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Meredith Loken. “Rethinking Rape: The Role of Women in Wartime Violence.” *Security Studies* 26:1 (2017): 60-92. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1243915>.

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Why do combatants engage in sexual violence during civil and interstate wars? This research question has received much-needed attention from scholars across multiple disciplines in recent years. It forms part of a larger research agenda focusing on why combatants deliberately seek to harm civilians in a variety of ways, whether through massacres, forced population movement, torture, terrorist attacks, indiscriminate bombing and shelling, and so on.¹ This research agenda is an important one for the scholarly understanding of conflict. In particular, it addresses the puzzle of why combatants would resort to targeting civilians, when there is considerable evidence that doing so can, under a range of circumstances, undermine the likelihood that they will achieve their political and military objectives.² This work also holds the promise of devising interventions that could minimize human suffering during conflict. Research on sexual violence is an important part of this movement, and scholars working this area have begun to identify the strategic, organizational, and cultural factors that drive rape and other forms of sexual abuse during wartime.

¹ See especially Alexander Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

² Mattew Kocher, Thomas B. Pepinsky, and Stathis N. Kalyvas, “Aerial Bombing and Counterinsurgency in the Vietnam War,” *American Journal of Political Science* 55:2 (2011): 201-218. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2010.00498.x>.

Meredith Loken contributes to this debate by investigating why combatants would engage in sexual violence. She begins by noting that there is wide variation in the resort to sexual violence by civil-war combatants; members of some armed groups—including government forces, militias, and rebel movements—engage in widespread sexual abuse, while others largely forswear such violence. Her article notes that a number of scholars have suggested that one explanation for this variation is the degree to which such armed groups incorporate women in combat roles. Work in this vein holds that such combatants should be less likely to undertake systematic sexual violence (pp. 65-70).

The major contribution of “Rethinking Rape” is to assess this posited relationship between female combatants and sexual violence. As Loken notes, scholars have developed a number of explanations for why this relationship should hold, and have illustrated these explanations with short examples. But no research has systematically evaluated how the gender composition of armed forces influences their use of sexual violence across a large number of cases. The absence of such work means that we have a weak evidentiary basis linking these two phenomena.

To address this important gap, Loken develops a new dataset that conceptualizes and measures the use of female combatants by government and non-governmental armed groups (70-73). This dataset measures “female combatancy” for state and rebel groups in 86 major internal conflicts between 1980 and 2009. Each combatant is assigned a score of none/low, moderate, and high use of female combatants. Creating such a dataset is challenging for many reasons—the absence of a single reliable source of information, the fact that combatants may have incentives to exaggerate or downplay their use of female combatants, uneven coverage of warring parties across conflicts, and the challenge of translating disparate qualitative accounts of female combatancy into a scale that is reliable and valid across time and space. Loken is well aware of these challenges, and is careful to balance the goal of creating a comprehensive dataset against the danger of false precision. She defines female combatancy to distinguish it from other, supporting roles that women might play, devises multiple ways of measuring these concepts, and limits her measurement to the armed group type (i.e. state forces and rebel forces), for which reliable information is more likely to exist, rather than attempting to measure female combatancy for each combatant, and using the entire conflict, rather than individual conflict-years, as the unit of analysis.

She then combines this new measure of female combatancy with existing data collected by other scholars measuring combatant-type rape (the dependent variable), and other established or plausible drivers of such violence, including the use of abduction, press-ganging, and conscription by combatants, the aims of the rebels, other measures of violence, and so on. Regression analysis finds that female combatancy is not systematically related to sexual violence at the level of the entire conflict or of state and rebel armed groups considered separately. Based on this analysis, she concludes that female combatancy has little discernable influence on wartime rape (74-80).

Stepping back from the details of this analysis, it is important to think through the contribution that these findings make to the larger literature on sexual violence during civil wars. At its core, “Rethinking Rape” presents a null finding. It begins by suggesting, based on the work of other scholars, that there are plausible reasons to think that female combatancy should reduce wartime rape, engages in a sophisticated effort to collect data on female combatancy, and finds that it does not, in fact, seem to decrease the use of rape as a weapon of war. Null findings are often difficult to publish, as there appears to be a strong, if often implicit, preference on the part of reviewers and editors to publish works that both present a novel theory and find empirical support for this theory’s implications. From this perspective, Loken’s work contributes to the

emerging literature on sexual violence by demonstrating, at least for the type of data she has collected, that a relationship posited by some scholars appears to have less of an evidentiary base than a reading of their works would suggest. This sort of finding is especially valuable in an emerging area of inquiry such as sexual violence during wartime, since it can direct future work in potentially more productive directions.

For example, one might speculate on other ways that female combatancy could, directly or especially indirectly, shape the use of wartime violence. The remainder of Loken's piece engages in this sort of discussion. She holds that combatants' organizational culture is key to understanding variation in such violence. Organizational culture, understood as shared understandings among members of the organization about appropriate norms, values, and practices, should influence the use of violence more heavily than the individual characteristics (including gender) of combatants, for three reasons. First, willingness to conform to group norms, including those against rape, should be especially strong in armed groups that are organized hierarchically and face powerful external threats to their survival. Second, many combatant organizations have cultures that are designed to incorporate new types of members—including women—without undermining their existing values, including those that discourage sexual violence. Third, armed groups often develop cultures that emphasize 'hyper-masculine' norms, some of which can encourage sexual violence, and female combatants can be socialized into these norms and engage in such practices.

If this is the case, variation in armed groups' organizational culture should be a key driver of the willingness of individual combatants, including females, to endorse or engage in sexual violence. Combatant organizations with cultures that discourage such violence should be able to restrain their fighters' resort to rape, while those with cultures that do not address or that actually encourage rape or other forms of civilian victimization should see their members engage in more such violence. A logical next step might be to try to measure such organizational cultures across a sample of combatants, and assess its relationship to sexual violence. Doing so would be difficult, as organizational culture is something that is not easy to measure in a reliable and valid way, and in particular because the components of the culture (for example, emphasizing restraint in the treatment of civilians) can be difficult to identify independently of the actual behavior of members of the organization. One way to address this might be to shift the focus somewhat to the political ideology of rebel, and perhaps state, combatants. It is interesting that many of the groups that Loken mentions as engaging in little rape appear to have leftist or Communist ideologies, suggesting the possibility that such ideologies may help to determine more specific organization cultures and the actual behavior of combatants during wartime. Other researchers have measured the degree to which militant organizations have a "positive gender ideology," and find that this exercises a strong influence over women's involvement in violent political organizations.³ Given these findings, a worthwhile next step suggested by Loken's work would be to tease out the relationships between political ideology and organizational culture, and theorize how these factors relate to the use of rape and other forms of sexual violence.

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³ Jakana L. Thomas and Kanisha D. Bond, "Women's Participation in Violent Political Organizations," *American Political Science Review* 109:3 (August 2015): 488-506. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055415000313>.

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