust and to destroy—they go together [*ezosangana*]. They may be on a mission to rape to destroy, but when they perform it and pick the women, they can feel lust.'⁵⁹

Men noted the same possible intermingling of motivations and the connections between sexual desire and violence, although mainly when discussing SV against women. As one explained, clearly alluding to the intermeshing of sexual pleasure and violence as degradation: 'Sexual violence [of men against women],

⁵⁴ Maria Eriksson Baaz, Harriet Gray and Maria Stern, 'What can we/do we want to know? Reflections from researching SGBV in military settings', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 25: 4, 2018, pp. 521–44.

⁵⁵ Gray, Stern and Dolan, 'Torture and sexual violence'.

⁵⁶ Author interviews, Kampala, 2016.

⁵⁷ Enloe, *Maneuvers*, pp. 111, 123, 132; Meger, 'Rape of the Congo'; Wood, 'Rape as a practice of war'.

⁵⁸ Bourke, *Rape*, p. 409. In her history of rape (including CRSV), Bourke notes multiple and fluid rationales and experiences in survivor accounts: 'some victims identify their violation as an act of domination by the perpetrator, but others experience it in terms they characterize as primarily sexual. Most see it as a bit of each' (p. 408).

⁵⁹ Author interview, Kampala, 2016.

it's a thing, it's an act which people do ... to look for sexual pleasure. Pleasure and degrading someone.⁶⁰ It is not quite clear if he is referring to the coexistence of pleasure and violence, or if he, like the woman participant above, is alluding to the intimate co-production of eroticism, violence and aggression. If the latter, it is a line of reasoning that resonates with many feminist theorists who, in different ways, have noted how productions of male (heterosexual) desire and pleasure are co-produced with domination and violence. Bourke, for instance, explores the way in which a perpetrator's sexual lust may be produced or evoked through harming, humiliating and dominating another, or through 'eroticizing the pain on the part of the victim'.⁶¹ It is also unclear in both of these statements whether the survivors understand the perpetrator's 'arousal patterns'⁶² as being produced or reinforced through the act of dominating or harming, or if they are regarded as hard-wired and thus *a priori* and separate from the violent act.

Another participant linked the (perceived) experience of domination and sexual pleasure and satisfaction even more clearly in her explanation of an act of forced sex (a father forced by an armed combatant to have sex with his daughter). She explained:

For the person who is forced to have sex with someone else there is no pleasure. But the person who orders the person to have sex with that person is the one who is feeling the pleasure. ... To force somebody to rape somebody [else] gives the person delivering the order satisfaction. So that is also sexual. ... : and then I see that ... for this person who is ... telling a person to have sex with someone, so for him, yeah, it's really pleasurable, for him. [He] feels pleasure ... Because pleasure [is] at the same time satisfaction. Yes, because what he wanted the guy to do, he has done it, and then he has performed it, and then it's done, it's done. So, it's really, ... a way for him to feel so good.⁶³

She thus conjoins the satisfaction of domination—irrespective of tactile erotic pleasure or gratification—with the sexual; the perpetrator is physically distant, yet intimately imbricated in the violent act. Such ideas are surely familiar to those who connect the watching of pornography with violence.⁶⁴ However, what is striking about this account is the way in which it foregrounds how the (military) commandeering of SV affords direct sexual satisfaction and attendant pleasure to the giver of the command, and is not only a catalyst for, or precursor to, the anticipated pleasure, exertion and danger of warring.

In *Capitaine Abigail*⁶⁵ (a video of an interview with a survivor), the participant (a man) explains how the perpetrator, a captain (a woman) in the Congolese (DRC) armed forces, abused him. For him, her abuse was clearly driven by her sexual pleasure, which she derived, in part, by dominating and harming him.⁶⁶ He describes

⁶⁰ Author interview, Kampala, 2016.

⁶¹ Bourke, *Rape*, p 408.

⁶² Alcoff, *Rape and resistance*, p. 78.

⁶³ Author interview, Kampala, 2016.

⁶⁴ e.g. Catherine MacKinnon, 'Turning rape into pornography: postmodern genocide', in Alexandra Stigl-mayer, ed., *Mass rape: the war against women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, trans. Marion Faber (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

⁶⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clHYkqhwfYg>.

⁶⁶ Ann Cahill's reflections are perhaps helpful here in further unpacking his account. There is a difference

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how she offered two options; 'Either I help you by killing you ... Alternatively, have sex with me' (*Tembea na mimi*). Although he initially refused, he quickly realized after being threatened with a knife and a gun that there was a palpable chance she would kill him. So, as he described it, 'I made love with her' (*Nikafanya naye mapenzi*). While he clearly endured SV, and, from an international criminal law perspective, was the victim of rape, he does not use the Swahili for 'I was raped' (*nilibakwa*), nor does he say *tulitembea* ('we had sex'). His choice of the active voice ('I made love with her') rather than the passive (I was raped) arguably demonstrates the difficulty (not least for survivors who are men) of moving beyond dominant and entrenched patriarchal and heterosexual framings of sex, in which men are seen as intrinsically proactive and the initiators of sexual activity. As such, he narrates his victimization in language that also (re)affirms his capacity to fulfil normative expectations of his sexuality.⁶⁷ He goes on to say: 'I did it with her about three times, *however, this thing of having sex by force* [here he does not use the language of making love, but rather *kutembea*, having sex], *it wasn't like I wanted it*'.⁶⁸ He is not, therefore, in denial about the power relationship that underpinned the incident. And there is little doubt that, despite using the language of 'making love' and 'having sex', he experienced extreme duress and subjugation. Furthermore, he clearly conceives of the experience as deeply injurious, with long-lasting effects. Torn between the importance of narrating his victimization on the one hand, and the need to reaffirm his (sexual) agency on the other, his linguistic choices suggest that the latter win out.

How violence can and cannot intermingle with sexual desire and pleasure

The notion of opportunity (*opportunité*), in some cases racialized or ethnicized, recurred with marked frequency in participants' accounts. As one woman clarified: 'Conflict allows men to take women that they have maybe wanted for a long time but who refused them.'⁶⁹ Sometimes, such notions of 'seizing the opportunity' also featured accounts of 'testing/tasting' (sexually) unfamiliar women.⁷⁰ Another explained, for instance, that Tutsi women appealed sexually to the armed group in question: 'War gives that opportunity, they have heard that Rwandan women are good, they are like this and that, also white people like them, so let's see and try ourselves.'⁷¹

The notion of opportunistic rape emerges here as an act through which men can seek fulfilment of racialized heterosexual desires and dreams that is otherwise

between the perspective and experience of the perpetrator (in this case a woman) and those of the victim; it is entirely possible that the perpetrator experiences sexual arousal and pleasure in dominating her victim through what she (the perpetrator) sees as sex, albeit coerced sex. See Ann J. Cahill, *Rethinking rape* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 140.

⁶⁷ See Schulz, 'Displacement'; Schulz, *Male survivors*.

⁶⁸ In Swahili, *Nilitembea naye karibu mara tatu. Lakini, ili ya ku tembea ki nguvu, sikukuwa minapenda* (emphasis added). On the distinction between consent and will, see Alcott, *Rape and resistance*.

⁶⁹ Author interview, Kampala, 2016.

⁷⁰ Cf. Porter, *After rape*, pp. 77–80.

⁷¹ Author interview, Kampala, 2016.

denied to them in the supposedly orderly context and clear moral economy of peace.⁷² Moreover, the accounts reflect familiar notions of war as a state of exception, marked by a general lawlessness and impunity and a suspension of societal norms. SV is cast as an expression of seemingly normal—known and independent from context—heterosexual desires and curiosities carried over from the space outside war, or the time before war, and unleashed in the context of armed conflict. How they were set loose—whether through the practice of violence, as a result of the space created by other acts of violence, or through the embodied performance of soldiering—remained, however, unclear in their testimonies.

Participants also distinguished between interminglings of violence and sexual desire that were possible or imaginable to them, and those that were not. Many referred to the possible age required for the victim to be considered an object of sexual desire. With regard to very old or young victims, one woman clarified: ‘No, it cannot be desire, why would then women in their seventies or children be raped? No, that is not desire.’⁷³ As well as reflecting heteronormative assumptions, such accounts also allude to other notions of appropriate sexual desire and pleasure in the eyes of the participants. For instance, anal rape (to which many women also had been subjected) featured as an example of how sexual desire could *not* possibly be a motivation for, or experience of, the perpetrator. In explaining this, several participants alluded to God’s creation of men and women, and the appropriate, natural manner of sexual encounters: the man’s penis in the woman’s vagina, with the anus created for ‘outward bodily flows, not inward ones’.⁷⁴

Others felt that desire could not possibly be a driver of, part of or integral to CRSV involving perpetrators’ use of excessive violence (such as inserting sticks in someone’s vagina or killing them, either intentionally or through the harms inflicted).⁷⁵ Similarly, some participants expressed their conviction that the presence of excessive violence precluded the presence of sexual desire;⁷⁶ one explained by referring to gang rapes as follows:

No, it cannot be pleasure [*ekoki kazala plaisir te*]. One goes in [penetrates] and then another, and then yet another, and in public. No that cannot be pleasure. If it was pleasure you only choose one woman and do it with her.⁷⁷

Such accounts surely reflect available grids of intelligibility in the narrators’ communities, as well as in the wider social and legal systems of Uganda and the DRC. Refusing the possibility of the perpetrator’s sexual pleasure in accounts of such brutal rapes can also be read as a way of expunging any complicity associated with the victim-blaming that often follows CRSV.⁷⁸ The notion of desire that

⁷² Cf. Porter, *After rape*, p. 5.

⁷³ Author interview, Kampala, 2016.

⁷⁴ Author interview, Kampala, 2016. See also Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: BasicBooks, 2007), ch. 9.

⁷⁵ Author interview, Kampala, 2016.

⁷⁶ Cf. Gaby Zipfel, “‘Let us have a little fun’: the relationship between gender, violence and sexuality in armed conflict situations”, *RCCS Annual Review: A Selection from the Portuguese Journal Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, no. 5, 1 Oct. 2013, pp. 32–45.

⁷⁷ Author interview, Kampala, 2016.

⁷⁸ Many participants explained how women who are survivors are shamed and blamed by their communities in the aftermath of rape, as well as how their status as victims also ‘led’ to domestic abuse. See e.g. Mardoros-

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emerges here—in its negation—is intersubjective in so far as it would require the desirability and accompanying complicity of the victim.⁷⁹ The ‘weapon of war’ framing is joined in the survivors’ accounts with a judgement that these violent acts emanate from the ‘evil hearts’ of the perpetrators (though not necessarily as a strategy of warring⁸⁰), erasing the possibility of sexual desire.⁸¹ This merged framing in the survivors’ accounts performs a discursive move that aims to prevent or at least alleviate painful injuries to their sense of ‘sexual subjectivity’ and ‘self-making capacities’, understood here, following Alcoff, as being composed of emergent notions of will, desire and consent, as well as pleasure.⁸²

The possibility and impossibility of men-on-men⁸³ same-sex desire as imbricated in violence

The notion of *opportunité* discussed above served as a catch-all phrase that connoted a presumed *carte blanche* in the eyes of the perpetrators for sexual and violent behaviour against women. It was largely absent in accounts of CRSV against men, in both men’s and women’s testimonies, despite the fact that, arguably, the opportunity to test out same-sex sexual acts under the guise of war might be even more tantalizing to some perpetrators than testing out heterosexual acts across ordinarily proscribed ethnic boundaries. Our participants, on the whole, did not acknowledge men and boys as objects of sexual desire for other men. Indeed, ‘same-sex’ sexual violence in all its many guises appeared as foreign, and outside forms of sex and violence available within lexicons of heteronormative and patriarchal male heterosexuality. In their accounts, homosexual desire and pleasure on the part of perpetrators are largely rendered so deviant that they cannot fit readily into familiar frames of understanding that help survivors make sense of why the violence they experienced happened to them.⁸⁴

sian, *Framing the rape victim*; Harriet Gray and Chris Dolan, ‘Disrupting peace at home? Narrating connections between sexual violence perpetrated by armed men and intimate partner violence in (post-)conflict settings’, draft manuscript (to be submitted to *International Journal of Feminist Politics* for review).

⁷⁹ We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer’s comments for helping us make this point.

⁸⁰ Like the survivors we interviewed, many perpetrators have portrayed ‘evil’, brutal rapes as similar to murder, driven mainly/only by frustrations, the craziness of war and an urge to destroy, and as devoid of sexual desire, referring to gang-rape or when a perpetrator commits SV against men, elderly women or children, and/or uses sticks instead of the penis, etc. Examples of these types of brutal violence, seen by many to be deviant, are also used to underscore in policy texts that CRSV is wielded as a weapon of war and destruction and is decidedly *not* about ‘sex’. See Eriksson Baaz and Stern, ‘Why do soldiers rape?’; Céline Hirschland, ‘Interview with 2018 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Denis Mukwege: a life dedicated to victims of sexual assault’, *UNESCO Courier*, 25 Nov. 2016, <https://en.unesco.org/courier/supplement-numerique/interview-2018-nobel-peace-prize-laureate-denis-mukwege-life-dedicated>.

⁸¹ Eriksson Baaz and Stern, ‘Curious erasures’. These narratives resonate with the stories of those who have committed (or been closely associated with) such violence in the DRC, who distinguished between ‘lust rapes’, driven by supposedly normal heterosexual male desire, and ‘evil rapes’: Eriksson Baaz and Stern, ‘Making sense of violence’, p. 77; see also Bourke, *Rape*, p. 409.

⁸² Alcoff, *Rape and resistance*, p. III.

⁸³ None of the participants spoke of women-on-women SV.

⁸⁴ Homosexuality is illegal under Ugandan law; in the DRC, although there is no outright prohibition, ‘LGBT people are routinely arrested and charged under Article 176 of the Penal Code, which penalizes activities against “public decency.” Also, in the past seven years there have been several attempts by members of Parliament to pass legislation to criminalize consensual sexual relations between adults of the same-sex’: Mouvement pour la promotion du respect et égalité des droits et santé (MOPREDS), Jeunialissime, Oasis Club

To comprehend this better, we can draw insight from the growing body of research on CRSV against men and boys, which, among other things, explores how homosexuality can be wielded as a weapon, particularly by leveraging homophobia (intentionally or not) in the survivor himself and in the social and cultural relations in which he is embedded.⁸⁵ In this sense, the violent act contains a latent threat, namely that the target of the violence evinced a previously unrecognized deviant desirability, and that this unacknowledged sexual pull provoked desire in the perpetrator. In other words, the violence could—in part at least—be the victim's own fault, thereby putting his sexual subjectivity in question. Here we see how notions of complicity reverberate in survivor accounts. As one survivor (a man) explained: 'How could another man feel the desire to sleep with me? Maybe I've seen something in me which is not real as a man.'⁸⁶ The survivor thus alludes to what Schulz describes as 'layered gendered and sexual harms' that continue to undo his sense of self as a man in relation to others.⁸⁷ Stigmatization of victims is of key significance here.⁸⁸ Similarly, the 'weaponization of homophobia' 'implies that perpetrators often assert dominance by weaponizing sexual identity'.⁸⁹ As noted above, inward-directed stigmatization of one's sexuality often shapes survivors' sexual subjectivity. The *Call it as it is* report (which also builds on testimonies from clients of the RLP) reflects these dynamics in the inclusion of 'marking someone as sexually deviant' in its list of possible 'acts of a sexual nature'.⁹⁰

Men and women alike noted the absence/impossibility of sexual desire and pleasure as a possible motivation for or experience within same-sex CRSV, although the women did not seem to speak from personal experience of woman-on-woman abuse. Sexual desire was most vehemently removed from the realm of possibility in men's accounts of the violence directed against themselves *as men*.⁹¹ For instance, one of the participants quickly replied as follows when we raised the question of potential sexual desire: 'No, it cannot be about sex/desire [when it comes to men], because there are so many women to choose between.'⁹²

In addition, other—in particular, men—participants repeatedly emphasized how, in contrast to CRSV against women, CRSV against men is 'not accidental':

Kinshasa, Rainbow Sunrise Mapambazuko, Mouvement pour les libertés individuelles (MOLI), Synergia, 'Human rights violations against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)', report submitted to UN Human Rights Committee, Oct. 2017, p. 3.

⁸⁵ e.g. Elise Féron, *Wartime sexual violence against men: masculinities and power in conflict zones*, 'Men and masculinities in a transnational world' series (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Marysia Zalewski, Paula Drumond, Elisabeth Prugl and Maria Stern, eds, *Sexual violence against men in global politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁸⁶ Cited in Gray, Stern, and Dolan, 'Torture and sexual violence'.

⁸⁷ Schulz, *Male survivors*; Schulz, 'Displacement'.

⁸⁸ Touquet, *Unsilenced*, p. 29; see also e.g. Sandesh Sivakumaran, 'Male/male rape and the "taint" of homosexuality', *Human Rights Quarterly* 27: 4, 2005, pp. 1274–306.

⁸⁹ Douglas Page and Samuel Whitt, 'Confronting wartime sexual violence: public support for survivors in Bosnia', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, publ. online Aug. 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002719867473>, p. 6; Drumond, 'What about men?'; David Eichert, "'Homosexualization" revisited: an audience-focused theorization of wartime male sexual violence', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 21: 3, 2019, pp. 409–33; Chris Dolan, 'Victims who are men', in Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Naomi Cahn, Dina Francesca Haynes and Nahla Valji, eds, *The Oxford handbook of gender and conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 84–104.

⁹⁰ WIGJ, 'Civil Society Declaration'.

⁹¹ See also Schulz, 'The "ethical loneliness"'.
⁹² Author interview, Kampala, 2016.

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'SV against men is planned, it is political, it does not just happen by accident, like it does for women.'⁹³ Such common discursive moves effectively suggest that it is possible in SV against women by denying the possibility of sexual desire in relation to SV against themselves *as men*. What is unstated, but clearly implied, is that the heterosexual rape of women by men does indeed occur by 'chance' and that appropriately gendered, racialized and aged women are, at least in theory, always already rapable,⁹⁴ because of their vulnerability and sexual desirability *as women*. Here, again, we see glimpses of familiar victim-blaming through allusions to complicity, hinting that 'she' (the woman who could always potentially be raped) through her desirability lured the perpetrator to attack her *par hasard* ('by chance').

Such moves were particularly apparent when, in a group discussion, we explicitly asked about the difference between SV against men and SV against women (these questions usually followed participants' accounts of CRSV as a weapon of war/act of domination and destruction). Many responded that the main difference was the potential for sexual motives in relation to women. Thus, while (certain) women were portrayed as victims because of their familiar vulnerability in times of peace, men were often portrayed as novel and unlikely victims—who were rendered more likely to *become* victims because of the conditions of war and the effectiveness of CRSV as a weapon. The narratives were thus clearly crafted out of available grids of intelligibility, including male heterosexual desire as natural and formidable, women as 'rapable', and homosexual desire as illegible or impossible.⁹⁵

Yet despite much insistence upon the impossibility of desire within men's SV against other men, these notions nonetheless coexisted with other familiar assertions noted above about same-sex acts as a potential substitution for 'normal' (read heterosexual) sex. In the absence of women, some explained, men might at times resort to, in their eyes, abnormal sexual acts with other men. Hence, CRSV against men could sometimes be understood as a possible substitution for 'natural' or 'normal' sex. One participant (a man) clarified: 'Rape of men could happen when combatants had been in the bush for a long time without seeing any women.'⁹⁶ Echoing familiar global narratives of same-sex sexual relations as a possible substitution in places where no women are available (prisons, military camps in which soldiers are not granted regular leave, etc.), such accounts suggest that under certain circumstances violence and (heterosexual) sexual pleasure can be intimately interdependent, irrespective of the disconnect between the ultimate object of desire and the immediate subject of violence.

When discussions turned to how, when homosexual desire is supposedly both improper and impossible, men do perform SV against other men, participants presented various scenarios featuring 'delinquent men'. War-related witchcraft recurred as a prevalent motif,⁹⁷ several participants proposed, for instance, that

⁹³ Author interview, Kampala, 2016.

⁹⁴ Heberle, 'Deconstructive strategies', p. 71; Gavey, *Just sex?*

⁹⁵ See also Schulz, 'Displacement'.

⁹⁶ Author interview, Kampala, 2016.

⁹⁷ See e.g. Peter Geschiere, *The modernity of witchcraft: politics and the occult in postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

some armed groups perform SV against other men to gain protection against being killed in battle. A few spoke (albeit in passing) of Satanists and sadists as possible (men) perpetrators of CRSV against men, which was construed as an act of sacrifice and abomination.⁹⁸ Many added that drugs enabled men to unwillingly commit SV against other men; and drug abuse, sometimes in combination with extreme poverty and the promise of money by those ordering the violence, rendered some particularly prone to committing SV.⁹⁹ Such examples take us into difficult territory,¹⁰⁰ in so far as they further complicate the drawing of lines between acts deemed to be consensual (e.g. agreeing to rape another for money) and acts of violence (in the sense of being forced or coerced to do so); they invite us to question further the consent of the apparent perpetrator, who may himself be coerced.¹⁰¹

As the discussions progressed, accounts emerged to disturb notions of men-on-men SV as abnormal and exclusive of any possibility of perpetrator pleasure. Several men suggested that the government recruited perpetrators of same-sex CRSV among men already known to be ‘rapists of other men’. They recalled stories from their times as students, noting that some were known for ‘raping’ fellow male students at college dorms, and explained that men like them are ‘easily recruited as rapists’. Such accounts seem to contradict other dominant storylines in the interview texts, namely that the rape of men was unknown before the onset of the armed conflict. Moreover, while participants did not refer to men-on-men rape as an ‘opportunity’ of war in the same way as they did to the rape of women, they suggested that former detainees who had been introduced to ‘the practice’ (anal rape) in prison might be the military perpetrators who could derive pleasure through the act of raping another man. In this sense, these participants echo, at least in part, the ideas noted above that sexual desire and pleasure can be produced through violence and domination.

Importantly, the narratives emphasize the coexistence of motivations in ways that, at times, threw into doubt the assumed impossibility of male homosexual desire as a factor in CRSV against men. We see traces of this in the quotation reproduced at the head of this article: ‘I have been asked about, and thought over the question, can you really ejaculate (which the perpetrators do) unless you feel desire?’ Here, it seems that the participant evokes the possibility that, while the main motivation might be domination, violence or even fulfilment of a third-party transaction, the perpetrator may *also* experience sexual gratification—a gratification of which domination and violence may indeed be constituent elements. The participant made this comment with what we read to be visible unease and apprehension about other survivors’ responses (they were mostly simply silent). This, we suggest, hints that the possibility of the perpetrator’s desire, while largely expunged in many accounts, is never fully erased. As in CRSV against women, the

⁹⁸ Author interviews, Kampala, 2016.

⁹⁹ Author interviews, Kampala, 2016.

¹⁰⁰ See e.g. Alcott, *Rape and resistance*, pp. 77–9, 83, 125; Porter, *After rape*, ch. 5; Mardorossian, *Framing the rape victim*.

¹⁰¹ Dolan, ‘Victims who are men’.

persistent possibility of desire appears as deeply discomfiting, posing a host of gender-specific problems for survivors' sexual subjectivity and place in society.¹⁰²

Concluding reflections

We do not have—nor would we want—any definitive answers to the question: 'What is sexual about SV?', and the answers we have gleaned from our participants' accounts do not hold still. Instead they shift and even at times contradict each other in survivors' narration—indeed, theorization—of CRSV. Moreover, how they shift hints at why it matters to pay attention to how survivors imbue these experiences with meaning. For if we do not understand people's complex interpretations of what is sexual about SV, how can we distinguish it from other forms of violence? How can we understand its drivers, dynamics and reverberating effects, as well as its destructive and productive power?

The survivor accounts both echo and depart from dominant framings in policy, and are embedded in complex 'feedback loops' informing the relations between the erotic, sexual desire, pleasure, violence, aggression and domination that emerge therein. They thus unravel simplistic notions of CRSV serving *only* as a strategically deployed tool for humiliation or destruction.¹⁰³ While many participants did indeed reflect on the ways in which the SV they experienced was used as a strategic weapon of war, and portrayed certain acts of violence as de-sexualized in ways that resonate in policy and media texts, many also explained that this violence was, at least in part, *also* motivated by, or even productive of, the perpetrators' erotic desire and sexual pleasure in different ways—even ones that do not involve direct physical contact.

The phenomenological and symbolic presence or absence of the sexual (as well as how this was imbued with meaning through the available lexicons of male heterosexuality) was also mobilized in different ways in the individual and collective accounts. We noted distinctions between the possibility or imaginability of the sexual as motive in acts of CRSV against women, on the one hand, and that against men on the other. SV against men emerged as deviant and (mostly) unintelligible, and homosexuality as weaponized. Yet, despite their struggles to order it (hetero)normatively, the hint of the presence of perpetrator sexual desire and pleasure remained as an uncomfortable possibility for some men struggling to comprehend and recover from the violence they had endured. For both men and women it evoked a sense of complicity attached to being 'rapable' that symptomized the enduring harms inflicted on them as sexual, social and embodied subjects.

Read together, these conflicted and conflicting testimonies offer a vantage-point from which to rethink some of the reductive truisms that (despite many recent efforts to better reflect the complexity of CRSV) persist in dominant policy-friendly accounts of CRSV—namely, that such violence is *not* about 'sex'; or that, when 'sex' does appear, for example in ideas about 'oppor-

¹⁰² Schulz, *Male survivors*.

¹⁰³ See also Schulz and Touquet, 'Queering explanatory frameworks for wartime sexual violence against men'.

tunity' or 'substitution', it does so in a two-dimensional characterization of heteronormative male sexuality. The complexity of its experience and effects are silenced or overlooked, and the multiple and varying vantage-points of CRSV ignored. Perhaps most importantly, then, this article suggests that we cannot understand and support survivors adequately without an understanding of how they perceive the sexual dynamics between them and the perpetrators.

Whether in interpreting the experience of the perpetrator, or in analysing their own experiences, the survivors' stories we have recounted and interpreted here are inescapably about the linkages and distinctions between violence and the sexual in CRSV, experienced both in the moments of the incident(s) themselves and in their aftermath, as survivors engage in the process of remaking their selves and their lives both individually and collectively. These stories thus contribute to our cumulative knowledge about the workings and harms of CRSV and SV more generally. In short, they urge us, as scholars, policy advocates and practitioners, to listen more closely to how survivors make sense of CRSV—including *how* it is (or is not) experienced and interpreted as sexual—and thus to resist reducing their 'multilayered' experiences to fit them into the palatably desexualized narratives of CRSV and its harms that prevail in humanitarian, juridical and policy spaces.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Ratna Kapur, *The tragedy of victimization rhetoric: resurrecting the native subject in international/postcolonial feminist legal politics*, SSRN scholarly paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, Aug. 2005), p. 10.